Wednesday
24 November 2021

Volume 704
No. 77

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 24 November 2021

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2021
This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

House of Commons

Wednesday 24 November 2021

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I want to say something about the presence of babies and very young children in this Chamber and the parallel Chamber, Westminster Hall.

It is extremely important that parents of babies and young children are able to participate fully in the work of this House. That is why, to give one example, we have a nursery. The advice given yesterday to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) on the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means, of which I was not aware until last night, correctly reflects the current rules. However, rules have to be seen in context and they change with the times.

This House has to be able to function professionally and without disturbance. However, sometimes there may be occasions when the Chair can exercise discretion, assuming that the business is not being disturbed. I accept that there are differing views on this matter. Indeed, hon. Members who have babies have contacted me with a range of views.

There are also likely to be some consequential matters. Therefore, I have asked the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), if she and her Committee will look into this matter and bring forward recommendations, which will ultimately be for the House to take a view on.

Thank you. I am taking no points of order on this.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Rape and Sexual Violence in Conflict

1. **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to protect women and girls around the world from the use of rape and sexual violence in conflict. [904378]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): It is grotesque that sexual violence and rape is used as a weapon of war. It is wrong that it is treated less seriously than chemical warfare or landmines. That is why we are working to build a new consensus with friends and allies across the world to condemn it as a red line.

Mrs Miller: Does my right hon. Friend agree that having women themselves around the policy-making table is crucial for entrenching change? What will she be doing to support more women into those sorts of roles in countries where sexual violence is a reality for so many?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are restoring the development budget for women and girls back to its previous levels, and will shortly be allocating funding for such projects. She is right that we need to ensure that we are using all the talents available on parliamentary benches around the world, and I am delighted that we now have a record number of female Conservative MPs in this House.

Women in the Workplace

2. **Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What steps the Government are taking to support women in the workplace. [904379]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): To help, support and protect women in the workplace, we intend to build on existing legislation by extending redundancy protections for women after they return from maternity leave, introducing neonatal leave and pay, and introducing one week of unpaid carer's leave. We are currently consulting on measures to increase the availability and uptake of flexible working.

Gavin Newlands: Earlier this month, I met Kate Seary and Mhairi Maclennan, the co-founders of Kyniska Advocacy, which they set up to campaign for zero tolerance of abuse of women in sport. The growing and welcome professionalisation of women's sport means that this is no longer just a sporting issue, but an issue of fairness and dignity at work. Does the Minister agree that sports governing bodies have a responsibility to ensure a safe environment for female athletes, and what action are he and the Government Equalities Office taking to ensure that the governing bodies are meeting these responsibilities?

Paul Scully: The Sport Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston)—is doing a lot of work to ensure that women in sport, and other people, are not getting abuse in their workplace.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): Last week I met Stuart and Daphne Anderson at Farnless bison farm in Sedgefield. They are concerned that the rules of succession for tenancy unfairly discriminate against women, affecting their ability to work in the farming industry. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the issue and ensure that he is clear about those concerns?

Paul Scully: My colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are looking at this issue. I will ensure that they hear my hon. Friend's question and request for a meeting; I am sure that a Minister will be happy to meet him.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): As the Minister knows, pay inequality is an intersectional issue—cutting across gender, ethnicity and disability. The Scottish Government are committed to requiring listed public authorities to extend gender pay gap reporting to disability and ethnicity pay reporting, and ensure that these are included in equal pay statements. They will also be required to develop an ethnicity pay strategy, alongside their existing strategies on closing the disability and gender pay gaps. Will the UK Government consider following suit?

Paul Scully: So much work has been done on the gender pay gap, as the hon. Lady says, but we are certainly looking at it, and we will report back on what we are doing about ethnicity pay reporting and disability pay reporting.

Diversity and Freedom of Belief: Public Institutions

3. **Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on diversity and freedom of belief in public institutions. [904382]

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): I regularly discuss these important issues with other Ministers, as does the Minister for Women and Equalities. Freedom of belief and speech are vital pillars of our democratic society, and no one should be silenced for expressing their legitimately held opinions. Freedom of speech in universities is already protected by law, but there is no effective enforcement mechanism. The Government are therefore taking steps, in line with our manifesto, to strengthen academic freedom and free speech in universities in England.

Gareth Bacon: My hon. Friend may be aware that John Cleese recently felt that he needed to pull out of speaking to the Cambridge Union following the revelation that it had blacklisted certain people from speaking. Although the union's president has now rowed back on the claim that a list of banned speakers exists, will my hon. Friend outline what the Government are doing to promote freedom of speech and belief in our universities to make sure that students are exposed to a range of views even though they may themselves disagree with them?

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, John Cleese was quite right to highlight this issue. However, it should not be up to comedians to educate students on core values such as freedom of speech and freedom of belief; the universities themselves should do that. Those that seek to bully, harass and intimidate others because of their views risk undermining our precious freedoms. Such behaviour should not and will not be tolerated on university campuses. That is why we have introduced the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill to strengthen freedom of speech and academic freedom in universities and ensure that individuals can seek redress.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Across the United Kingdom, women in public institutions are being hounded for the belief that sex matters in life as well as in law. I have in mind the case of Professor Kathleen Stock at Sussex University, but there are many other women suffering the same fate who do not have such a high public profile. What support can the Minister offer to such women?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for bringing that question to me. She is absolutely right. I have been appalled by the disgraceful treatment of Professor Kathleen Stock. I think that we, as a Government, should do more, and I am personally looking into what we can do in terms of workplace harassment and bullying, which a lot of that behaviour falls under. I hope that I will be able to work with the hon. and learned Lady on this issue more closely.

Health and Care System: Women's Experience

4. **Mr Richard Holden** (North West Durham) (Con): If she will take steps with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to improve understanding of women's experience of health and the health and care system. [904383]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Improving our understanding of women's experience of health and the health service is a key priority for this Government. That is why in March this year we launched a call for evidence asking women to tell us about their experience. We had nearly 100,000 responses, which we are working through now and which will form the baseline of England's first-ever women's health strategy.

Mr Holden: Yesterday this House passed a UK-wide ban on virginity testing through the Health and Care Bill, but banning virginity testing will only work if hymenoplasty is banned alongside it. Will the Minister use her good offices to ensure that the Government introduce amendments in another place to ban hymenoplasty and then encourage other countries around the world to stop these practices worldwide?

Maria Caulfield: I am sure that all Members across this House will welcome the Government's amendment yesterday to ban virginity testing. The evidence for a ban on hymenoplasty is mixed, so the Government have convened an independent expert panel to review all the evidence and look carefully at the issues, and that will report back to Ministers before Christmas.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is HIV Testing Week in Wales, and yesterday I joined the Terrence Higgins Trust at Fast Track Cardiff and Vale to do my own free home testing kit. In Wales, everybody can get access to a free HIV test at home through Frisky Wales, but in some areas of England free home testing is not available to everyone. Will the Minister work with her Cabinet colleagues to follow where Wales leads and ensure that everyone in England can get access to a free HIV test kit if they wish to?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. Free testing is available across the NHS in England, and same-day test results are often possible. I will look at the specific issue of home testing kits, because it is important that everyone who needs a test has access to it.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): One of the times that women most engage with healthcare services is when they are pregnant. My constituent Michelle, a qualified midwife, has contacted me, talking specifically about the importance of retention in midwifery and highlighting the crisis that she says there is. What is my hon. Friend doing to make sure that qualified, experienced midwives stay working at the frontline where we need them?

Maria Caulfield: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Maternity care is a top priority for the Government, and earlier this year NHS England announced a £95 million recurrent funding package to support the recruitment of 1,200 midwives and 100 consultant obstetricians. Maintaining both the skill mix and the numbers is key to retaining experienced midwives, who often have to take the pressure when there are staff shortages.

Islamophobia

5. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps she plans to take with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to tackle Islamophobia in sport. [904384]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I am sure the whole House has been appalled by recent reports of racism in cricket, a sad reminder that racial discrimination still exists within sport. There can be no place for it. Sports bodies must take robust action to tackle this behaviour. The Government and our sports councils are committed to ensuring that sport is inclusive for everyone, and will be watching; where action does not go far enough, the Government are prepared to step in.

Jamie Stone: It seems to me that we have an opportunity here to tackle hate crimes by raising them to the status of aggravated offences. Clearly, training and resources would have to follow that decision, but, while we can all say the right things and be quite correct in what we say about absolutely opposing Islamophobia and antisemitism, unless we do something concrete, we may have this problem for a lot longer than we think.

Nigel Huddleston: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He is right: we must ensure that laws are constantly updated and reviewed. That goes for the offline world, but also the online one; I am sure he will be aware of the work we are doing, with cross-party support, on online safety to tackle the important issues he raises.

Ethnicity Pay Gap

6. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to tackle the ethnicity pay gap; and if she will make a statement. [904385]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): We are considering the range of views and experiences outlined in responses to the ethnicity pay reporting consultation, further soundings from employers and the conclusions of the independent report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, and we will respond formally in due course.

Kate Osamor: Unlike the gender pay gap, there is no legal requirement for companies in the UK to publish their ethnicity pay gap. Research from the TUC has shown that black workers earn 12.8% less on average than their white counterparts, and the gap widens to almost one quarter less when comparing workers with degrees. The Labour party, the TUC, the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the CBI are all calling for mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting. Can the Minister tell the House when the Government will follow suit and rectify this harmful practice?

Paul Scully: As I said, we will respond in due course. In the meantime, voluntary reporting by employers exists and we have seen it increase over the past three years. Clearly, there is a balance to be struck, and that is what we are working through with consultation across the board.

Public Sexual Harassment: Legislation

7. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What recent discussions she has had with the Home Secretary on gaps in existing legislation on public sexual harassment. [904386]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): Public sexual harassment is appalling, and we are committed to tackling it. As set out in the tackling violence against women and girls strategy, we are looking carefully at where there may be gaps in existing laws and how a specific offence could address those, while also engaging closely with campaigners.

Wera Hobhouse: Some 66% of young women and girls experience public sexual harassment, which has a huge impact on their confidence, their self-esteem and their mental health. It makes them feel unsafe and uncomfortable wearing, doing or saying things in public spaces. Therefore, we should make public sexual harassment a specific criminal offence. Will the Minister meet me and campaigners who want to see that happen, and look at a way forward on this serious issue?

Rachel Maclean: I can assure the hon. Lady that we are taking the views of campaigners on board, and I and other Ministers meet with them regularly. As I have said, we are looking at whether there may be some specific legislative gaps, but it will always be a pleasure for me to meet her.

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): I thank the Minister for her response, but what specific discussions has she had on the recent increase in spikings that has unfortunately affected women and girls in south Wales?

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue on behalf of young women and girls in his constituency. Drink spiking and needle spiking are horrific and frightening offences, and we are taking steps, led by the Home Secretary herself, working with Maggie Blyth, the chief of police leading the response to violence against women and girls across police forces, to ramp up our response and tackle them effectively.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): The Minister says that spiking is frightening, but it is actually assault and often leads to further violence. The Government must look urgently at improving forensic provision in healthcare so that we can identify the perpetrators and boost public awareness of the risk of that horrific crime. How will she work with the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to tackle the threats of spiking?

Rachel Maclean: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the prevalence of spiking, which is why the Home Secretary is leading on action, via the Home Office and with other Government colleagues across the board, to ensure that we have an effective response. I draw the attention of the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) to the specific funding that the Home Office has put into the safety of women at night fund, which provides drink spiking detection kits and specific training for security staff so that women and young girls going out at night into the night-time economy can feel safe to have a good time, as we all want them to.

Conversion Therapy Ban: Faith-based Settings

8. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): Whether she plans to bring forward legislative proposals to ban sexual orientation and gender identity conversion therapy that occurs in religious or faith-based settings through prayer healing, faith declarations, religious conversion courses and other non-physical practices. [904387]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): There is no place for the abhorrent practice of conversion therapy in our society. Our proposals will ensure that LGBT people can live their lives free from harm, will stop under-18s making irreversible decisions about their future, and will protect freedom of speech and choice.

Kate Osborne: The national LGBT survey found that 51% of conversion therapy happens in religious settings and Government-commissioned research found that adult victims often undertake religious conversion practices voluntarily, so the Government's proposal to allow informed consent for conversion therapy will permit that abuse to continue and risks introducing consent defences to other forms of abuse, such as domestic violence. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether a conversion therapy ban will cover non-physical conversion practices in religious settings, including prayer? Will she remove the dangerous consent loophole?

Elizabeth Truss: What is important is that we ensure that people are not coerced into conversion therapy, but it is also important to protect freedom of speech, the ability of adults to consent and the freedom to express the teachings of—*[Interruption.]* I hear Opposition Members asking whether freedom of speech is a good thing. Yes, it is.

Autistic Children: Educational Support

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Education to help ensure that autistic children receive appropriate educational support under equalities legislation. [904389]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): Education settings are required to make reasonable adjustments for disabled children, including those with autism, under the Equality Act 2010. The "SEND code of practice" sets out detailed guidance on meeting children's needs. Through the new autism strategy, published in July, the Government set out our vision to make life fundamentally better for autistic people by 2026, including in education.

Kerry McCarthy: A recent report from the National Autistic Society said that a quarter of autistic children can wait more than three years to receive the extra support they need. Does the Minister agree that that is an equalities issue? What conversations will he have in the Department for Education to ensure that schools and councils get the funding that they need to carry out special educational needs and disabilities assessments and make the right provision?

Will Quince: As an Education Minister, of course I want every child to fulfil their potential. I am committed to speaking to and working with children, families, parents, carers and SEND experts, including the National Autistic Society, which I met this week as part of a stakeholder roundtable. I am always happy to listen to the voices of sector leaders and I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Topical Questions

T1. [904370] **Robert Largan** (High Peak) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Elizabeth Truss): I am delighted that Katharine Birbalsingh has begun her new role as the chair of the Social Mobility Commission. By expecting high standards and not indulging in the soft bigotry of low expectations, she produced fantastic results at the Michaela Community School and gave children the best chance in life. We want her to bring that same attitude to the commission and be a loud champion of equality of opportunity by focusing on education, employment and enterprise, levelling up opportunity and unleashing the full potential of our great country.

Robert Largan: I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling disparity in our healthcare, which is particularly important when it comes to maternity care. I ask the Minister to speak to her colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care about Tameside Hospital, where there is a desperate need for capital funding in a new maternity unit and antenatal clinic. The current unit is located in the Charlesworth Building, which was built in 1971 and is poorly insulated, so sensitive clinical equipment often overheats. The capital funding bid badly needs support and I hope that she will work with me on it to deliver better healthcare for the women of High Peak.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): Maternity care is a top priority for this Government, and we are making progress. Since 2010, we have seen a 25% reduction in stillbirths and a 29% reduction in neonatal mortality. On the new maternity unit at Tameside, I understand that the Acorn birth centre opened last year and has been well received locally, but I am happy to discuss further improvements with my hon. Friend.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): This morning, we learned that domestic abuse-related crimes have doubled in the last five years, but the number of prosecutions has fallen every year in the same period. A few minutes ago, the Foreign Secretary rightly lamented violence against women and girls across the world. When will she get a grip on the catastrophic situation facing many women and girls in our own country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): This Government were the first Government to pass the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill to set out for the first time on the statute book protections for women and girls and other victims of domestic abuse. This is a sweeping piece of legislation, and we are working at pace to drive actions to increase prosecutions across the entire criminal justice system, backed up by a significant investment in our courts to address the backlog.

Anneliese Dodds: I regret that the Minister does not appear to have seen the figures from this morning. If she had, she would know that her Government's measures are not working. I thought she would mention additional measures that are required: increasing sentences for stalking and domestic murder; introducing new defences for victims; stopping the social security, family courts and migration systems from failing victims; and making serial abusers subject to special supervision. Labour has called for all of these measures. When will the Conservatives enact them?

Rachel Maclean: I can tell the hon. Lady that the Conservatives are already enacting the vast majority of that long list she has just recited. As I said, we are the first Government to put domestic abuse legislation on the statute book. I would invite her to attend Home Office questions and address the Home Secretary directly to hear about the vast amount we are doing to protect women and girls in this country, which is a personal priority of the Prime Minister.

T3. [904372] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Does the Minister agree that improving trust in and legitimacy of key public officials and institutions in areas such as law enforcement, immigration and health, particularly in communities where historically they have been low, is absolutely essential, and what steps does she intend to take to level up in this vital area?

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Building trust between different communities and the institutions that serve them was a central theme of the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. We will respond to the report shortly, setting out our plans for building back fairer, and I can assure my hon. Friend that his concerns will be at the heart of our response.

T2. [904371] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): Between March and June this year, self-harm for women in prison grew by a staggering 47%. Is the Minister aware that the best health outcome for women with children is not incarceration in prison, but a sentence in the community? Can the Minister say how she is pursuing this with the Secretary of State for Justice?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that very important point. I do not have the Ministry of Justice figures to hand, but what I can do is get one of my colleagues in that Department to write to her with a more specific and comprehensive answer to her question.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is time to better protect women from abuse and harassment, and the vehicle to do this is the Online Safety Bill?

Rachel Maclean: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. No one should feel afraid to participate in our democracy. Intimidation in public life can stop talented people, such as my hon. Friend, and those from minority backgrounds from standing for public office.

T4. [904373] **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When it comes to inequalities, young carers very often lose out. Can I invite Ministers to come and look at a wonderful organisation in Wick called KLICS, which really is delivering a service that means a huge amount to young people?

Elizabeth Truss: I am sure we would be very keen to do that.

T5. [904374] **Kim Leadbeater** (Batley and Spen) (Lab): Dame Laura Cox recently argued:

"The macho behaviour and posturing so frequently displayed in our political debates have disproportionately and adversely affected women in public life."

She added that not just politicians but

"women journalists, academics, campaigners and political activists have all reported instances of intimidation, abuse and even physical violence."

What does the Minister believe that we can do collectively to change this culture?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is right: we do need to deal with the culture in our politics, and we need to make sure that we have rational, reasonable debates. I think we are demonstrating that today.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv. *[Interruption.]* I do not think we need any more interruptions. If Members listen to this next bit, it might help.

I wish to make one further point. There were many reflections on Sir David Amess's decency and kindness at the very moving requiem mass held yesterday. I sincerely hope that those qualities of kindness and decency are reflected in our proceedings today and in the future.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904330] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 24 November.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning I had meetings with—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. *[Interruption.]* Thank you very much. Immediately following Prime Minister's questions, I will attend the welcome home march-in to thank all those involved in Op Pitting, our evacuation from Kabul. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Chris Bryant: I, too, will be attending in a few minutes' time.

Nikki's seven-year-old son had 37 seizures a day because of a brain disease he suffered from. He has had surgery now, but it is a struggle every day to get him to stay in school. Nikki is supporting the Acquired Brain Injury Bill because she believes that the Government need a cross-departmental strategy for supporting those who have an acquired brain injury, whether that is rugby players with concussion and dementia, women who have been beaten in the head by their partners, children who have suffered from carbon monoxide poisoning, or soldiers who have been in explosions. I really hope that the Government are going to back the Acquired Brain Injury Bill, but above all we need a strategy to help 1.4 million people in this country. Will the Prime Minister give us that?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this vital issue and for his personal commitment to this cause. I can assure him that we are studying his proposed Bill and working to ensure that people do get support for the acquired brain injuries that they have received. What we can certainly pledge at this stage—I hope this will be of some use to him and the many who care about this issue in the way that he does, as I am sure Members do across the House—is that the Department of Health and Social Care will lead on the development of a cross-departmental Government strategy on acquired brain injury and other neurological conditions. I will be very happy to share details with him shortly.

Q3. [904332] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): In July this year, my constituency, Kensington, suffered devastating flooding, with more than 2,000 homes flooded, a river running down Portobello Road and a lot of residents having to move into temporary accommodation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Thames Water needs to come up with short and long-term solutions, and that it needs to make sufficient investment in infrastructure to prevent such events from happening again?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise flooding, and she is right about short and long-term solutions. That is why I am proud, among other things, to have helped to instigate the Thames Tideway Tunnel, with the biggest super-sewer in the history of this country, which will help to deal with what happens in London when the Bazalgette interceptors overflow and to deal with flooding throughout the city.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): At the last election, the Prime Minister promised that nobody would have to sell their home to pay for care. That is another broken promise, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: No, because if the right hon. and learned Gentleman looked at what we are proposing and if he supported what we are proposing—it is fixing something that Labour never fixed in all its years in office. We are saying to the people of this country that we will disregard their home as part of their assets if they and their spouse are living in it. No. 2, you can have a deferred payments agreement if you move out and are living in residential care. Most important of all, by putting the huge investment we are making now in health and social care, we are allowing, for the first time, the people of this country to insure themselves against the otherwise potentially catastrophic costs of dementia or Alzheimer's. Even if you are not one of those people who suffer from those afflictions, we are taking away the anxiety from millions of people up and down the land about their homes.

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister just described the broken system he said he was fixing. It is certainly not a straight answer. Let us have another go. He used to say—*[Interruption.]* I see they've turned up this week, Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think we need any further shouting. Yesterday, we had a very good example of the House at its best, in the cathedral. Please, let us show some respect. I want to be able to hear not only the Prime Minister, but the Leader of the Opposition. Shouting each other down does not do you or your constituents any good. We need to hear the questions and I certainly need to hear the answers. And if anybody does not like it, please leave now.

Keir Starmer: It is not a complicated question, so let us have another go. The Prime Minister used to say that nobody would have to sell their home to pay for their care—it is in his manifesto, right here. On the basis of that promise, he then put up tax on every working person in the country. Has he done what he promised and ensured that nobody will have to sell their home to pay for care, yes or no? It is not complicated.

The Prime Minister: No, it is not complicated, because what we are doing is disregarding your home as part of the assets that we calculate. If you go down to £100,000, that is the beginning of where we will ask you to contribute, but your home is not included in that. Labour has absolutely no plan. It has spent decades failing to address this. Only a few weeks ago, Labour Members failed to vote for the £36 billion that will enable us to fix this and to help people up and down the country—not just to fix the social care problem, but to pay for people to live in their own homes and receive the care they need in their homes. That is what this one nation Conservative Government are doing. Why will the right hon. and learned Gentleman not support it?

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister has had two opportunities to stand by his manifesto commitment and he has not taken them. *[Interruption.]* He says he just has, so let us test this in the real world. Under the Prime Minister's plans, a person with assets worth about £100,000, most of it tied up in their home, would have to pay £80,000. They would lose almost everything. How on earth does the Prime Minister think that they can get their hands on that kind of money without selling their home?

The Prime Minister: I am going to have a third go at trying to clear this up in the befuddled mind of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, because it is important. The fact is that the Labour party has totally failed to address this. It has not had the guts to fix this in all its time in office. It is something left over from the Attlee Government and we are fixing it. Let me repeat for the third time: your home is disregarded. No. 2, even if you have a second—if you are in residential care, you have a deferred payments agreement. No. 3, we are allowing you to insure yourself for the first time against catastrophic consequences by capping it at £86,000. He stood on a manifesto to put the cap where? At £100,000!

Keir Starmer: The question was really simple, and it is the question that all his Back Benchers are asking. If you have a house worth about £120,000 to £140,000, how do you find £80,000-plus without selling your home? It is common sense.

Strip away the bluster, strip away the deflection and strip away the refusal to answer the question and there is the simple truth—and this is why the Prime Minister will not address it: people will still be forced to sell their home to pay for care. Why do they—*[Interruption.]* Look at the vote the other day to see the answer to that question. People will still be forced to sell their home.

It is another broken promise, just like the Prime Minister promised that he would not put up tax; just like he promised 40 new hospitals; just like he promised a rail revolution in the north. Who knows if he will make it to the next election, but if he does, how does he expect anyone to take him and his promises seriously?

The Prime Minister: Yet again, the right hon. and learned Gentleman raises the rail revolution in the north: three new high-speed lines and £96 billion—*[Interruption.]* Again, nothing like it for a century. Just for the advantage of hon. Members, I did not even know this—I was in a state of complete innocence about this last week—but it turns out that he actually campaigned against HS2 altogether. He said it would be "devastating" and that it should be cancelled. I can tell you, Mr Speaker, that HS2 runs through my constituency as well, and even though it has been very tough for my constituents, I took a decision that it was the right thing to do for the long-term interests of the whole country. How can they possibly trust that man?

Keir Starmer: I think the Prime Minister has lost his place in his notes again. The only thing he is delivering is high taxes, high prices and low growth. I am not sure that he should be shouting about that.

It is not just broken promises; it is also about fairness. Everyone needs protection against massive health and care costs, but under the Prime Minister's plans, someone with assets worth about £100,000 will lose almost everything; yet somebody with assets of about £1 million will keep almost everything. It is just like the Conservatives' 2017 manifesto all over again, only this time something has changed: he has picked the pockets of working people to protect the estates of the wealthiest. How could he possibly have managed to devise a working-class dementia tax?

The Prime Minister: I think I have answered that question three times already. This does more for working people up and down the country than Labour ever did, because we are actually solving the problem that Labour failed to address. We are disregarding your housing asset altogether while you are in it.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about jobs and working people. Let me remind him of one key statistic that people should bear in mind. He talks about the economy, and now, almost a month after furlough ended, there are more people in work than there were before the pandemic began. That is because of the policies that the Government have pursued.

Keir Starmer: There is no getting away from it: working people are being asked to pay twice. During their working lives, they will pay much more tax in national insurance, while those living off wealth are protected. When they retire, they face having to sell their home, when the wealthiest will not have to do so. It is a classic con game—a Covent Garden pickpocketing operation. The Prime Minister is the front man, distracting people with wild promises and panto speeches, while his Chancellor dips his hand in their pocket.

But now the Prime Minister's routine is falling flat. His Chancellor is worried that people are getting wise. His Back Benchers say that it is "embarrassing"—their word. Senior people in Downing Street tell the BBC, "It's just not working." Is everything okay, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I will tell you what is not working, Mr Speaker: that line of attack. I just want to repeat the crucial point: we are delivering for the working people of this country. We are delivering for the people of this country, we are fixing the problems that they thought could never be fixed, and we are doing things that they thought were impossible. Let me repeat: there are now more people in work in this country—jobs up, with their wages going up—than there were before the pandemic began. That is because of the policies that this Government have followed. Whether it is on rolling out the vaccine, which the House will remember the right hon. and learned Gentleman opposed; whether it is on investment, which he opposed—*[Interruption]* He did; he did not want to invest in the vaccine taskforce, I seem to remember. Or whether it is making the strategic investments that we have made, if we had listened to Captain Hindsight, we would have no HS2 at all. That was what he stood for. If we had listened to him, we would all still be in lockdown.

Q4. [904333] **Dame Andrea Leadsom** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that he will use the rest of the UK's presidency of the conference of the parties to urge countries around the world to make good on the pledges that they made in Glasgow? Does he agree that decarbonisation can create millions of jobs across the UK and around the world?

The Prime Minister: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend, who is right about this and many other things. That is why our transition to green jobs is supporting 440,000 new green high-wage, high-skill jobs across the UK. The breakthrough agenda that we endorsed at COP26 will, I believe, support between 20 million and 30 million jobs across the world by 2030—and I think that that is probably a gross underestimate.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you will wish to join me and the rest of the House in welcoming the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, Lord Wallace, to the Gallery today and thanking him for the sage words of his sermon this morning.

The past few weeks have shown this Tory Government at their very worst: a Tory sleaze and corruption scandal on a scale not seen since the 1990s, Tory cuts and tax rises that will leave millions of people worse off, and a litany of broken promises, from HS2 to carbon capture, social care and the triple lock on pensions. And who can possibly forget the £20 billion bridge to Ireland that evaporated into thin air?

At the centre of it all is one man: a Prime Minister who is floundering in failure. I ask the Prime Minister: with his party falling in the polls and his colleagues briefing against him, has he considered calling it a day before he is pushed out the door?

The Prime Minister: I think that what the people of this country want to hear is less talk about politics and politicians. They want to talk about what the Government are doing for the people of Scotland—and what the Scottish Government are doing for the people of Scotland, which is not enough.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about infrastructure investment. I can tell him that if he waits until Friday, I think, or later this week, he will hear about what we will do with the Union connectivity review to ensure that the people of Scotland are served with the connections they need, which the Scottish nationalist party has totally failed to put in.

Ian Blackford: That certainly was not an answer to the question that I asked, but we are used to that. I did not expect the Prime Minister to take responsibility because he never does, but this is not just about the chaos in the Conservative party; it is about the state of the United Kingdom under his failing leadership. While the Prime Minister spends his time hunting for chatty pigs and staving off a leadership challenge from the Treasury, people in the real world are suffering a Tory cost-of-living crisis. Brexit is hitting the economy hard, but the Prime Minister cannot even give a coherent speech to business. The Prime Minister's officials have lost confidence in him, Tory MPs have lost confidence in him—the letters are going in—and the public have lost confidence in him. Why is he clinging on, when it is clear that he is simply not up to the job?

The Prime Minister: I might ask the right hon. Gentleman what on earth he thinks he is doing, talking about party political issues when all that the people of Scotland want to hear is what on earth the Scottish national Government are doing. They are falling in the polls—*[Interruption.]* Yes, they are. Their cause is falling in the polls, and considering their manifold failures on tax, on education, on all the things that the people of Scotland really care about, I am not surprised—and I can see some agreement on the Benches opposite.

Q8. [904337] **Mr Jonathan Lord** (Woking) (Con): I celebrate the recent successes of Woking College, my local sixth-form college, and I welcome the recent Government investment in a new teaching block, which will allow it to expand. Many colleges and students find BTECs to be a really valuable qualification and course, enabling people to progress to higher education and skilled employment. Does the Prime Minister agree that we should protect student choice, and keep BTECs as an option for students?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we will continue to fund some BTECs where there is a clear need for them, but I must stress that we have to close the gap between the things that people study and the needs of business and employers, and that is what T-levels are designed to do.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I rarely agree with the Prime Minister, but last week, when he said that COP26 showed that we could end our reliance on fossil fuels, I did agree with him. That, however, prompts the question of why his Government are pressing ahead not just with the Cambo oilfield, but with 39 other oil, gas and coal developments, which would amount to three times the UK's current annual climate emissions.

I do not want to hear an answer that is about all the things the Prime Minister thinks he is doing on cars and cash and trees. I want him to tell the House whether he will leave those fossil fuels in the ground. Will he cancel those projects, and does he recognise that if he does not, he will need to ask forgiveness not just for losing his place in a speech, but for losing the future of our children?

The Prime Minister: Not only are we powering past coal towards the ending of fossil fuel reliance in our energy generation by 2024, which is absolutely stunning, and we are ahead of countries throughout the world—I am glad the hon. Lady is praising me for that, although, as she knows, the Cambo oilfield is a matter for study by an independent regulator—but what we have also done, and led the world in doing, is stop the financing of overseas hydrocarbons. That is a fantastic thing, which the whole world followed.

Q9. [904338] **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Net zero, levelling up and building back better cannot happen without a massive increase in the supply of critical tech minerals such as silicon, copper and lithium, but Beijing controls most of those. In the light of China's recent tech minerals leverage on Japan, does my right hon. Friend agree that the success of our green industrial revolution hinges on advancing our indigenous silicon valley? Now that we are free of the EU, what fiscal incentives can he provide to make that happen at pace?

The Prime Minister: As my right hon. Friend knows, there are some very interesting and potentially very lucrative sources of minerals such as lithium in this country, whose exploration, discovery and reuse we are encouraging. As for the tax point that he rightly raised, we will ensure that we support freeports as hubs for the processing of those critical minerals here in the UK.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): In 2014, my constituent's three-year-old son Freddie Hussey was killed by an unsafe trailer. Every year, 30% of people who take the B+E test fail it, and now the Government are abolishing it, thus unleashing thousands of untrained, untested, unsafe drivers on to our roads. Why are the Government breaking their promise to grieving families to make towing and our roads safer?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady very much for raising this with me, and I am very sorry to hear about the tragic circumstances of Freddie's death. We want to free up B + E licensing time so that we can get more people qualified as HGV drivers, but that cannot compromise road safety, as she rightly says, so we will review the legislation and its consequences at regular intervals.

Q14. [904343] **Karl McCartney** (Lincoln) (Con): From 2 to 5 December, Lincoln will be hosting its world-famous Christmas market in the grounds of the historic Lincoln castle, and it would be remiss of me not to invite my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and yourself, Mr Speaker, and all other colleagues, even those on the Opposition Front Bench, to come and enjoy the marvellous long weekend of festivities. However, what is less than marvellous for my constituents is the levelling down of Lincolnshire's highway maintenance grant by 25% on 2019-20 levels. Can my right hon. Friend use his influence to cause the Treasury and the Department for Transport to revisit that unfortunate decision? Restoring the grant to 2019-20 levels is imperative to the safety of my constituents, whether in vehicles, cycling or walking, as I would hope my right hon. Friend agrees.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much for his question and I will do my utmost—he has invited everybody, and I hope that a lot of people will be going to Lincoln. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport will have listened carefully to what he had to say.

Q6. [904335] **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): "Inexplicable" is how the former vaccine taskforce chair Kate Bingham described this Government's decision to cancel their contract with Livingston-based vaccine developer Valneva—a company that the Prime Minister has himself visited. She also noted how shoddily Valneva had been treated and how damaging his Government's decision had been for UK life sciences, exports and jobs in my Livingston constituency, where a state-of-the-art vaccine manufacturing plant now lies unfinished. There has been no apology for the incorrect statements in the House, so will the Prime Minister please meet me and representatives of Valneva, and will he tell me whether his Government have tabled proposals to reach the amicable resolution that was promised from the Dispatch Box? If not, when will they do so?

The Prime Minister: I was personally very disappointed when we could not get approval for the Valneva vaccine in the way that we had hoped, and I know how disappointing that was to colleagues in Scotland. I will certainly ensure that the hon. Member gets the relevant meeting. What we are doing is investing massively in this country's vaccine capability across the country so that we are prepared for the next pandemic, and I very much hope that Valneva will be part of that.

Q15. [904344] **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): We know that serious side-effects from the covid vaccines are very rare, but that was not the case for my constituent Sarah Kyte. She suffered a very serious reaction, leaving her in constant pain and losing most of her eyesight. She now cannot work. The Prime Minister has successfully and quite rightly speeded up all the vaccine processes except one: the vaccine damage payments system. Can we now get on with making those payments to people who have suffered these serious reactions, to give them the financial support that they need?

The Prime Minister: I want to reassure my hon. Friend, and indeed the House and the country, that cases such as the very sad one that he raises are extremely rare. We are putting in more money to gather evidence for claims such as one that he describes, but I want to repeat what is perhaps the most important message that I can get across today, which is how vital the vaccination programme is, how safe it is and how important it is that everybody who is eligible gets their booster when they are called.

Q7. [904336] **Matthew Pennycook** (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Government's integrated review has concluded that the Chinese state poses a systemic challenge to our national security, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that when it comes to China, we must remain vigilant about our critical national infrastructure. Can he therefore confirm unequivocally today that plans for China General Nuclear to own and operate its own plant at Bradwell in Essex have been abandoned, and explain to the House precisely how and when his Government intend to remove CGN's interest from the Sizewell C nuclear project?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. Clearly, one of the consequences of our approach on critical national infrastructure in the National Security and Investment Bill is that we do not want to see undue influence by potentially adversarial countries in our critical national infrastructure. That is why we have taken the decisions that we have. On Bradwell, there will be more information forthcoming—*[Interruption.]* What I do not want to do is pitchfork away wantonly all Chinese investment in this country, or minimise the importance to this country of having a trading relationship with China.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): The Prime Minister will be very pleased that Shrewsbury Conservatives are doing everything possible to help Neil Shastri-Hurst, the excellent candidate in North Shropshire. He will also know that the No. 1 issue affecting Salopians at the moment is the £312 million that we have secured for the modernisation of our A&E services. This has suffered terrible delays over the past eight years, leading to a worsening of our A&E services for local patients. Will he do everything possible to help us finally get it across the line so that we can provide safe A&E services for all the people of Shropshire and mid-Wales?

The Prime Minister: That is one of the reasons why we are now investing £36 billion more in our NHS to help cope with the backlog and the extra winter pressures, particularly on A&E. It is also a reason why the booster programme is so vital, because we do not want those beds filled with covid patients and we do not want delayed discharges either.

Q10. [904339] **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Prime Minister's Government have found billions for nuclear but nothing for the Scottish carbon

capture cluster and nothing for pumped-storage hydro. Now the Government are at risk of failing tidal stream generation, a technology in which Scotland is a world leader. The ask is for a £71 million ringfenced marine port in next month's energy auction. The Prime Minister has a choice: provide this money and allow continued scaling up and commercial success, based on a UK supply chain, or see the manufacturing jobs move abroad. What is it going to be?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the hon. Gentleman asks that question, because I can tell him and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) that we will be including support for tidal stream to the value of £20 million in the upcoming contract for difference auction—*[Interruption.]* Come on, that is not to be sneezed at. I have met representatives of Scottish tidal power. What they are doing is fantastic, original and inventive, and we want to support it.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I have been out campaigning with our excellent candidate in the Old Bexley and Sidcup by-election, Louie French, and the responses on the doorstep are very good—*[Interruption.]* The Opposition know nothing, as usual.

Will my right hon. Friend confirm that he will continue to implement our 2019 manifesto by implementing policies to ensure that we build up better for the whole country, including London, as that is what the electors in Bexley want?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will. I have happy memories of many years of campaigning with my right hon. Friend in Old Bexley and Sidcup. We are delivering on our agenda for the people of London, putting 20,000 more police out on the streets and making sure they get to outer London boroughs, too. We are also making sure that Londoners do not suffer from the crazed outer London tax that would see motorists penalised by the Labour Mayor for driving into their own city.

Q11. [904340] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Cherwell Larder in Kidlington does incredible work to serve nearly 2,000 of my most vulnerable constituents, but there simply is not enough food to go around at the moment. This is a national crisis. The stock of charities such as FareShare is down 30%, in part due to the same supply chain issues that are affecting supermarkets. First, will the Prime Minister help the Cherwell Larder by restoring the funding of FareShare? And what more can he do to incentivise businesses to give away surplus food this winter so that no family need go hungry this Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising FareShare and I thank it for what it is doing to support people this winter, and indeed at all times. My experience is that businesses do an amazing job of contributing to this effort. Iceland is one company that springs to mind.

We are addressing the supply chains night and day, and we are seeing some of the problems starting to ease. They are the result of the British economy and the world economy coming back to life, which frankly would not have happened if we had listened to the Leader of the Opposition.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was bang on when he spoke on Monday about ending the unfairness of our high energy-intensive industries paying more than is paid overseas. We know that he is a friend to steel in Scunthorpe, so will he continue to do all he can to ensure that my world-class steelmakers are on a fair footing?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for everything she does for steel and for Scunthorpe. I can tell her that I do believe British steel has suffered, as a result of decisions taken years and years ago, from unfair energy costs—we need to fix it. This Government are getting on with making another of the long-term changes we are instituting: we are putting in the nuclear base-load that this country has long been deprived of.

Q12. [904341] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): In a couple of weeks' time I will be introducing a Bill to ban the importing of hunting trophies. Not only has that had widespread public support and support from Opposition parties, but in the past the principle has been supported by Conservative manifestos, the Queen's Speech and indeed the Prime Minister himself. So on Friday 10 December will the Prime Minister tell his Whips not to block the Bill, but to let it go forward, so that we can work together and end this vile trade as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is completely right, which is why we are going to introduce legislation in this Parliament to ban the import of hunting trophies and to deliver the change that we promised. I hope that he will support it.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Prime Minister cheered all of my constituents up when he came to south-west Hertfordshire and said that we were going to have a new hospital. Sadly, even though the money is there, the local management of our trust have blocked it; they are going to refurbish Watford's hospital and not give us a brand-new hospital on a greenfield site, which is what we want. Will the Prime Minister meet me and some of my constituents to unblock this and tell the NHS that it needs to build a new hospital for Hemel Hempstead?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and I do remember the issue being raised with me when I was with him. I will be very happy to secure a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, who I am sure will be able to unblock things, one way or the other.

13. [904342] **John Nicolson** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Scots stood slack-jawed with astonishment this week at the news that the Prime Minister has abandoned his DUP bridge to Northern Ireland—perhaps he will offer hot air balloons for the crossing instead, and inflate them himself. We have broken bridge promises to Scotland and broken rail promises to northern England. With buyer's remorse consuming the Tory Back Benchers, who does he think will be defenestrated first, his hapless Tory leader in Scotland or himself?

The Prime Minister: I just want to remind the Scottish nationalist party that they are there to represent the people of Scotland and to deliver better services—better

transport and better healthcare. The hon. Gentleman talks about transport, so I will tell him what I said to the leader of the SNP in Westminster: what we are delivering is the first thoroughgoing review of Union connectivity, so that we look properly at all those roads, the A75, the A77 and the A1—all those vital connections for the people of Scotland that have been neglected by the SNP and that this Government are going to fix.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I am absolutely delighted with the half a billion pounds Start4Life funding that was announced in the Budget. My right hon. Friend knows from personal experience how important those early years are, whether we are talking about parenting advice, access to healthcare or age-appropriate theme parks. Does he agree that rolling out family hubs to 75 local authority areas is a great start? Will he confirm that it if it a successful programme, the Government's aim is to roll it out across the whole country?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much and she is totally right in what she says about Start4Life. I am just looking to see whether my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) is still in her place. She has vanished, but I want to thank her because she has championed this for many, many years. My hon. Friend is right to say that investment in kids' early years is absolutely crucial. That is why this Government have begun Start4Life and, yes, if it works, we will roll it out across the country.

Bulb Energy: Administration

12.39 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if he will make a statement on Bulb Energy entering administration.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): As many people in the House will know, when energy suppliers leave the market, the regulator, Ofgem, runs a competitive supplier-of-last-resort process. Last week, Bulb informed the Government and Ofgem that it would be leaving the market. Ofgem has advised that the supplier of last resort process is not viable for Bulb because of the size of its customer book. Ofgem has, with my consent, applied to the court to appoint energy administrators. If appointed by the court, the administrators will continue to operate Bulb under what is called the special administration regime, which is set out clearly in legislation.

We will update the House once the court has made its determination, but I wish to clarify a couple of points. First, a special administration regime is a temporary arrangement that provides an ultimate safety net to protect consumers and ensure continued supply. The special administration regime will keep bills at the lowest cost that it is reasonably practical to incur while ensuring that the market remains stable. The House should understand that we do not want the company to be in this temporary state for longer than is absolutely necessary. Supplies remain secure and credit balances will be protected. Finally, all domestic customers in Great Britain are, of course, protected by the energy price cap, which remains firmly in place.

Edward Miliband: It is right that the Secretary of State has been forced to come to the House: 18 companies have gone bust since he last came to the House in respect of this issue, in September, and reassured us that there was nothing to worry about.

I have a series of questions. First, what is the Secretary of State's estimate of the scale of costs the taxpayer faces as a result of the Bulb bail-out? That was not clear from his statement, but this is a taxpayer bail-out and the public deserve to know. Will he level with people about the costs that bill payers are going to have to pick up from all the other companies that have failed since September? How much will bills increase as a result?

Secondly, we are now in a position in which companies have banked profits but losses stretching to hundreds of millions incurred by those same companies are being borne by taxpayers and bill payers. So many companies going bust in just two months—something not happening anywhere else in the world—points to a systemic failure of regulation. Firms took risky bets and were allowed to do so, and the Government and Ofgem significantly deregulated the conditions of operation in 2016. Will the Secretary of State now take responsibility for this clear failure of regulation? Does this not suggest that there needs to be a proper review of the regulation of the market?

Thirdly, there is a global dimension to gas price rises but the truth is that we are more exposed as a country because of failures on onshore wind, solar, energy efficiency and gas storage, which is just 2% of our annual demand compared with 25% in other countries. Will the Secretary of State admit that Government inaction over the past decade has left us more vulnerable?

Finally, on the cost-of-living crisis, with further energy price rises coming, why are the Government making the situation worse with cuts to universal credit, by raising national insurance and by refusing to bring some relief by cutting VAT on energy bills? With businesses being hit, too, where is the support that he indicated was coming more than a month ago for energy-intensive industries?

We have seen a failure of policy over a decade, a failure of regulation and the Government making the cost-of-living crisis worse. Is not the truth that this Government cannot be the answer to this energy crisis because it is their crisis? It is businesses and families who are paying the price.

Kwasi Kwarteng: On a point of fact, the number is actually 22 companies, not 18, and I refer back to that—*[Interruption.]* No, that is the figure. That shows the incredible resilience of the systems that we have in place. We have the supplier of last resort, which has worked very effectively, and, as I outlined in my statement, we also have the special administration regime, which was designed precisely to deal with situations such as the one we are now in.

On regulation, Ofgem has launched a review of the retail market and how it operates. I will be directly involved in that and will study it very closely.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the global market and the situation we are in post covid; he and his party predicted record levels of unemployment and recession, and of course they were completely wrong—they were absolutely wrong. We are growing the economy stronger than any other country in the G7. We are also creating jobs and creating investment, so the right hon. Gentleman's prophecies of doom were completely misplaced, and he is completely without any firm arguments over our response to what was a global pandemic.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): What action has the Secretary of State taken to ensure that, in future, there will be more UK domestic gas to replace unreliable and expensive imported gas, and what action is he taking to expand the capacity of our generating system for the days when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend will know that this is the first Government in about 25 years or more who are firmly committed to nuclear power. He will understand that the Cabinet expenditure—the long-term commitment to nuclear power—will not necessarily bear fruit in a week or a month, but for the first time, we have made a very dramatic 100% commitment to increasing our nuclear capacity. That answers his point about security of supply overall.

In terms of gas, I am pleased to announce that I and the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands), are driving the North sea transition deal. The key to that is transition—about trying to transition to net zero while securing jobs and security of supply from gas in the UK Continental Shelf. These are things of which we are apprised.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In 2018, there were more than 70 companies in the energy retail sector, but now there are fewer than 30—a reduction of 60%. Bulb is the 23rd company to go bust since August, a statistic that, somehow, the Secretary of State seemed to be happy about when he was at the Dispatch Box earlier. When are this Government going to get a grip on what is now a cost of living crisis and an energy supply crisis? As energy bills soar, the Treasury gets extra VAT, extra income on fuel duty, and, on top of the £350 billion-worth of oil and gas revenues from Scotland that it gets to squander, an extra £1.1 billion more that it predicted this year alone, because gas prices have increased, so when will it reinvest some of that money to support consumers and the sector?

Bulb was the seventh largest company, with 1.7 million customers. What is the plan for coming out of special administration, because the Secretary of State has still not told us that? When EDF, Scottish Power, Octopus Energy, Utilita and Good Energy all say that they cannot afford new customers, what will happen with these customers? Can the energy companies actually refuse to take new customers, and what discussions is the Secretary of State having on that?

The Secretary of State says that the energy cap is here to stay, but what will be the effect on consumers in fuel poverty when the cap invariably goes up by £400 to £600 in April? It is a disgrace. The Government have allocated £1.7 billion of taxpayers' money to develop Sizewell C to final investment stage. Why not invest that money in energy efficiency and renewable energy and do stuff that actually brings down energy bills, rather than committing consumers to a 10 to 15-year contract for nuclear and six years on top of that? When will they get a grip on energy policy as a whole?

Kwasi Kwarteng: This is where the hon. Gentleman and I disagree. We are firmly committed to nuclear power; he is against it. We can do two things: we can commit to renewables, as we are doing with our 10-point plan, and commit to 40 GW of offshore wind. I hope that he recognises that we are committed to tidal for the first time in many decades—that is something that he should appreciate. He should also remember that we have the warm home discount and lots of mitigations protecting the most vulnerable customers across the winter and in the next few months.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to making sure that this temporary measure is indeed temporary, and I encourage him to make it as short as possible. I also welcome his commitment to the ongoing use of the price cap, but I urge him when the price cap legislation comes up for renewal in the next 12 months to think very carefully about reform in order to make the price cap much more fit for purpose. At the moment, it is not doing what we need it to do. We have companies going bust and an ongoing problem with the loyalty penalty, which was, after all, one of the key reasons for introducing it in the first place.

Kwasi Kwarteng: My hon. Friend will appreciate that Ofgem, as I alluded to in my statement, has already launched a consultation on precisely the issue of the retail price gap. It will be driving that forward and I am sure that his input will be welcome. We have had lots of mitigations to protect the most vulnerable consumers, but we clearly need to have a discussion about the retail market. Ofgem is leading that discussion and my Department is supporting a closer look at the retail market.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned the particular arrangements for Bulb customers, but constituents who have been moved from other energy suppliers that have collapsed—there were 21 when I mentioned this issue at business questions last week—are now facing long delays in being set up with suppliers of last resort, so they do not know what their bills are going to be, they face accumulating debt and they may miss out on the warm home discount. What are the Government doing to address that?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am happy to talk to the hon. Lady about specifics in her constituency. The supplier of last resort process was set up for precisely this process. Generally, it is working, and customers have been successfully transferred to new suppliers.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's attention to detail on this issue. One of the problems is that gas prices have dramatically increased across the world and we have to cope with that. What is he doing to ensure that we increase the supply of gas so that the market then reduces overall prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The House should understand that we have a security of supply. For example, in 2020, 50% of the gas was from the UK continental shelf, 30% was from Norway, 18% was essentially shipped and 2% came from interconnectors. That is a diversity and security of supply that other countries in the EU and on the continent frankly do not have. My hon. Friend will also appreciate that the supplier of last resort process and the energy price cap have protected consumers considerably through this difficult period.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Hundreds of my constituents have been in touch with me over the last few months as their energy suppliers have collapsed. As the Secretary of State said, 22 suppliers have now collapsed. We are moving back to an oligarchy of energy companies that are increasing their profits, while the supplier of last resort is socialising losses. What is he going to do to fix the broken energy market? This winter we are going to have a perfect storm of rising wholesale prices and collapsing companies. How is he going to resolve that, so that people do not end up in fuel poverty?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's characterisation; I do not think that we are going back to an oligopoly, as he said. I have always maintained that competition is essential in this market. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) alluded to, there has been a huge mismatch between the wholesale price and the retail price cap. The retail price cap is there to protect consumers, otherwise we would have seen a huge increase in consumer prices and the hon. Gentleman's constituents would have been under even more pressure.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I have been on something of an energy nomadic experience over the last few months. I started with Avro Energy a few months ago, but that went bankrupt and I was converted domestically to Bulb, and I am now in the support scheme within the space of three months. There was a 12% energy price rise at the last round, in August. Who knows what it will be in April next year? The policy of trying to sell ten pences for sixpence does not last very long. What we are going to see over this winter is the Treasury—that is, the taxpayer—making up the difference for these spot prices versus the reality of what energy is being sold for to domestic users. Will my right hon. Friend please see the vision that the only bridging energy supply, of which we have a lot domestically, is gas? We all want net zero sometimes, but it is not going to happen tomorrow; it is going to take a generation to get there. We have a domestic supply that can bring us the two key planks of energy: security of supply and affordability. Domestic users and the industry need that immediately.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I have two points in response to my hon. Friend. First, I am not embarrassed about the retail price cap. It has protected consumers effectively and we are proud to maintain it. On the security of gas, I could not agree with him more, but he should be addressing his comments to other Members of this House, who want essentially to shut down the UK continental shelf. We had a North sea transition deal precisely because we recognised that the transition would take a number of years.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The fact that another energy supplier has gone under is causing huge anxiety for constituents everywhere, who will be equally concerned that the supplier of last resort process has not worked in this case. Will the Secretary of State reassure them: how many other energy suppliers is he concerned about this winter and how many customers would that represent? If this process is not working, is he considering a Northern Rock-style energy company to take on customers of companies that have gone under, given that the process has not been working in this case?

Kwasi Kwarteng: As I have maintained, there are two forms of remedy to deal with this sort of situation: the supplier of last resort, and a special administrative regime. In the particular instance that is the subject of the urgent question, it was felt by Ofgem, not the Government, that the supplier of last resort mechanism was inappropriate, and we are therefore looking at the special administrative regime, as I said in my statement—but both the structures are working.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): This will be a worrying time for Bulb customers, who will be concerned not only about the continuity of their supply, but about the protection of the payments that they have already made. Many of my constituents were with Avro and have been in touch with me, concerned about whether the payments that they have made by direct debit will be translated into future payments. Will the Secretary of State give them some reassurance that their payments have been and will be protected?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I mentioned in my initial response to the urgent question that consumer balances will be protected throughout the process.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State keeps on saying that it is all working, but to be honest, it does not feel like it is. I do not think that I have ever seen such an example of Government complacency at the Dispatch Box as bad as this. The truth of the matter is that millions of people are worrying about what their bills are going to be, businesses are going to struggle and 22 companies have gone under. How on earth is that, "Yes, it's all working perfectly"? Will he please answer one simple question, to which taxpayers will want to know the answer: how much is the Government bail-out going to be in the end?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I will answer the hon. Gentleman's latter question. There is no Government bail-out; the poor, failing companies have not been bailed out—I want to reiterate that. If he knows anything about the energy market, he will know that over the last few years, six or seven companies have exited the market and were dealt with through the supplier of last resort process. The stresses of this particular gas price situation—which, I remind hon. and right hon. Members, quadrupled in the last six months—meant that there was more pressure this year, but the system and structure of the supplier of last resort process and the special administrative regime are working.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Kettering parliamentary constituency generates enough renewable energy from wind and solar to power all 45,000 local homes, and is one of the greenest constituencies in the whole country. If we are to reduce our exposure to volatile international gas prices, is it not crucial that we do more to diversify our source of supply?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Absolutely. My hon. Friend will be happy to realise that that is exactly what we are doing through the 10-point plan, with commitments to offshore wind, solar power, nuclear power and other technologies. It is a huge imperative for us—and for me as Secretary of State—to ensure that we have a diversity of supply.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Bulb was the seventh largest energy supplier in the United Kingdom. How much bigger does a supplier have to be before it is too big to be allowed to fail? What are the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues going to do to ensure that the cost of this market failure is not borne by ordinary families, who are already struggling to pay their fuel bills this winter?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about Bulb. It was a very large company, which is precisely why the supplier of last resort was not felt to be an appropriate mechanism in this instance. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members chunter from a sedentary position. The solution is the special administrative regime, which I outlined—I hope, clearly—in my initial statement.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made various references to nuclear power and it is great to hear that there is a mix and a commitment to nuclear power. How long is it

since the latest round of commissioning of nuclear power stations that the last nuclear power station was commissioned and how many more are planned in the future?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Being a close student of the energy White Paper, as I am sure he is, my hon. Friend will know that we have had a commitment to invest in one more large-scale nuclear project before the end of the Parliament. He will also know that we have committed to small modular reactors. I was very pleased to go to Sheffield to make that announcement only last week. Nuclear is clearly a big part of our energy mix and will help us in the future.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Government's headlong rush to net zero is already showing through in people's fuel bills and levels of fuel poverty in the United Kingdom. Despite what the Secretary of State has said about licences to help through the transition period, we will still be reliant for 50% of our gas on outside sources, which does not give us energy security. At the same time, we have enough gas under the ground in the UK to keep us totally supplied for the whole country for 150 years, which could help the levelling-up agenda in the north-west of England, and help my constituents who currently find themselves at the end of a very expensive pipeline and are very vulnerable. Why are the Government not prepared to exploit the resources that we have to deal with fuel poverty and fuel security and to help the levelling-up agenda in poorer parts of England?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I do not apologise for the net zero agenda. We saw big strides at COP26. We could have gone further. That is an area in which we are showing leadership and that is something we should be proud of. On, as the right hon. Gentleman put it, exploiting gas resources, we looked at fracking. There were issues with regard to the Richter scale, earthquakes and that sort of thing. People objected to that and we imposed a moratorium. But I am very happy to discuss this issue with him if he wishes.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The UK Government are responsible for families facing a cost of living crisis due to the triple whammy of rising gas prices, looming tax rises and cuts to universal credit. Thankfully, in Wales, our Labour Government are providing an additional one-off cash payment of £100 for vulnerable households to support them in paying their fuel bills this winter. This Government are more concerned with bailing out energy companies like Bulb than supporting the most vulnerable. Will the Secretary of State do the right thing and follow Wales's lead in supporting the most vulnerable in fuel poverty?

Kwasi Kwarteng: Supporting the most vulnerable is exactly what we are doing through the warm home discount and the extension to it. That is exactly why we have maintained the energy price cap, which many of the companies have protested against. We are always mindful to protect consumers and to protect the most vulnerable.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Federation of Small Businesses has found that 77% of Scottish businesses have seen an increase in their overheads since this time last year, and fuel costs make up a huge proportion of that. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the likelihood of these costs being passed on to consumers, who are also paying higher prices at the tills because of inflation and Brexit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: One word that the hon. Lady did not mention was covid. As a consequence of covid, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has put £400 billion into the economy to support the very businesses that she refers to. Many, many of the businesses in Scotland have been supported by that.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Just since the Budget, several companies have gone under. Will the Secretary of State inject some urgency into this matter and look again at the suggestion, now that the Treasury has the freedom to do so, to lift the VAT burden both on households and on small businesses, so that we could have an immediate lift that will happen in this country regardless of what is happening to global prices?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will appreciate that matters to do with taxation, VAT and all those things are subject to the Chancellor of the Exchequer's departmental policy. She will also know that there is urgency about this. I speak to Ofgem every day. We monitor the market extremely closely. We are looking at how the supplier of last resort process is working—it is working reasonably well. As I have said, we are looking at the special administration regime with regard to Bulb.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): This is not happening in other countries. If this is evidence of the system working, I would hate to see it if it was not working. The Government have ruled out any bail-out from the Treasury. Will the Secretary of State give the same undertaking that customers will not be forced to pay huge bills in order to pay for the Government's failure of regulation?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I would like to point out that an energy price cap such as we have does not occur in other countries, so consumers here are being protected. Many of those who are actually bearing the brunt of this crisis are the very firms that, for whatever reason, have had to leave the market. The structure is working. It is protecting consumers, and companies that have fallen foul of these very high prices have been forced out of the market.

Transport for the North

1.5 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)*(Urgent Question):* To ask the Minister to make a statement on the future of Transport for the North.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Transport for the North is a sub-national transport body. Its statutory role, as set out in legislation, is to provide a strategic transport plan for the region and to provide advice to the Secretary of State.

Since 2016, in addition to these statutory responsibilities, Transport for the North has co-clienting the development of Northern Powerhouse Rail alongside the Department for Transport. As this important programme moves into its next, more complex, delivery stage, it is right that we have a single, clear line of accountability to the Secretary of State. This has been an important lesson learned from the delivery of other major infrastructure projects. Therefore, Transport for the North will transition from co-client to co-sponsor, continuing to provide statutory advice and to input on the strategic direction of the programme. The details of this arrangement are currently being worked out between my Department and Transport for the North.

Transport for the North's advice was carefully considered, alongside a range of other evidence, when developing the integrated rail plan. Any changes to Northern Powerhouse Rail's delivery does not impact Transport for the North's statutory function, nor the level of core funding it will receive this financial year to carry out those functions. Nor does it alter the Government's commitment to levelling up the north or the fact that the integrated rail plan commits £96 billion to improving rail infrastructure across the midlands and the north—the largest single Government investment in the history of British railways.

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question and thank the Minister for his response.

Sadly, though, I am far from reassured that cutting Transport for the North's responsibilities and funding are not just spiteful reprisals for TfN advocating strongly on behalf of the north for a new high-speed, fully electrified Northern Powerhouse Rail and for the eastern leg of HS2. I thought there was broad consensus, informed by Lord Heseltine's 2012 report, that rail infrastructure investment is a central part of the levelling-up agenda. Levelling up, in turn, was meant to be a central part of the Government's strategy to increase overall UK economic growth. Treasury rules were meant to have been changed. The Prime Minister has repeatedly promised not one but two high-speed train lines: the eastern leg of HS2, which would have benefited areas to the east of Leeds, including Hull; and Northern Powerhouse Rail. Now regeneration of great cities such as Hull and Bradford will be held back for another 20 years at least, with poor connectivity, slow speeds and inadequate capacity for passengers and freight.

By removing Transport for the North's responsibility for developing Northern Powerhouse Rail, Ministers reduce scrutiny and accountability and show no interest in working in partnership with the north. So much for devolution. When challenged, Ministers have decided to stop the criticism by gutting the powers of Transport for the North and centralising to Whitehall responsibility for rebranding the TransPennine route upgrade as Northern Powerhouse Rail. This Government are taking back control to prevent levelling up.

I, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) and many other MPs across the north want answers to the following questions. When did the Secretary of State decide that Transport for the North's advice on the integrated rail plan would be ignored and that it would not be provided with the full details and impact assessments of the integrated rail plan? What will be the fate of Transport for the North if it continues to advocate for a genuine Northern Powerhouse Rail line? What implications do the changes to TfN have for the wider levelling-up agenda and prospects for boosting UK GDP growth? Finally, how can the north now have a genuine say in its future?

Andrew Stephenson: Regrettably, the right hon. Lady's comments seem to stem from a confusion about what Transport for the North does. The last time she and I debated its role in this Chamber, she argued that her inability to secure improvements to the toilets at Hull station was why Transport for the North needed more money. I therefore gently remind her and hon. Members across the House that Transport for the North is not, nor has it ever been, a delivery body. Its statutory function is purely to develop a strategic transport plan for the north, in the same way Midlands Connect does for the midlands, and it therefore remains unchanged.

What has changed is that, as we are now moving into project delivery, the Department for Transport will assume the role of sole client for the Northern Powerhouse Rail programme, with responsibility for instructing both Network Rail and HS2 Ltd. Establishing that single client, answerable to the Secretary of State, is consistent with the Northern Powerhouse Rail delivery model endorsed by the board of Transport for the North in January 2021. We will take on board lessons learned from other major projects about the need for clear accountability.

The right hon. Lady might want to stand in this Chamber and talk about process and minor technical changes to delivery models, but I know what her constituents and mine, also in the north of England, want this Government to talk about: getting on with delivering the changes people want to see. We are investing £96 billion in the railways of the midlands and the north, the biggest investment the Government have ever made in the rail network. It will slash journey times, double or in some cases even triple capacity and, crucially, it will do all that 10 to 15 years earlier than the original plans.

When the right hon. Lady's constituents in Hull start to see the doubling in frequency of trains to Leeds, for example, they will not be worried about co-clienting or co-sponsoring. They will see a Government who are getting on with the job of levelling up this country and delivering the transformational transport improvements we were elected to deliver.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): May I first declare an interest, having been a member of the Transport for the North board for a period of time and having been involved in setting up the subnational

transport bodies? I confirm exactly what my hon. Friend has just said: Transport for the North is not a delivery body. What my constituents want to see is more progress in the delivery of our rail improvements. We have seen huge progress on rolling stock changes in the north. Next month we will see a doubling of the frequency of the service from Harrogate and Knaresborough to York, thanks to the work of North Yorkshire County Council and Don Mackenzie in particular. Will my hon. Friend just confirm that there will be a focus on delivery of the investment plans and accountability mechanisms for those charged with that delivery?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend, a former rail Minister himself, makes an important point. We must ensure there is clear accountability to Ministers for delivery of these projects, in the same way that there is already clear accountability for projects being delivered through the rail network enhancement pipeline and other schemes across the country. I completely endorse what he says. Transport for the North will remain an important partner for us to work with, and we look forward to receiving further advice from it, but the delivery model is best done with the Department for Transport as the sole client.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): How dare the Minister stand there and talk down my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for her question? She knows exactly what this means for people in Hull and for people in the north of England. The funding that was promised has not been delivered. The powers that were promised to the north of England, so that our metro Mayors, our council leaders and people in the north would finally get control, are being snatched away by this centralising Government, and we know exactly what it means—so let us have no patronising from the Government Front Bench on that.

We all know exactly what this is. We have seen it with the Electoral Commission: when it comes up with an answer the Government do not like, it is attacked. When parliamentary standards bodies come up with an answer the Government do not like, they are attacked. When Transport for the North comes up with a plan the Government do not agree to, it is to all intents and purposes scrapped.

I begin by asking the Minister to point now to where the money will come from and where the plans will be developed for new transport projects, bearing in mind that the integrated rail plan is a plan for 29 years. If no new schemes come forward in that period, residents in Hull will see very little investment. What are the practical implications for the staff? How many people who currently work for Transport for the North will be TUPE-ed across to the new organisation?

We know this is a Whitehall power grab, and we also know what it will mean in practice: no new projects, just more smoke and mirrors. Last week, the Transport Secretary said he was spending £96 billion in the north. That is not true. It is around half of that coming to the north of England, and that is over 29 years. What does that mean in practice? It is actually £100 per person a year, when the transport spending gap between the north and London is £400 per person a year. That is not levelling up. To be clear, we are not demanding that London gets levelled down. We are asking for the same.

We want to know that this is not a centralising power grab, because, if it is, we will not stand for it. What will the Minister do now, while he has a final chance to put the record straight, to convince us that this is not about robbing people in the north of the investment they deserve or a centralising Whitehall ministerial power grab, and finally to promise that the 29-year plan will not be the last word on transport investment in the north of England? If it is, the Government will have failed again.

Andrew Stephenson: Dear oh dear. It is clear once again from what the shadow Secretary of State has said that Labour want to stick to the outdated plans that would give the east midlands and the north nothing for 10 years. Our plan delivers the same, similar or better journey times to almost everywhere, with eight of the top 10 busiest rail corridors in the north and midlands benefiting, and it starts delivering those improvements 10 years sooner.

Labour wants to focus solely on the biggest cities in the north, ignoring smaller towns and communities that link them. Under the original plans, which Labour is so determined to stick to, places on the existing line such as Doncaster, Huddersfield, Wakefield and Leicester would have seen little improvement to, or even a worsening of, their services. Our plan means that those great northern places will receive the infrastructure projects they need to link them up with local, regional and national services that run alongside them.

In government, Labour failed to upgrade our railways. Our infrastructure tumbled down the world rankings. On top of that, the Leader of the Opposition cannot even decide whether he supports HS2. Labour does not have a plan to deliver for the midlands and the north; we do.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I thank the Minister for all the efforts I know he has put in during his time in the role to getting the very best package possible. I stood at that same Dispatch Box, promising the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) on very many occasions that Northern Powerhouse Rail would go all the way from Liverpool to Hull. Can the Minister set out how the integrated rail plan delivers the commitment I made within the journey times that she anticipates—and how much sooner it will now be delivered, compared with if we had had to build a second, parallel rail line?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank my hon. Friend and predecessor for his comments. As he will know, the Prime Minister was very clear and we were clear in our manifesto that we would commit to Northern Powerhouse Rail, with an initial focus on the section between Manchester and Leeds. The integrated rail plan expands that initial focus to between Liverpool and York. That is the core investment. Alongside it, many of the upgrades already being delivered as part of the rail network enhancement pipeline will continue—for example, upgrades to the Hope Valley line, improving journey times to Sheffield—but we will continue to consider other investments in our rail infrastructure alongside that, to deliver the transformational benefits that we all want to see to communities across the north of England.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The undermining of Transport for the North is just the latest act in a pattern of centralisation and

[Gavin Newlands]

Whitehall-think emblematic of this Administration. This Government do not like transport policy being run by Holyrood, so they cobbled together a Union connectivity review over its head—although it must be said that before the review is even published, the bridge over the biggest undersea munitions dump in Europe, the Prime Minister's pet project, has been dumped. This Government do not like transport policy being run by the Mayor of London, so they are starving him of funding. Now the Government do not like transport policy being criticised by Transport for the North, so they are slashing its funding and removing many of its responsibilities.

Why does the Minister think this Government know better than the people and elected representatives of the north of England? Last week, the Secretary of State said that a whole 75 staff from the DFT have moved to Leeds. When will the rest follow to the north, so that the people at the top of the Department truly understand the rundown and under-invested transport network that they are responsible for? Will the Minister guarantee that devolved Administrations will not be subjected to such attempted power grabs and undermining in future?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman talked about devolution. As he will know, 60% of the north is now covered by mayoral combined authorities and metro Mayors thanks to the historic devolution settlement by this Government. Indeed, this Government established Transport for the North.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about Department for Transport staff based in Leeds. I am delighted that, in the past year, we have established a new DFT office there. Last time I visited, 70 staff were working there. I am pleased to confirm that, as of today, the number has gone above 100. I look forward to visiting again to welcome even more staff in the coming months.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): We should take no lectures from Opposition Members who, in 13 years in government, did not lay a single mile of electrification in my area, downgraded northern routes, ploughed money into the south and left northerners rattling around on decades-old Pacer trains. I say to the Minister that we are grateful to have received our restoring your railway funding for the Brigg line, because if someone misses that last train on a Saturday they have to wait a week for the next one. Can he look closely at the business case that has been submitted on that? Will he also agree to work with us on the Goole to Leeds line through town deal funding? Can he tell us what improvements there will be to East Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire—the Humber—from the trans-Pennine upgrades?

Andrew Stephenson: There was quite a lot in that. I am sure my hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that the restoring your railway fund announcement will be separate from the integrated rail plan, so we have more announcements to come on that along with the rail network enhancements pipeline, which will also be published separately. The £96 billion is not the total of our investment in the north but the core pipeline for the north of England. He will also be pleased to hear that the investment in the trans-Pennine route upgrade will double the number of services from Hull to Leeds, among other benefits.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): The eastern leg of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail in full with a city centre stop in Bradford were promised many times. Now we hear that the Government have, in effect, dismantled Transport for the North by removing its powers and staff. A letter was sent from his Department to TfN late last night, but that does not change the fact that it did not approve the Government's approach—the Minister should show us the minutes. What we have seen is a mishmash of broken promises and a silencing of the Government's critics. How can the north have a say in its own future? Can he define exactly what a co-sponsor is and what its powers are?

Andrew Stephenson: It is important to say that we are not abandoning Transport for the North staff. We thank them all for the work that they have put into developing options for Northern Powerhouse Rail. The TUPE discussions are ongoing, so we hope that those staff can join the growing number of Department for Transport staff based in the north of England. The Government remain committed to HS2 and to Northern Powerhouse Rail. The plan that we set out last week explains how we will deliver the benefits to communities across the north sooner than ever expected.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): There are some excellent measures in the integrated rail plan that will be transformational for the economy across the country. In the plan, some money is set aside—I think £100 million—to look at the feasibility of other measures. Will the Minister consider asking Transport for the North to look at an improved direct connection between Bradford and Manchester? It currently takes about an hour to travel that 40-mile journey, so it would be transformational for Bradford and Manchester and across the north.

Andrew Stephenson: The £100 million announced in the integrated rail plan is specifically to look at how we can get HS2 trains most effectively from East Midlands Parkway to Leeds. We have not ruled out the construction of the full eastern leg at this stage; we are looking at whether it is the best long-term solution.

On Bradford, my hon. Friends the Members for Shipley (Philip Davies) and for Keighley (Robbie Moore) continue to remind me of its importance. I am just over the border from the Bradford district, so we are keen to see what we can do to support it. I spoke to the leader of Bradford Council the day after the publication of the integrated rail plan. We are keen to continue working with Bradford and local stakeholders to deliver benefits to that area.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Following the Minister's words about Bradford, the whole city of Bradford and my constituents are angry. Some 530,000 people have been failed. Although I welcome the question of the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) to focus on Bradford, the truth is that the Government have stripped it of £30 billion of growth in the next 10 years. It is the fourth-youngest city in the country. I also hear on the grapevine that the Government have held on to the IPOSs for Leeds because there might be a U-turn. My question is simple: when will he U-turn on the NPR?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Lady asks when I will U-turn. We do not intend to U-turn for all the reasons set out in the integrated rail plan. To spend billions of pounds investing in the existing rail route from Manchester to Leeds, and then to spend £18 billion more building a brand-new line, simply did not make economic sense. We will reduce journey times from Bradford to Leeds from about 20 minutes to 11 minutes, and we will continue to work with regional stakeholders to deliver benefits[1].

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My constituents are not interested in quangos, but they are interested in actual transport infrastructure. The Minister knows how unhappy and disappointed I was with the announcement regarding Bradford, the scaling-back of Northern Powerhouse Rail and the lack of a station stop in the centre of Bradford. Even at this late stage, I hope that the Government will think again about that. Given the huge disappointment to Bradford in that announcement, I urge him to go away and think about what additional transport infrastructure could be delivered to the Bradford district. I urge him to start with the Shipley eastern bypass.

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend continues to be a doughty champion for Shipley. As he will know, alongside the £96 billion announced in the integrated rail plan, we are spending more than £7 billion on road investments and more than £5 billion on buses and cycling initiatives. I am sure that his campaign for the bypass has been heard by other Ministers in my Department.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The integrated rail plan gives nothing to the north-east and will create economic imbalances across the north, giving us all less and at a later date. If the Government were confident of their position, there would have been a ministerial presence at this morning's meeting of Transport for the North. Instead, TfN seems to be meeting the same fate as anyone else who dares to speak the truth about the Government. Can the Minister confirm exactly what powers he is grabbing from Transport for the North and how many people are set to lose their jobs?

Andrew Stephenson: No one is set to lose their jobs and the statutory functions of Transport for the North are not changing. The plan delivers significant benefits to the north-east of England.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): My hon. Friend the Minister knows that I am a strong proponent of better transport links and infrastructure for my constituency, so I make a plea to him: whether it is in Transport for the North, Midlands Connect or any other organisation that is strategic or involved in delivery, could Lincoln figure more than just occasionally on a map?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend continues to make a passionate case for Lincoln. As he will know, many of the investments that he has campaigned so strongly for are the responsibility of other Ministers in the Department for Transport, but I am sure that they have, once again, heard his pitch.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I say to the Minister that there is no evidence that the Department for Transport can deliver on time or on cost, so why has the change to the delivery mechanism taken place? The cuts that we saw last week will have a serious impact on the economy across the whole of the north of England. Rochdale wants to trade with Hull, Newcastle and Sheffield, but the Government's plan does not allow that to take place.

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman asks about the change from co-clienting to co-sponsorship. As he will know, Crossrail, which has yet to open, was a co-cliented project, and one of the major lessons we have learned from that project being massively over-budget and delayed is that co-clienting does not work on major infrastructure projects. There need to be clear lines of accountability to the Secretary of State for Transport—he needs to be solely responsible for these projects to Parliament, the National Audit Office, the Public Accounts Committee and others—and that is why we are going for a sole-clienting model. It is one of the lessons we have learned from the Crossrail debacle.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I welcome the improved connectivity from Kettering railway station to the north as a result of Government investment in our railways. We have recently had our twice-an-hour service to and from the north reinstated, after it was taken away by the Labour Government in 2010. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the connectivity from Kettering to and from the north will be further improved with the complete electrification of the midland main line?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Kettering is one of many parts of the country that will benefit much earlier and more significantly from the plans we announced last week than from the previous plans. He continues to campaign for further improvements in his constituency, and I am keen to continue working with him to ensure that we deliver those benefits, such as the midland main line electrification, as early as possible.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is quite simple, is it not? The Government are slashing Transport for the North because they are slashing transport for the north, abandoning the much-promised ambitions for an integrated transport infrastructure that our economy needs. Will the Minister tell me who will set out the plans for our northern transport future, or do we not have one?

Andrew Stephenson: Last week, the shadow Secretary of State described £96 billion, the biggest investment in our railways, as "crumbs from the table". I think we need to focus on what we are delivering, not the amount of money we are putting in. We will continue to work with Transport for the North, as the statutory transport body in the north advising on our plans, and we look forward to continuing to have a positive relationship with it.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): Way back in 2016, when I was thinner and probably younger looking, I helped a young man by the name of George Osborne set up the Northern Powerhouse Partnership. As part of that, I actually worked with those at Transport for the North in their Manchester Piccadilly offices, and I have to tell the House that I found them partisan, specious and entirely obsessed with Labour party politics. Does the Minister agree with me that what is happening

1. *[Official Report, 25 November 2021, Vol. 704, c. 6MC.]*

[Katherine Fletcher]

here today is the Labour party finally realising that it does not control the whole of the north of England, and there is more than one way of getting something done?

Andrew Stephenson: I am delighted to see my hon. Friend in the House, alongside many other Conservative MPs elected in 2019. I am surrounded by far more Conservative MPs in the north of England than I used to be when I was first elected in 2010, and it is a real pleasure, because people such as my hon. Friend bring real expertise to this House. We want to work with Transport for the North in the same way that we work with Midlands Connect and other sub-national transport bodies across the UK, but as we move into delivering the benefits of these investments sooner, we need to have the Department for Transport as the sole client delivering these projects.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): In February 2020, I asked the Prime Minister about this issue, and he told me:

"We will make sure that we have Hull fully as part of our vision for High Speed North".—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2020; Vol. 671, c. 729.]

So why were the strong recommendations from Transport for the North for electrification of the Hull to Selby line completely ignored?

Andrew Stephenson: No one's advice was ignored. For 20 months after we launched the integrated rail plan, following the Oakervee review, in February last year, we have taken a range of evidence from the National Infrastructure Commission, Transport for the North, Midlands Connect and stakeholders across the region. As we have worked through those plans, we have been clear that we will deliver benefits to people across the north of England sooner than the original plans. I think that the £96 billion we have announced—an historic investment in railways across the midlands and the north—is something of which we can all be proud.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): When it comes to the discussions around this, I do not think it is helpful to get the Northern Powerhouse Partnership chairman on TV claiming that things are not going to happen that were never even going to happen under Northern Powerhouse Rail. The misleading words being said are no use to this debate at all. When we talk about the north, one of the big things that is a concern to us is the Leamside line and the things that should happen with it. It does get a mention in the IRP, about how this could be done through a different mechanism, but would the Minister meet me to discuss that further and work out how best we can continue to progress the Leamside line?

Andrew Stephenson: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend, who continues to make a passionate case for the Leamside line. I am happy to work with him and local stakeholders to see what we can do. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Can I make it clear to those who are gesturing while sitting down that I have called to ask questions several people who were not here at the very beginning of the Minister's response to the urgent question? I should explain to the Chamber that I have been very lenient today because I am aware that the Annunciator was not changed until several—*[Interruption.]* No, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) must not dissent from what I am saying. It is a very simple explanation of why I am being kind and considerate to the Chamber.

I could stop and say that the moment the Minister gets to his feet, anyone who is not in the Chamber at that moment is not allowed to utter a word, but in my judgment that would mean that neither the Minister was properly questioned nor the Government held to account on this important matter. On this occasion, the monitor was not changed, this part of business started early and several people were taking part in an important event with Mr Speaker downstairs. I have therefore been lenient, because I think it is more important, when there is a matter of judgment, to come down on the side of giving colleagues the opportunity to ask their questions and to hold the Government to account. That is my judgment and why I have done this, and it ought not to be questioned.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Both today and last week when Ministers talked about the scrapping of the eastern leg of HS2, they have talked a lot about improving journey times, but we all know that one of the reasons for doing HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail was, above all, to improve connectivity and capacity. Can the Minister explain how the new integrated rail plan and today's announcement about Transport for the North are going to increase capacity and connectivity, and will this reduce fares to encourage more people to stop using their cars and get on to trains?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. As set out in the integrated rail plan, on many of these key routes we are doubling or trebling capacity. I also want to be clear, on the eastern leg, that we have committed and funded through the integrated rail plan to build a first phase from the west midlands to the east midlands, and there is now £100 million for further work to look at the best way to get HS2 trains from there through to Leeds. For the time being, therefore, the plans to build the full eastern leg remain as they are. No safeguarding has been lifted, and that is something that will be changed only after we have the outcome of the study.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As a big supporter of HS2, I have to admit I was very disappointed about the news of the eastern leg going up to Yorkshire. Obviously, I was disappointed as well that the Leader of the Opposition had campaigned against it so vigorously. Can the Minister confirm that there is lots of good news in the integrated rail plan for my constituents who use Huddersfield station, Slaithwaite station and Marsden station on the trans-Pennine route? I thank the Minister for visiting Marsden last year with local rail campaigners, and will he confirm that we can get investment in disabled access at Marsden railway station as well?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend is completely right in what he says about the Leader of the Opposition, who has opposed HS2 consistently over the years and said that its impact on the country would be "devastating";

even in 2019, he was still calling for the project to be cancelled. I am happy to confirm that, as part of the trans-Pennine route upgrade, every single station in my hon. Friend's constituency will see massive investment, including to make them all fully accessible to disabled passengers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The reason why Transport for the North has rail and political leadership on it is to join up the local economies of the north with the transport system. That is what the Northern Powerhouse Rail project was all about. Cutting the project means that we are going to lose connectivity and capacity and see major disruption on the route. The board of Transport for the North met this morning to try to find a way forward with the integrated rail plan and its proposals. Will the Minister ensure that he meets the board and finds a way forward?

Andrew Stephenson: I spoke to Martin Tugwell, the chief executive of Transport for the North, the day before the integrated rail plan came out. I continue to have regular conversations with Transport for the North, and we are determined to work closely with it as its role moves from co-client of the Northern Powerhouse Rail project to co-sponsor.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Unfortunately, the eradication of Northern Powerhouse Rail will have a detrimental effect on my constituents who use Greenfield station. Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about the Transport for the North board meeting today, I believe that TfN has put out a statement proposing a process of mediation, which would involve investigating potential local financial contributions to get the much-needed new line via Bradford. Will the Minister meet the leaders of the north to discuss that?

Andrew Stephenson: Last Thursday, the day on which the integrated rail plan was announced to the House, I met many board members of Transport for the North to discuss the plans. We are keen to continue to work with members of the board and with Transport for the North itself, although it is important to say that the integrated rail plan process has now concluded, as has the spending review. If local funding is brought forward, we will certainly look at that, but the Government's plan has now been published.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Last week's announcement, a centralised decision from the Department for Transport, effectively scrapped not merely the high-speed line from Sheffield to London, but the high-speed lines from Leeds to Sheffield, from Sheffield to Birmingham, and from Sheffield to Manchester. Is it not the case that, because Transport for the North disagreed with those decisions, the Minister has effectively switched it on to Zoom? He can sit in his office, he can see that it is there, but with the mute button on, he does not have to listen to its advice.

Andrew Stephenson: Transport for the North has never been a delivery body, it is not a delivery body, and it is not becoming a delivery body. Opposition Members seem to get hot under the collar about these technicalities when in actual fact, we are getting on with electrification. The midland main line electrification will deliver significant benefits sooner than anticipated. I gently remind the Opposition that in the 13 years of the last Labour Government, they managed to electrify only 63 miles, compared with the 1,100 miles already electrified under this Government.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that a lot of the north is further north than York. In the north-east, there is political consensus and support from business and Transport for the North for the reopening of the Leamside line to get extra capacity on the east coast main line, which is needed. That is clearly being ignored. Can the Minister tell me where that project lies, or will it just be shelved and forgotten about? I urge him to stop trying to con people in the north by giving pots of money out to fantasists' projects such as the railway line up to Consett, which will cost £640 million. I would rather have the money concentrated and spent on transport, and not on just backing consultants.

Andrew Stephenson: The right hon. Gentleman again makes a compelling case for the Leamside line. Many colleagues across the House, and many of the regional stakeholders in the north-east that I talk to, continue to make that case. It is not funded as part of the integrated rail plan. However, the Department for Transport is keen to continue working with local stakeholders to see how it could be delivered. I remind him, though, that within the £96 billion there is £3.5 billion for improvements to the east coast main line, which will significantly reduce journey times from the north-east of England down south.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): However much the Minister blusters, he cannot get away from the fact that this is an £18 billion cut to the capital programme and a centralisation of the investment decision. The basis that the Minister and the Secretary of State gave for the change in the project and the cut was that it would take until the 2040s to achieve the expenditure of that extra £18 billion. Why, under the Government's control, will they build and invest at a slower rate than the Victorians did using pickaxes and shovels?

Andrew Stephenson: The hon. Gentleman is going to see over the coming years an acceleration of investment in the midlands and the north and a rebalancing of some of our investment programmes. Northern Powerhouse Rail will deliver two brand-new lines, from Warrington to Manchester and from Manchester to Marsden. In addition, we have a transformational upgrade of the trans-Pennine route far beyond anything committed to that route by any previous Government.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I pay tribute to my constituent in Little Neston, Councillor Louise Gittins, who has been doing a sterling job as the interim chair of Transport for the North. Judging by some of the comments from Conservative Members, she has been doing her job a little too well. She, like me, has been campaigning for a half-hourly passenger service on the Wrexham to Bidston line, which we had hoped to see in place by now. Can the Minister guarantee that we will see that delivered next year?

Andrew Stephenson: I am sure that the rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), will have heard the hon. Gentleman's pitch on behalf of his constituents. Of course, we are progressing with improvements to deliver the western leg of HS2 as early as possible. We committed in the Queen's Speech to bringing forward a Bill in this parliamentary Session. That will deliver significant benefits to Cheshire, particularly realising the Crewe hub and the Crewe northern connection visions.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Make no mistake about it, the north-east was abandoned last week by the announcement from this Government—cut off completely from the high-speed rail network. I urge the Minister to actually visit Northumberland; if he looks at the map, it is a little bit above Newcastle, just below the Scottish border. The Government have announced on more than 60 occasions that there would be this "Crossrail in the north", so I am right to be concerned that the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line in my constituency, which runs from Ashington, through Bedlington, up to the Metro, might be considered for withdrawal. Will the Minister guarantee from the Dispatch Box today, Wednesday 24 November, that investment in the Ashington, Blyth and Tyne line will continue in earnest, and that there will be no reduction in the original plans?

Andrew Stephenson: Dear oh dear, Madam Deputy Speaker. We are getting on with investing and levelling up the north-east of England. We are reopening the Northumberland line; we already have new Azuma trains running on the east coast main line; we are spending £3.5 billion more on investment in the east coast main line; and, of course, the Pacers, which were allowed to rattle passengers to the core under Labour, have all been eradicated thanks to this Government. We will continue to invest in the north-east and deliver early benefits to passengers across that region.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Mick Whitley.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The integrated rail plan came as a bitter blow to the people of Merseyside. It will do almost nothing to improve connectivity, capacity or rail times, and it could end up costing our region millions of pounds due to disruption. It also does nothing to address the issue of spiralling rail fares, which are set to increase by almost 5% next year, pricing the poorest in our region out of rail travel altogether. Does the Minister agree that my constituents in Birkenhead have been badly let down by this Government?

Andrew Stephenson: No, I do not. I look forward to continuing to work with Mayor Rotheram and local stakeholders to ensure we deliver the transformational improvements to Liverpool that are committed to as part of the £96 billion, the biggest ever Government investment in rail in the midlands and the north.

Points of Order

1.50 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you could help me to ensure the ministerial code is followed and the Minister corrects the record in the House.

On 17 November, the health Minister, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), gave misleading information to MPs on the Government's handling of contracts during the pandemic. The Minister said:

"The National Audit Office has reviewed the testing contract, and it has confirmed that all the proper contracting procedures were followed."—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 596.]

That is not correct, and it is severely misleading.

The NAO issued a report on 18 November 2020 evaluating 20 contracts awarded during the early stages of the pandemic. This included multiple covid testing contracts. The NAO's report concluded that

"we also found specific examples where there is insufficient documentation on key decisions, or how risks such as perceived or actual conflicts of interest have been identified or managed."

It went on:

"In addition, a number of contracts were awarded retrospectively, or have not been published in a timely manner. This has diminished public transparency".

A High Court judge found that the former Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), acted unlawfully in failing to promptly release the details of Government agreements with private firms. The NAO noted that the Government created a VIP lane, where firms were 10 times more likely to be awarded a contract. It found:

"The sources of the referrals to the high-priority lane were not always recorded on the team's case management system and we found a case where a supplier was added to the high-priority lane in error."

The NAO reported:

"We found inadequate documentation in a number of cases on how the risks of procuring suppliers without competition had been mitigated."

The NAO also stated that there were examples of work starting before contracts had been awarded. Given all that evidence from the NAO—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Is the hon. Lady coming to an end, because this is a very long point of order?

Dawn Butler: I am really sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, but there is so much evidence from the NAO that the Government have not followed procedure, it is vital the Minister come to the House and correct the record, because it is totally misleading, incorrect and wrong.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I appreciate that she wanted to put it in great detail, although I discourage such long points of order. I also appreciate the point she wants to make and that she wants to draw her argument to the attention of the House and to those on the Government Benches, which is perfectly reasonable.

I have to say to the hon. Lady, however, that the content of what Ministers say here in the Chamber is not a matter for the Chair. It may be—it may be; it is not for me to judge—that the Minister considers what

she said correct, but that the hon. Lady considers what the Minister said not correct. The hon. Lady has produced evidence from very worthy and dependable bodies challenging what the Minister has said, but that is not a point of order for the Chair; it is a matter for the continuation of the debate. However, the hon. Lady has every right to bring her points to the Chamber. I encourage her to speak to the Clerks and the Table Office, and to consider ways in which she can reopen this very important subject.

Dawn Butler: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Further to that point of order? I doubt it.

Dawn Butler: I wonder how we are supposed to operate in Parliament if Ministers do not come to the House and tell the truth.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ah. Now, now, now. We must be very careful here. I am sure the hon. Lady does not want to rise in her place and say that a Minister, whom she has identified, has not told the truth. Will she assure me that that is not what she is saying?

Dawn Butler: The Minister is rewriting history and I think we have a problem with that. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will accept that. The Minister rewriting history is a matter—*[Interruption.]* No, I do not need any advice from the Treasury Bench right now, thank you. The hon. Lady is alleging that the Minister is rewriting history. She may make that allegation. I was not happy with her saying that an untruth had been told and I am grateful to her for changing the way in which she has made her point. I am very grateful to her. We must keep moderation here in the Chamber.

I say again to the hon. Lady that what she clearly wishes to do, and it would seem on perfectly reasonable grounds, is reopen the debate. There are various ways in which she can do that. The Clerks and the Speaker's Office will help her to do so, because it is important that Ministers are held to account, and that if the hon. Lady believes the facts laid before the House by a Minister are not correct, they be corrected at the earliest possible opportunity. The Minister's colleagues will have heard what I have said and what the hon. Lady has said, and I hope that that will be acted upon. If the hon. Lady needs further advice on how to bring this matter forward, I am more than happy to help her in private.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope my point of order will be moderate and speedy. I believe it relates to a critical issue for the House. A week ago, this House agreed:

"That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty"—

to lay before the House—

"the minutes from or any notes of the meeting of 9 April 2020 between Lord Bethell, Owen Paterson and Randox representatives, and all correspondence, including submissions and electronic communications… relating to the Government contracts for services provided by medical laboratories, awarded to Randox Laboratories Ltd." —[*Official Report*, 17 November 2021; Vol. 703, c. 586.]

During the debate prior to that motion being agreed, the Minister present was unable to provide a definition of what was within scope in relation to the solemn commitment made by the House to Her Majesty, and she was unable to reassure the House with a concrete timetable to make good on that commitment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, is it in order for the Government to agree to present an Humble Address to Her Majesty yet not be forthcoming with the vital information required to fulfil that commitment? If not, what action can Opposition Members take to ensure the Government keep their promises to the Crown?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. She is absolutely right to raise this matter. I recollect that the House agreed to the terms of the Humble Address. Mr Speaker would expect the Government to fulfil their obligations under that Humble Address agreed to by the House. I am sure that those on the Government Benches have heard—

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am getting assent on that. I am sure that those on the Government Benches have heard what the hon. Lady very reasonably said. I am quite sure that Mr Speaker will expect the Government to act accordingly and in a timely fashion. If the hon. Lady is still concerned about this matter in a few days' time and she has not had the action she very reasonably expects, I am quite sure that the Clerks and others will give her advice on how she might pursue the matter in this Chamber.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As you will be aware, the proposed demutualisation of Liverpool Victoria and its sale to Bain Capital has generated considerable public concern. The current chief executive of LV is claiming that all the bids LV received would have led to demutualisation and loss of membership rights. I understand that that might not be the full story, and that the tender document issued to Bain and others might have been specifically written with demutualisation in mind. I also understand that the full new board of LV, if the deal goes through, has been approved by the Financial Conduct Authority, but is being kept secret by Bain.

Can you advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how to encourage Treasury Ministers to persuade the FCA to publish in full the details of the new board and the tender document, so that our constituents who are members of LV have all the relevant information in front of them before they decide how to vote on the future of LV?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. It is probably not a point of order for the Chair as it does not refer to procedure in the House. However, he is absolutely right to say that the Liverpool Victoria issue affects constituencies across the country. I am well aware of the points that he makes, and I understand and have sympathy with why he wishes to raise the matter in the Chamber. However, as I have advised other colleagues, the Table Office will be able to

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

advise him on how to pursue the matter further with Ministers. If he does so, I am sure that his attempts will be treated with sympathy and understanding.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday, I finally received a response from the Government to my named day question on the state of ambulance services in England—a month after I tabled it. The Government stated that all ambulance services in England are at their highest alert level—officially known as resource escalation action plan level 4—and that they have been since 22 October. That means that, for more than a month, every ambulance service in England has been under extreme pressure. We are hearing extremely worrying reports of areas that have run out of ambulances because they are all queuing up outside hospitals. The situation is now so dire that some patients are dying before ambulances arrive, or even in the back of ambulances outside hospitals because there is not enough space in accident and emergency.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I would be grateful if you please advised me and other Members of the House on how we can hold the Government to account for the crisis that is facing our health and care system when, as in this instance, the Government have failed to make a statement on the pressures facing our ambulance services and when Members such as me have had to chase the Government twice to get a response to a named day question that should have been answered a month ago.

Madam Deputy Speaker: There were two parts to the hon. Lady's point of order, one of which was a point of order and one of which was not. The part that is not a point of order is on how she can hold the Government to account. My answer to that, as I have advised others, is that she can take advice from the Clerks in the Table Office on how she might do so, such as by submitting an urgent question, applying for an Adjournment debate or a ten-minute rule Bill, or indeed an Opposition day when she can attempt to hold the Government to account.

On the matter that is a point of order for the Chair, Mr Speaker has said over and over again that he takes very seriously the matter of Government Ministers and Departments answering questions on time. Mr Speaker is very concerned about this matter and has said so many times from the Chair. I simply reiterate what he has said on that. The hon. Member might wish to raise the issue with the Procedure Committee, which monitors the Government's performance in responding to questions.

BILLS PRESENTED

Hate Crime (Misogyny) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse presented a Bill to make motivation by misogyny an aggravating factor in criminal sentencing; to require police forces to record hate crimes motivated by misogyny; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March 2022, and to be printed (Bill 200).

Members of Parliament (Prohibition of Second Jobs) (Motion) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Richard Burgon presented a Bill to require the Leader of the House of Commons to move a Motion prohibiting Members of Parliament having paid second jobs; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 December, and to be printed (Bill 201).

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Nadine Dorries, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Steve Barclay and Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng, presented a Bill to make provision about the security of internet-connectable products and products capable of connecting to such products; to make provision about electronic communications infrastructure; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 199) with explanatory notes (Bill 199—EN).

Social Media Platforms (Identity Verification)

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

2.4 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require social media platforms to offer a user identity verification process to all users; to require such platforms to offer options to limit or block interaction with other users who have chosen not to verify their identity through that process; and for connected purposes.

It is now normal to be called names like "bitch" and "whore" and to be called a liar on a daily basis. Young people are sent indecent graphic images during school lessons. Millions of people are routinely harassed through their mobile phones. Parents with dead or dying children are trolled at the most painful time of their lives. Confusion reigns from disinformation, scams and fraudulent posts, and we are regularly censoring ourselves to avoid attacks, pile-ons and rape threats. That cannot continue unchecked.

I have spoken before about the misery of the dark cyber-streets and alleyways. Our constituents are looking to us to help clean up digital Dodge City. While not all abuse is anonymous, the most frightening threats are from faceless, nameless, cowardly perpetrators who prevent us from being able to assess the true risk of a post. This cross-party Bill's approach not only provides social media users with more choice and more control over their online lives but tackles anonymous abuse. By adding that to the measures proposed in the draft Online Safety Bill and the Secretary of State's determination to make what is illegal offline illegal online, we can create immediate, meaningful change that will be felt throughout the UK.

I also want to say up front that, despite growing calls to ban anonymity online, that is not my proposal. I seek three simple things from social media platforms. First, give all social media users a choice: the right to verify their identity. Secondly, give social media users the option to follow or be followed only by verified accounts. Thirdly, make it clear which accounts are verified. Our blue ticks work—why should they be available only to famous people and MPs? The platforms could have already done that, but they have chosen not to do so. I think it is time that we legislate in these terms.

We cannot be perceived to ignore the impact of anonymity any longer. It is a key factor in bullying, harassment and trolling. When social media users are anonymous, they feel much more able to behave badly and abuse other users—it is a phenomenon known as the online disinhibition effect. Partly due to it being much harder to find and enforce rules against such behaviour, anonymous trolls do not get traced or banned—they often cannot be found. If they do get found, it takes them moments to create fresh accounts with new pseudonyms and continue their trolling or abuse.

We must also be honest that the ease with which accounts can be created and used anonymously, or with pseudonyms, is a major driver of harmful behaviour. We see the spread of disinformation, conspiracy theories and extremism. Organised disinformation networks exploit the ability to create fake accounts and false identities at scale. They use those networks to create false and misleading content, to spread and amplify that content, and to distort and disrupt online conversations. Facing facts, the tech companies do not know who millions of their users are, either. I understand that Facebook's own figures estimate that 5% of its accounts are inauthentic—that is 144 million inauthentic accounts—and independent estimates range up to 25%.

I have long argued that the issue of anonymity online is a gap for the Government but not for the public. While the Government's consultation omitted to ask questions on the topic, for many people, online abuse and anonymity go hand in hand. Famous campaigners such as Katie Price have talked movingly about the vile abuse that her disabled son Harvey receives. Ashley Cain—the dad of the late Azaylia Diamond Cain, a baby girl who died from leukaemia—had me weeping when he described the trolling that he and her mum received. I am sorry; I get upset.

A brave woman who I met through Instagram called Malin Andersson told me that when her baby was dying, trolls were telling her to kill her daughter by taking the tubes out of her face. I am sorry that I get upset, but I really struggle to say this without tears.

It is not just celebrities. I went down an awful internet rabbit hole last night looking at the scores of parents who were trolled when their children died. Some young Welsh dairy farmers were sent the most unimaginable messages from anonymous trolls, who claimed it was their fault that their son died because of their jobs. The article suggested that the trolls were vegan extremists, but the family will never know. They will live with the hate in their head, on top of their pain and grief.

It is therefore not surprising that Opinium polling suggests that 73% of adults

"support…government action to reduce the number of anonymous accounts"

and online abuse. Three quarters of UK victims online say that they have experienced abuse or harassment from anonymous accounts, and one in four people in the UK has been a victim of some type of online abuse—we can see the levels that we are dealing with.

Young women and girls are also suffering, so parents want action. I spoke to the actress and comedian Emily Atack about her awful experiences. Before she even has her breakfast in the morning, she is sent multiple pictures of penises by strangers, often anonymously—a bizarre thing to do, given how ugly they are, but she is now questioning whether she, rather than those who are sending the pictures, needs to be the one who changes.

We in this place want to deal with cyber-flashing, but as the Law Commission states, victims of cyber-flashing

"will often not know the identity of the sender".

Girlguiding and girls in the Stroud constituency are appealing to me and my colleagues to make changes to protect them.

Over the past few years, we have all been rightly appalled by the rise of antisemitism. In 2020, the Antisemitism Policy Trust identified that nearly 40% of reported antisemitic abuse online came from fully or partially anonymous users. The Community Security Trust notes that

"online platforms…represent an especially convenient, far-reaching, anonymising and secure-feeling environment for those who wish to voice and incite hatred."

[Siobhan Baillie]

It goes on. The stories of black footballers receiving racist abuse are well known. The incredible Kick It Out has identified social media as a "battleground of hate" and has said that everybody needs to do more to tackle the problem. It believes that we need

"better regulation and enforcement and we need social media companies to be part of the solution".

Currently, nobody feels that they are.

I am rightly challenged about my proposals, and I welcome that. I know that inciting hatred and racist abuse is already a crime: where an online user is engaged in illegal activity, they can be identified and prosecuted using existing legislation, namely the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Investigatory Powers Act 2016, but that takes years. One woman told me that when an anonymous troll threatened to "bleach" her, which is properly terrifying, it took a couple of years for him to be found and then no action was taken.

I look forward to talking to the Minister for Security and Borders to see whether enforcement of existing laws is the issue, but I still worry for victims, the police, Ofcom and the courts, who need to battle with finding the perpetrators before they can even deal with the abuse. If more people's details were held via verification, it would undoubtedly help.

Another important challenge is protecting whistleblowers and freedom of speech. My proposals will give space for people to continue using anonymous social media handles. They could still have an online Twitter handle of @NumberOnePeppaPigFan, although we may now be able to guess who that is. They could still use social media to explore their sexuality, whistleblow and reach out to others without their name on show. In all those circumstances, they could choose whether or not to verify the account; freedom of speech and vulnerable individuals would still be protected. The greatest impediment to freedom of speech, however, is not verification, but people fearing a rape threat or a death threat for saying what they think. That is what is happening right now—so many people are not free online.

I fear that the fantastic Online Safety Bill's lack of specific measures to tackle anonymous abuse will, unfortunately, weaken its credibility before the ink is even dry. Expectations have already been raised by headlines suggesting that the Bill will stop all abuse and that there will be multi-million-pound fines for the social media giants. If the proposals in my Bill were adopted within the Online Safety Bill, the regulator and social media platforms would understand from day one that there needs to be a change in how anonymous abuse is managed. The public would also experience immediate, tangible changes to their online experience and take back some control, rather than waiting to see whether there are more prosecutions and mega-fines.

I thank Stroud constituents, campaigners, organisations, sponsors of the Bill, peers and parliamentary colleagues for all their assistance in getting the Bill off the ground. I also thank the Joint Committee chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for its pre-legislative scrutiny work. I know that the team in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport really care about the issue. Working together, I really think that we can bring some light into the dark cyber-streets and make a true difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Siobhan Baillie, Mrs Maria Miller, Laura Trott, Dame Margaret Hodge, Caroline Nokes, Carla Lockhart, Andrew Griffith, Jeremy Wright, John Nicolson, Mr David Davis and Esther McVey present the Bill.

Siobhan Baillie accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March, and to be printed (Bill 202).

Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill

[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee of Session 2019-21, "The impact of Coronavirus on businesses and workers: interim pre-Budget report", HC 1264, and the Government response, HC 119; Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 7 June 2021, on Economic impact of coronavirus, HC 306.]

Second Reading

2.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We have made some incredibly difficult decisions, including closing certain businesses, to stop the spread of the virus during the covid pandemic. To minimise the impact on businesses, we have put in place temporary measures to stop evictions of commercial tenants for unpaid rent, restrict landlords' ability to seize goods to recover rent owed, and prevent landlords and other creditors from instigating certain insolvency proceedings. While those measures offered much-needed protections, they also meant that in many cases rent on commercial premises went unpaid and businesses accrued significant rent debt, estimated to be £6.97 billion across the UK over the pandemic.

We are already seeing the economy bounce back, but now we need to begin the work of preparing for a new economy post covid. We cannot draw a line under covid, however. Understandably, it has not been possible for many businesses to pay the rent debt that accumulated during the pandemic. Over the past year, we have therefore worked closely with business leaders to find a solution to that accumulated debt.

In June 2020, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government published a voluntary code of practice that encouraged landlords and tenants to work together to negotiate and resolve that unpaid rent. I am reassured by the fact that many tenants and landlords have used the code. The indications are that overall rent collection is increasing but remains below average levels, especially in certain sectors.

There are cases in which negotiation is not working. The Bill will support landlords and tenants who cannot otherwise agree in resolving disputes relating to the rent owed. It will protect rent debts built up by businesses required to close during the pandemic. It will establish a new binding arbitration process that aims to find a proportionate solution that will provide commercial tenants and landlords with the clarity and certainty that they need to plan ahead and recover from the pandemic.

The Government have published an updated code of practice that sets out what the arbitration process will look like, the kind of evidence that will be considered and the key principles to which the process will adhere. The code can be used by any business to help it to negotiate and resolve rent disputes, even if it falls outside the scope of the Bill.

The Bill will protect jobs and enable a swift return to normal market operation. I make it clear that it covers only rent debt that it is attributable to the period from 21 March 2020, when restrictions on business began, until restrictions for the relevant sector were lifted, which generally happened over the spring and summer of 2021.

We believe that it is important that the Bill is targeted to support the businesses that most need it and provide swift resolution to remaining disputes, so it applies only to those tenant businesses that were mandated to close during the pandemic. They are the parts of our economy that were hit hardest, including restaurants, pubs and high street shops; the rent collected from those sectors is still lagging behind other parts of the economy. The income from many businesses in those sectors, even after they have opened their doors again, will not yet be back to normal. Many businesses will therefore have been unable to build up the cash reserves needed to pay off rent debt.

These efforts to support businesses, largely in the hospitality, personal care and non-essential retail sectors, will particularly benefit women, young people and people from ethnic minority backgrounds because of the higher ratio of persons from those groups who work in those sectors.

The primary purpose of the Bill is to implement a simple, binding arbitration system to resolve those outstanding rent debts. A tenant or a landlord can refer a case to arbitration at any time within six months of the Bill's coming into force, and propose a solution to the protected rent debt. Arbitrators appointed by arbitration bodies approved by the Secretary of State will review proposals and then assess evidence from both parties to determine whether any relief from payment of the debt is appropriate. That could include a reduction from the total amount to be paid, cancellation of the debt, or an extension of the time period in which it should be repaid. The arbitrator will make an award, and if granting relief from payment of a protected rent debt is appropriate, the award will set out the terms.

The arbitrator must follow the principles established by the Bill. One key principle is that awards should only be made for viable businesses, or those that would become viable with an award of relief from payment. For example, a business could be granted an award that reduced the amount of debt owed if that reduction would allow it to become viable again. In this way, we are actively supporting businesses that will continue to prosper and grow, will provide jobs and will help the UK to build back better.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Will the Minister expand a little on how he expects the viability test to be met? It is obviously extremely important. During the pandemic, many businesses that applied for bounce back loans and the like were told they could not have the loans because they were potentially unviable owing to the coronavirus. How is the arbitrator meant to assess whether a business is viable?

Paul Scully: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a champion of pubs throughout the country. We will be looking at those and at the hospitality sector in general.

The arbitrator will be able to take evidence from both sides—the Government will not be taking a doctrinal approach—and look carefully at the books and the profit to establish whether this is just the rent debt that

[Paul Scully]

occurred during that period of closure, rather than any other debts that the business might have. He or she will have a narrow focus.

Mr Perkins: I welcome the Bill—it is important that action is taken, even if it is retrospective—but often the very fact that the rent had to be found will have had impacts on other parts of a business's funds. As the Minister works through the Bill, will he look carefully at the guidance to ensure that it does not shut out many businesses that could benefit?

Paul Scully: Throughout the Bill's progress, we will continue to engage with Members on both sides of the House, but also with landlords and tenants. We want to make this work, and to resolve these issues speedily but in the most appropriate way. That is in the interests of landlords and tenants. We hope that the fact that the legislation has been announced and we are taking it through the House will send a strong signal to landlords and tenants and they will not have to rely on this in the first place; we would love it if people had the conversations and resolved the issues. Landlords want their units to be filled, and tenants want to ensure that they can continue in a reasonable way, and if they can pay they should do so, as they are at the moment, because the Bill relates only to a particular period of closure.

An arbitrator should not make an award if it would make the landlord insolvent. This works for both tenants and landlords, and support for businesses must not be to the detriment of a landlord's solvency. The Bill also makes it clear that, if commercial tenants can afford to pay the rent debt without becoming unviable, they should pay. The arbitrator will consider financial records, and any other evidence considered appropriate to determine the viability of a business or the solvency of a landlord. We have engaged with arbitration bodies to develop this approach, and I am confident that it will deliver swift resolution for tenants and landlords locked in disputes. Officials' engagements with potential arbitration bodies has also raised awareness of our proposals, with the intention that, if Members of both Houses approve the Bill, the system will be set up and ready to go quickly.

I have already mentioned the protections that the Government rightly provide to stop commercial tenants being evicted or their businesses being wound up owing to rent debt during the pandemic. The measures introduced during the pandemic were designed to be temporary, offering much-needed respite to businesses unable to trade. We have already extended protections to continue to support businesses as needed, and to provide the time required to draft the legislation and put it before both Houses for consideration. In place of those measures, the Bill establishes a targeted intervention.

While parties are able to refer cases to arbitration within six months of the Bill's coming into force, and while arbitration is in progress, there will be restrictions on evictions, seizing of property and other measures of enforcement, and certain insolvency proceedings in respect of protected rent debt. That ensures that the parties who cannot agree have a chance to use this arbitration system to resolve protected rent debt before resorting to other legal remedies. I am confident that six months is enough time to allow tenants and landlords to apply for arbitration, but the Bill allows for the period to be extended if there is evidence that it is not long enough.

Throughout the development of the Bill, the Government have engaged extensively with tenant and landlord representatives. We launched a call for evidence in April, which gathered the views of tenants and landlords on the current protections and the voluntary negotiation approach, and asked for preferences on options for further solutions. The feedback was that while negotiations were taking place their voluntary nature was actually hindering progress in some cases, and nearly half the respondents said they agreed that a system of binding adjudication would resolve the outstanding rent debt. Since those findings, we have continued to work closely with business and landlord representatives to help shape the Bill and support negotiations, and, as I said to the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), we will continue to do so throughout the Bill's passage.

I have regularly met businesses and landlord representatives to discuss these proposals, and the issue of rent debt in the affected sectors in general. Following the Bill's introduction, we have received support from several bodies representing commercial tenants and landlords. They recognise the efforts the Government are making to encourage continued negotiations, and that a system must be in place to be used when negotiations fail.

We have also had productive engagement with colleagues from the Welsh and Scottish Governments and the Northern Ireland Executive, and I thank them for their continued input and support. I have written to the Ministers from the devolved Administrations to inform them of the relevant aspects of the Bill and seek legislative consent where it is required.

The Bill provides a solution that should be used only when parties have been unable to reach agreement between themselves. We are still adamant that tenants and landlords should negotiate where possible, but we recognise that some may never reach agreement on what is owed and how it should be repaid. The protections that the Government implemented during the pandemic have been extended to give the time needed for these negotiations. They have offered much-needed respite for businesses fearing eviction and bankruptcy, but they cannot continue forever, and we must act to help the market get back to normal.

I am sure the House agrees that leaving this rent debt unresolved would be detrimental to UK businesses and landlords, and indeed to communities. I am glad to see that the economy is bouncing back, but it is unreasonable to expect all businesses to be able to pay off immediately all the rent debt that they accrued when they were closed. We have heard from businesses and from landlord representative groups that the voluntary approach will only get so far, and that a binding arbitration system will work to unblock this issue. The Bill will put an end to the temporary protections and clear up the unpaid rent debt that is stalling commercial tenants and landlords and preventing them from prospering. I commend it to the House.

2.27 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his speech and for introducing the Bill. Let me reassure the House that I hope to make

a slightly more cohesive speech then the Prime Minister managed on Monday when he spoke to the CBI about the Government's approach to business, but Members are welcome to intervene if I do start making car noises or talking about Peppa Pig.

We generally welcome the Bill, and it will be welcomed by retail businesses up and down the country, because it creates an arbitration process for disputes between landlords and commercial tenants on rent arrears caused by enforced closure during the lockdowns, and also the subsequent impact on businesses' income and their ability to meet their outstanding rent demands, including outstanding service charges. It also restricts enforcement action for the recovery of rent arrears debt through the county courts for six months.

We accept the need for a fair arbitration process that deals with commercial rent arrears, and the need to ensure that that process works. There are some aspects on which we will seek further information, but before I come to them, I want to address the context in which this short and specific Bill is being introduced. Until this morning, we understood that it was to be a joint Bill between two Departments. It will not surprise the House to know that, as a shadow Levelling Up, Communities and Housing Minister, I shall be responding to the Minister as though he were the Communities Minister, because there are a number of aspects of communities and levelling up that I wish to address.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): My Lewisham East constituency has among the largest number of small businesses in London. Brilliant councils such as mine, the Borough of Lewisham, can only go so far in supporting small businesses, especially when their budget has been cut by the huge amount of 63% since 2010. What businesses across our country really need is the Government to see them through this very difficult ongoing period, and they need a recovery plan in place.

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Bill is specific and closely drawn and, as I will go on to say, there are a lot of other challenges still outstanding for businesses and the communities in which they sit that the Government need to be working on as well.

We of course recognise how tough the last 20 months have been for so many businesses and the pain of the pandemic has impacted across the economy, but it has been particularly hard on small businesses, especially family-owned businesses which are anchored in their communities—businesses that have spent years, even decades, doing the right thing such as supporting their staff and investing in their skills, and putting back into the local area. There are countless examples of businesses that have always done the right thing, and saw a downturn after they followed public health regulations and they closed.

I of course acknowledge the support that the Government provided for businesses during the pandemic —bounce back loans, VAT deferrals, rates relief, the furlough scheme, and the rents-based schemes—but too many businesses missed out on many of these schemes: those refused loans because their bank was not on the Government-approved list; or supply-chain businesses to sectors such as hospitality whose customers were required to close but they were not. They missed out.

Despite the relief schemes, many are still struggling; loans and VAT deferrals still have to be repaid, and those not yet making a profit are still required to pay their bounce back loan. Labour has sought to amend the rules so that a business has to repay its loan only when it is making money. The pain has been particularly hard on small independent businesses and family-owned businesses, which are anchored in their communities, and many sectors—such as the arts and events, and, particularly in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), travel and tourism—still face great uncertainty for months and years ahead.

On businesses that could not cope and had to close, in too many areas there are now vacant windows; there is no demand to take on the vacant premises. Of course the pandemic is not solely to blame for retail premises remaining vacant for long; the change in our shopping habits towards more online and less in-person has a major part to play, and in areas where a large proportion of people are impacted by the triple whammy of rising costs of living, the cuts to universal credit and the permanent or temporary loss of jobs, it is no wonder that retail businesses are particularly struggling when too many people have not enough money left over in their pockets at the end of the month.

The commercial rent arrears built up for businesses that had to close during the lockdowns are only one part of the challenge facing businesses across the country, so although we welcome the Government's taking action through this Bill, there is still so much more that they could do. For a start, they must address our outdated business rates system, under which similar sized shops pay vastly different rates and revaluations.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about the fact that although we support the Bill in its narrow terms, it could have offered much more, and particularly grateful for her making the point about business rates. I remember being in the shadow Business Department team back in 2014, and the Government were promising to change the business rates system back then. We have had any number of talks about it since, and so many businesses on the high streets know how unfair the regime is, yet we still have not had that action. Does my hon. Friend welcome the announcement of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) that a future Labour Government will address this unfairness?

Ruth Cadbury: My hon. Friend anticipates what I am about to say: this is about not just similar sized shops paying vastly different rents, but revaluations that result in exorbitant rises—by 200% for a business in Brentford in my constituency. Yet again the Chancellor has kicked the can down the road on business rates reform, as his predecessors have done before him. Businesses cannot afford the further dither and delay that we keep seeing from this Government, and of course I welcome the announcement by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) that Labour will abolish the outdated business rates system and replace it with a fairer system that creates a more level playing field and breathes life into our high streets.

[Ruth Cadbury]

Then there is the Chancellor's latest tax hike, a 1.25% increase in national insurance contributions, a double-whammy attack on our businesses; just when they need support, this Government decide it is time for a tax hike.

Then there is the permitted development rights changes and the impact that they will have, and in some cases already have had, on our town and village centres. The geographical hearts of our communities are threatened, particularly with the most recent changes brought in on 1 August that will make it easier for high street shops and businesses to be converted into poor-quality slum housing, with local communities and councils powerless to stop it.

I will finish by touching on a few areas where we would want to ensure further scrutiny of this proposed legislation as it moves forward. First, on the levels of arbitration fees, we know how tough things have been for businesses and want to ensure that they are not pushed over the edge with excessive fees in the new system. Secondly, as has been mentioned, there is the question of the viability of businesses and how they are assessed. Many businesses, especially those reliant on international travel and in other sectors that have been impacted in the long term by coronavirus, are still facing business slowdown even today. So I hope the Government will put in place a fair and reasonable assessment of viability, ensuring no business that can survive is left behind.

Thirdly, there is the issue of transparency and consistency in the arbitration and appeals process and how we can ensure a fair balance in the system between landlords and tenants. Finally, we seek assurance on whether a brand new, fully operational arbitration process can be in place by March next year. These are all areas that need more scrutiny and where the Opposition will make sure the Bill as it progresses works for businesses up and down the country.

To conclude, I reaffirm that we welcome the Bill and the arbitration process it creates for businesses who were in rent arrears through the pandemic closures, but the Government must not see this as the only action they still need to take: businesses up and down the country have had such a difficult 20 months that they need a Government prepared to do more to support them.

2.38 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate. I welcome the Bill but want to echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) by raising a series of important questions about how it will operate, in particular whether the Government's desire to set up the arbitration work so quickly is realistic given the pressure on the business and public sectors at this time. I also want to draw the Minister's attention to a number of related points that I wish were dealt with in the Bill, in particular physical retail businesses being treated fairly in comparison with online businesses.

At the outset, I want to put on record my support for our small businesses: they are the lifeblood of our economy and it is vital that all political parties support them. As the Reading and Woodley MP, I am currently running a campaign asking our residents to nominate their favourite small business, and I encourage other colleagues to do the same, because it is important for us to show our support for the small—and indeed the large—business sector after what the country and the world have just been through.

I would like to raise the issue of retail in Reading, and to encourage the Minister to look into the wider issue of the balance of Government policy in favour of online retail versus physical retail. As a London MP, he might know that Reading is the retail centre for central southern England. Retail generates thousands of jobs in our community, many of which are highly skilled, long-term jobs. People enjoy their work deeply and are passionately committed to retail. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth rightly said, the role of retail in place-making and establishing vibrant town and city centres is fundamental. I would like to ask the Minister, when he responds to the debate and in his further consideration of the Bill, to remind the House of the work that the Government are doing to level the playing field between online businesses, which seem to have so many advantages these days, and physical businesses. Physical businesses are referred to in the Bill, which deals with the issue of rent arrears, but I believe that there is much more work to be done and I urge him to address that when he speaks.

In particular, I would like to draw the Minister's attention to an issue that I have mentioned to him before, and for which I believe he has some sympathy. That is the need to have physical bank branches in local centres. This issue has been raised in relation to rural communities, but it is also an issue in many urban and suburban areas and in larger villages.

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend's comments are also pertinent to my area, where we have seen so many local banks close. That has caused a great issue for people in my local community, because they now need to travel further to different parts of the constituency and the borough, and the queues are longer. For older people and people who find it difficult to move around freely, this adds an additional burden, as well as having to wait longer in the queue. I am really frustrated by it. It is a serious issue when local banks have to close, because it has such an impact on so many people in our community. The Government really need to see what more they can do to support local banks. I really hope that local banks are listening to my hon. Friend's speech and to what I have just said.

Matt Rodda: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. She has stolen part of my speech, but she has done so very graciously.

Branch closures are an issue in suburban areas, as the Minister knows well. Travel times can be considerable at busy times of the day, and there are access issues for elderly and disabled people. Another important point that I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) would have made had she had the chance is that many small businesses are still receiving their takings in cash and they need to bank that cash safely. They want to be able to go to a physical bank to do that. I understand that the Department is doing some interesting work looking at pilots for shared services for banks in rural areas, and indeed there is a pilot in

Essex. Perhaps the Minister can update the House later when he speaks on this important issue. It is of great concern to many local small and medium-sized enterprises in Reading, Woodley and many other areas across the country and I hope that he will be able to address it. I also hope that he will encourage the banks to work together to ensure that there is interoperability of IT systems and other back-office functions so that they can support each other and support our small businesses. They really should be focusing on this important issue at this time.

I would also like to draw the Minister's attention to some related points, some of which have been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth. It is important, as we consider how to support small businesses at this difficult time, to look at the issue in the round and consider other aspects of support that the Government should in my view be offering. First and foremost, there are small businesses, many of which are micro-businesses, that missed out during the pandemic, and I would like the Government to look again at the issue of those businesses that were left behind. They include those that were set up in all good faith at the start of the pandemic but did not have three years of accounts and were therefore unable to claim any support. There are a number of other worthy and worthwhile groups that deserve further attention from the Government, and I ask the Minister to address the matter when he speaks later. This is a matter of huge significance to many of my constituents. I have had constituents in tears while speaking to me about this issue on the telephone, but unfortunately I was unable to offer them any help because of the limitations of Government policy.

In addition, I would like the Minister to speed up the work on business rates. We are calling for the current system to be scrapped. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) has spoken powerfully on this issue. It is deeply unfair that physical businesses are being asked to pay high levels of business rates while other competitor businesses in out-of-town locations or online are not being asked to pay the same level of business rates. That cannot be right, and it is not fair. I hope that the Government will address this point, and that the Minister will address it later today.

I would also like to pick up on the importance of rail and other transport infrastructure. The area that I represent is very lucky to be the western terminus for Crossrail, and we are already seeing enormous transformational change across the Thames Valley—and, I am sure, in Kent and Essex as well—as better rail connectivity brings people into town and city centres. Many towns and cities are being rebuilt significantly because of this investment, and if this is good enough for the south of England, I hope the Minister will urge his colleagues to think again about HS2 and the number of cities and towns that have been left on one side as a result of the Government's announcements earlier this week.

We can see the benefits of the infrastructure in our parts of the country, and we would like other towns and cities around the country to share in the regeneration renaissance that comes from sound investment in public transport leading to better connectivity. That investment spurs retail and the leisure and hospitality industry, and it is also crucial to sectors such as IT and other knowledge-based sectors of the economy. We have huge growth in that area in the Thames Valley, with businesses relocating to Reading purely because of its connectivity, and I urge the Minister to treat the north of England in the same way that previous Governments, including the Labour Government prior to 2010, treated the south.

2.45 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill and we hope it will be passed swiftly in order to protect struggling businesses. I have spoken to many businesses in my community that have really struggled with rent bills over the past 20 months. This is been a significant issue for many. As the Minister said, many landlords and tenants have been able to come to terms and make arrangements for how rent payments will be made, but a number have not been able to do so. I am thinking in particular of Don Fernando's restaurant in Richmond High Street, a legendary Spanish restaurant right by the railway station that has been there 30 years. It was unable to make such an arrangement and it is still getting rent demands from its landlord, which is registered in Jersey, unfortunately. This is a significant issue for the restaurant. Only the stay of execution allowed by the moratorium on evictions has enabled it to carry on trading. It is still open and I was there a few weeks ago. It is doing well, but it has significant concerns about its rent debts, so on its behalf I very much welcome the steps that the Business Department is taking.

Of course, this affects not only tenants. I have spoken to landlords as well, including small landlords and landlords of single units. In some cases, where they are letting those units out to large multiples, some of those retail chains are just turning round to those landlords and saying, "We are not paying." Up to now, there has been no mechanism to enter into a negotiation on this. It is very much the weaker party in these transactions that has to suffer the consequences, and on that basis I am really glad that this arbitration mechanism is being brought in. It will give a voice to both sides, particularly where there are no other mechanisms to resolve the issue.

My only slight grumble is that we could perhaps have passed this Bill sooner. The moratorium has been extended several times, which has been welcome, but bringing this Bill to Parliament more promptly would perhaps have allayed some fears and got the process going sooner for certain tenant-landlord relationships. But better late than never, as they say. It is here now and we certainly plan to support it. I hope that we will use this opportunity, even though we want to pass the Bill swiftly, to scrutinise it a bit further. One of the important points we want to raise is how arbitrators can effectively assess whether a business would have been viable. That is an important point, and we need to see more discussion about it. In the context of the pandemic, many businesses had to close because of Government instructions, but consumer behaviour has also changed radically as a result of the pandemic. As we look back over the past 20 months, I do not know how easy it will be to say which businesses would have been viable if their rent arrears had not built up to such an extent.

There are lots of great businesses in my constituency that came through the pandemic because they changed their way of working, including developing their online offering and doing home deliveries. We see right across our business sector, particularly in our small businesses,

[Sarah Olney]

that entrepreneurs will always respond to challenges. Many businesses now look quite different from how they looked before, which is an example of how it is difficult to say what would or would not have been viable. Many business owners or their family members have suffered coronavirus infections, and they suffered untold disruption in their personal life that will have affected their ability to run their businesses. Again, how can we judge what would have been viable? How would things have been different? That is a difficult question to answer.

I welcome this further support to help businesses through what we might call the after-effects of lockdown.

Mr Perkins: The hon. Lady raises an important point. From what the Minister said, it sounds like a business will be eligible if the amount it owes in rent is the difference between going bust or not. Many businesses might have major rent payments that take them right to the brink, going through all their savings; other businesses might have debts that are slightly more than their rent, but the support would make a huge difference. I fear we may end up with a huge number of businesses being shut out of this important redress, so I urge her and other colleagues to scrutinise this point in Committee.

Sarah Olney: That is exactly right, and it is the point I am trying to make. Every context and every business is different. The business owners will have faced different challenges, and the environment in which they trade will have faced different challenges. The hon. Gentleman has already spoken about hospitality businesses facing significant challenges, and it is difficult to see how we can have one set of guidance that covers the viability of every kind of business of every size and every sector.

Janet Daby: In that same vein, small businesses, and even large businesses, have seen a surge in energy costs and product costs. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is increasing financial pressure on businesses?

Sarah Olney: I absolutely agree. We see a maelstrom of different pressures on businesses at the moment, and many of my retail businesses are experiencing difficulty in getting stock for a number of different reasons, many of which will be familiar to Members. There are increased energy costs, and we are still facing quite an uncertain Christmas.

Hospitality businesses across the country are keen to open their doors to Christmas parties, but there is still a lot of uncertainty about the public health situation, which will prevent many of them from being able to make the revenue they would expect. That will obviously have an impact on their ability to pay their debts. As the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said, it is not just their rent debts; they have VAT bills, rates bills and loans to repay. There are so many different debts mounting up as a result of lockdown, and there is still a great deal of uncertainty, coming from a number of different sources, on whether businesses can count on the revenue to service all those debts. There are a lot of pressures facing businesses.

Matt Rodda: Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government need to get on top of the supply-chain issues, particularly in our ongoing relationship with the European Union, the issues in Northern Ireland and the cross-channel issues? These could potentially have a serious impact on businesses and families this Christmas. It is high time the Government got on with developing a positive relationship with our neighbours.

Sarah Olney: I entirely agree. I would now normally be at the Public Accounts Committee, which is currently looking at the readiness of UK ports for Brexit, how well our port and logistics sectors are dealing with Brexit and how well the Government have prepared them. The picture is mixed, but there is no doubt that there is more disruption to come, because we have not yet implemented all the checks that will be required in due course. Some will come in on 1 January, and there will be others in July 2022. It is fair to say that we are still not through this huge period of uncertainty, and there is a great deal more still to come.

I welcome this Bill, but I would like to see the Government do more to help our retail, hospitality and personal services sectors, and all the other sectors that make up our high-street economy, because of all the positive impacts a thriving high street has on our local communities. I want to see the Government go a bit further to support businesses on our high street.

I am keen for the Government to consider scrapping the upward-only rent review clause that is often in new leases. Richmond High Street, in particular, is suffering from this clause. We now have very high rents for all our retail units, which is a private sector matter but we are finding that it creates a barrier to entry for new retail, hospitality and other businesses that might want to take up a town centre lease.

Leases are based on old-fashioned ways of doing business, and we often find that landlords put an upward-only rent review clause in leases. When the lease terms are renewed, the clause means that a firmly established business that has generated a great deal of business as a result of its location will find that its landlord puts up the rent to such an extent that the business cannot service it with its revenue. I am keen that leases and rent payments should reflect underlying market conditions, which would help a huge amount. More needs to be done. We talk about leasehold reform a lot in this place, but I also want to see it for commercial rents. I would welcome the scrapping of upward-only rent reviews.

I echo the hon. Members for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), for Reading East (Matt Rodda) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who mentioned the business rates review, which is urgent because we want to help businesses to have better control of some of the costs of doing business. There is no doubt that business rates are a key part of that, and we are keen to see a review as soon as possible. A review has been promised for many years, and business rates are a fundamental part of the business costs that are continuing to be a deterrent to new entrepreneurs.

We very much support the Bill, which is the right thing to do. We want to support our town centre businesses, and there is more that could be done, particularly on rent and rates. We are keen to support the Bill, but we need to scrutinise the arbitration clauses a little further.

2.57 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to wind up this debate, although I am sorry that the Minister has both had to open and close.

I want to recognise some of the contributions to this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) raised the important definition of viability and the considerations around it. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) mentioned how we need to make sure that all our businesses are supported through the pandemic and into the recovery, which will continue at different paces for many businesses. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) also talked about the wider context and about supporting and championing businesses, which Small Business Saturday will be doing in the run-up to 4 December. It was eye-opening to be out with them in Southampton earlier this week. This is important in the context of what we are discussing today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) said at the beginning of the debate, Labour supports this important Bill, although we are surprised it has taken this long to introduce it following the announcement in the summer. We need to talk about the context because the growing cost of business will have an impact on how businesses pay back their rent. We have had an important set of contributions on the urgent need for reform of business rates, which the Labour party has also called for, and for it to be considered alongside a much fairer taxation system to bring in a much more level playing field between online businesses and businesses in our communities.

We are having this debate in an important week, as we know that business needs the Government to be on its side—perhaps the Minister will not be able to say anything about that. That is an incredibly important part of how we go forward and work towards the recovery—we are just at the beginning of that. The Prime Minister's embarrassing speech to the CBI at the start of the week was an issue because confidence in the Government is knocked when the Prime Minister does not give a speech that suggests they understand the challenges businesses are facing and the crucial nature of getting the recovery right to make sure that it is sustainable.

The Bill will legislate for a binding arbitration process to be used where business landlords and tenants cannot agree on how to deal with outstanding rent arrears. It also expands on existing restrictions on enforcing business rent arrears to ensure that they cannot also undermine the arbitration process, which will be in place for six months from Royal Assent. As we have heard from hon. Members, the covid pandemic has hit businesses hard, affecting disproportionately those at the frontline in our high streets and communities, which have been forced to close or restrict trading from March last year.

Labour recognises the need for a fair arbitration process to deal with commercial rent arrears. That is why we will scrutinise the legislation in detail in Committee, having raised some of those broader concerns today, to ensure that the proposals are effective and accessible, and fairly balance the interests of relevant parties. Our principle is that no otherwise viable business should face the significant burden from rent arrears without due arbitration and a burden-sharing process. The guiding principle must also be focused on fairness and on the long-term interests we have in British businesses and supporting them to provide much-needed employment across the country.

Labour has also called for the Government to help ease the covid debt burden faced by firms across the country by creating a British business recovery agency. The reason why we would want to convert the bounce back loan scheme into a student loan-style arrangement is so that businesses would have to start repayments to the British Business Bank only when they are making money. It is important that we have an integrated set of policies on business recovery so that we do not deal with one aspect while there are crises in other areas of life for businesses.

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is closing this debate brilliantly. Does she agree that this week we have been reminded of how much businesses need a responsible Government, who take speeches to the CBI very seriously?

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. I had referenced that and she makes the point powerfully; it is important that we have a Government taking their responsibility to business seriously and showing the nation that they are doing that. The Prime Minister's speech did more for the sales of Peppa Pig than for supporting business recovery across our country.

Rent debt is a heavy burden for landlords and commercial tenants, and we need a solution that will be in the interests of both. This is a big issue and although we do not know its full scale, the Bill's impact assessment—the Treasury analysis—notes that the total amount of deferred rent liabilities could be about £9 billion by March next year. That is why we need a policy solution that is fair, fast, trusted, affordable and accessible, so I hope that the Minister will be able to tell us how confident we can be that the system will be in place and what the next steps will be to ensure that.

Labour also called for action on rent debt and the wider business costs in the summer. The Minister will know that before then I had met UKHospitality, the British Beauty Council, the Federation of Small Business, the Night Time Industries Association and many of those stakeholders to discuss the ongoing commercial impact of covid. Those stories, which he and I still hear, showed the strain on and perseverance of those who have fought against the odds to keep going. As has been highlighted by the 3 million excluded campaign, far too many had been excluded from Government support and still struggle.

Luke Hersheson, a renowned hair stylist who is backing the "Save Our Salons" campaign, said earlier this year:

> "In March this year my salons will have been closed for 260 days out of 365. Running a business for more than two thirds of a year with no income at all is incredibly challenging. When the tap is turned off salon businesses are still paying landlords, they're still paying utility bills, insurance costs and subsidising furlough pay."

That is a powerful statement about how businesses were struggling and yet were still wanting to do their bit in the community and support, at the frontline, our communities in getting through covid.

Ensuring that viable businesses are able to survive into the future is part of the responsibility of the Government. Members have discussed how small businesses are the backbone of our economy. We see that in all our

[Seema Malhotra]

constituencies—my constituency has more than 5,000 small businesses. We know that the almost 6 million small businesses across the country account for 99.9% of the business population, three fifths of employment and about half of the turnover in the private sector. As the Minister alluded to, many that will be affected and which may need to draw on the scheme in this Bill may well be women-led businesses and ethnic minority-led businesses. Perhaps he will tell us how he is going to make sure that the opportunities provided by this legislation will be known about by those who might need them. How is the ability to seek a reference for arbitration going to be made known to businesses at the frontline in our communities, so that they do not get to the end of six months of struggle and find that it is too late? It is crucial for our recovery to make sure that that is understood and we have that ongoing partnership between the Government and business large and small. We are going to need that to make sure that our economy starts to fire on all cylinders, which is what we want to see, in a recovery that is sustainable. We want to start to see a recovery that generates the profits and then the taxes to sustain our economy.

The challenge of dealing with rent debt that has accumulated is particularly acute because businesses are also having to deal with a wave of rising costs. Government incompetence led to Britain being harder hit than other countries by the supply chain crisis, ongoing issues and steep rises in energy prices. Those are huge blows to businesses as they approach Christmas, which should be the time when they are hoping to claw back profits in order to make up for stresses earlier in the year. The cost-of-living crisis has also seen consumer confidence knocked, as we know. Last month, it dropped to its lowest level since April, thus reducing consumer spending in all our communities. That has been compounded by the inexplicable decision by the Government to cut universal credit for 6 million families in October—returning just a small part of that was not good enough. In my constituency, this will take £18 million out of the local economy. The Government's jobs tax, which the Opposition oppose, is also due to come in right at the time when debt protections ease and businesses are expected to pay back costs they could not afford during lockdown.

The Minister will be aware that all of those compounded pressures will cause a potential crisis for businesses come next April. We know that not all sectors of the economy will recover fast. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth. Aviation, travel and tourism, and parts of hospitality will recover at a slower pace. These measures are set to be in place for six months from Royal Assent. It will be helpful to know how Ministers plan to review whether an extension of a further six months will be required and how they will bring those considerations to the House.

The Bill strikes an important balance between the duties of tenants and of landlords and builds on the code of practice for commercial tenancies that was announced in the summer and revised most recently in November. Will the Minister respond to the points raised about how the viability of businesses is to be determined? A key task for arbitrators under the Bill will be to assess how viable businesses are. There are some relevant comments in the code of practice, but the Minister will understand the Opposition's concern about what qualifications we can expect arbitrators to have so that they can make that assessment. How will the panel of arbitrators be pulled together? What will be the criteria for and what scrutiny will there be of their capabilities? What does the Minister really mean by "a viable business"? Over what time period will viability be assessed, given that different sectors will continue to recover at different rates? Has the Minister considered a simplified appeals system in case there are disagreements about arbitration decisions? Will he comment on the consistency of the arbitration framework? There is currently no great detail on it and there is a risk that different arbitration bodies and arbitrators will take different approaches to cases, resulting in inconsistent decisions.

Businesses are facing a difficult and now costly recovery from the pandemic, with rising costs coming downstream. I am sure the Minister will want to assure the House that he will make sure that the arbitration process is affordable. What plans do the Government have to make sure that the fees do not preclude access for those who need support?

The Bill is welcome, but it is narrow in respect of addressing the overall issues that businesses face and will continue to face as we recover from the pandemic. It will be a slower recovery for some sectors than for others. The Bill provides necessary support for businesses with their rent debt if agreement has not been reached, along with an arbitration process, which must be fair and implemented quickly. If the Conservatives really cared about business health, they would use this opportunity to go much further in the provision of support in respect of business rates reform and the other costs and supply-chain issues that are hitting businesses and consumers hard.

3.12 pm

Paul Scully: With the leave of the House, I will speak a second time to sum up the debate. I appreciate and very much value the constructive nature of the debate and the comments and positive notes on the Bill's purpose. I shall concentrate my remarks on the issues raised that relate directly to the Bill. I do not apologise for the fact that the Bill is narrow.

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) asked why legislation did not go through earlier; we extended the moratorium for several months, rather than for just a quarter so that we could get the Bill right. We spent that time working with the arbitration services to make sure that we have the capacity and expertise—on which I shall say a little more later—that we need. We have also worked with landlords and tenants, because we have to strike a really delicate balance: we are, in effect, intervening on a contractual arrangement between two private bodies. A lot of the other support that the Government have given has been in the form of relief on various taxes, including business rates and VAT; through direct grants; or through the guaranteeing of loans. The Bill is very much about the moratorium, and our unwinding from that involves our stepping into private contracts, which we would not do without due care and attention.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) talked about the scope of the Bill and eligibility. By targeting the support, we can be sure to get the

arbitration cases through quickly and resolved quickly. We clearly need a solution to the debt and do not want cases to drag on for years. If the scope of the Bill were too wide, capacity would start to be swamped, so in trying to help as many people as possible we would end up helping nobody. It is really delicately balanced.

Nevertheless, I appreciate the fact that over the past 19 months there have been significant difficulties for people we have not been able to support with the £352 billion-worth of financial support we provided as we wrapped our arms, as best we could, around the economy to protect jobs, livelihoods and businesses. By resolving the rent debt for a business within the Bill's scope, we will help not only that business, but its immediate supply chain and all the individuals who contribute towards its success, by getting that business back on a level footing. I hope Members understand why we have targeted the legislation in the specific way we have and how it will deliver support where it is most needed.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth also talked about the availability of arbitrators, as did several other Members. I reassure Members that we have worked closely with the arbitration bodies and the market is ready to deliver. Our engagement with arbitration bodies has raised awareness of the proposals and we will continue to engage with interested bodies so that the system is up and running as soon as the Bill comes into force.

We put out a call in respect of arbitration earlier this month and there have been a number of respondents. The arbitration bodies that have demonstrated an interest in becoming approved bodies are already widely recognised and respected in the field of arbitration for the accreditation services they provide to their arbitrators. That accreditation acts as a quality-assurance service. There is a statutory duty on approved arbitration bodies to ensure that the lists they maintain contain only arbitrators who appear to an arbitration body to be suitable by virtue of their qualifications or experience. An approved arbitration body also has a duty to remove arbitrators from a case on any one of the grounds for removal specified in the Bill—for example, when

"the arbitrator does not possess the qualifications required for the arbitration".

The Secretary of State also has the statutory power to withdraw approval from a body if it is no longer considered suitable to carry out the functions of an approved arbitration body.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) asked how we are going to communicate the changes. It is important that the parliamentary process has signalled the introduction of legislation and, along with continued conversations between the Government and the Opposition, that will raise its profile, but we will have to do more direct communication through business-representative organisations, banks and accountants—the kind of intermediaries that all businesses tend to have. There is lots of work to be done, but we want to make sure that we get it right on the front foot.

On how much arbitration will cost and whether it will be affordable, the party that puts forward the case for an arbitration will pay an application fee to the arbitral body. If both parties agree, the fee can be split between landlord and tenant at the point of application. When making the award, the arbitrator must require the other party to reimburse half the fees paid or to pay

"such other amount as the arbitrator considers appropriate".

The price will be set by the arbitration bodies, although the Secretary of State retains delegated powers to set a cap on the fees charged. For similar schemes, there is a £1,250 application fee, with additional costs if the parties choose to progress to a hearing. Our preference—not just about cost, but about speed so that we get things resolved for both parties—is an online, documents-based process to keep costs to a minimum and to ensure that the process is available to all.

The hon. Member for Feltham and Heston also asked about demonstrating viability.

Seema Malhotra: The Minister has given a figure of just over £1,200 as a comparable amount. Given the Secretary of State's power to introduce a cap, is the Minister signalling the Government's intention to introduce a cap and the amount it might be set at? If so, what is the assessment of affordability for the context in which the Bill has been introduced?

Paul Scully: I do not want to pre-empt further consideration of the Bill, further discussions with the arbiter or, indeed, the Bill's passage, but it is clear that tenant businesses will already be struggling financially, given the problem that we are trying to solve with the Bill.

We will make sure that, if we do introduce a cap, that is done at a limit that is consistent with the market, with the overall aim of not preventing small and medium-sized enterprises from accessing the scheme. The cap, though, will be variable. It will be on a sliding scale relative to the amount of protected rent debt that we used to determine the cap should it come in, and we will ensure that it is proportionate for each case. We do expect otherwise viable businesses to be able to afford the cost of arbitration.

On viability, there is no specific definition of what constitutes viability, because, clearly, business models vary hugely. In clause 16, there are factors that arbitrators should consider when assessing the viability of a tenant's business. Within the wider code of practice, there is also a non-exhaustive list of evidence that could be considered when determining viability and affordability.

Hopefully, that has covered a number of the direct issues. I will not go too heavily into some of the other areas that extend around high streets. Suffice it to say that having put £352 billion-worth of support into the economy—including into those hard-pressed sectors, including retail, hospitality, leisure and personal services—we have 352 billion reasons to get the next bit right to make sure that we can have the Reading East that I remember. Probably some of those businesses have gone since I was at university 30-odd years ago, when I enjoyed far too much hospitality—the Purple Turtle, the After Dark Club, the Turk's Head, and the Ye Babam Ye kebab shop, he says going down a Ricky Gervais memory lane in Reading East. Indeed, I have also had many a happy meal in Don Fernando's in Richmond. We want to make sure that we can protect these hard-pressed sectors.

Matt Rodda *rose—*

Paul Scully: I will briefly give way to the hon. Gentleman if he tells me whether any of those businesses are still open.

Matt Rodda: They are still open, yes. I am grateful to the Minister for his tour of Reading town centre, and I am also a big supporter of many of those businesses. Will he come and visit Reading with me to look at the specific issues that some of the local businesses face, in particular how some of our small businesses on our local high streets cope when there is no longer a bank?

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the need for access to cash and access to banking services. I am always happy to come to Reading. It is important that banks—and post offices where banking pilots are under way—remain that cornerstone of social value on the high street.

Finally, I went off track when we started talking about Peppa Pig. Children in 118 countries know about Peppa Pig because it is a hugely important British brand and British export worth £6 billion to the economy—that is just Peppa Pig itself. I dare say, though, that the people behind Peppa Pig probably will not need the Bill. It will be those smaller businesses on our high streets up and down the country that do, and that is what this Bill is here to do.

The Bill provides that resolution for the remaining rent debt accrued by businesses required to close. It will deliver key Government objectives, protect jobs and help to prepare for a new, stronger economy post covid. I look forward to discussing the Bill further in Committee, but for now, I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

COMMERCIAL RENT (CORONAVIRUS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 16 December 2021.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Rebecca Harris.)*

Question agreed to.

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism

3.23 pm

The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds): I beg to move,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

This Government are committed to protecting the people of this country, and tackling terrorism in all its forms is clearly a critical and central part of that mission.

As the House will be aware, following the tragic death of our friend, Sir David Amess, last month, and the explosion outside Liverpool Women's Hospital earlier this month, the independent Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre raised the threat level in the UK from substantial to severe on 15 November. A severe threat level means that an attack is highly likely.

Terrorism poses a persistent and enduring threat to our way of life. Public protection must be our No.1 priority and we continue to work very closely with counter-terrorism, policing and the intelligence and security agencies in pursuit of that vital endeavour. The Government's position towards Hamas is well-documented.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): While my right hon. Friend is on the subject of the assessment of the terrorist threat, will he say whether there is any assessment at all of any threat to the United Kingdom from Hamas?

Damian Hinds: I will come to the reasoning for the proscription order in this case.

As I was saying, we have a no-contact policy now with the entirety of the group, but we proscribe only the military wing.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Damian Hinds: Will the hon. Gentleman forgive me for a moment? I will give way, if that is all right, a wee bit later.

We mirror the EU sanctions in our own domestic regime against Hamas, also in their entirety. The Government condemn Hamas's indiscriminate and abhorrent rocket attacks and remain resolute in our commitment to Israel's security. We continue to call on Hamas permanently to end its incitement and rocket fire against Israel.

Steve McCabe: I support the measure. It seems to have cross-party support, which I welcome. It seems to me that it largely closes a few existing loopholes and brings us into line with the position of our allies. None the less, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it does not close the door on Hamas participating in the political process? Were it to recognise Israel's right to exist and renounce violence and terrorism—in effect, accept the Quartet principles—it would be very welcome.

Damian Hinds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for the support that he indicates for the measure. Our position on Hamas is clear and it is public. Hamas must renounce violence. It must recognise

Israel and accept previously signed agreements. Credible moves must be made towards those conditions. They remain the benchmark against which intention should be judged.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con) *rose—*

Damian Hinds: I will take one more intervention and then, Madam Deputy Speaker, I suggest that I make some progress.

Tom Hunt: I thank the Minister for giving way. Last weekend, an Israeli tour guide was murdered in Jerusalem. My understanding is that the individual who committed that murder was a member of the political wing of Hamas. Surely that goes to prove that this arbitrary distinction between a military wing and a political wing is not accurate, and that, in its entirety, Hamas is a terrorist organisation and deserves to be labelled as such.

Damian Hinds: The incident that my hon. Friend mentions is a timely reminder, and our sympathies are very much with the victims and their families and friends. I will come on, if I may, to the important point that he raises about the distinction, or lack thereof, between the so-called political and military wings.

The threat posed by terrorist organisations varies depending on each group's ideology, membership and ability to train members. Groups such as Hamas train members in terrorism, as well as preparing and committing terrible acts of violence against innocent members of the public. We have a duty to our allies, as well as to our own people, to tackle groups that inspire and co-ordinate terror on the international stage. Although we can sadly never entirely eliminate the threat from terrorism, we must always do all that we can to act against and mitigate the danger it poses, and to seek to keep the public safe.

Some 78 terrorist organisations are proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000. Thanks to the dedication, courage and skill of counter-terrorism policing, and our security and intelligence services, most of these groups have never carried out a successful attack on British soil. Proscription is a powerful tool for degrading terrorist organisations and I will explain the impact that it can have shortly. We propose to amend the existing listing of "Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem Brigades", or Hamas IDQ, in schedule 2 of the Terrorism Act 2000 to cover Hamas in its entirety.

Under section 3 of TACT 2000, the Home Secretary has the power to proscribe an organisation if she believes that it is currently concerned in terrorism. If the statutory test is met, the Home Secretary may then exercise her discretion to proscribe that organisation. The Home Secretary considers a number of factors in considering whether to exercise her discretion. The relevant discretionary factors for Hamas are: the nature and scale of an organisation's activities; the specific threat posed to British nationals overseas; and the need to support other members of the international community in tackling terrorism.

The effect of proscription is to outlaw a listed organisation and ensure that it is unable to operate in the UK. Proscription is designed to degrade a group's ability to operate through various means, including: enabling prosecution for the various proscription offences; underpinning immigration-related disruptions, including the exclusion from the UK of members of groups based overseas; making it possible to seize cash associated with an organisation; and sending a strong signal globally that a group is concerned in terrorism and is without legitimacy.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): On my right hon. Friend's latter point, is not one of the strongest reasons for proscribing the whole organisation to strengthen the role of moderate Palestinians and the ability of the Palestinian Authority to come to a peace agreement with Israel, and to send a clear message that extremists, who do not accept the existence of Israel and want to use violence, have no place in this process? Is not that one of the strongest benefits of the proscription that my right hon. Friend is setting out?

Damian Hinds: The signalling and messaging are important, as are the practical effects of proscription. I will come briefly to the middle east peace process, and our continuing hopes for a peaceful and sustainable future for all.

It is a criminal offence for a person to belong to, support or arrange a meeting in support of a proscribed organisation. It is also a criminal offence to wear clothing or carry articles in public that arouse reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation. The penalties for proscription offences are a maximum of 14 years in prison and/or an unlimited fine. Given the wide-ranging impact, the Home Secretary exercises her power to proscribe only after thoroughly reviewing the available evidence on an organisation. That includes open source material, intelligence material and advice that reflects consultation across Government, including with intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The cross-Government proscription review group supports the Home Secretary in her decision-making process. The Home Secretary's decision to proscribe is only taken after great care and consideration of the particular case, and it is appropriate that it must be approved by both Houses.

Having carefully considered all the evidence, the Home Secretary believes that Hamas in its entirety is concerned in terrorism and the discretionary factors support proscription. Although I am of course unable to comment on specific intelligence, I can provide the House with a summary of the group's activities. Hamas is a militant Islamist movement that was established in 1987. Its ideology is related to that of the Muslim Brotherhood combined with Palestinian nationalism. Its main aims are to liberate Palestine from Israeli occupation, the establishment of an Islamic state under sharia law and the destruction of Israel, although Hamas no longer demands the destruction of Israel in its covenant. The group operates in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): My intervention is further to that of the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who made the key point: what assessment have the British Government made of the impact of the measure on the internal political dynamics of the Palestinian Territories? Does it weaken Hamas, as the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean said, and help the moderate forces, or is there a danger that it might strengthen Hamas's hand?

Damian Hinds: We are of course greatly concerned with what happens in-country and in-region. We want to see progress. We want to see the Palestinian Authority extending its governance. But this measure is specifically about the entity of Hamas. It is a proscription of a body because of its involvement in terrorism, and this debate and vote must focus on that specific question.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister clarify what assessment has been made of important discussions that may need to go on in relation to humanitarian issues, education and healthcare, and how that will continue in the very important work that has to be done to support people in the Gaza strip?

Damian Hinds: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. If she will forgive me, I am coming to that a little later in my remarks, and I will cover it then.

Hamas formally established Hamas IDQ in 1992. IDQ was proscribed by the UK in March 2001. At the time, it was determined that there was a distinction between the political and military wings of Hamas, and that the only part of the organisation that was concerned in terrorism, and should therefore be proscribed, was the military wing. Over the past 20 years, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) said, Hamas's so-called military and political wings have grown closer together, with any distinction between them now considered to be artificial. The Government's assessment is that Hamas is a complex but single organisation made up of constituent parts, one of which includes Hamas IDQ. It is clear that these constituent parts are not wholly independent of Hamas's so-called political wing and that they take strategic direction from it. There is also movement of key individuals across the organisation as well as, of course, a shared ideology. It is clear that the current proscription listing of Hamas does not reflect its true structure, and that is why this order has been laid. The Home Secretary has a reasonable belief that Hamas, in its entirety, is concerned in terrorism. It is our assessment that the group prepares for, commits and participates in acts of terrorism. There is also evidence that the group promotes and encourages terrorism.

Indiscriminate rocket or mortar attacks against Israeli targets are key examples of Hamas committing this terrorism. During the May 2021 conflict, over 4,000 rockets were fired indiscriminately into Israel. Civilians, including two children, were killed as a result. The rocket attacks also targeted airports and maritime interests. Hamas also frequently uses incendiary balloons to launch attacks from Gaza into southern Israel. There was a spate of incendiary balloon attacks from Gaza into southern Israel during June and July 2021, causing fires and resulting in serious damage to property. These attacks were likely carried out by both Hamas and by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which is already proscribed. Only last summer, Hamas launched camps in Gaza that focused on training groups, including minors, to fight. In a press statement Hamas described the aim of these camps as to "ignite the embers of jihad in the liberation generation, cultivate Islamic values, and prepare the expected victory army to liberate Palestine". This vile indoctrination of young people into the organisation's violent ideology shows how diametrically opposed it is to our country's core values.

The action we are taking is not a commentary on the ongoing tensions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, nor is it a departure in any way from the Government's long-standing position on the middle east peace process. We continue to support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. This decision is based on the Government's assessment that Hamas, in its entirety, is concerned in terrorism and that proscription is a proportionate action to take, and nothing more. Having concluded that the distinction maintained in the list of proscribed organisations is artificial, it is right that this is addressed. Hamas, in its entirety, is a terrorist organisation. We must be clear on this to avoid conferring legitimacy on any element of the organisation.

It goes without saying that this Government do not provide any assistance to Hamas or the Government structure in Gaza that is made up of Hamas members. However, to answer the point made by the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), this proscription will not prevent aid from reaching civilians in need. In Gaza we have strong controls in place to monitor spending and ensure that aid sent into the region reaches its intended beneficiaries.

To conclude, the enduring and wide-ranging nature of the threat from terrorism demands an agile approach and a comprehensive strategy. That includes confronting groups that participate in and prepare for acts of terrorism or unlawfully glorify horrific terrorist acts. We must use every tool at our disposal to prevent them from stirring up hatred and division in our communities. We will never be cowed by those who hate the values we hold dear. The safety and security of the public is our No. 1 priority, and I commend the order to the House.

3.40 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for the letter she sent me on Friday, detailing her intention to bring forward this proscription motion and the reasons for its being considered at this time.

I start by outlining that the Opposition agree with the proscription motion and support the decision to proscribe Hamas in its entirety. As the Leader of the Opposition and I have repeatedly said, the first priority of any Government is the safety of its people and the protection of the public. I thank the members of the proscription review group for the vital work they do.

In the past month, this country has yet again faced the horror of two terror attacks. In Liverpool, a bomb was exploded outside the Liverpool Women's Hospital, with the taxi driver, David Perry, fleeing from the car and fortunately surviving that horrific situation. We think of him and all the people of Liverpool. Only yesterday, I and hon. Members across the House attended Westminster Cathedral for Sir David Amess's requiem mass, when he was laid to rest. That callous terrorist attack took the life of a much-loved Member of this House, leaving behind his family and friends. We think also of them today. Those incidents are the most sobering of reminders that any act of terrorism is designed to sow division and hatred. We always stand together against these attempts to drive us apart.

As the Minister set out, the proscription tool is a vital one in the fight against terrorism. We on the Opposition Benches appreciate the difficult balance that must be struck when considering the application of the test in section 3 of the Terrorism Act 2000. The previous

Labour Government proscribed Hamas's military wing in 2001 and made the assessment that there was at that time a meaningful distinction between the military and political wings.

Looking at this situation today, 20 years on, the Government have set out that there is now no distinction between the military and political wings. They have said there is an

"interconnectivity (including movement of individuals into different leadership roles across Hamas' various structures) and cooperation between Hamas' constituent parts; and that Hamas' constituent parts are not wholly independent of the so called political wing of the organisation and take strategic direction from it."

Hamas, the Government have said, is certainly a complex organisation, but it is a "single terrorist organisation", and the Opposition accept that.

The Minister gave a number of reasons in his opening remarks for why this step has been taken, noting Hamas's significant terrorist capability, including access to sophisticated weaponry and training facilities. The proscription also affects the ability to raise money and means significant restrictions on any activity here in the UK.

I turn, however, to a wider discussion on the use of proscription. I would be grateful if, when the Minister responds to the debate, he addressed these points in his further remarks. First, public confidence in the process is important. While of course matters must often remain confidential for reasons of national security, to the extent that it is possible, transparency is crucial. Can the Minister reassure hon. Members how often the cross-Government proscription review group considers these matters, and that the decisions are always under review?

Secondly, proscription is only one of the measures available in our armoury to tackle terrorism. At whatever level and wherever it comes from, it depends on the proper resourcing of our counter-terrorist and mainstream policing. When terrible major incidents happen, it is not only the counter-terror budget that is affected; resources are inevitably drawn in from mainstream policing. In addition, I commend neighbourhood policing that provides not only reassurance in our communities but vital local intelligence in the fight against terrorism. Appropriate funding for all those areas of our policing is crucial.

In relation to this proscription, Members on both sides of the House remain committed to a negotiated settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that delivers a safe and secure Israel alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state. We know that meaningful dialogue that brings together those from both sides of the conflict to find a resolution offers the only prospect of a meaningful and lasting peace in the middle east.

Earlier this year, the conflict between Israel and Palestine erupted once again, with lives lost on both sides. Given our country's important role in supporting peace talks, I ask the Minister to give his assessment of and reassurance on the impact that today's decision will have on the prospect of securing a peaceful resolution to the conflict, and what he understands the implications are for future engagement with bodies including the Palestinian Legislative Council and the Palestinian Authority.

Similarly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) said, could the Minister outline the impact that he foresees on non-governmental organisations supporting Palestinian civilians in Gaza and on British people who are there at the moment and their safety? He gave a reassurance in his opening remarks about humanitarian aid still getting to where it is needed, but if he could expand on that and set out how he sees that happening in future, that would be helpful for Members on both sides of the House.

Seema Malhotra: My right hon. Friend is making an important speech. Does he agree that that must include giving guidance to the British consul general? Important visits happen that have an impact on many areas of policy and supporting NGOs on the ground. It is important to have that guidance to make sure that they can continue as they have been.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I agree with my hon. Friend that guidance is vital and I hope that the Minister will address that point when he winds up.

As the Minister stated, the decision brings the United Kingdom into line with our allies the United States, Canada and the European Union, all of which have already proscribed Hamas in its entirety. I end by thanking our policing, especially counter-terror policing and our emergency services that, sadly and tragically, have been called into action many times in recent years. In the last few years, there have been several appalling attacks from the Manchester Arena bombing to the attacks on our democracy here in Parliament. Our world-leading security services have prevented 31 attacks since 2017; we thank them for their dangerous, careful and painstaking work.

Let us, too, mark the resolve and strength that our communities have shown in the face of such threats, which should give us cause for optimism. We continue to fight terrorism in all its forms and we support the motion.

3.48 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I take this opportunity—my first—to congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister on his appointment to the role, which I can see that he is already performing exceptionally well, as I would expect. I thank him and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for their decision to proscribe Hamas in its entirety, which I strongly support. I also thank the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds); the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy); and the Leader of the Opposition for their important decision to support the Home Secretary's decision, which is to be welcomed wholeheartedly.

Last week, a young man, as we heard earlier—Eli Kay, a 26-year-old tour guide—was murdered as he was doing his business, walking around the old city in Jerusalem. His grandparents are well-respected members of the West Hampstead Jewish community, and he had deep links here in the United Kingdom. I think all of us would send our best wishes and our deepest condolences to his grandparents and all those who knew him here in the UK. He was murdered by a Hamas terrorist—a Hamas terrorist who purported to be from the political wing of that organisation. That one young man's brutal, unexpected and unexplainable death goes some way to explain why we as a country need to be proscribing the whole of the organisation that that murderer, that terrorist belonged to.

[Robert Jenrick]

I cannot reach into the heart of that individual and explain what motivated him to take the life of Eli Kay. I do not think any of us here can. That is terrorism—that is the unexplainable impact of terrorism. It is pure evil. We cannot accommodate terrorism. When someone uses the slaughter of innocent people to advance a political cause or a supposed political cause, at that point that cause becomes immoral and unjust, and they and the organisation that they stand for have to be eliminated from serious debate and serious discussion.

We have to take this issue seriously, and I am afraid at times in this country we do not. We have seen, just in the last few weeks, two very serious terrorist incidents. Most deeply we felt, of course, the loss of our friend and former colleague Sir David Amess, and of course we have seen a very serious incident—albeit one that could have been all the more serious—in Liverpool. We do not know, and it is not our role right now to speculate on, the true causes and motivations of either of those incidents, but we know enough to say that they were motivated by extremist individuals. That, again, should give us cause to redouble our efforts here to tackle extremism in all its forms, and that is why I think this effort, this move is so important.

As my right hon. Friend the Minister has said, the distinction between the political and the military wing of this organisation has for a very long time been entirely artificial, just as it was with Hezbollah, which we took similar action to proscribe in its entirety just a couple of years ago. It was an absurdity that, during the al-Quds Day rally, an individual could march through the streets of London shouting antisemitic remarks and waving the flag of Hezbollah, but get away with it because it was the flag of the political wing of Hezbollah, not the military wing. For exactly the same reasons as the former Home Secretary took action against Hezbollah, it is absolutely right that the current one does the same with respect to Hamas.

This action will be welcomed in the United Kingdom and by our friends and allies around the world, not just in the west—where the European Union, the United States, Australia and other countries have already done this—but in a number of Gulf states. I was in Bahrain at the weekend, and I can assure my right hon. Friend and Members of this House that the Government there support this action. It is entirely in line with what is happening in the middle east today. When I was in Bahrain on Saturday, I visited a synagogue with the former Bahraini ambassador to the United States who is both a woman and a Jew, and is now a senior member of the Government in Bahrain. Thanks to the Abraham accords, the whole atmosphere in much of the middle east is beginning to change.

This hatred between Muslims and Jews is a product of history, which we must consign to history. Organisations such as Hamas that stand for that hatred must be treated as the terrorist organisations they are. We only need to look at its charter to see that. Its preamble has a promise that Islam will "obliterate" Israel. Article 32 reads:

"Leaving the circle of struggle against Zionism is high treason".

Article 15 reads:

"In the face of the Jews' usurpation, it is compulsory that the banner of Jihad be raised."

Article 7 reads:

"The Day of Judgment will not come about until Muslims fight Jews and kill them."

This is an organisation that in its entirety deserves to be proscribed in the United Kingdom. By doing so, we will help to further isolate Hamas, we will hinder its ability to raise funds and spread its extremist ideologies, and we will bolster more moderate forces in Palestine and elsewhere in the middle east. I strongly support the Government's action today, and it is extremely heartening that it is being conducted in a broadly cross-party approach.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Mr Percy, were you indicating that you might want to speak earlier—is that right?

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con) *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay. The debate has to finish at 4.53 pm and I want to bring the Minister in with adequate time to respond, so I just warn Members that after the SNP spokesperson, I am likely to introduce a time limit of perhaps eight or nine minutes to give us a chance to get everybody in. I call Alyn Smith.

3.55 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will endeavour to be brief too.

I think that across the House we all have a common endeavour: we all support a just peace in the middle east. That just peace will need to be based on dialogue, the rule of law and peaceful respect. Israel has a right to exist and a right to peace and security within its borders, but we also recognise that a deep injustice has been done to the Palestinian people, and that injustice is continuing. Everything in the middle east is connected to everything else, and it is important for all of us, as outsiders, to view it in totality rather than through a particular prism.

We believe that international law should be applied to all sides, and there are more than two sides to this dispute. Peace is made not among friends but among enemies, and difficult conversations with difficult people need to be taken forward to create the conditions for peace to happen. Dialogue is not supported by declaring stakeholders, however unpalatable, to be persona non grata or illegal. That said, we recognise, of course, the odious nature of Hamas. As a gay man, I need no reminder of the reality of that obnoxious organisation.

Proscribing all of Hamas will bring the UK in line with the US, all EU states, Japan and Canada, and Australia is in the process of adopting similar measures. We recognise the wider construct. However, we have unease at this proposal, and that unease boils down under three heads: the timing, the process, and the implications of this proposal in the real world.

On the timing, why is this being done now? I listened with great attention to the Minister. I did not find much I disagreed with, but I also did not find much that we could not have heard two or three years ago. Hamas was an odious organisation as the EU proscribed it; the

UK took a different path. That that line is being changed now begs more questions than we have had answers today.

As recently as 18 months ago, in response to a written parliamentary question in June 2020, Minister Brokenshire set out the UK Government's position as follows:

"The political wing of Hamas is not proscribed as it is considered that there is a clear distinction between Hamas's military and political wings."

That was the position very recently. I have not heard much today to suggest that much has changed. I would hate to think that this measure has been brought forward for domestic or, indeed, party political purposes, playing fast and loose with peace in the middle east—an issue that we must all take gravely seriously.

On the process, the Australian Parliament has just concluded a thoroughgoing review of this very question. Where was the UK Parliament's similar review? Where was the engagement of Parliament in these processes? I do not doubt that there has been a process, but this House has not heard much of it. The House needs far greater opportunity to scrutinise how we got to this proposal, rather than just the opportunity to nod it through. The Australian Parliament has reached broadly the same conclusion, so I am not necessarily disagreeing with the proposal; I am, however, querying how we got here.

As Members on both sides of the House have already asked, what consultation has there been with allies—especially countries, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, that do not proscribe Hamas but have back-channel dealings with it, on both finance and other matters? Crucially, what consultation has there been with the humanitarian non-governmental organisation community?

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend will know that my husband and I spent 18 months as volunteers in Gaza in the early '90s and have been running a breast cancer project between Scotland and Gaza for the last five years. My concern—I apologise for being late due to the change of time and my slow speed of running—is this. Do we not need clarity on the position of small education and healthcare NGOs in Gaza supporting the 2 million people there? The work that I and my volunteers do inevitably involves the Ministry of Health because that is who runs the hospitals. It is simply unavoidable. I am afraid this will send a chill when I am trying to recruit breast cancer specialists in Scotland to keep supporting this wonderful project.

Alyn Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention and I pay tribute to the work she has done over a long period and her humanitarian efforts in Gaza in particular.

I refer to the explanatory notes to this statutory instrument. The final sentence states:

"A full impact assessment has not been produced for this Order as no, or no significant, impact on the private, voluntary or public sector is foreseen."

I am glad to hear that, but I have to say that I find it quite unbelievable. I think it fits into a pattern of behaviour we have seen on the ground. The Minister will be aware of the Israeli Government banning six Palestinian humanitarian NGOs on deeply spurious grounds. I am concerned about anything that shuts down the space for dialogue and civil society in this conflict.

That is our final unease on this matter: the implications. What will be the effect—I would be grateful to the Minister if he could reassure me and I am open to that reassurance today—of this listing on NGOs, big and small, and on civil society? The reality in Gaza especially is that Hamas is a fact of life. You cannot get anything done—you cannot get aid delivered, you cannot have a medical project, you cannot have a civil society dialogue—without Hamas's active involvement one way or another. I do not say that as a matter of anything to be glad about, but it is the reality. How will this listing impact on the NGOs trying to promote dialogue and civil society, and trying to deliver humanitarian aid? Anything that would limit their activities or curtail their active involvement is surely a retrograde step. I would be grateful to the Minister if he could reassure us on the specific point that nothing in this measure or in the future will limit pragmatic humanitarian engagement within Gaza, and within Israel and Palestine. There is already a chill under way. Palestinian reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah has never been more important. I would hate to see anything done by this House that would limit the scope for that dialogue and engagement.

We all have a common aim in this process. I think everyone on all sides of the House today has indicated our clear support for justice and peace in the middle east, but surely the way to that peace is dialogue, and anything that limits that dialogue must be properly ventilated and properly scrutinised. From the SNP's perspective, we will not stand in the way of the proposal, but we believe it needs far better scrutiny than we have been able to do today and will need far more scrutiny in future.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We will start with an eight-minute time limit. I may have to take that down, but we will start with that.

4.2 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which I will return to at the end of my remarks if I do not run out of time.

First, we need to put the measure in context. The nearest parallel is the proscription of both wings of Hezbollah. In terms of practicality, our engagement with Lebanon is very much less than it is with Palestine and Israel. We are unable to talk to the four Ministries that have Hezbollah Ministers and the French are then seen as the lead western European nation in that space. Our relative position in the very troubled country of Lebanon—we have made difficulties for ourselves because of the extent of the popular support for Hezbollah in Lebanon—is significantly reduced from that.

Of course, Hezbollah is only part of the Government of Lebanon. The difficulty we are giving ourselves here is that the jurisdiction of Gaza is run by Hamas. Nearly 2 million people are administered by the local Administration, who, strangely enough, have their own security forces. If you were responsible for administering Gaza, you might rather need them in one form or another, otherwise you would find organisations such

[Crispin Blunt]

as Islamic Jihad or Islamic State providing security instead. This, therefore, is a complex and difficult question that we have to address. We have already taken a position on what is plainly the stupid, illegitimate and immoral mortaring of people where you cannot tell where the targets are, simply flying weapons over the wall, because you do not have the capacity to engage in that targeting of what would be legitimate targets under international law as resistance. Of course those acts are illegitimate. That is why they have been proscribed.

However, we need to be careful because people do have a right to resist, and we must understand that we are talking about an occupied people. The history is very long, going back to the Balfour declaration in 1917. We delivered half of the Balfour declaration, perhaps one of the great moral projects of the 20th century, where we gave the Jewish people, who had suffered the most appalling, the greatest crime in human history in the holocaust, as well as the pogroms and all the other oppression in European history and elsewhere, a safe place in the state of Israel. Obviously half of that declaration is undelivered—the bit that said it would not be done at the cost of the rights of the people already there. Of course it has been. That is undone. That is why we have the Balfour project, led by our former consul-general in Jerusalem, Sir Vincent Feen, who is working away to draw attention to the fact that the work is half done and the United Kingdom still has to deliver the Balfour declaration. There is a duty on all of us to try to ensure that we assist—perhaps for the 21st century—a great process of reconciliation between the Palestinian and Jewish Israeli people to enable it to be an example of a great moral project where people come together to forge a future together. That is my hope.

My personal position is that the two-state solution is long gone. In the end, this will be resolved only by the peoples coming together, with us enabling and helping that to happen. I fear that the order does precisely the opposite.

Mr Harper: I do not want to misunderstand my hon. Friend. I have listened to him carefully. I agree with his last point about Britain wanting to encourage the Palestinian and the Israeli people to come together and live in harmony. When he was talking about the indiscriminate attacks that Hamas sends into Israel, he seemed to say that the only problem with them was that they were not more accurately targeted to kill certain Israelis, that they indiscriminately killed other Israelis, and that, if they targeted the weapons more accurately, that would be sort of okay. Did I hear him correctly? I fear that I may have misunderstood him but can he put me right? If that is so, I find that an offensive and extraordinary thing to say.

Crispin Blunt: Let us be careful what we are addressing on that narrow point. Under international law, you have a legal right to resist. Not only is the use of those weapons unlawful because they are untargeted and indiscriminate; it is also fantastically stupid because it gives the Israelis' argument about the threat they face from the Palestinian people its raison d'être. I deplore violence of any kind from the Palestinians because they are going to get smashed if they try to resist under international law. It is completely the wrong thing to do. That is why I want to work to give Palestinians assistance in finding a route to justice through using the law and the moral and legal authority that the Palestinian position has. Violence is a road to nowhere. That is why it ought to be condemned in terms of practicality as well as under the law where use of it is indiscriminate. But there is a position where resistance is allowed. For me, that "but" is wholly qualified by its stupidity, its inappropriateness and its uselessness in furthering the Palestinian cause. However, let us get back to the balance between the two sides.

The Israelis have been in gross breach of the fourth Geneva convention ever since the occupation of the territories in 1967, and the ensuing settlements are a grievous breach of international law. What has the United Kingdom done about it? What is the United Kingdom going to do about it? This is building the two-state solution out of existence; it is also taking territory that does not belong to Israel in a way that is proscribed by the Geneva conventions that came into force after the second world war.

Let us look at the contemporary position. Six non-governmental organisations have been proscribed by Israel. As I understand it, no evidence has yet been given to the British Government as to why that has happened. Why not? United Nations Relief and Works Agency funding from the United Kingdom is going from £70 million to £20 million, which puts a huge responsibility on civil society to try to make up the difference because of the desperate, desperate situation in Gaza. What will the motion do? It will have a terrible, chilling effect on putting anything into Gaza, because Gaza is administered by the organisation that we are about to proscribe.

Robert Jenrick: As I understand it, my hon. Friend's central argument is that by enacting this measure we will make it more difficult for the United Kingdom to interact with Hamas or other organisations to pursue the peace process, or for NGOs from the United Kingdom to provide humanitarian support within Gaza. Is that argument not undermined by the fact that this measure has already been in place in the whole European Union, in the United States and among a number of other significant players in the middle east conflict for several years?

Crispin Blunt: No, because the motion goes further: it leaves "support" undefined, so it will be up to the courts to define what support means. The European Union's measures are very specific about finance and the movement of money, which can be traced and followed. This measure is much more far-reaching. We do not know exactly how far-reaching it will be or what its effect will be.

In the forthcoming vote of the UN General Assembly on the status of Jerusalem—a resolution sponsored by the Palestinians and the Jordanians—we appear to be about to change the long-standing British position of supporting the status quo in Jerusalem. The United Kingdom is apparently going to abstain; according to reports made to me, it is also actively working to get other countries to abstain and change their position.

Why is all that happening? Let us look at the statement that the Israeli Minister of Foreign Affairs put out on 19 November:

"The announcement anticipated today is the conclusion of an intimate and successful dialogue between Israel and the United Kingdom led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs"

and

"the security services".

This will have a chilling effect on effective assistance to Gaza. The double standards of the west's position will be even more visible around the world. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who spoke about supporting the moderates: given who had the majority on the Palestinian Legislative Council when it was last elected in 2006, how many of the Palestinians does he want to identify as extremist? If the purpose of our policy should be to undermine and remove the reasons for turning to violence, give Palestinians a route to justice that is legal and moral, and lead towards a negotiated settlement, what will be the effect of applying today's measure to the organisation that received most support the last time there was an election in Palestine?

Do I support Hamas? That is a little unlikely, speaking as the gay chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group. But have I taken the trouble to try to understand political Islam? Yes, I have. When I was Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, we completed an inquiry on it; our report is called "'Political Islam', and the Muslim Brotherhood Review". I spent 20 years getting to know and trying to understand these people. My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) said:

"I cannot reach into the heart of that individual".

I say to him: no, but you deserve to make every effort to understand the movement around that individual and whether it relates to why he came to that perspective.

We owe it to ourselves to understand the perspective of political Islamists in order that we can try to draw them in and draw them away from violence. I fear that the motion will do precisely the opposite.

4.14 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I support the proscription of Hamas in its entirety as a terrorist organisation. Every protection and reassurance must be given to the Jewish community in this country, and antisemitism has no place in our society. I also appreciate that since we have left the European Union, the EU's ban on Hamas in its entirety is no longer in place, and we must have an alternative measure in this country. However, I want to ask the Minister a number of questions. First, what advice did the Home Office receive from the Proscription Review Group? Was it comprehensive advice, or was there simply a feeling—which was judged by other means—that action of this kind was necessary?

I am also concerned about the fact that there appears to have been very little consultation, if any, with organisations and bodies that are engaged in conflict resolution efforts and humanitarian work in the occupied Palestinian territories and in Gaza in particular. Aid agencies such as Oxfam, Medical Aid for Palestinians and Save the Children do excellent work in Gaza, and the nature of their humanitarian work means that they have no choice but to engage with civilian agencies in Gaza which are under the control of Hamas. Indeed, it is impossible to enter Gaza without contact with Hamas agencies. In this context, I want to refer particularly to a non-governmental organisation, based in Britain, called IDEALS.

Since 2012, IDEALS has been supporting the development of a local limb reconstruction service in Gaza. Training fellowships at King's College Hospital here in London have been provided for three orthopaedic surgeons, and there have been training fellowships for nurses and physiotherapists, helping to establish the multidisciplinary team that is required to provide such complex, long-term care in Gaza. Specialists from the hospital have also visited Gaza on many occasions to work alongside local colleagues, continue the training process, and provide clinical care for patients. That good work must continue. I am sure we are all united in supporting it, and I think it would be quite wrong if anything were done here that might impede its continuation.

I know that the Home Secretary and the Minister have no wish to obstruct the work of respected, effective charitable organisations such as IDEALS, Oxfam and Save the Children, so will the Minister now give a commitment that such agencies will not be inadvertently impacted by this designation? I heard what he said earlier about governmental support for aid programmes in Gaza, but I am particularly concerned about non-governmental organisations, particularly smaller ones.

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that if there had to be an individual process rather than a general exemption for humanitarian work, that might be beyond some of the projects that are running in Gaza, and they would simply be lost?

Wayne David: These issues clearly need to be examined, and that is why I regret the lack of prior consultation and discussion. I ask the Minister to give a commitment that they will be looked into in great detail, and that that will be done in partnership with the organisations that could be impacted. I also ask him to give a cast-iron commitment to ensure that the good work to which a number of Members have referred will indeed be continued, and that there exists no impediment of any kind that will cause a material obstruction.

4.18 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I obviously support the Government on this important matter. I also pay tribute to the Opposition for the sensible approach that they have taken. Some important points have been made. The leader of the Scottish National party—or rather the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith)—*[Laughter.]* Well, perhaps he will be the next leader; we will see! Anyway, I think that he may have been trying a little too hard to disagree while agreeing, but he made some important points. However, I think the Minister went some considerable way to addressing those points in his opening remarks, and I also point to the decisions of other Governments around the world that broadly mirror what we have done and their continued and much needed humanitarian support and aid for the people of Gaza, and indeed more generally in the region. We all would absolutely—100%—want to see that continue, but of course this measure is incredibly important.

[Andrew Percy]

I was somewhat disappointed by the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt). He seemed as blind as a flittermoose to the facts on the ground. He talked about occupation, which of course ended in Gaza in 2005; there is a debate to be had about the continuing restrictions but, on the actual occupation, Israel left Gaza in 2005. He talked about how we had created and made good on Balfour, but seemed to forget the other part of the story as to why the other elements of it had not been made good on and the culpability of Israel's neighbours in preventing the creation of a viable Arab state at the time of the creation of the state of Israel, so there was something lacking there. I was also slightly confused, as was my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), about his comments around weapons not being targeted enough and making them therefore legitimate to use against targets in Israel. I am sure he did not mean that, and I tried to decipher his response to my right hon. Friend but am still a bit confused about what he was saying.

Then of course there was a bit of an attack on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Israel, or so it seemed, which again is what too often happens in this debate: instead of having a conversation about what is a despotic antisemitic terror organisation, we again get back to talking about the activities of the Israeli Government, in this case a press release from the MFA. I think more important are comments by senior Hamas officials who say they want to cross the border and reach into the hearts of Jews and Israelis and rip them out. Those are the comments I am more interested in, rather than some press release from the MFA.

Crispin Blunt: First, I of course absolutely condemn violence—that is the only point I make on that. Secondly, it is hardly an attack on the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to read out a tweet by the Israeli Foreign Minister.

Andrew Percy: I was commenting on the application of that in the context of why we have reached this decision in the UK today; that was my criticism. But I will not focus my comments on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, because we are here to talk about the terror organisation Hamas.

Comments have been made today about the targeting of British nationals and the threat to Brits, and we saw with the murder of Eli Kay this weekend how attacks from Hamas are targeted indiscriminately not just at Israelis but Brits in the country. I myself have spent time in Israel in bomb shelters as rockets have rained over from Gaza; it is not a pleasant experience, but Israelis are at least to a great degree protected from that.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I have been listening carefully to the debate and this is an extremely complex issue, but does my hon. Friend agree that, in essence, those who incite terror are as culpable as those who implement terror, and that is really what we are discussing this afternoon?

Andrew Percy *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds, let me say that I hope that even if such important interventions are taken, hon. Members will stick to the eight-minute limit, or else I will not be able to give a fair allocation to everybody.

Andrew Percy: As my constituency near-neighbour, Madam Deputy Speaker, you know how much I like the sound of my own voice—I am not alone in this place in that to be fair—but I will try to limit myself. My hon. Friend's comment is absolutely right. The crux is that this is an antisemitic, despotic terrorist dictatorship, effectively, in Gaza, guilty of war crimes, targeting civilians and hiding behind its own civilians. That is why I entirely support this measure, which the Minister put across in a very measured and thoughtful way, and I appreciate that.

The only sadness, when we get to the conclusion, is that life for Gazans will continue to be pretty horrendous. We must all work and strive towards a resolution that improves the lot of everyone in the region, especially those in Gaza who have to live under this regime and under the other restrictions that are placed on the people of Gaza. We have heard about the summary executions and the treatment of women and homosexuals. I recently read about the experience of a young gay man called Hamza, who described what had happened to him at the hands of Hamas:

> "They arrested me, hanged me from the ceiling, beat me up and interrogated me for five days".

They then made him sign confessions saying that he had had sexual relations with other Gazans who happened to be supporters of Fatah. Sadly, all of that will continue, as will the brutalisation of women, the summary executions and the trumped-up allegations of collaboration with the state of Israel. I welcome this measure today, but I do so with a great degree of sadness that life will continue in such a way for Gazans. I hope that all of us in this place will do everything we can to strive towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict in that part of the world.

4.25 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I support this measure for the reason set out by the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds)—namely, that there is no doubt that the political wing of Hamas supports its military operations. As we have heard, these operations include attacks on Israeli civilians that are completely unacceptable.

We are all opposed to any use of indiscriminate violence in the middle east, but there has been a lot of it, with a terrible loss of life as a result. If we are honest, however, these repeated outbreaks of violence are the consequence of the absence of a political process. We all support a two-state solution—a safe and secure Israel living alongside a Palestinian state—but the shape of that state, which is needed to bring an end to the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people to which the hon. Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) referred, is becoming less and less clear. Some argue that it has disappeared because of the growth of settlement building and annexation. The truth is that there is no peace process at the moment. In my view, that is because of an absence of courageous political leadership on both sides of the conflict.

I have always been greatly struck by the parallels between the middle east and Northern Ireland. Progress was eventually made to bring the Northern Ireland

conflict to an end when the leaders realised that courage was required to find a different way forward. In the case of the Provisional IRA, its leaders eventually said to their troops, "We are not going to bomb Northern Ireland out of the United Kingdom; we have to lay down our bombs and bullets and engage in a political process." Similarly, the Unionists took the step to sit side by side with their former sworn enemies. That took courage and a lot of quiet, patient and at times secret diplomacy. The Minister said that the Government's policy was not to talk to Hamas. That was the Government's stated policy in 1972 in respect of the IRA, but we now know that the Home Secretary met Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness in secret to see whether a way forward could be found.

I am mentioning this because it is relevant to second of the two issues that I want to raise with the Minister, about the consequences of the order and how it will be applied in specific circumstances to specific organisations. The first issue relates to medical and humanitarian work; the second relates to the activities of groups such as Forward Thinking, a widely respected organisation that is trying to bring people together to find a peaceful way forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) talked about the work of IDEALS, and other organisations have been referred to in the course of the debate. We know that in the case of IDEALS, NHS volunteers from all over the country have gone repeatedly to Gaza to advise very capable Palestinian surgeons—I have visited the main hospital in Gaza—on the management of the most complex injuries that arise from bombs, bullets and blasts. There is now more capacity than previously existed, precisely because of that work. The question that I want to put to the Minister is: will NHS staff be able to carry on doing that work without fear of prosecution? It has been pointed out that they have to talk to the authorities there in order to be able to do that work.

Dr Whitford: Does the right hon. Gentleman also recognise that because of the blockade it is impossible for doctors in Gaza to get out and train, and that we therefore have to bring the training to them?

Hilary Benn: I recognise that, and it is one of the consequences of the blockade that has affected the people of Gaza for a very long time.

Secondly, what about peacebuilding organisations such as Forward Thinking? Over the years, as the Minister may be aware, Forward Thinking has brought leaders of the parties to the conflict, from Israel and from the Palestinian side, to Britain and Northern Ireland to meet former foes who talk them through the journey they made that led from armed conflict to the Good Friday agreement. That has included leaders from Hamas. I have seen the work of Forward Thinking at first hand, and I have participated in some of it. It is deeply impressive and, in my view, very important.

The Home Office document, "Proscribed terrorist groups or organisations", published in 2015, sets out the offence and draws attention to section 12(4), which

"provides a defence, in the case of a private meeting addressed by a member of a proscribed organisation, if a person can prove that they had no reasonable cause to believe that the address would support the proscribed organisation or advance its terrorist activities.

Further, the explanatory notes to the Terrorism Act 2000"—

the explanatory notes are designed to help the courts and prosecutors in deciding whether it is in the public interest to prosecute—

"explain that the defence in section 12(4) is intended to permit the arrangement of 'genuinely benign' meetings…designed to encourage a designated group to engage in a peace process or facilitate delivery of humanitarian aid where this does not involve knowingly transferring assets to a designated organisation."

There is also the question of journalists. On reading the guidance, it seems to me that the activities I have highlighted would not be caught by this order, but I look to the Minister for reassurance.

None of the individuals involved will want to fall foul of the law. I recognise what is said in the Home Office document but, for the kinds of organisations that a number of Members have raised, it is not a satisfactory answer to leave people in the following position: "Well, there is a defence. Hey, if you are prosecuted, you can go to court and advance the defence. You may win, you may not. You may be found guilty."

Will the Crown Prosecution Service now produce guidelines on the implications of this kind of order for the activities to which I have drawn attention? I am aware that the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation suggested such guidance in 2018, and I understand that in October 2020 the Home Secretary said she had written to the Attorney General to ask her to discuss the question of such guidance with the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Can the Minister tell us how those discussions are going? That would help to reassure Members who want the good work of Forward Thinking to continue while supporting the order today. We have an obligation to the staff who do the work and to the trustees of the organisation, because what they are doing is self-evidently good and important work, and I hope it will be able to continue.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD) *rose*—

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I would like to call the Minister at 4.45 pm, so I ask the two remaining speakers to divide the time between themselves. It is about five minutes each.

4.33 pm

Sarah Olney: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will keep my remarks short.

The Government should undoubtedly be doing all they possibly can to combat terrorism and stamp out antisemitism wherever they find it. Within Gaza, Hamas's persecution of and discrimination against marginalised groups—including Jews, the LGBT+ community and women—civil society organisations and democratic opposition is abhorrent, and it is certainly true that Hamas's attitude to the conflict in Israel and Palestine, including its entrenched and extremist rhetoric, its antisemitic incitement and its refusal to recognise the state of Israel, is a significant barrier to peace.

That was only too apparent in the dreadful terrorist attack carried out by a Hamas operative in Jerusalem on Sunday, in which an Israeli citizen tragically lost their life, with others wounded. I hope that Members on

[Sarah Olney]

both sides of the House will join me in paying tribute to those victims and their families. Those awful scenes underline the fact that this is a conflict, in which peace is desperately needed. It is needed for Israeli citizens and for Palestinians.

The military wing of Hamas is currently proscribed by the Government and has been for nearly 20 years, and rightly so. However, we have some concerns about the legislation before us today. Under the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, jurisdiction for offences relating to proscribed organisations was extended on an extra-territorial basis. Offences such as these carry a maximum sentence of 14 years in prison. We are seriously concerned that someone who meets the political wing of Hamas for the purposes of advancing peace, in the UK or even in a country where the political wing of Hamas is not proscribed, such as Palestine, could still be prosecuted for it in the UK. We must not risk criminalising those who work towards peace building and dialogue. There is a concern among UK charities who play an important role in working towards peace that this measure may impact them. There is genuine confusion about what this means for their work.

Worryingly, we have heard from such charities that the Home Office did not conduct a consultation regarding this step. If that is true, it is remarkably irresponsible. Those charities may find that overnight they are criminalised, with a risk of significant prison sentences, for work that they are currently undertaking, and have undertaken for years. Will the Minister commit to meeting charities such as Forward Thinking to discuss how this may impact them? Will the Government consider exemptions for British-based charities working on peace building and dialogue? I hope that Members in all parts of the House agree that it is vital that greater reassurance is provided to these charities, so does the Minister agree that the Crown Prosecution Service should urgently bring forward prosecutorial guidance in England, to provide that certainty?

We also have concerns regarding the delivery of aid to Gaza; again, it is vital that this step does not obstruct or criminalise charities that are trying to improve the situation on the ground in Gaza. Have the UK Government carried out any assessment of how this might, for instance, impact the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which helps to assist the 1.4 million refugees in Palestine by delivering education, healthcare, and relief assistance? As we work towards peace in the region and a two-state solution, I urge the Government to take an approach that actively supports humanitarian and civil society efforts within Israel and Palestine to support peace. I hope that the Minister will consider this proposal, and I hope that the Government will address the concerns I have raised, and centre peace building and dialogue at the heart of their approach to this conflict.

4.36 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, let me welcome the Home Secretary's decision fully to proscribe Hamas. Many, including myself, will argue, "Better late than never. It is long overdue." Hamas's charter is unequivocal in setting out its objective of wiping the state of Israel off the map. Israel has a right to exist and its citizens have a right to normal life. I am unashamedly a friend and supporter of Israel. I supported it when I was in the Northern Ireland Assembly, in my previous job, and I have been on the same page on the issue in Westminster. Anyone who suggests that Hamas's objective is benign should take a look at its record. Since taking over Gaza in 2006, Hamas has been responsible for four major conflicts, the deaths of more than 6,000 civilians and countless war crimes, not least of which is firing thousands of rockets from Gaza into civilian areas in Israel. Hamas has also sent incendiary balloons from Palestine into Israel, and it has training camps where people are trained to kill, and that is what they do.

I do not quite understand some of the comments that have been made, but I do understand this: attacking civilian posts or civilians is wrong. If terrorists attack military bases, that is also wrong, and terrorists who do that deserve to have the full weight of the law taken against them. I am the MP representing Strangford in Northern Ireland, so obviously I understand only too well the murdering devilment, wickedness and evilness of the IRA; we are talking about the same wickedness and bloodthirsty terrorists that Hamas are as well. They deserve to be proscribed, and that is what I wish to see today.

I wish to place on record my thanks to the Israel Britain Alliance for its tireless campaigning on this issue. This decision will ensure that there is no longer any ambiguity about what Hamas is or about the consequences of supporting terrorism. Hamas glorifies atrocities and the murder of innocents—women, children and civilians. Those in Hamas deserve no mercy for what they have been doing over the years. This order will rightly categorise Hamas as a terrorist organisation, without caveat. It will force the media to properly record its designation as a terror organisation when it is referenced. I commend the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for his comments and what he put forward, and I wholeheartedly support him in what he said. Perhaps most significantly, the order destroys the argument used by Hamas and some in this place to pull their punches on and mitigate Hamas's nefarious and deadly activities.

We must protect the democratic countries and their democratic processes; terrorist organisations deserve to feel the full weight of the law. They are not the same; they are two different things—there is democracy and there is terrorism. Terrorism always needs to be put down and Hamas needs put down. It is not difficult for me to understand how Hamas's military and Hamas's politics are one and the same. I believe they are.

Will the Minister confirm to the House whether the proscription in this order will automatically cover Hamas's offshoot organisations—many suppression of terrorism orders come forward and another organisation always comes forward—or will we need to follow this process each time there is a name change and so on? I welcome what the Minister has said and look forward to the proscription of Hamas and every organisation like it.

4.40 pm

Damian Hinds: The Home Secretary and I strongly believe that the proscription of Hamas IDQ should be extended to cover the entire organisation. Subject to the agreement of this House and the other place, the order will come into force on Friday 26 November.

Before continuing, I extend my thanks and pay tribute to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), for the tone and content of what he said, and for his support and that of his right hon. and hon. colleagues for the order. I join in the praise that he rightly gave to our counter-terrorism police, the rest of the policing family, the agencies and everybody who works so hard to keep us safe.

I shall try to address what the shadow Home Secretary said, starting specifically with the proscription review group. As he will know, it is a cross-Government group, chaired by the Home Office, that supports the Home Secretary in her decision making on proscription issues and remains active.

I absolutely reassure the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) of the rigour of the process on this and every occasion. We constantly keep the list of proscribed organisations under review. The evidence for that is that over the past two years we have proscribed the extreme right-wing terrorist groups Sonnenkrieg Division, Feuerkrieg Division and Atomwaffen Division, as well as the militant white-supremacist group called the Base. We have also added four aliases to the list of proscribed organisations, as well as this order to extend the proscription of Hamas.

There was a question about whether there should be more consultation in respect of a proscription. Proscription is an Executive tool based on assessment from security departments and across Government. The proscription regime itself is scrutinised by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, who makes annual reports on how the Government use their counter-terrorism powers. Of course, in debating this order today, we have an opportunity to consider it specifically.

Jonathan Edwards: Successive incumbent independent reviewers of terrorism legislation have all argued for the introduction of timeliness in respect of proscription orders; are the British Government considering that?

Damian Hinds: We keep proscription—including not only whether organisations that are not proscribed should be but whether the proscription of those that are remains the correct and proportionate approach—under constant review.

The shadow Home Secretary and others asked implicitly—in fact, the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), who spoke for the SNP, asked explicitly—why now? It is because we keep the response to terrorism under continual review. It is entirely appropriate that we take all available opportunities to strengthen the UK's response to domestic and international threats. The extension of the proscription of Hamas is part of that response. As I have said, the group in its entirety is assessed to be concerned with terrorism, with the lines that the Government had previously drawn between its constituent parts now being assessed as artificial.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) spoke movingly and with great passion about the terrible case of 26-year-old Eli Kay. Ultimately, it is a reminder of what we are discussing here—the end result of terror and why it is essential that our Government and Governments around the world be constantly attentive to the threat of terrorism and do what is required to mitigate that threat.

A number of colleagues across the House spoke about the position of NGOs and related matters. Implicitly, the question is, would this stop the work of UK NGOs or others in location? The shadow Home Secretary asked about that, as did the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and others. The Government recently published guidance to support our NGOs to operate overseas in high-risk jurisdictions while complying with the counter-terrorism legislative framework and sanctions regime. A specific section refers to proscription, including how to operate around what are known as sections 11 to 13 offences. That is guidance, and we encourage our NGOs to seek legal advice in relation to specific activities and ensure compliance with terrorism legislation.

The UK will continue to work with international partners and NGOs to support the people of Gaza, including through our long-standing support of the United Nations—

Crispin Blunt: I think we would all be grateful for clarity on one specific issue. If those of us who want to continue to engage with people whom we know are members of Hamas and who are in leadership positions—in order to try to draw them into peace negotiations, the unification of the Palestinian position and all the other things that we should be trying to do as parliamentarians engaged in that process—have made it clear that we have no support for Hamas as a movement, will we be at risk of prosecution?

Damian Hinds: I think my hon. Friend will appreciate that I am not in a position, standing at the Dispatch Box, to give guarantees about unspecified activities in which he or others may or may not be involved in the future. This is an order specifically to proscribe this organisation in its entirety. The legislation is clear about the activities that that covers, including support for the organisation, and particular ways of using emblems and so on in support of it, or in ways that would reasonably be considered to be in support of it, and I direct him to that guidance.

Let me come back to what I was saying about NGOs. We will continue to work with international partners and NGOs to support the people in Gaza. It is important to stress that a number of donor partners already list Hamas in its entirety and still continue to deliver significant humanitarian development programmes in the region. Specifically on the point raised—not with me, but with her colleague, the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith)—by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) about her charity work on breast cancer, for which I commend her, and more widely on the position of smaller NGOs, I am happy to follow that up with her separately if that is helpful.

Finally, a number of colleagues raised the overall position of the middle east peace process. The UK's long-standing position on that has not changed. We support a negotiated settlement leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on the 1967 borders, with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states, and on a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees. Proscription is not targeted at any particular faith, social grouping or ideological motivation. It is

[Damian Hinds]

based on clear evidence that an organisation is concerned with terrorism as assessed by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre.

We are clear that, based on the available evidence, it is appropriate for the Home Secretary to exercise her discretion to proscribe Hamas in its entirety. It is our duty to support the order to protect the public from the noxious ideologies that Hamas holds. That being the case, I urge hon. and right hon. Members across the House to support the order.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 3) Order 2021, which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.

Business without Debate

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT CHANGES)

Ordered,

That the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A. Select Committees Related to Government Departments

(1)That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2) as follows—

(a) leave out item 9 and insert the following item:

Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities	11

B. Related Provisions

(2) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees in this Parliament relating to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, including for the purposes of calculating any period under Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees).

C. Liaison Committee

(3) That Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended, by leaving out, in subparagraph (7)(a)(i), 'Housing, Communities and Local Government' and inserting 'Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'.

(4) That the Resolution of the House of 20 May 2020 relating to Liaison Committee (Membership) be further amended by leaving out, in paragraph (2), 'Housing, Communities and Local Government' and inserting 'Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'.

D. European Committees

(5) That Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended, by leaving out in the Table in paragraph (7) in respect of European Committee A, 'Housing, Communities and Local Government' and inserting 'Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'.

E. Planning: national policy statements

(6) That Standing Order No. 152H (Planning: national policy statements) be amended, by leaving out, in subparagraph (2)(a), 'Housing, Communities and Local Government' and inserting 'Levelling Up, Housing and Communities'.—*(Stuart Andrew.)*

Captain David Mockett

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Gareth Johnson.)*

4.50 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Before I turn to the important case of misjustice that I wish to raise with the Minister, may I place on record my deep sadness at the news of the tragic killing in Plymouth of Bobbi-Anne McLeod, whose body was discovered last night? As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, Plymouth is a city in shock over the Keyham killings earlier this year, and the news last night of another senseless murder, of a defenceless young lady, has shaken us to the core. Our thoughts and prayers are with her family and loved ones. We thank very much the police and emergency services for all that they are doing to bring to justice the perpetrators of this appalling murder in Plymouth.

While I am speaking about Plymouth, I should thank the Government for their support of the people of Keyham, with more funding announced today for schoolchildren in Plymouth, many of whom have seen things on the streets of our city that children of primary school age should never see.

I am delighted to turn now to the subject matter of the debate, which I am introducing to bring to the attention of the House an injustice suffered by my constituents, the Mockett family, who have never been able to achieve closure on the brutal murder of a much-loved husband, father and grandfather, Captain David Mockett, who was killed in Yemen in 2011—a death that has never been properly investigated by British authorities.

I will put my arguments in three sections. First, I will set out the background to the matter, and the link between the murder of Captain Mockett and the commercial court case of the Brillante Virtuoso. Secondly, I will set out the many attempts that the family have made to seek justice, and the failings of our prosecuting authorities. Finally, I will spell out the steps that we wish the Minister to take to achieve justice for my constituents.

Let me turn first to the background. David Mockett was a marine surveyor who divided his time between Yemen, where he worked on many insurance claims, and Plymouth, where his wife and daughters lived. He had a reputation as the finest marine surveyor in the region. In July 2011, an oil tanker with a cargo worth around $100 million—the Brillante Virtuoso—was apparently boarded by pirates in the Gulf of Aden. The Minister will remember that at that time the threat from Somali pirates in that stretch of water was very real. The ship was boarded at midnight by seven masked men armed with automatic weapons. Shots were fired and the crew held hostage. For reasons not then known, the capture of the vessel by pirates resulted in an explosion and the ship being set on fire. The crew were evacuated, but the cargo and the ship were substantially lost.

In the immediate aftermath of the incident, Talbot Underwriting, with which the ship was insured, sent a surveyor to find out what had happened and to assess the claim, as was standard practice. David Mockett, who was working for Noble Denton in Yemen, was the surveyor chosen for the task. He was immediately suspicious

that this had been not a straightforward act of piracy, but a clumsy insurance fraud. Through email correspondence with colleagues and his wife, David reported that he was unable to

"find any evidence of bullet holes or exposures to grenades",

and that the incident on the Brillante Virtuoso was not simply an attack by Somali pirates, as claimed by the ship owner.

On 20 July 2011, David Mockett took his laptop and climbed into his Lexus car. After he had driven a short distance, the bomb carefully placed under his seat exploded, killing him instantly. In the days that followed, some attempts were made by British authorities to investigate the murder, but no real progress was made. However, substantial legal action followed in relation to claims made by the owner of the vessel, who was a Greek ship owner called Marios Iliopoulos. That legal action continued until a judgment was handed down in a British court by Mr Justice Teare late last year. In that trial—brought in the commercial court at the Royal Courts of Justice by Suez Fortune Investments Ltd and others against Talbot Underwriting Ltd—the learned judge concluded the following in his comprehensive judgment, in which he found for the insurers:

"The constructive total loss of Brillante Virtuoso was caused by the wilful misconduct of the Owner, Mr. Iliopoulos… the motives of the armed men were not to steal or ransom the vessel or to steal from the crew, but to assist the Owner to commit a fraud upon Underwriters… Iliopoulos had a motive to want the vessel to be damaged by fire, namely, the making of a fraudulent claim for the total loss of the vessel in the sum of some US$77 million which, if successful, would solve the serious financial difficulties in which he and his companies were at the time."

I think the Minister will agree that that finding is as clear a statement from a High Court judge as we could ever wish to hear.

That commercial case was not about the killing of Mr Mockett, but it goes a long way to explaining the motive for killing him, as he was about to uncover the truth about the taking of the Brillante Virtuoso, and it also provides a clear indication as to who was almost certainly behind his murder.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for bringing the matter forward. I hail from a nation where too many lives have been lost in similar devastating manner. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that integrity such as that shown by Captain David Mockett is feared internationally, and that it is only right and proper that his death be recognised as the work of evil men with an evil purpose whose acts of darkness will never succeed in getting rid of the light?

Sir Gary Streeter: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Certainly, Captain Mockett was a man of the highest integrity, and for him to be killed for doing his job, and doing his job well, is an absolute outrage.

During the 12-week trial in the High Court, it was established that the hijackers were Yemeni coastguard officers disguised as Somali pirates, and that the automatic weapons they used had been supplied to them in advance by one of the Greek salvors who was on standby to salvage the burning vessel, as part of the plan. It was all a massive fraud that Captain Mockett was in the process of uncovering—for that, he was killed.

Let me turn to my next question: what have the family tried to do to obtain justice for their murdered husband and father? At the inquest in Plymouth in June 2012, the coroner found that Captain Mockett was unlawfully killed. Evidence was given ruling out al-Qaeda terrorists and suggesting strongly that the killing was linked to an insurance fraud. In the past 10 years, Mrs Mockett, supported by two close friends who each have relevant expertise, has sought to persuade the British investigative authorities to carry out a detailed and forensic investigation of the case and to go after the people responsible. That has never happened.

The family have been shunted from pillar to post within the Metropolitan police, receiving only vague assurances that the matter was being looked into. Although terrorism was quickly ruled out, none the less the case went to the counter-terrorism command rather than a team used to investigating organised crime. No progress was made. As the commercial court case unfolded, much information was passed to that team within the Met that clearly demonstrated the link to the commercial shipping case, and that Captain Mockett was murdered owing to insurance fraud, but no obvious action was taken.

In 2018, Mrs Mockett sought my help. I wrote to the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and received a reply confirming that the counter-terrorism command—SO15—had been involved in the investigation of Captain Mockett's murder, but pointing out that the Yemeni authorities had the lead responsibility, and that it was all very difficult. We were no further forward. In March 2019 I wrote to the then Home Secretary, raising my concerns about the lack of investigation and making the crucial point that the way forward in this case was to open a piracy investigation in international waters, for which our investigators do have jurisdiction. That would enable them to bring proceedings against the perpetrators of this act of piracy, enabling the family to obtain justice.

I set out this argument clearly in my letter to the then Home Secretary, but, although his office spoke to the Metropolitan Police, they did not proceed as requested. The fact that the killing took place in Yemen, a failing state, is not the obstacle it might at first appear, because most of the evidence in this case sits in London and in Athens. The judgement of Mr Justice Teare provides a clear indication that serious criminal acts under the Aviation and Maritime Security Act 1990 have taken place, and our authorities most certainly have jurisdiction to investigate them. I wrote again to the next Home Secretary in March 2020, making a similar case, and received a response from a Home Office Minister, again pointing out the difficulty of bringing proceedings in relation to a crime committed in Yemen, but once again not gripping the argument about investigating the act of piracy and bringing to court those responsible.

In frustration, I then organised a meeting with the officers of the Metropolitan Police on whose desk this file sat, gathering dust, with Mrs Mockett present. Sadly, that proved to be equally frustrating. The only real point of encouragement was that they promised to keep a close eye on the commercial case involving the Brillante Virtuoso and, if any useful evidence emerged therefrom, to take matters forward. As far as we know, they did not once attend court during a very long hearing and, despite the crystal-clear judgment from the learned judge on the identity of the people behind

[Sir Gary Streeter]

the whole criminal enterprise, they have not taken a single step since the judgment to investigate the people responsible.

The Metropolitan police have been provided with a very clear way forward, which they have so far refused to pursue. I am sure the Minister would agree that when a British citizen is murdered in cold blood overseas, our authorities should move heaven and earth to bring those responsible to justice, using every legal means of action available to them. That has not happened, and the years are slipping by. There has been more than enough information to progress this investigation, yet the Metropolitan police appear to show an alarming reluctance to move forward. Any confidence that the Mockett family had in the police force has now been completely eroded.

Even now, however, it is not too late. The fresh wave of evidence raised in the insurance fraud trial provides a real opportunity and is more than a starting point for further investigation. While it may be difficult to obtain sufficient evidence surrounding the planting of the bomb, there is ample evidence to prosecute the mastermind behind all this for the international crimes of hijacking and destruction of the vessel. In the investigation of those offences, the murder of Captain Mockett would also automatically be investigated as part of the cover-up, leading to a measure of justice for those responsible.

The injustice in this case, and the inaction by our prosecuting authorities, has attracted the attention of third parties. Next year a book is to be published into this whole sorry mess, including an in-depth look at why nobody has been held to account, despite the evidence now uncovered. There will also be a Radio 4 programme highlighting this case as a miscarriage of justice. I am sure the whole House would agree that when a British citizen is murdered in any part of this world just for doing his job, there must be justice.

What do we want the Minister to do? The family will not let this drop, and nor will I. We recognise that the Home Office is not directly responsible for decisions on prosecution, nor should it be, but Ministers have influence and are there to ensure that our independent police forces are working correctly. I ask the Minister, for whom I have a great deal of respect, to call into his office the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and ask her to properly investigate this case. She should be asked to remove this file from the desk of the current team, where it still sits gathering dust, and give it to a new team of people experienced in investigating serious international fraud. They should be instructed to draw on the rich seam of evidence that the commercial court case has brought to light and to engage with the seasoned professionals who have advised Mrs Mockett throughout and who have real life and relevant experience. If that were to happen, I am confident that a way would be found under existing law to investigate and bring to book those responsible for this appalling crime and to deliver to Mrs Cynthia Mockett—one of the loveliest women anyone could wish to meet—her daughters and grandaughters the justice that they so richly deserve.

5.5 pm

The Minister for Security and Borders (Damian Hinds): It was with great sadness that we heard yesterday of a body being found in the search for 18-year-old Bobbi-Anne McLeod. Our thoughts and prayers, and those of the whole House, are with her family. I join my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter) in his praise and thanks of the emergency services.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate on the tragic case of the late Captain David Mockett. My hon. Friend has long campaigned on the case and has shown great determination in seeking justice on behalf of his constituents, the family of Captain Mockett. I hear what my hon. Friend says about his continuing commitment in that regard. I also express my sympathies to the Mockett family for the tragic loss of their husband and father, and of a professional who was clearly highly respected in his field. Their determination and perseverance in seeking justice is entirely understandable and right, and of course we must do what we can to deliver on that.

As my hon. Friend said, the Metropolitan police counter-terrorism command, known as SO15, supported the Yemeni authorities and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as it was then known. That command has unique expertise in assisting with complex cases in other countries. In 2011, a senior SO15 officer conducted a scoping exercise on the circumstances around Mr Mockett's death to assist the UK coroner, and he subsequently gave evidence at the inquest. The coroner concluded that the murder was most likely criminally motivated. I understand that SO15 has worked closely with the City of London police, which carried out a fraud investigation linked to the case, as my hon. Friend mentioned. The Metropolitan police assured us that, over the last 10 years, SO15 has sought to assist other agencies with the appropriate jurisdiction and will continue to do so.

It is the case that Yemeni authorities have overall responsibility for the homicide investigation and there are very limited circumstances where UK police can take primacy on an investigation into a murder overseas. The Metropolitan police is of the view that the circumstances in this case are such that UK police do not have legal authority.

My late predecessor, our friend James Brokenshire, wrote to my hon. Friend in 2020 in response to his correspondence, as he will recall. As noted in that letter, the police and the National Crime Agency are operationally independent, as he noted in his closing remarks. Ministers do not have the powers to make a request or direction to them to open an investigation. In our system, that would not be appropriate.

I am entirely sympathetic to my hon. Friend's determination to seek justice for his constituents. I am also sure that he will appreciate the principle of the operational independence of the police and of how operational decisions and, ultimately, prosecution decisions are made. Indeed, the police must be able to operate free of political influence or interference, even in cases as tragic, emotive and difficult as this one. Where there is a case for further action, we would of course expect them to take appropriate action.

While I regret that I am not in a position to agree to the requests my hon. Friend set out in his speech, I will do—and want to do—what I can to help support David's family. First, I can confirm that the case has been drawn to the attention of Her Majesty's ambassador to Yemen, who can make representations about the matter to the Government of Yemen. I am also, of course, very happy to meet my hon. Friend away from the Floor of the House to discuss the case more fully, and we should be in touch on that immediately.

I would like to thank my hon. Friend for seeking this important debate.

Sir Gary Streeter: I appreciate all that the Minister has said, but is he satisfied, or could he make further inquiries, on the point I have raised repeatedly about looking at the Aviation and Marine Security Act to see whether some other kind of investigation might be pursued by the British authorities into the act of piracy, which could then have the right result in securing some kind of justice? Could he please go back to his office and look at that point for me? I would be most grateful.

Damian Hinds: Of course, I am not going to say no to my hon. Friend on that question. I do not know what the prospects might be, but, yes, of course I can do that, and specifically, when he and I meet, we can discuss it.

I was just coming to the end of my remarks, but I wish to finish by once again extending my own deepest sympathies and, on their behalf, those of colleagues in the Home Office and the Home Secretary to the family and friends of Captain Mockett.

Question put and agreed to.

5.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 November 2021

[Caroline Nokes *in the Chair*]

Energy-intensive Industries

9.30 am

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind hon. Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the estate, which can be done either at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the Chamber.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered energy intensive industries.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Nokes. I am grateful to have secured this timely debate. As we continue to emerge from the economic hit of the covid crisis and as financial activity builds and grows, energy prices are noticeably higher and our constituents are feeling the pinch. We have seen domestic suppliers go bust, and jobs and product affordability have been threatened by the cost of energy to businesses. The short-term issue of price volatility is exacerbated by longer-term issues of energy production and energy efficiency.

Today, I will set out the issues facing industries that rely on the intensive use of energy, not least the ceramics industry, for which the Potteries are internationally famous. It is worth remembering that to be the world capital of ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent needed to be not just a city of pots and clay, but a city of pits. The energy requirements to fire ceramics at extreme temperatures are intense, and it was local coal—as well as clay—that fired kilns historically.

Times change and coal firing is now, thankfully, a thing of the past. The last such firing was literally a museum piece, organised by the fantastic Gladstone Pottery Museum in my constituency at the Sutherland works of Hudson & Middleton in 1978. It is a good thing that coal firing is a long-lost practice. We should not over-romanticise the scenes of smoke billowing from hundreds of bottle kilns, which came at the human cost of debilitating industrial illnesses such as miner's lung and potter's rot, but neither should we look to close the industry down or leave it to wither on the vine, as the last Labour Government did, when massive household names, including Spode, Tams and Royal Doulton, were lost during their time in office.

The ceramics industry was born out of the innovation of Josiah Wedgwood and, while some processes from that time survive, the industry has continuously been one of innovation, with producers often competing to deliver even greater efficiencies. Just as the ceramics industry has had to adapt and adjust from the use of coal to the use of gas and electricity, it is currently adapting and innovating to the ongoing shift from gas. We should support it and other energy-intensive industries in doing so.

As a whole, the energy-intensive industries of steel, chemicals, paper, glass, cement and lime, industrial gases and ceramics contribute £38 billion annually to UK GDP, according to figures from the Energy Intensive Users Group. The group notes that the industries provide 200,000 jobs directly and support 800,000 indirectly. Those are not jobs that we should lose to international competitors with lower environmental standards than our own, lower ambitions for carbon reduction or higher interventionism.

There is an urgency to ensuring that energy-intensive industries survive in the UK, due to the real and present danger of the volatility in world energy markets. It would be a tragedy if short-term price pressures were allowed to undermine British industry just at a time when order books are recovering strongly from covid and firms are looking to take on more skilled staff. Just as there is a need to keep industrial jobs in Britain, we need to make sure that the existing orders for goods stay on the books of British firms.

Competitor countries are providing support and are ready to seize the market share. Worryingly, that includes competitors with less exposure to world energy markets and scant regard for enforcing environmental protections. In ceramics, it is worth being clear what that risk is.

The renaissance of the ceramics industry since 2010 is a great British success story, with the sector's gross value added doubling in real terms from 2009 to 2019, according to the House of Commons Library. Ceramics is particularly important in the midlands economy. Some 60% of direct employment in the sector is within the midlands engine, and most is concentrated in the Staffordshire Potteries, focused on Stoke-on-Trent. The sector's products encompass everything from crockery to electrical components, bricks to agricultural filters, sanitaryware to armoured plating, tiles to prosthetic joints, and pipes to works of fine art.

I have previously visited Ross Ceramics in Newstead in my constituency, which has expertise in the manufacture of complex geometry ceramic cores, which are used in the casting process of jet engine components for aerospace and other industrial uses. It is world-leading engineering. Far from being an industry of the past, modern manufacturing in advanced ceramic technologies is securing the future of skilled employment on good wages in and around north Staffordshire, but firms that usually face one third of their total production costs from energy are suddenly finding that two thirds of costs are from energy.

The industry has long militated against price shocks by buying energy in advance, but many were stung by the pandemic, finding that they had excess energy at a time of restricted demand for ceramic production, and taking a loss on selling back that energy. Things have now boomeranged completely. Firms that had held off from buying energy early for this winter—for fear of further lockdowns hitting demand—now face severe financial difficulties. Firms with full order books operating at 100% capacity have none the less had to contemplate shutting down early in December, out of fear that it will be cheaper to pay employees not to work than to incur the costs of the necessary amount of gas and electricity to fire products at 1,000°C or more.

[Jack Brereton]

I note that Portugal, a direct competitor for tile manufacturers, has recently introduced a 30% reduction in the network access tariff for the ceramics sector. That is just one example. Many countries around the world have taken such steps to support energy-intensive industries that have high costs. The industry's electricity prices in the UK are some of the highest in Europe and are becoming uncompetitive. Additionally, although many of our manufacturers use electricity to generate heat, others who could switch to decarbonise are deterred from doing so by the high cost of commercial electricity on top of the capital investment that would be needed.

I am encouraged that the Government's industrial decarbonisation strategy of April this year recognises the dangers and undesirability of simply offshoring production, or ceding it to competitors, as a route to getting the UK's overall emissions down. Of course, the Government have devised the energy-intensive industries exemption scheme, which is great for businesses that qualify for it. Unfortunately, many of the industries in Staffordshire are excluded at the first hurdle from what the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has dubbed the "sector-level test". Specifically, that means businesses within NACE codes 23.41, 23.42 and 23.43, which cover household ceramics and ornaments, sanitaryware and insulators. Those codes need to join other NACE codes in the ceramics sector that, thankfully, are within the eligibility criteria—namely 23.20, which covers refractory products; 23.31, which is ceramic tiles and flags; 23.32, which is bricks and so on in baked clay; 23.44, which is other technical ceramic products; and 23.49, which is other ceramic products.

If we see the industrial decarbonisation strategy as a herald of the Government's intention for a serious investigation of the longer-term measures needed to support industry as it transitions to lower-carbon energy, we need to look at how the parallel doubling of public research and development investment can benefit energy intensive industries. That will be necessary to improve efficiency, to encourage a move towards more electric firing and to develop hydrogen as the solution for the larger high-powered kilns where electricity is not an option.

There is a pressing need for an investment strategy for R&D in the energy transition for the midlands engine ceramics cluster, which is just as important as those in London and the Oxford-Cambridge arc who have for far too long received disproportionately high public R&D funding. Public R&D funding is particularly needed in a sector such as ceramics, given the high number of small and medium-sized enterprises—as much as 97% of the sector, according to the British Ceramic Confederation. Even firms that do pass the sector-level test for the energy-intensive industry scheme have difficulty passing the business-level test, due to the smaller-sized enterprises typical of the sector—even firms with worldwide brand recognition.

When certain qualification thresholds for energy-related assistance are set at tens of millions of pounds per work site, the ceramics industry loses out. A sum of £1 million per site would be more realistic. The use of NACE codes could, as has already been demonstrated, target lower thresholds at the ceramics industry for its particular characteristics and configuration.

I know that the Government recognise their responsibility to step up to the plate. Only this Monday, the Government announced £9.4 million to back a trailblazing hydrogen-storage project near Glasgow, helping to create high-skilled jobs. Last week, the Royal Navy issued a market exploration notice to seek hybridisation of the fleet, seeking private sector expertise for a public sector commission to reduce emissions by 20% to 40% by 2030.

The week before that, the RAF announced that it had secured a Guinness world record, no less, for the world's first successful flight using only synthetic fuel, in partnership with Zero Petroleum Ltd. There was also confirmation this month of the highly significant £200 million Government investment in the Rolls-Royce small modular reactor—an exciting development that could create 40,000 jobs and secure many more in the supply chain, including at Goodwin International in Stoke-on-Trent, which leads the way in British precision engineering.

Sources of intense energy with low to zero carbon emissions are one clear way forward for heavy industries. Another is carbon capture and heat capture. The Minister will know that Stoke-on-Trent leads the way with a district heat network to use deep geothermal energy to heat our city and save thousands of tonnes of carbon dioxide annually, benefiting residents, education providers and businesses alike.

We can go further; I know that our local industries want to go further, but they need support to do so. Keele University, in our neighbouring borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, has not only worked with EQUANS, part of the ENGIE Group, to generate and store energy from wind and solar on campus; it has also worked with Cadent Gas to demonstrate that hydrogen can be blended at up to 20% into the natural gas network, with no adverse effects for users. The consequent reduction in carbon emissions is obvious, but with hydrogen being six times as combustible as natural gas, public reassurance on safety will be paramount.

Fortunately, Keele and Cadent found in their year-long trial that it is safe to use a 20% hydrogen mix, saving 27 tonnes of CO_2 emissions in the process. Rolling that out to the domestic market nationally could remove from the atmosphere the equivalent emissions of taking 2.5 million cars off the road, all without changes to current gas heating and cooking appliances. For any new fuel source tested in private homes and campus buildings, as happened with the Keele-Cadent trial, there is a need to research the effects on ceramic and other industrial production, not least because glazes can respond very sensitively.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The hon. Member is making a good speech. Does he agree that it is high time the Government changed the regulations on hydrogen blending to allow that to happen in the gas network? At the moment, the gas management safety regulations do not allow any blending above 2%, which is contrary to the Government's own hydrogen strategy.

Jack Brereton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I know that the Government are looking at that. Further trials at scale are being looked at—in Newcastle, I believe—to be undertaken by Cadent. I am sure that that will lead to further changes and to developments of hydrogen mix within the industry.

As I was saying, it is important to do that testing for energy-intensive industries, not least because glazes can respond sensitively to firing conditions, such as temperature and humidity. For that reason, I am glad to say that certain offshore production lines have looked to return to Stoke-on-Trent from locations with different climatic conditions that simply do not create the pristine quality of ceramic goods one gets from Stoke-on-Trent. I have been pleased to discuss with Cadent the importance of fully scientifically trialling and testing the impact of hydrogen mix, and I know that Cadent has been looking into this further with Lucideon, which leads the industry in ceramics research and material science.

I have argued for several years that we need an international research institute—a ceramic park—based in Stoke-on-Trent to institutionalise the myriad projects and advances, not least the work of Lucideon, to develop hydrogen kilns, which I am pleased to say recently secured UK Research and Innovation funding. What we need now is a dedicated research facility as a base for those projects for the industry, with Lucideon as the anchor. Glass Futures in St Helens is one example of what might be achievable by learning from another energy-intensive industry.

I am sure that the British Ceramic Confederation will have engaged with the Minister about its ambition for a similar world-leading centre of excellence for the world capital of ceramics. Indeed, as the BCC will point out, the sector has been working on recycling waste heat for decades, such as by pre-heating spray dryers with exhaust gases or heating spaces via heat exchangers on tunnel kilns. This is not a sector that wants to waste anything, and where it is economically viable, energy and carbon efficiency has been invested in for decades.

I should note that one such improvement comes from switching from intermittent to continuous kilns. One of the dangers of today's very high energy prices is that kilns may need to be shut down completely and then restarted, which is far more complicated and dangerous than it sounds, with wide-ranging consequences. However, innovation must continue. That means supporting the development of new technologies, providing incentives for large-scale investment in proven technologies, and creating a regulatory framework that supports decarbonisation alongside the international competitiveness of UK industry. Some of the new technologies are almost there, but there are issues to overcome. For example, we have to overcome tar build-up or moisture content, depending on the fuel innovation; resist corrosion for acidic kiln exhaust gases; and avoid emissions of nitrogen oxides.

The need to produce and distribute hydrogen on a large scale must be fully researched, not least because hydrogen is also being touted as a fuel of the future for everything from JCBs to trains, including the freight trains that will bring the fine white china clay into the Potteries and will hopefully take more products out in the future. The Government want demand for hydrogen to be high, so they must ensure that the market conditions are right for a ready fuel supply. Interestingly, I note that as part of the Government's industrial fuel-switching competition, BEIS funded a £3.2-million project led by the Mineral Products Association and Hanson UK to trial a mix of 100% net zero fuels, including hydrogen, meat and bone meal and glycerine, for commercial-scale cement in Lancashire for the very first time this September. Let us see more of those sorts of trials covering more of our energy-intensive industries.

In conclusion, I am happy that we have a Government who have enabled manufacturing to resurge in the UK, particularly the British ceramics sector. Modern and advanced manufacturing is a key provider of high-skilled, well-paid employment across Stoke-on-Trent—not just in ceramics, but emblematically so, as it is the world capital of that industry. We are on the cusp of very big advances in low-emission energy, and we need to seize the opportunities without taking our eye off the ball of the short-term dangers of price volatility in traditional fuel markets. Energy-intensive industries are spread right across the country, and are crucial to realising the higher-skill, higher-wage economy that will level up opportunities. I look forward to the Minister's response detailing how the Government will meet the challenges ahead.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): It looks like we have in the region of seven Back Benchers wanting to contribute, so if Members could do the maths and work out how many minutes they have, that would be much appreciated.

9.49 am

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate and on a very good opening speech, in which he has talked about the ceramics industry. I hope that his speech demonstrates the call for greater Government support for energy-intensive industries, including steel, which I will be talking about today, representing Llanwern steelworks and Liberty Steel in Newport East. I hope that shows that this is a truly non-partisan, cross-party campaign that we can all agree with.

I declare an interest today as a proud member of the Community and GMB trade unions, which—along with Unite—so ably represent steelworkers in my constituency and across the UK. Those campaigning unions, along with the industry trade body UK Steel and hon. Members of different parties, have long banged the drum about the need to reduce eye-watering energy prices, which hold back our steel sector. I make no apologies for doing so again today, as this is an issue that has not gone away; in fact, it has got much worse over the last year.

Even before the pandemic hit, industrial energy prices were hitting our steel producers to the tune of £50 million a year. In the five years that UK Steel has been monitoring the costs, they have cost the UK sector £0.25 billion more than what is paid by French and German producers. UK steel producers—we always quote this fact, but it is worth doing so again—still pay 86% more than German competitors and 62% more than those in France. As the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South said earlier, wholesale prices are now at record highs, with electricity costs peaking in October. To put that into context on the ground, energy costs for medium-sized steel rolling mills in south Wales and across the UK have almost quadrupled over the past year. One manufacturer said to me that it was paying £130,000 a week, which has now gone up to over £500,000 a week in some cases.

There is nothing inevitable about this, as my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) said in Wales questions last week. Other

[Jessica Morden]

countries have acted swiftly to ensure that energy costs are less of a burden on steel producers. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned the Portuguese Government. The Spanish and Portuguese Governments have taken decisive steps, including reducing the extraordinary profits made by energy companies, cutting special electricity tax rates for steel, and introducing a minimum 30% reduction in network charges for industrial users. Although every economy and every country is different, such steps represent Governments making a tangible show of support for their steel sectors—an example that the UK Government should follow.

The reasons why we support our steel sector fall into even sharper focus following COP26. Indeed, there was welcome acknowledgement at the summit that the world cannot decarbonise without steel—whether it is for use in wind turbines, electric cars, energy-efficient buildings, infrastructure and much more. That is why it was all the more disappointing that nothing of note for steel was in the Budget, which UK Steel rightly called a "missed opportunity" and a "triumph of complacency", particularly on support to help the industry to decarbonise. For example, there was nothing on industrial energy costs, even though we know that the move towards decarbonisation will require even more energy-intensive methods of steel production.

I asked the Prime Minister about this last week but did not get much of an answer, so I will put the question to the Minister: what is happening with the clean steel fund that the industry was promised? It was absent from recent announcements and last month's net zero strategy paper, and when my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) raised the issue in the main Chamber recently, he was referred to the industrial energy transformation fund, which is two years older than the proposed clean steel fund. It really feels like the Government do not know what is happening to it, and its absence risks adding to the growing gap between what is needed to decarbonise the sector and what is available in support.

We have also heard little from the Government on improving the procurement of UK steel—a move that would support jobs and livelihoods, benefit our economy, provide value to the taxpayer, and lower our carbon footprint. The latest Government data on how much steel is sourced for the UK includes only 160 tonnes of British steel, which is somewhat lower than the estimated 800,000 to 900,000 tonnes that the forward-looking pipeline indicated. It is not good enough, and it is about time the Government took steps to ensure the maximum economic value of public money to be spent on steel in the coming years.

It is worth saying again that the Government talk the talk on net zero and industrial strategy, but it is really not worth anything if steel is not at its core, as my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) will agree. When the Community union launched the "We Need Our Steel" campaign, the "We" it referred to was not just our world-class, highly skilled steelworkers, or communities such as mine, with industry at their heart, and all those in the supply chain. It also referred to government at all levels harnessing the potential of steel and using it to build back the economy after the pandemic, and to power a green industrial revolution.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. It appears that some Members on the Government Benches seem to see steel as a sunset industry. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. It is at the cutting edge of innovation. New alloys are being developed all the time. We need to emphasise the fact that this is a future-facing industry.

Jessica Morden: I thank my hon. Friend. It is absolutely true to say that steel is a future-facing industry, which will help us build back the economy after the pandemic and help us power a green industrial revolution. That is as true now as ever.

9.55 am

Dr Jamie Wallis (Bridgend) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Nokes. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for opening this very important debate.

On top of fierce international competition, the recent volatility of energy prices means that energy-intensive industries are facing significant challenges to remain competitive in the global market. That is putting thousands of jobs and livelihoods at risk. That is why we need to take action now.

UK electricity prices for extra large industrial consumers in the second half of 2020 were higher than for any European Union member state. My hon. Friend will be aware that the steel industry, much like ceramics, is heavily reliant on vast amounts of heat to produce high-quality consumer goods and materials. With China now dominating the market, accounting for 53% of production, more needs to be done to protect the quality British steel we make here from crippling high costs, which will potentially exclude us from the very industry that we created.

The British steel market needs the Government to remain committed to it. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) is absolutely correct to say it is a future-facing industry. We need the Government to remain committed to this future industry to protect the generations of families who have worked in and around it. Sadly, the number of people working in steel has already declined by half since 1990. We need to buck that trend if we are to deliver on our 2020 mandate. Sectors such as steel are vital to the Government's levelling-up agenda, with modern technology and infrastructure increasingly dependent on steel for components for everything from wind turbines to electric cars. Consequently, it is essential that we support these industries as they struggle to respond to higher energy prices.

The Port Talbot steelworks is located in the constituency of the hon. Member for Aberavon, just on the doorstep of Bridgend and Porthcawl, and hundreds of my constituents are employed there, much like their families before them. The jobs, and the people, need to be safeguarded.

The Government currently provide compensation to energy-intensive industries for higher electricity costs associated with low-carbon energy emission reduction policies. Between 2013 and September 2020, that provided the steel sector with £480 million. Nevertheless, the steel sector is calling loudly for further support from the

Government. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) highlighted the UK Steel electricity price report of February 2021, which estimated that electricity prices would cost UK steelmakers an additional £54 million, compared with production costs in Germany. For the past five years, the cost is £254 million. These are clear danger signals. We are teetering on the edge and we need urgent action.

I would strongly welcome more targeted Government support for hydrogen technology within the steel sector, to help our green transition to cleaner and more affordable energy. I was delighted to see the Chancellor's announcement in the autumn Budget of £140 million to establish the industrial decarbonisation and hydrogen revenue support scheme, and the £240 million in the net zero hydrogen fund—but more needs to be done, working in conjunction with the steel industry.

I would welcome a commitment to work with international partners that are world leaders in exploring hydrogen technology, such as Sweden and the United States, to explore potential areas of co-operation. Investment in the green hydrogen-based steel demonstrator project via the clean steel fund requires more clarity, which I hope can be provided today. We ought to prioritise green hydrogen in the net zero hydrogen fund, with the goal of commercialisation.

Looking ahead, I firmly believe hydrogen is key to achieving the Government's ambitious net zero strategy and to building a green economy, and that such technologies will be crucial for the future development and protection of our steel sector. Now that we have taken back control of our own laws, including those on state aid, we can and we should go further. Finally, more support for transition to a hydrogen-steel economy should be considered as vital in how we respond to the current major challenges to the steel sector.

10 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this very important debate.

Manufacturing is the backbone of the British economy, but it is a backbone that has been dangerously damaged in recent decades. By failing to back our manufacturing sector, successive Conservative Governments since 2010 have only succeeded in offshoring jobs. As a result, they are ripping the heart out of our local communities, while also offshoring our carbon emissions. The Government's No.1 priority should be to do whatever it takes to support and regenerate our manufacturing sector.

Steel is the cornerstone of that manufacturing sector, and it will continue to be so for decades into the future. Steel is the homes that we live in, the vehicles that we drive and the offices that we work in. Steel will build the smart cars and the wind turbines that power our economy forward. The Government appear to believe that steel is a sunset industry, but nothing could be further from the truth. The steel industry is a hotbed of innovation and pioneering technology.

Tata Steel is the largest private sector employer in my constituency, and the company is absolutely determined that there should be a future for UK steelmaking, while also recognising the importance of decarbonisation. It recognises that for UK steelmaking to enjoy a prosperous future, the industry needs support and partnership from the UK Government, first by working with the industry to manage a pathway to net zero on both public and private investment, but also by the Government levelling the playing field in order to ensure that the industry is competitive against its European counterparts.

Let us be clear—the current energy spike has played havoc with energy-intensive industries.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a first-class speech. I was brought up in Sheffield and lived there for 20-odd years. I know what he is talking about and he is completely right. I am not going to make a speech, but I want to congratulate him.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words.

Let us be clear—the energy spike has played havoc. November 2021 prices peaked at 50 times the 2020 average, at £2,000 per megawatt hour. The monthly average wholesale costs are 50% higher than in Germany. These extraordinary electricity prices are leading to smaller or completely eliminated profits, and thus to less reinvestment and even pauses in production for some companies. Higher electricity prices also act as a disincentive for investment from international steel companies, with the UK being seen as a less favourable investment environment than other places.

The potential for a widening price gap between the UK and our European competitors means a loss of market share, both in the UK and in key export markets. That is why it is utterly self-defeating for Ofgem to recommend that network energy prices rise even higher. The Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee has rightly called for the steel industry to be exempt from this price hike; let us hope that Ofgem, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Minister, who is in his place today, will take heed of the Committee's recommendations.

Other European countries have taken quicker and more expansive action than the British Government by offering support to energy-intensive industries. As has already been mentioned, the Portuguese Government have announced a minimum 30% reduction in network charges for industrial users. The Italian Government have pledged over £4 billion to eliminate renewable levies on gas for industry and electricity for small and medium-sized enterprises. In Spain, we have seen tax cuts and the temporary reduction in extraordinary profits made by energy companies, including extending the existing suspension of a 7% power generation tax through year end. They will also cut their special electricity tax from the current 5.1% to 0.5%.

What we need to see in this country now is the provision of 100% compensation for costs of carbon in electricity bills, through a carbon price floor and a UK emissions trading scheme, up from the current 75% allowed for under EU state aid rules. We need to provide 85% compensation for the capacity market fee and an 85% reduction in network costs, in line with France and Germany, as well as full exemptions for the renewable levies or the introduction of additional compensation.

The Minister will point, of course, to the energy-intensive industries compensation fund, but that was half a decade ago, and the gap I have just described exists after that

[Stephen Kinnock]

fund is taken into account. We have had enough of warm words; we must now commit to levelling the playing field for our steel companies. It is the least British workers in industrial communities deserve. What a contrast between the Government's dithering and Labour's bold and ambitious £3 billion steel renewal fund. In that fund, we pledge serious investment while the Chancellor had absolutely nothing to say about steel in the Budget. It is a dereliction of duty and makes a mockery of the Government's so-called levelling-up policies. Tragically, successive Conservative Governments have failed to support our steelworkers and their families and communities. What a contrast with our party and our steel unions, which truly grasp the central importance of the steel industry to the past, present and future of our country. Let us hope that the Government will at some point recognise the need to unleash a modern manufacturing renaissance, with steel at its heart.

10.5 am

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship on this debate, Ms Nokes. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing the debate. I know he is as passionate about the ceramics industry as I am about the steel industry.

I want to lay my cards on the table and make three clear points. First, steel uses a lot of energy; we understand that. That means we are on the frontline of the energy price rises. Secondly, we will never not need steel. I am sorry to anyone who has heard me say this a hundred times already, but no one in this country can go a single day without steel. We need it for everything we do, from infrastructure to defence and from healthcare to the wire in the tyres of my trusty old Škoda parked underneath Parliament. Thirdly, of course we must find ways to make steel that consider the environment, but we must never completely rely on other countries to make steel for us. We will have no control over the quality or the environmental issues that come with that, and it would be foolish and immoral to ship steel from other countries.

Between 5 o'clock and 6 o'clock last Monday, steelmakers in Scunthorpe paid an eye-watering £2,080 for a megawatt-hour of electricity. The average cost of electricity prices in 2020 was £35 per megawatt-hour. That volatility is crippling our daily operations. Site managers have to shut down or delay key processes to cope with the spikes in energy prices. It is unfortunate and I know this is a collective challenge for energy-intensive industries, but the cost of energy is now higher than the cost of labour and this is not merely a market blip that will come and go.

I recognise that this is in great part caused by global circumstances beyond our direct control. I believe in a free market, but when it comes to steel a free market does not really exist. Steel is made in every G7 country and, quite bluntly, one way or another those countries have consistently found creative measures to support their steelworks because they want to maintain a steel-making capacity. We were already at a disadvantage when the energy price spikes hit us and that has highlighted the extent of other nations' support for their energy-intensive industries.

I also want to directly challenge anyone who has the incorrect view that steelworks constantly need bailing out. They do not; they need a level playing field, but it could not be any more firmly the other way round. Steelmakers in Scunthorpe are survivors and thanks to our local talent, we have kept our heads above water for decades. We need to be on a fair footing with our European competitors and we will thrive. The Treasury has said it wants

"an attractive and internationally recognised ecosystem across both regulation and tax"

for financial services. I want the same for steel. That is why I was delighted to hear the Prime Minister in his speech on Monday acknowledging that we must end the unfairness that UK energy-intensive manufacturing pays so much more than our competitors overseas. The Prime Minister has historically been supportive of steel. I know for a fact that he has a keen understanding of the industry and clearly understands the threat of high industrial energy costs and the burden of the incredibly high policy costs that UK energy-intensive industries continue to face. So I ask the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister to continue the conversations they are having with the steel industry in these really tricky times, to help it to step forward into a greener and more sustainable future.

I know that since taking over his brief my hon. Friend the Minister has engaged regularly with our steelworks, which I thank him for, and I also know that he has been assiduous in understanding this issue. So I hope that he will agree with me that as a sovereign nation we have the ability to legislate and support our steel industry in a number of ways. Our neighbours and competitors in Europe have started taking action. As the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) outlined, in Italy the Government are temporarily removing renewable levies; in Spain, the Government have suspended power generation and consumption-related taxes; and in Portugal, the Government have put forward a minimum reduction in energy charges.

Meanwhile, our policy and network charges still continue to be much higher than those of our main competitors, so I urge the Minister to look urgently into abolishing the carbon price support mechanism, which is a tax that is not faced by our competitors; cutting down the network costs and capacity market fees; providing support for emissions trading scheme costs; and reassessing existing renewable levies applicable to steel. I understand that the renewable levies are there to encourage businesses to move towards environmentally friendly practices, and to some extent they have succeeded, but the cure should not be worse than the disease. Of course, we also need a green steel deal, as businesses transition to better, greener technologies, and British Steel has laid its cards on the table with its low-carbon road map announcement. I remain hopeful that my hon. Friend the Minister and the Business Secretary will be the ones to seal that historic deal.

There are few industries in this country that are more closely associated with an area than ceramics is with Stoke and steel with Scunthorpe. As fellow MPs in manufacturing constituencies, I am sure that many of my regional colleagues share the sense of duty to protect those industries and the communities built around them. I genuinely hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to make some progress on this issue.

10.11 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I thank the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this debate and I commend him on his frequent contributions on energy-intensive industries. We are very fortunate that we now have a formidable group of Stoke MPs who work as a team and bring forward issues, and get results as well, which I have noticed in the main Chamber. I commend them for that.

Sustainable energy and greener energy debates are becoming more regular and I believe that it is important that we move with the times, which can start with ensuring that energy-intensive industries have the correct means to progress. Just this morning, probably coincidentally, but none the less importantly, I had the opportunity to meet the independent networks association. Its chief executive is Nicola Pitts and it is one of the UK's leading independent utility network owners and operators, driving industry collaboration and innovation to shape the future of the UK's energy and water sectors. It is in the business of ensuring that we can be more energy-efficient with electricity and the use of water, both for the industrial sector and for healthy homes—I chair the all-party parliamentary group on healthy homes and buildings. I commend that organisation.

I had a quick look through the early-day motions before the debate progressed and I noticed that three particularly promote the issue of heat pumps. I commend early-day motion 675, which the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) has put forward; early-day motion 677 on Home Energy Scotland; and early-day motion 681 on Invinity Energy Systems. That tells me that there is a great interest in the issue, not just from the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South but from everybody else here in Westminster Hall today and perhaps even among those who were unable to attend the debate.

The UK should take great pride in our energy-intensive industries. Our main businesses of that kind are dedicated to food, pulp and paper, iron and steel, and basic chemicals. The UK's manufacturing and industrial sector accounted for 60% of total consumption, along with another 16% for chemical manufacturing. The UK industrial sector is made up of some 35% electricity and 39% natural gas, according to Gazprom Energy.

I will give an example not from my own constituency, but of a company that many of my constituents work in. I refer to the recent work done by Bombardier Spirit AeroSystems in east Belfast. It received approval to develop a new £85 million project to develop energy from waste through an EFW gasification plant in the constituency of my Democratic Unionist party colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). It is a tremendous idea and I am sure that it is one that the Minister is well aware of. If he is not, perhaps he can get more information on it. It gives an example not only of what we will do in Northern Ireland, in my neighbouring constituency, but of what can be done elsewhere.

That £139 million plant can process 120,000 tonnes of refuse-derived fuel, comprised of non-recyclable fractions of commercial and industrial waste per annum, to generate electricity and heat. Although I appreciate the extreme finance that firms will need to advance to this level, the benefits are much more energy efficient in the long term. When it comes to the net zero carbon targets, this is one that we should be aiming for. It is crucial that we take the future into consideration when discussing greener energy for our industrial firms. The Full Circle Generation facility in Belfast has aimed to process 140,000 tonnes of waste per annum, but it takes an initial 400,000 tonnes of rubbish for the facility to operate at full capacity. It is particularly exciting, innovative and futuristic; it is something we should be looking at.

The cost aspect is giving large firms little incentive to switch to cleaner energy strategies, but there must be more discussion between the BEIS Minister and the firms so that they can meet in the middle, because there needs to be a compromise sometimes. Perhaps the Minister could give us his thoughts on how that could be achieved. Additional funding must be allocated to help energy-intensive industries decarbonise. That is essential in ensuring that we meet our 2050 carbon zero promise set at COP26. As stated earlier, energy-intensive industries make a great contribution.

We must support our energy-intensive industries within the UK if we want to encourage global firms to come here. We want to see that happening, too. Perhaps the Minister, in his response, could give us some idea of whether we have attracted many firms to come here and invest. I think we have, but it is always good to put it on the record and say what we have done. I have recently been made aware that an industrial firm that set up in China is considering coming back to the United Kingdom because of the price of containers. That is a step forward, although we all know of small businesses in our constituencies—I have many—that are threatened with difficulties because of that price structure. However, we must do more to entice other firms to come back to the UK. One way we could do this would be by taking a lead role in green firms, giving them the funds they require to make this happen. That would also improve local job opportunities for those who aspire to work in the manufacturing industry.

I call on the Secretary of State to ensure that priority finance is given to large industrial firms to give them that jump start in creating greener energy-intensive industries. The cost is a crucial aspect, and I would argue that it puts firms off improving their energy efficiency. There are small but useful steps that the BEIS Minister can take and, given our recent promises at COP26, I do believe these should be taken accordingly.

Caroline Nokes (in the Chair): We have 11 minutes left, so that gives the remaining Members just over five minutes each.

10.17 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing such an important debate at such an important time. I wholly agree with and endorse much of what has been said so far.

One of the key starting points for energy-intensive industries—the focus of this debate—is having affordable energy, but we must have reliable energy too. One of my concerns is that the energy mix we get in the coming years must be reliable, not just in its provision—there are obvious concerns with wind turbines and solar panels—but in the costs. We ought not to be susceptible or vulnerable to these massive price fluctuations that can jeopardise businesses.

[Chris Green]

I do have a broad interest in the nuclear sector, as a north-west Member of Parliament. Much of the UK's nuclear industry is based in the north-west of England, and the Springfields fuels centre, near Preston, is not too far away. Warrington is also a key centre. If we go down the small or advanced modular routes, the leadership scene in Rolls-Royce, in Derby, will also provide very powerful growth within the UK. If we can capture the market early on and have that manufacturing and intellectual property side in the UK, we can then sell further afield.

Sir William Cash: Does my hon. Friend agree that the nuclear delivery group is doing an extraordinary job? In the last two months, we have moved, very substantially, down a strong, stable route towards getting better nuclear delivery.

Chris Green: I agree entirely. It is welcome that the Government have renewed their focus on nuclear organisations, and that groups of colleagues within Parliament are increasingly giving that focus to the nuclear sector. I appreciate that is not universally appreciated, but the narrative and strength of argument is building up for the sector. If we want to have energy-intensive industries, we need that strong foundation of reliable energy. Even if it is a little more expensive than some alternatives, that certainty of production is immensely important, because if a business is going to invest, it has to have that confidence in the first place.

When we discuss levelling up, we have to think about the energy-intensive industries in the north of England and the midlands from ceramics to the steel industry, glass and chemicals. We have to think of levelling up as focusing in a significant sense on manufacturing—and heavy manufacturing—that requires that intensive provision of energy. It would be a positive thing if the Government set out more clearly their support for those sectors. I was concerned with the Cumbrian coal mine, which was going to produce metallurgical coal for the steel industry, but that has been challenged, not because it is going to produce thermal coal, which is a different type of coal used for different reasons. We have to have that clarity and be able to support the industry when it needs it.

We have had a trend over many years of offshoring manufacturing and allowing other countries, perhaps with lower environmental standards than ours, to take our manufacturing industry. If we are looking at COP26 and the agenda that so many countries around the world focused on and championed, we have to recognise that in recent years we have been exporting manufacturing, therefore manufacturing jobs, carbon and other emissions for domestic consumption. We do not have the emissions in the UK, but we are still creating those emissions overseas.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) captured the sense very well when she talked about free markets. We all ought to champion and support free markets, but we ought to be cautious when other countries around the world do not champion free markets and do not have the same appreciation of a level playing field that we do.

I welcome the Government's direction of travel. I wish they would be even more supportive. There will be many more ways, especially listening to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, to make it more competitive to invest in energy-intensive manufacturing in the United Kingdom.

10.22 am

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Ms Nokes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), who is a doughty champion of Stoke. He is Stokie born and bred and boasts regularly that nearly half of Stoke-on-Trent North was built with his family line, so I look forward to seeing Brereton Place soon when I am out campaigning on the trail.

[Clive Efford *in the Chair*]

I also want to give a shout-out to my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) who gave an absolutely outstanding speech; one of the best I have heard since I became a Member of this place. I hope that a lot of those asks are taken up by the Government and acted on.

The city of Stoke-on-Trent is absolutely steeped in its ceramics, not just in its history but in its future. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South talked about Lucideon, one of the leading UK advanced ceramic manufacturers which was recently awarded £18 million with the Ceramics Manufacturing Group, which is looking at how we can have new and exciting ways for this technology to work, alongside the traditional industries. I have companies such as Steelite, Churchill China and Burleigh, which are still making their world-leading products, which we can enjoy in this place if we go into Portcullis House or the Members' Dining Room. It is a shame that when I go into Government Departments or visit a Minister, I do not see a Stoke-on-Trent mug. I am absolutely dumbfounded when I visit a Minister and see that they do not have Stoke-on-Trent ceramics in their office.

One of the things the Minister should take away from this is to ensure that we properly procure Stoke-on-Trent's world-leading ceramics in every single Government Department, because it sends a message that a UK Government are backing UK production.

Sir William Cash: I commend my hon. Friend on making an excellent speech, as they all have been today. With sovereignty we can stand on our own feet and insist on a level playing field in energy, which never existed in the EU, and promote our own manufacturing on a proper basis.

Jonathan Gullis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. As a co-Staffordshire MP, he has absolutely championed our world-leading ceramics manufacturing in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, as well as being a doughty champion for the coal industry. A lot of ex-miners in my community always wish to pay their respects to him for all the work he did for them.

Turning to covid-19 and the energy price rise, if we take Steelite International as an example, 99% of its turnover comes from the hospitality industry. In April 2020, as covid-19 forced us into our homes and away from pubs, restaurants and cafes, Steelite lost 95% of its turnover overnight. Despite that being hugely damaging to Steelite as a hospitality operator, it failed to qualify

for the rates relief offered to hospitality businesses as part of the emergency package announced in 2020, and it was classed as a manufacturer.

The ceramics industry is crucial to the hospitality sector and should also benefit from the 50% one-year business rates discount announced recently by the Chancellor. As a company that depends on hospitality, Steelite was one of the businesses hit hardest by the pandemic, and now by gas prices. Gas prices have risen rapidly across Europe in 2021, but the UK has been exposed to considerably higher prices than elsewhere, with prices rising to five times what they were this time last year.

Many ceramic companies forward purchase their gas and electricity. However, during lockdown when demand for the hospitality sector drastically decreased, gas that had been forward purchased was not used. That meant companies had to sell it back at a loss, making many reluctant to forward purchase again due to uncertainty over future lockdowns and levels of demand. As a result, the ceramics industry has been left particularly exposed to the current exceptional gas prices. On average, gas is roughly 10% of the cost of manufacturing a plate. However, companies have been exposed to gas costs five times of what they were last year. Companies should, of course, aim to build in some resilience in their processes, but this kind of market fluctuation is beyond anything they could have reasonably planned for. For large manufacturers, it could add as much as £500,000 to £1 million per month to production costs. It is simply impossible for ceramics companies to continue to swallow these increased costs, especially at a time when orders from the hospitality sector are still not up to the previous levels in 2019.

Costs will need to be passed on to customers. However, while we are still recovering from the hangover effects of the pandemic, customers are looking to cut costs, not increase them. Passing on extra costs to customers risks encouraging them to turn to cheap imports from abroad, where Governments have taken decisive action to support intensive industries. Spain has introduced tax cuts, including extending an existing suspension of a 7% power generation tax until the end of the year and cutting the special electricity tax from 5.1% to 0.5%. At the end of the day, we must take action and protect these industries. I hope the Minister will take away everything that has been said, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South on securing the debate.

10.27 am

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on bringing forward the debate. At the outset, he rightly highlighted the energy supplier crisis. I am sure he agrees that the Government need to do more about this crisis. He highlighted coal and the bygone days of coal, and certainly that should be a reminder to Government in terms of the lack of support that was given when the coalmines were shut down. It still has a legacy, and it is a legacy that lives on in my constituency. It is something that cannot be repeated, and that is why we need a just transition commission for the UK Government, like the Scottish Government have. We need that support as we move from a reliance on fossil fuel towards renewable energy.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South is a vocal advocate for the ceramics industry, and he should be commended for that. I hope the ceramics industry has a strong future because we need to retain all the manufacturing that we can. Support like that is welcome, and hopefully the Government will listen. The key thing is that there needs to be support for decarbonisation. Other Members spoke about tariff reductions and reducing energy costs. Energy is too high at the moment, but the Government really need to be helping industry decarbonise, and proper investment and support from Government is required. That should put some of these industries ahead compared to those elsewhere. That is where, for me, the investment needs to come from Government to help them decarbonise.

We heard from the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who is clearly a big advocate for the steel industry. I was pleased to visit the works in her constituency, and I repeat: investment is needed to help the steel industry decarbonise. That is the future. We talk about clean green steel, and that is where Government investment is needed.

The hon. Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis), who is not in his place, also spoke about the steel industry and highlighted the fact that there is not enough money in the UK Government's hydrogen strategy by comparison with members of the EU. I agree with him that more needs to come from the UK Government in terms of the hydrogen strategy.

We heard from the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who has also always been a strong supporter of the steel industry and a strong advocate in this House. His key message to the UK Government seemed to be that it is not a sunset industry, and I agree. In fact, that message was so strong that he said it twice—in an intervention and in his speech—and I agree: the UK Government need to support the steel industry.

The hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) is another advocate for the steel industry—I am kind of repeating myself here, but investment in clean green steel and decarbonisation is important. I commend her for being the only one who got something out of the Prime Minister's speech on Monday other than Peppa Pig, so congratulations on that.

We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always turns up at these debates and always makes a useful contribution. Again, he highlighted the importance of manufacturing and Government support for decarbonisation.

What I took out of the speech by the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) was that nuclear energy is indeed more expensive. He is an advocate of nuclear energy, but it is more expensive. We are talking about taking away tariffs for renewable energy, but nobody is talking about taking away tariffs for nuclear energy or addressing the eye-watering costs.

Chris Green: Energy costs are clearly important, but reliability and stability of supply is also a key feature, which nuclear power would provide. Does the hon. Gentleman think that that is an important feature that we should have?

Alan Brown: That inflexible reliability that comes from nuclear energy means that, while we talk about the wind not blowing, the amount of base-load it pumps on

[Alan Brown]

to the grid means having to curtail other, renewable energy sources, because nuclear is so inflexible. So no, I do not agree. That is the problem: nuclear is the wrong energy to mix with renewables, and it really is not the future.

I was talking about tariffs and the cost of nuclear energy. There is £1.7 billion in the Red Book just to develop Sizewell C, before we get to the final investment decision. Think what that £1.7 billion could do for the steel industry, the ceramics industry or decarbonisation—and that is only to get to the final investment decision, before the Government then rush to spend £20 billion on the capital investment for Sizewell C. Then that will be added to our electricity bills under the RAB—regulated asset base—model, for the 10 to 15 years of construction of the nuclear power station, and then a 60-year contract thereafter. So do not let us talk about taking away levies for renewable energy; let us look at what nuclear energy will cost us. I urge the Government to spend that money more wisely, rather than on nuclear energy.

Finally, the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), who is obviously another advocate for the ceramics industry, made an interesting point about the lack of ceramics from Stoke-on-Trent in this place. I suggest to him that he make an investment: buy a lot of mugs and pottery and donate it to this place. That will help the industry and promote it here.

I am coming to the end of my remarks, and I do not want to be too flippant, because this is a very important debate. We need to see support for ceramics and manufacturing, and we need to look at how we decarbonise. Carbon capture has been mentioned. I urge the Minister to reconsider the disgraceful decision to make the Scottish carbon capture cluster a reserved cluster. That should have been given the go-ahead and it should have been one of the track 1 clusters. It incorporates carbon capture, hydrogen production, which has been mentioned as part of the future of decarbonisation, and direct carbon capture from air. It is a really important, innovative cluster and it should have been given the go-ahead. Why was it not selected? I want the Minister to answer that. Equally, I would like to hear what proper investment will be made available to help and support the manufacturing sector to decarbonise.

10.35 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): This has been an excellent debate, involving Members on both sides of the Chamber. It has focused on the two things that are absolutely essential for energy-intensive industries. The first is how we deal with the present spike, as it is called—although it is, in fact, a dome—in energy prices, how they affect energy-intensive industries and what action might be taken to alleviate their suffering as they attempt to cope with, and continue to plan their activities on the basis of, those unprecedented price rises. This time last year, gas was 39p a therm, but it is now well over 200p a therm. That is an enormous, fivefold increase in the price of gas, and that of course runs through into electricity prices. It is absolutely crucial for energy-intensive industries to have a stable price environment, and it is essential for their future plans and competitiveness that they have knowledge of what the future environment might be.

Secondly, the biggest challenge for the future, as mentioned by hon. Members, is how we decarbonise those vital energy-intensive industries so that they continue to produce in and for the purposes of the UK. We should not export energy-intensive production but decarbonise it, so that it continues to operate in the UK as effectively as it has done in the past. In that context, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) pointed out that steel is not a sunset industry but very much an industry of the future. Our efforts to decarbonise such industries should not be seen as a means of closing them down or of removing elements of their activities because they are sunset industries and others can decarbonise. Our energy-intensive industries need to be decarbonised so that they continue to play a central role in future production.

We have heard excellent advocacy this morning. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing the debate. He is one of several Members present from Stoke, home to the crucial ceramics industry. I also congratulate Members on both sides of the Chamber on their strong advocacy on behalf of the steel industry and on their clear understanding of what we need to do about energy-intensive industries.

It falls to me to remind Members that energy-intensive industries are not just about ceramics and steel. A little while ago, the Government helped energy-intensive industries with energy prices by exempting them from some levy costs. There was a list of 70 different sectors that are energy-intensive industries, including the manufacture of malt, the weaving of textiles, the casting of iron, the manufacture of batteries and accumulators, the manufacture of corrugated paper, rubber products, plastic products, technical ceramic products, cement, metal packaging and electronic wires, and metallurgy. Those are all energy-intensive industries across the country, not just in certain parts of the country, and they need our support on current prices and the need for decarbonisation. What I can say about prices right now—I think everyone present will agree—is that we absolutely have to tackle the harm that they are doing to energy-intensive industries, and the difficulties that such industries are experiencing.

One thing that we should all be clear about is that absolutely nothing has happened so far in this country in relation to the price rises. The Government appear to be caught like rabbits in a headlight and waiting for the price spike to go down the other side, so that they do not actually have to do anything. As I have mentioned, this is not a price spike. It is a possible future sea change in energy prices, and it needs to be approached on that basis. It is not sufficient simply to hope that this will go away in a while and things will return to normal, because they probably will not do so, and we need to have Government action to ensure that there is a regulated price arrangement for energy-intensive industries that protects those industries from high prices and the volatility that we are seeing on world markets. There are several ways in which that can be done. As far as I can see, however, the Government have not even looked at any of those things. Indeed, as hon. Members have mentioned, a number of other European countries are doing things in order to combat the price spikes, or price dome, that we are seeing at the moment, none of which are being followed by the UK Government.

There are also issues arising from the fact that a number of energy-intensive industries had a bad deal with energy prices before the present price spike. From my frequent conversations with my hon. Friends the Members for Aberavon and for Newport East (Jessica Morden), I know that UK steel has a cost price far greater than comparable steel production in France and Germany. That is partly because those countries do different things to assist their industries that we do not do in this country, concerning things such as distribution costs and the joint commissioning of procurement of energy packages. The Government would be well advised to look at such things, both now and in the long term, in order to get the stable environment for energy prices that we really need for energy-intensive industries.

At the same time, we also need to get serious about the support that we need to provide for the decarbonisation of energy-intensive industries. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon mentioned Labour's £3 billion steel renewable fund, which is a fund not just to stabilise prices but to take steel well down the road towards decarbonisation by changing things such as electric arc furnaces, hydrogen production for the introduction of energy for steel generally, and a host of other things. They need to be replicated in those other energy-intensive industries with Government support, so that they can decarbonise in good time and good order and keep their production going across the country in a way that we need for the future.

That is a substantial task for the Government, both in the present and in the future, and very little has been achieved so far. I am sorry to have to say that, because it is so important that we get our act together right now and for the future, given the absolutely vital role that energy-intensive industries play in our country's economy. I look forward to hearing from the Minister whether his Government have had a change of heart and are, perhaps even at this late stage, deciding to do something about price rises and the decarbonisation of energy-intensive industries for the future.

10.45 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lee Rowley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate today. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on an important and timely debate. I have already spoken to Members about the issue. We have had a good, constructive debate that has got to the heart of the challenges. Members have recognised the challenges that we face both globally and domestically, as well as the long-term and short-term objectives that we are trying to meet, and they are right to highlight the issues on behalf of their areas and the companies and organisations in them. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South eloquently articulated the challenges. They are noted and we in the Department continue to work through what might be possible. I hope everyone in the Chamber acknowledges that there has been a substantial amount of support for energy-intensive industries in recent years.

We accept that energy-intensive industries are important, as all manufacturing is, for the United Kingdom. They are hugely important to the regions represented in this room, from the north-west to Lincolnshire, from my neighbouring county of Staffordshire—so ably represented by many of its MPs here today—to Scotland and Wales. We know that hon. Members here today attach great importance to the issue, whether it be steel, paper, cement, lime, chemicals, or any of the nearly 70 sectors that the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) read out a number of.

I cannot avoid pointing out ceramics, given that that is the genesis of this morning's debate. Colleagues in Stoke-on-Trent South and beyond have been eloquent champions for the future of the ceramics industry. We are glad to see its continued renaissance and we hope that will continue in the years ahead. It is a great British success story and we want to ensure that that continues.

More broadly, it is vital that we put energy-intensive industries, and manufacturing as a whole, on a sustainable, resilient and reliable footing—a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). That is important for the communities represented here and for levelling up in general.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) has been extremely welcoming and helpful to me in my first few weeks as a Minister, and I am grateful for his time. However, I will gently disagree with him on the point about manufacturing. Although I accept that manufacturing has had challenges for many decades—I have seen that in my own part of the world—we have seen an increase in jobs over the past 10 years, and it is important to note that. Energy-intensive industries and manufacturing have faced a particular set of circumstances in the last year with the real challenge of coronavirus. We are very glad to see that moving on, but a set of new challenges, as articulated by colleagues, face those industries. We can overlay that with the long-term transition plan to try and ensure that we walk more lightly on this earth and that the industries leave less of a legacy on this earth.

We know that the industry faces a set of unique challenges. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) highlighted, we cannot get far without needing steel. We need ceramics and many of the important high-tech industries that we rely on. Glass has a hugely important part to play in our transition. Those are the key building blocks that we need to understand and then formulate policy around in the coming years and decades.

I am two months into this role. On a personal level I have tried to take an interest in the role—of course I have tried to take an interest. I should have taken an interest in the role, given the amount of paperwork that I have had to read in the last two months! I have met users of the energy-intensive sectors. Last week I was with the chemicals sector and I visited a steel location. I look forward to coming to see ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent at the earliest possible opportunity.

Jim Shannon: In my contribution I referred to Shorts Bombardier—Spirit as it is now—and the £85 million project it is trying to develop in Belfast. Has the Minister been to see that project or talked to Shorts Bombardier Spirit to ascertain what it is doing and what could be replicated elsewhere in the UK?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. He anticipates some of my speech. To pick that up now, there is an incredible amount of work going on across the four nations of the United Kingdom.

[Lee Rowley]

I am looking forward to coming to Northern Ireland as soon as I am able. We are currently trying to organise a visit, and I am keen to talk to him further about the example that he highlights.

Alan Brown: The Minister mentioned the chemical industry. Does he understand that INEOS at Grangemouth is part of the Scottish carbon capture cluster, and at the moment INEOS is one of the biggest emitters of carbon dioxide in Scotland? The Scottish CCS would obviously alleviate that problem. Will the Minister look into that, promote the Scottish carbon capture cluster and take it away from being reserved, as it is classed at the moment?

Lee Rowley: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I do acknowledge the challenge of the Grangemouth plant and the excellent work that goes on there. I have spoken to INEOS on several occasions since taking up my post. He and his colleagues have contributed to the carbon capture and storage debate actively and noisily over the past few weeks. He knows that an initial two sites have been announced and the intention is to have four by 2030. The Minister of State, Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Greg Hands) has articulated that we want to continue to work with the Scottish cluster to see what is possible there.

I want to touch on a number of points that individual Members made. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South rightly highlighted—along with many Members—the challenge of energy prices. We acknowledge and accept there are challenges with energy prices. My hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe highlighted price spikes noted in just the past few days. From conversations I have had, this debate and wider discussion within industry, we know that there are challenges. I thank colleagues, unions, industries and trade bodies for articulating that in recent months.

There is significant price volatility, which it is important to acknowledge. Prices have spiked and started to float down over recent weeks. I hope all Members would accept that in the past two years alone we have had very low prices and very high prices. We are at a particular place in the market at the moment.

Holly Mumby-Croft: Will my hon. Friend comment a little more on those lower prices? Although we might have seen lower prices, we are still at a significant disadvantage in the steel industry compared with competitors in the EU. Although he has made an important point, it does not negate the issue we are talking about.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is right to point out that there two factors here. One is the volatility and how the price has moved and the second is the comparator. The latter point is well made by colleagues from all parties. I know hon. Members will acknowledge that we have provided more than £2 billion of support in under a decade in price-release schemes for energy-intensive industries. I accept that there are significant concerns about the position we are in and where we are seeking to go. I hope that that will be acknowledged and contextualised within that reality.

When formulating where we do or do not go in future, I hope hon. Members will accept that the situation is extremely complicated. We have a very diverse group of energy-intensive industries—more than 70 sectors—as the hon. Member for Southampton, Test highlighted. We have a range of exposures, challenges around efficiencies and hedging strategies. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) pointed out the challenge of hedging strategies in recent months. Other forms of mitigation might be possible.

Sir William Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Lee Rowley: If my hon. Friend does not mind, I have to make progress. If I have a moment at the end, I will happily give way. This is a diverse sector, but we are seeking to see what may be possible. Announcements will be made in due course, should they be possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South made a very good point about eligibility criteria. He is aware—it has been referenced already in the debate—that a review is under way at the moment. A consultation ran between June and August. There were more than 30 responses, and we will make further announcements in due course. He is absolutely right to highlight the longer term, as other hon. Members have done. The Prime Minister mentioned that point in his speech on Monday. He highlighted the importance of manufacturing, of energy-intensive industries and of making sure that electricity prices over the long term are in place, so that the viability and competitiveness of those industries are ensured. He highlighted nuclear. I know there are a range of views in the room about nuclear, although happily the majority of us seem to be in favour of making progress. I hope we can do so in the months and years ahead.

I want to give my hon. Friend a couple of minutes at the end of the debate to wind up, but I have a couple of points on the long term. Obviously, we are in a long-term process of decarbonising our electricity grid. That continues and will have a real impact over the long term for energy-intensive industries, and elsewhere. There is a lot of work under way, a lot of schemes, a lot of funding and a lot of Government subsidy that has already been announced, such as the £315 million industrial energy transformation fund, £40 million of which has already been awarded, including to steel companies such as Celsa, to brick manufacturers, to glass and to metal casting. The second stage will close on 6 December.

Chris Green: With the £96 billion investment in the railways—we have a debate on the headquarters of the Great British Railways to come—will the Minister do all he can to ensure that Severfield steel in my constituency gets its fair share of the contracts, whether that is for bridges or other infrastructure projects?

Lee Rowley: I thought I was about to be asked about the headquarters of Great British Railways. We are of course seeking to find an equitable distribution of support across the country.

On ceramics, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South will be aware of the establishment of a global centre for advanced technical ceramics, which is good news. We are also supporting some transformation in glass and there is extensive ongoing work on

decarbonisation options, including in steel. We are working with trade bodies at the moment and look forward to announcements in due course.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the Chamber. I am grateful to all Members for their constructive contributions. The Government are aware of the strength of feeling in the communities represented here and more broadly. We acknowledge the importance of those industries for the regions and for our country as a whole. We look forward to working with you all in due course over the coming months to see what is possible on these important issues for our country.

10.57 am

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for the great interest he is taking in these sectors. I hope to welcome him very soon to Stoke-on-Trent.

These jobs are so important for levelling up across the country. They are skilled, well-paid employment opportunities. As a number of Members have said, it is vital that we see a level playing field on energy. We have seen huge competition from Europe, which subsidises a number of markets, and from China, which puts huge subsidies into many of these sectors. We need support to make sure we have a level playing field. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Holly Mumby-Croft) noted, there is no level playing field at the moment—there is not a free market in these sectors—and we need to address that.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis) said, the costs are beyond what many of these industries can reasonably plan for. We need action and support to make sure that we have a level playing field, so that these sectors continue to build on their strengths and that we continue to see these important jobs and industries in the UK. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his kind words about Stoke-on-Trent, which is ably represented here.

I also want to touch on the importance of levelling up in R&D investment. There is increased investment in R&D now, with a doubling of R&D spending in the UK. We need to see more of that being spent in the midlands, in the north and in Wales. A huge proportion of R&D spending has been in the south and other parts of the UK. We need to spread it out across the country, particularly for the energy-intensive sectors such as ceramics, which need that support to transition and to decarbonise, to secure those jobs for the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered energy intensive industries.

Great British Railways: Headquarters

11 am

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. Members are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test twice a week if coming on to the parliamentary estate, 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 Chamber.

11.1 am

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of York's bid to host the headquarters of Great British Railways.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I thank the City of York Council for its time and effort in preparing York's case and for providing me with the updated details in advance of the debate.

Earlier this year, following the Williams-Shapps rail review, the Government announced their intention to create the new public body, Great British Railways. Billed as a modern-day successor to British Rail, Great British Railways will take on the responsibilities covered by Network Rail, as well as further responsibilities from the Department for Transport and the Rail Delivery Group. The new body will bring the ownership and management of the railways under one structure, with the organisation responsible for collecting revenue, running and planning the network and setting most fares and timetables.

On 4 October, the Transport Secretary announced that he was looking for a town or city to host the new headquarters of Great British Railways and, in doing so, become the home of the railways. In the next 10 minutes, I hope to persuade you, Mr Efford, and the Minister that York has always been and should remain the home of the railways, a fact that should be recognised by locating the new headquarters of Great British Railways in our great city.

York was first connected to the railway network more than 180 years ago and quickly became one of the best-connected cities in the UK, having direct rail access to more than 150 towns, cities and villages, representing a third of the UK's population. To accommodate that, at the time of its completion in 1877, York station was the largest in the world; to date, it remains one of the most impressive.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate him on securing the debate. He has my full support. Does he agree that, with the National Railway Museum based in York, the city is already at the centre of our railway heritage, and that it therefore makes sense to make York the home of our railway future, as well as our past?

Julian Sturdy: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, based on which I consider that he might have had sight of my speech, because I will come on to that point. He is absolutely right: we have to link the

[Julian Sturdy]

past with the future. York has an amazing rail heritage and the railway museum is at the heart of that. I will touch on that further. York has an amazing opportunity going forward and I want to touch on some of the sites—the York central site—that really can deliver for York, but also for our future rail centre.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving way and for securing the debate. Does he agree that it is about not just the past, but the future? Indeed, York has the engineers, the operators and the skillset needed for advancing digital rail in the future—the very skills that are needed by Great British Railways.

Julian Sturdy: I thank the hon. Member—I was going to call her my hon. Friend—and neighbour. I think she might have seen my speech as well, because I was going to touch on skills. She is absolutely right that the skills in York have been developed not only through the Network Rail centre, but through our colleges and universities, which are at the forefront of the future. That is why York, for me, is undoubtedly the first choice for the location of the headquarters of Great British Railways.

York has always been an important staging post for those travelling between London and Scotland, which is reflected in its prominence on the east coast mainline. It also has another role as the interchange between the east coast mainline and the trans-Pennine line, connecting northern industrial heartlands, such as Merseyside, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire with the east coast, the east of England and the north-east of England. If, as I believe to be the case, the Government are truly committed to levelling up and spreading prosperity to areas outside London and south-east, then they should look no further than York.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the headquarters of the Great British Railways needs to be at the centre of the country in order to be able to service the whole country? Does he agree that Derby is almost at the centre of the United Kingdom? It has 200 rail-related companies and the largest train manufacturer in the country. I have been campaigning, even before this competition starts, for Derby to be the centre for the Great British Railways headquarters.

Julian Sturdy: It will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I am not going to agree with that, but I understand that she is putting her case forward, as she always does extremely well. I will continue to argue that York is at the centre of the country when we talk about the United Kingdom. If we are talking about connecting and keeping the United Kingdom together, then York plays a key role in delivering that and stands out as the perfect choice.

We are talking about the centre of the railway network in the north. If, as I believe, the Government are serious about strengthening the Union, through the creation of a Great British-wide body, then York, near to the geographic centre of Great Britain, is the perfect choice.

It is not just York's rail connectivity that sets it apart, but its central role in the nation's wider rail industry. In 1975, this was recognised by the opening of the National Railway Museum, as has been mentioned, at a site adjacent to York station. It is home to such iconic locomotives as the Mallard and the Flying Scotsman. The museum attracts over 700,000 visitors per year from around the world, with plans for further expansion in the coming years.

There is much more. York's skills base in rail and connected industries is unrivalled. The industry employs 5,500 people in the city, some 10% of the national total and two thirds of all rail jobs in the Yorkshire and Humber region. It also lies at the centre of the UK's largest rail cluster, being ideally located between Doncaster and Sheffield to the south, Leeds and Huddersfield to west and Durham and the Tees Valley to the north. Over 100 relevant companies, with 9,500 employees, are based within one hour of York.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case for York to host the Great British Railways headquarters and I strongly support his arguments. He is commenting on skills. For me, the reason why York is such a strong contender is the breadth of its skills base, whether it is in rolling stock, engineering, planning or, particularly, the digital future. That expertise will enable the Great British Railways to hit the ground running and be more effective as a result.

Julian Sturdy: I could not have put it better myself. I completely agree with my hon. Friend: it is about the skill base and the digital future. We have that wider skill base, which I will elaborate on further, but it strengthens York's case and makes it, for me, the only choice.

The region boasts no less than 13 leading rail education providers, including Selby College, which has partnered with Siemens to deliver apprenticeships for level 3 rail engineering technicians. York College is the home of the Yorkshire and Humber Institute of Technology, which delivers high-quality technical education with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics subjects.

York is also home to Network Rail's training centre, which provides professional development for existing employees as well as training the engineers of the future, as was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). Indeed, Network Rail already employs more than 1,000 people in York across every discipline. In 2014, it opened the country's biggest rail control centre in the city, and I suggest that the same vote of confidence in York should be made by its successor organisation.

The home of the railways should have an eye to their future. That is where York stands out. The city and the wider region are home to a dynamic mix of businesses and academic institutions, working together on the latest innovations in rail. The University of York is a pioneer in the field of rail auto—I cannot say it.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Automation.

Julian Sturdy: Automation, yes. I thank my hon. Friend for putting me right on that. The University of Leeds is currently developing the new state-of-the-art

Institute for High Speed Rail and Systems Integration. That work was enabled by collaboration between key sectors in the fields of railway engineering, signalling and software development, many of which are based in York or have major offices there. I hope I have persuaded you, Mr Efford, of York's credentials as a railway city and perhaps the UK's pre-eminent railway city.

There is another reason that York would be a sensible, if not the best, choice for locating a major public body in the form of the Great British Railways. As the Minister will know, York is currently home to one of the country's largest brownfield sites, which is also a regeneration project. It covers some 45 hectares of disused track and railway depots, adjacent to York station and right in the heart of the city. York Central promises to be of a similar scale and ambition to the highly successful redevelopment of King's Cross. The project promises to provide more than 2,500 new homes and, crucially, 112,000 square metres of high-quality commercial office space. Work has already started on clearing the site, following a successful bid for £77 million of Government funding for the enabling infrastructure.

As the Prime Minister would say, this is an oven-ready proposition for Great British Railways, providing a unique chance to build the new headquarters on a city-centre brownfield site in which Network Rail is a major partner and landowner. Surely there is a certain appeal about this: the new Great British Railways being based on a regenerated railway site. That the site happens to be located next to the National Railway Museum, one of the north's major and main interchange stations, and the offices of several major players in the national rail industry makes it an option that is impossible for the Government to ignore.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Member makes a very powerful case for York. The location of Great British Railways would also be next to the rail operating centre, which is the flagship of digital signalling and contains advanced skills. Is that not why this particular location is so important for the future of our railways?

Julian Sturdy: Absolutely. The location is perfect, with the brownfield regeneration site that interlinks with the Network Rail headquarters and all the skills around there, as we have touched on. Those new skills are so important to the future of our railways. That is what we, as well as the region, can deliver in York. The location is ideal, but this is also about the skills that the whole region can deliver. That is so important and it is what makes the case for York so strong.

Kevin Hollinrake: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Is there not another reason to consider York? In addition to its proud history, its strategic location and the concentration of the rail industry within the city, is not York simply a fantastic place to live for those who will relocate to wherever the headquarters of Great British Railways ends up?

Julian Sturdy: I am bound to agree with that, as someone who lives and works on the edge of York, as many people in this debate do. We all know what a fantastic place York is to live and to work in, which is surely a huge attraction when we need to attract the right skills to this new headquarters. York provides that attraction; there is absolutely no doubt about that.

As we have touched on, there are also universities, including the University of York. The number of people who initially study at the University of York but ultimately stay to live and work in the city or just around the city tells its own story. Great British Railways will need to attract people with skills, and York has that attraction, without a shadow of a doubt.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is indeed making a very strong case for York. Is there not also a precedent for moving a national headquarters to York? Was it not Edward I who, in 1298, moved the Treasury to York?

Julian Sturdy: I bow to my right hon. Friend's knowledge of history, but yes, absolutely—the precedent is there. This issue is also about the future, as we have said. Nevertheless, I entirely agree with him.

Despite York Central being an important and distinguishing feature of York's bid, that bid is not dependent on an individual site. City of York Council has put forward several other existing city centre office buildings that it regards as viable options. Such is the compact nature of the city centre in York that Great British Railways can expect similar levels of connectivity and business engagement wherever it is ultimately located in our great city.

To sum up, York is most definitely the right choice for Great British Railways for four main reasons. First, there are the existing Network Rail facilities, the strong connectivity, the rail heritage and the availability of a range of convenient city centre sites. Secondly, it has a skilled workforce, accounting for over 10% of the workforce of the national rail industry, as it is located at the centre of the north-east Yorkshire rail cluster, which is the largest in the UK. Thirdly, it has a leading status in training and innovation, driven by local businesses, colleges and universities. Fourthly, York's position at the heart of the UK rail network makes it an ideal national administrative base. However, even more than those reasons, there is York's potential contribution to the Government's goals of strengthening the Union and levelling up in the north of England, especially given its strong links to Scotland, the north-east of England, Manchester and all parts of Yorkshire.

I understand that this process will be a competitive one, and that other rail towns and cities are being quick to make clear their interests, and I will admit that I am probably biased, as many Members are about their constituencies. Nevertheless, I think that York's case is extremely strong, and I know that it would be a source of great pride for our city, which has been so prominent in English and British history, if its next chapter could include the status that comes with being officially recognised as the home of the railways and of Great British Railways.

Thank you very much, Mr Efford, for calling me to speak. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

11.19 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, especially in a debate on a subject that I know you will follow with great interest in the future.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

I have learned a great deal today. Before I respond to the various points that my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) made, I thought that I should respond to a couple of other points. I have had a history lesson. I did not know that the Treasury was moved to York by Edward I. Obviously, this Government have moved part of the Treasury to Darlington, so it must have been a good idea then that we are repeating now.

I have also heard a great deal about the merits of Derby from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). She says that it is in the centre of the country, but if you were to take England and put a pin in the middle, you would find that the best place to put Great British Railways would be the village of Hellidon in my constituency. I am not convinced that there will be a great campaign for such a development, but I thank my hon. Friends for their contributions so far. I know my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer is a tireless advocate for his city. He is to be commended for promoting an understanding of what a wonderful place it is.

I completely understand that York is a city famed for its rich railway heritage. The first direct train ran between York and London in 1840. By the 1850s, there were 13 trains a day between the two cities, carrying 341,000 passengers a year. As the centre of the railway network along the east coast, York played a major role in the management and development of Britain's railway network. For more than 120 years, York was the base for the construction and servicing of steam locomotives and rolling stock.

Fast forward to today and some of the remaining buildings used during the construction and servicing of the locomotives and rolling stock have become part of the wonderful National Railway Museum, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight).

Today, York is home to Network Rail, LNER, Northern, Grand Central, the Siemens train servicing and cleaning depot, and many varied rail consultancy businesses, contractors and specialists, from signalling and electrification experts, to civil engineers and railway operatives, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has told me a number of times and I am sure, based on this debate, will continue to do so for quite some time to come.

Since 1877, York railway station has helped to transform the city, connecting York to the rest of the United Kingdom and the wider world. At one time, the biggest railway station in the world, it remains today an important transport hub for the north and the United Kingdom as a whole. During the autumn of 2019, there were approximately 20,000 daily passengers on London to York services, and there were more than 10 million passenger journeys from York station over the course of that year. From the very earliest days of the railways, through to the modern day, York has played an important part in the history and future of the railway in this country, and it will continue to do so. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) and for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for their contributions today to emphasise the importance of this great city.

Of course, there are other towns and cities across the country that have played an important part in our proud railway heritage and that right hon. and hon. Members are proud to represent. It is good to see one of them, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, here today.

The Government's aim is to have a world-class railway, working seamlessly as part of the wider transport network and delivering opportunities across the nations and regions of Great Britain. The Williams-Shapps plan for rail, published in May this year, sets out the path to a truly passenger focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritise punctual and reliable services; the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets; and long-term proposals to build a modern, greener, more accessible network that delivers the Government's priorities to level up and decarbonise our transport system.

Central to the Williams-Shapps plan for rail is the establishment of a new rail body, Great British Railways, which will provide a single familiar brand and strong unified leadership across the rail network, as was described by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer. It will be responsible for delivering better value and flexible fares and the punctual and reliable services that passengers deserve, and it will bring the ownership of the infrastructure, fares, timetables and the planning of the network under one roof. It will bring today's fragmented railways under a single point of operational accountability and ensure that its focus is to deliver for passengers and freight customers.

Great British Railways will be a new organisation with a commercial mindset and a strong customer focus, and it will have to have a different culture from the current infrastructure owner Network Rail and use very different incentives from the beginning. As we have heard, it will also have to have a new headquarters. Indeed, Great British Railways will have responsibility for the whole railway system, with a national headquarters as well as regional divisions. I can tell my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer that the national headquarters will be based outside London, bringing the railway closer to the people and places it serves, and ensuring that the skilled jobs and economic benefits are focused way beyond this great capital city, in line with the Government's commitment to levelling up.

The competition to find the national headquarters will recognise towns and cities with a rich railway history and that are strongly linked to the network, ensuring that the headquarters will take pride of place at the heart of a new era for British railways. The Great British Railways transition team is in the process of designing the selection process for the national headquarters, and the Secretary of State is setting up a panel of experts to assess the various locations. We are, therefore, right at the beginning of the process and I hope that Westminster Hall will continue to see celebrations of great cities and towns and their railway heritage as the bids develop.

Rachael Maskell: The Minister clearly understands and appreciates the value of York and all that it will bring. Does he agree that the partners, including the business community, City of York Council and North Yorkshire County Council, will have an important role to play in signing off the bid?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is vital that there is buy-in from all local stakeholders for such a big new headquarters. When I met the hon. Lady and City of York Council, railway skills were mentioned in passing. I completely understand and agree with her point.

Kevin Hollinrake: I very much appreciate the Minister's comments. Does he know how many people will be located at the Great British Railways headquarters?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid that I do not because it is an organisation that is yet to be set up. The legislation has not even gone through the House yet, so I am afraid that I cannot answer that question at this time. However, given that it will be a coming together of so many different parts of the railway, I would expect it to be a large number of people and for it to involve new jobs as well as existing ones being relocated. It will be a very important heart of our railways for the future.

Andrew Jones: The Minister has talked about the decision-making process, which is helpful. Could he talk a little more about the criteria for the location decision at this stage?

Chris Heaton-Harris: As I have said, we are at the very early stages. I can probably say that it will be outside London, but that is about as good as it gets at this point in time, I am afraid. However, the Secretary of State will detail the criteria in the not too distant future. We hope to set that out before the new year, if not first thing in the new year. Clearly, a number of strong candidates will come forward once the competition is launched, and I truly hope that this will be a moment when, through these bids, we can celebrate the rich railway heritage of our country, its towns and cities, and its rich railway future.

I feel that I should come to an end at some point quite soon—at least in the next 90 seconds—so I will finish by saying that I look forward to building this new vision for British railways and to collaborating with the sector and communities at the launch of the Great British Railways headquarters. That launch will be one of the many steps we are taking to achieve the transition from the existing mindset of the railways, which perhaps does not put passengers and freight customers first, to the new mindset that we want to instil. I know from my mailbox and from conversations in the House that a large number of towns and cities are eyeing up a bid to have the Great British Railways HQ in their area.

I very much welcome the interest expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer and his advocacy on behalf of his city. I thank him for his speech and his pitch, as it were. It is the first formal one I have received, and I know that it will have been listened to by all the partners involved. I will certainly make sure that it is made available to the panel when it is set up to assess the criteria.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Islamophobia Awareness Month

[Peter Dowd *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate. That is in line with Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also 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 on the estate or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the Chamber.

Before we move on, may I say a little about the process? Seventeen Back-Bench Members have indicated that they wish to speak. In practical terms, other than the mover and the Front Benchers, that gives each Member about two and a half minutes tops, and that is with no interventions—I am not saying that there should not be interventions. To be fair to everyone in advance, I should say that if we get too many interventions, that limit might even drop down. There will be a formal limit of two and a half minutes each after the mover of the motion has spoken, with 10 minutes each for the Front Benchers.

2.31 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Islamophobia Awareness Month.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

When I go home and look at my grandchildren, I see limitless potential that deserves to flourish and thrive, yet I find it heartbreaking that they must grow up in a world where racism is still present—they will be subject to racism purely because of their faith—and that I, as their grandfather, must stand up to talk about the rampant Islamophobia in our midst. This month is an opportunity for us all to tackle that insidious hatred, which manifests itself in hate crime, discrimination and loss of opportunity.

As I look around the Chamber, I am touched by the support of my hon. Friends from all parts of the House who have committed to rooting out racism, whichever form it takes. I hosted a drop-in event in collaboration with the Muslim Council of Britain and Amnesty International last week, and it was brilliant to see the cross-party support. I thank the many hon. Members present today for attending.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The information shared with us by the Muslim Council of Britain last week was very powerful indeed, and reflects the experience that many of us have heard about from our Muslim constituents. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to take responsibility for engaging effectively with the MCB to tackle the issue?

Afzal Khan: Yes, I agree, and I will be making that point.

[Afzal Khan]

I had the privilege of visiting Europe's first eco-mosque in Cambridge—a real trailblazer in the community. It highlights how effective the British Muslim community has been in tackling the climate crisis with a positive and inspiring message. I extend an invitation to the Minister. I cannot promise that a visit will be as thrilling as Peppa Pig World, but it is worth a visit.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate. Does he agree that there is more to be done to ensure that our children grow together in harmony, celebrating the differences that we share, which make us stronger when added to the similarities? That makes us communities. Furthermore, does he believe that one way to achieve that is to facilitate cross-community events that focus on young people of different backgrounds coming together to learn more, to understand more and, inevitably, to accept more about each other, so that we are better together?

Afzal Khan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I could not have put it better myself.

For 2.7 million Muslims, Islamophobia has distressing and real-life implications. A recent example is the far right peddling the narrative during the pandemic that British Muslims were super-spreaders of covid simply by practising their faith. As a result, Muslim communities suffered a shocking 40% increase in online Islamophobia during this period, according to Tell MAMA. The online safety Bill is an opportunity for the Government to better regulate online content, including harmful and racist material.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for accepting my intervention, and for all his work—and indeed that of other Members—on this important issue in the House. Does he agree that the issue is not just about online abuse, but that sports can play a role? I know he will go on to this topic, but with the Ashes ahead of us, surely now is the time to tackle Islamophobia in cricket, once and for all.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend. Again, that is a point I will touch on.

I have no doubt that those of us who participate in this debate will be on the receiving end of further abuse. Social media platforms have a moral responsibility and a duty to protect their users. Here, a definition of Islamophobia will help establish a mechanism for accountability and improved regulation. I will return to the definition in a moment, but can the Minister outline what measures will be introduced by the Government to keep users safe online, and what steps are being taken to tackle far-right activity?

It would be a mistake, however, to see this as merely an online phenomenon. The Government's own figures reveal, once again, that Muslims have been victim to the highest proportion of all hate crimes committed this past year. My hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and I have written to the Conservative party chair over the surge in hate crimes against Muslims following the Liverpool attack. Time and again, we see the conflation of Islam and terrorism, which is wrong and perpetuates a harmful stereotype of Muslims.

Last week, Azeem Rafiq's powerful and moving testimony about his experience in cricket shone a light on how easily racism and Islamophobia can go unchecked and be simply dismissed as "banter". A series of attacks on mosques, including in Manchester and east London, demand serious action by the Government. Most recently, a man was convicted of terrorism offences after planning an attack on a mosque in Scotland. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to better safeguard places of worship?

Crucially, we must remember that these are not isolated incidents. Home Office data supports this, showing that referrals to Prevent for extreme right-wing ideology have increased exponentially. Many of my parliamentary colleagues and I have pushed for an independent review of the Prevent strategy for several years. A coalition of more than 450 Muslim organisations has boycotted the Government's review of Prevent in protest at the appointment of William Shawcross as its chair. Shawcross has openly expressed a hostile view of Islam and Muslims, including suggesting that—I quote—"Islamic fascism" was the biggest problem facing our society.

I want to put four questions to the Minister today. Will she outline why the Government appointed someone with Islamophobic views? Will she respond to the overwhelming discontent over Shawcross's appointment? Will she explain why the Government refuses to engage with the MCB, the largest Muslim organisation in the UK? Who sits on the Government's anti-Muslim hatred working group, and has she ever met the group?

The appointment of William Shawcross is just a symptom of something that must be addressed in this debate: the Conservative party's Islamophobia crisis. In 2018, we held a general debate on Islamophobia, in which I delivered the Labour party's position. Two years later, no meaningful progress has been made and the Government have failed to take any action on this issue.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this important debate. Does he agree that the Prime Minister likening Muslim women to letterboxes and bank robbers directly fuels Islamophobia—I have seen it myself, as a former hate crime worker—and that apologising for offence caused is not good enough? The Prime Minister must apologise for what he said and, more importantly, engage with the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims and take some real action, starting with adopting the definition for Islamophobia.

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend, and I agree. The APPG on British Muslims has worked tirelessly to create the definition of Islamophobia, which has the confidence of more than 800 organisations and has been adopted by Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Green party and even the Scottish Conservatives, as well as the Mayors of London and Greater Manchester and hundreds of councils across the country. I applaud the aforementioned for taking that positive step.

Defining and naming a problem is the first step in rooting it out, but it seems that the Government cannot even bring themselves to use the term Islamophobia. How do they intend to deal with a problem that they cannot even name? In fact, I challenge the Minister to use the term Islamophobia today.

The truth is that the Conservative party has repeatedly shown it is in denial about this problem through its failure to accept the definition proposed by the APPG, its failure to conduct a truly independent investigation and its failure to appoint Government advisers on the issue. What concerns me is that the Tory party has an institutional problem. Frankly, it does not care about Islamophobia.

The Singh review revealed institutional failings in how the Conservative party handled Islamophobia complaints. However, the review failed to engage with any Conservative Muslim parliamentarians and, once again, it did not even acknowledge or mention the term Islamophobia. Given that the definition has such widespread community support, can I ask the Minister why the Government insist on reinventing the wheel?

All of this goes right to the top. We all remember the Prime Minister's shocking comment about Muslim women and letterboxes, but what is less well known is the fact that his comment directly resulted in a 375% rise in hate crime against Muslims. To add insult to injury, the Prime Minister continues to ignore the issue. During last year's Islamophobia Awareness Month, I wrote to the Prime Minister to urge him to take action and to meet with me and key Muslim organisations. More than a year later, I am still waiting for a reply. I raised the matter in the Chamber earlier this month, and Mr Speaker and I both agreed that it is totally unacceptable for the Prime Minister to simply ignore letters from Members, no matter the subject. The Muslim community in our country deserves better: it deserves an explanation and, frankly, an apology.

The theme of this year's Islamophobia Awareness Month is "Time for change", and it is time for change. It is time the Government changed their approach towards Islamophobia and tackled it head on. Whether we look at evidence from the McGregor-Smith review, the Lawrence review or the Lammy review, we are confronted with the unavoidable fact that Islamophobia has damaging consequences on the life chances and equality of Muslims across the UK.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making such an excellent speech on this really important issue, which affects so many of my constituents in Vauxhall. On his point about the Muslim community being affected, he will know that Muslims have suffered disproportionately throughout the covid pandemic, and yet they were the ones helping at mosques. Does he agree that it is really important that we have leadership from the top, including that apology from the Prime Minister?

Afzal Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I agree—that is exactly what we need. Perhaps, at the end, that is what I will ask as well.

At the heart of the APPG's inquiry into a working definition of Islamophobia was an attempt to do something about the nature, scale and impact of Islamophobia. As political representatives, we have a responsibility to listen to the voices of all in our communities and strive to serve them to the best of our abilities. Representing British Muslims requires more than just lip service: it requires commitment, leadership and, most importantly, action.

2.44 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I know the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), and I would consider him a friend. We speak regularly. I am disappointed that a debate on a very important subject has turned into the normal political attack on the Conservative party. To hear the sanctimony of an organisation that was investigated by the Equality and Human Rights Commission for prejudice and antisemitism in lecturing this party on prejudice is something.

I would like to talk about the practical—*[Interruption.]*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I appreciate that people feel very passionately about this matter, but we must keep order in the Chamber.

James Daly: Thank you, Mr Dowd. We can talk about the definition of prejudice, but it is within ourselves. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton knows two people who work for me; one is certainly my best friend. I am a Conservative Back-Bench MP who does not see a difference in human beings because of their religion, faith or anything. I see the decency in people and that is what motivates me in politics. It is what motivates Shahbaz and Khalid. At least two Members opposite know those two people who have given years of service to my area and its community. To be tarred with what has just been said—the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton knows it is not correct.

I fight every day in my constituency to ensure that my Muslim constituents have the best possible representation. When we talk about Islamophobia, I would like Labour MPs to support me in practical policies to help with the various issues that affect the Muslim community. There are lots of important issues, but I will talk about just one. In my seat and the seats of the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Manchester, Gorton, just about every Muslim family is touched by a taxi driver who works there—families who are absolutely dependent on that income. When I contact the hon. Members for Manchester, Gorton and for Bolton South and say, "Let's set up an APPG for taxi driving in Greater Manchester," and they say, "No, we can't do that for political reasons," it is therefore extremely disappointing. We could actually put in place practical policies—

Afzal Khan: I have just made a 10-minute speech outlining the different problems that the Muslim community has been facing. The issue is not that the hon. Gentleman has two employees who are Muslim or that he has friends who are Muslim; the issue is that we have a Government who are failing to tackle this problem and the hon. Gentleman is a Member of that Government and needs to tackle the problem as well.

James Daly: The issue is that Members of Parliament such as myself and my hon. Friends the Members for Peterborough (Paul Bristow), for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham), for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker) spend our days going out there and doing our very best to support the Muslim community in every possible way. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton has just made a generalised statement trying to slur every Conservative MP with a prejudice that is not correct.

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): Does my hon. Friend agree that on such a sensitive subject such as this, the highly partisan nature in which the debate has been opened, if watched by our Muslim constituents, will look not like people trying to tackle anti-Muslim hatred, but as if they, as a community, are being used as a political football for political goals?

James Daly: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I could mention all sorts of policies here, whether it is support for the self-employed, for taxi drivers or for anybody else in my constituency. I believe I should be working with other MPs in Greater Manchester for the greater good to support all our Muslim constituents through specific policies that address the issues that are at the heart of the challenges they face.

When you represent people who you know; when you have been part of a community; when you do everything you possibly can to represent people, to be their voice in Parliament and to address the issues—what more do Opposition Members expect? Prejudice is an issue that is addressed through the individual and through all of us behaving in a way where we welcome and take every opportunity to say that we value all our communities, and we especially value our Muslim community. We value every single person. Prejudice and racism are not addressed by a definition. They are addressed by an individual and by all of us coming together to make sure that people are not judged by anything other than their personality, their goodness, and their ability and desire to influence their community for the better.

I can tell everybody in this Chamber and elsewhere that my interaction with my communities is simply for that purpose. I am a politician who wants to make change and who wants to ensure that people are treated in an equal fashion. This Government's levelling-up agenda is about equality of opportunity. Every single policy that we put in place is to ensure that that is the case and that people are not discriminated against on the basis of their background.

2.50 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this debate and on recently raising a point of order to state that the Prime Minister had not actually addressed his letter about Islamophobia Awareness Month last year and to urge him to better safeguard the lives of British Muslims. Sadly, that Government inaction comes as no surprise to those of us who continually raise issues of this nature. So I express my full solidarity with Muslim Members right across this House in their ongoing fight against Islamophobia.

Unfortunately, many of us are all too familiar with the vile torrent of abuse that MPs are subjected to, whether it be racist, sexist or misogynist, but we have some reassurance in knowing that society generally recognises the severity of these types of abuse. But for those who experience Islamophobic abuse, there is a feeling that the abuse they receive is not taken seriously. Islamophobia is relegated to the very bottom, despite British Muslims being on the sharp end of some of the worst racism. And it is no surprise that there is a growing sentiment of anti-Muslim hate, because the current party of Government have such a disgraceful track record on Islamophobia, as highlighted by the independent investigation into discrimination in the Conservative party.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): I obviously have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) that there is a certain amount of partisanship involved in this debate. In that vein, what does the hon. Lady think about the quote included in the report entitled "Islamophobia and the Muslim Experience" that 55% of Muslim respondents do not

"trust the leadership of the Labour Party to tackle Islamophobia effectively"?

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: I believe that we should attack Islamophobia wherever we find it, and where the Government have failed they should admit to that. *[Interruption.]* And where the Government have failed—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Right—I will give this warning once more. I do not want shouting across the Chamber; this is a very passionate subject, but I ask Members to stop shouting and I will name people if they do not stop. I hope that is clear.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: If Government Members listen to what Labour Members are saying, they will realise that no one is disputing that there is Islamophobia in all parts of society. We are calling on the Government to take action in their own party and right across society; that is all we are doing.

I also want to point out that, as far as I am concerned, the Prevent strategy has contributed to the continuing prevalence of Islamophobia. That policy has embedded infrastructure of surveillance in Muslim communities, has increased police stop-and-search powers and has been inherently Islamophobic in its theoretical underpinnings. Although I initially welcomed the Government's review of Prevent, they have now delayed the publishing of that review as part of the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021. And to add insult to injury, the Government appointed William Shawcross to head the supposedly independent review, despite, as we have heard, his questionable actions as head of the Charity Commission in disproportionately putting Muslim charities under investigation.

Finally, I remind Members that 45% of religious hate crimes recorded by the police in 2020-21 were Islamophobic. That is an estimated 42,000 incidents of religiously motivated hate crime per year, which is approximately six times the number of recorded offences. And perhaps it is a reflection of how much Islamophobia permeates our entire society that a professional sportsperson had to share his painful experiences of being discriminated against during his time as a cricketer. Since Azeem Rafiq provided evidence to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee this month, other professional cricketers have shared their stories of being abused due to their ethnicity or religion, and an independent commission looking into racism and discrimination in cricket has now been inundated with responses.

All of that is sufficient to show that the Government need to take action now. I urge the Government to give a comprehensive response to the letter by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton; to update Members on Government progress in defining anti-Muslim hatred; to listen to the needs of the community when it

comes to the impact of the Government's strategy; and to ensure that there are proper safeguards for British Muslims against further abuse and discrimination. That is all we are asking for.

2.55 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this debate. He made a powerful speech and a lot of good points, but may I respectfully say that I think this was a missed opportunity? We have worked together on Muslim burials, on Kashmir, on Muslims and their efforts during covid, and on the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, so to come here and attack the Conservative party in the way that he has is a really missed opportunity. Making this a partisan thing does his argument no favours whatsoever.

I introduced a debate in this place on Islamophobia some time ago, and I talked about how, during the 2019 by-election in Peterborough, I came across a gentleman called Amir Suleman, who asked my opinion on the all-party group's definition of Islamophobia. I was rather embarrassed to say, at the time, that I did not really understand or know a lot about it, but I promised that I would get back to the gentleman in question and would campaign and stand with him. I stand here two years later as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims.

I work incredibly hard, each and every day, representing my Muslim constituents and trying to promote the positive benefits that Muslims contribute in my city each and every day, whether during covid, or through business, society or politics. In the Conservative party we have many Muslim councillors. We have two Muslim councillors in our city cabinet, until recently we had a Muslim councillor who was Mayor of the city, and we also have many Muslim councillors there from the Labour party. We work together, and that is the spirit in which we should be coming together to tackle Islamophobia and promote the positive contribution that Muslims make. We do that in Peterborough; it is such a shame that we cannot do it in this place.

Mark Eastwood: My hon. Friend mentioned that positive contribution. Does he agree that Muslim charities and mosques, especially in my constituency of Dewsbury, have been pivotal in helping the needy and vulnerable during the pandemic, while also helping to promote social cohesion between communities?

Paul Bristow: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is very humbling to see Muslim communities in my city help not only people in their own community, but those from communities in my city. They make me proud of Peterborough. It did not matter what background people were from, whether Muslim, Christian or eastern European. In Peterborough, we come in different shapes and sizes. We come from different cultures, different religions and different backgrounds, but we stood together as one city. I cannot think of a better example to promote the message of what a positive contribution Muslims made than the one that my hon. Friend gave, or how we all came together as one city.

We have also had success resulting from that in tackling Islamophobia. We have had Muslim councillors elected by huge majorities in wards where many Muslims do not live. People are not seeing this as a Muslim issue; they are seeing it in a completely and utterly colour-blind way. I urge all Members to come to Peterborough and see how a city working together actually works.

We have lots of work to do in this House, and we should be doing it cross-party. We should be tackling the hatred that I sometimes see across the country. Violence, attacks—these are despicable things that need to be stamped out. We also need to see the perhaps more subtle elements of Islamophobia stamped out. I remember the investigation by *The Sun* in January 2018 that showed that people with typically English-sounding names were given lower quotes than those with typically Muslim-sounding names. We can work together on this. I hope that the rest of the speeches by Opposition Members in this debate highlight that, and say how we can all work together to tackle Islamophobia.

2.58 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Like many other speakers today, I have my scars. From being attacked by a racist gang in the park with dogs, as me and my brother ran away, having our clothes ripped from us, scared; to the audible gasps of, "Why the hell would you choose to be a Muslim?", my experiences are as real as they are painful. With a Polish mother and a Pakistani father, and proudly British, I feel fortunate to have grown up immersed in many cultures. I have, sadly, experienced overt racism and bigotry; unfortunately, I have also been where people speak in perceived safety, not realising that I am a Muslim.

When I was studying medicine at Cambridge, a senior surgeon spoke openly about terrorism and Islam. When I asked him kindly to stop, he was shocked. When I stated that I was a Muslim, he asked where I was from and proceeded to tell me that half my family were eastern European cleaners and the other half were terrorists, and that I should go and tell my family to stop killing people.

A taxi driver once told me, 20 minutes into a cab journey, that he would never in his life allow a Muslim into his taxicab. He told me that Muslims were taking over the world, that he had absolutely no desire to meet one, and that he would not allow his daughter to go and study at a university where someone wore a hijab. I told him to stop the car, that he had met a Muslim and that I would continue my journey on foot.

My mum, who is not a Muslim but married one and had two children who chose to be Muslim, is Polish and has blonde hair and green eyes. She has been spat at in the street, called dirty for walking with her children and, while we were growing up, had people shouting at her on the tube, telling her she had married a dirty—I will not name the name, because I do not want to give it a place in this place.

Many people tell me I should have used getting married as the opportunity to drop the Khan and call myself Rosie Allin in a bid to be accepted, and that I should hide all traces of Islam from my daughters' names, so that they may have "an easier life." Well, fear will not make me drop my name or my faith, and fear will never stop me fighting against Islamophobia. In this place we have a platform, but millions of people do not. We owe it to them to speak out, and to fight for change for our community and for our children.

3.1 pm

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe), who is my constituency neighbour, wanted to be here today, but unfortunately cannot attend.

When we have these discussions in this House, they present an opportunity for us to shine a light on an issue and to encourage all our constituents who have experiences like those of the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) to talk about them, and to raise them with us as Members of Parliament, so that we can have a much better informed debate, and to raise them with the police. Such discussions give them confidence that they do not have to suffer in silence or accept that kind of behaviour.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that as well as accepting the passionate speech given by my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) we also need to challenge ourselves, whenever and wherever we experience such behaviour? There are some fantastic videos of people on tubes and trams challenging people and calling them out. We all need to do that, in all our organisations, wherever we see this discrimination.

Antony Higginbotham: The hon. Member is absolutely right. If we want to build a better society and better communities, then we all have a part to play. If we can do one thing in this House, it is to give confidence not just to victims and potential victims but to everyone, so that if they see intolerance or discrimination they have the confidence to call it out and stand up for what is right.

It is very sad that in recent years we have seen an increase in Islamophobia and antisemitism. The words that we use here are incredibly impactful. When I was first elected in 2019, one of the first organisations to reach out to me was Tell MAMA. I had the privilege of meeting Iman Atta, the director of Tell MAMA, who spoke to me at length and incredibly powerfully about the experience of Muslims across the country, but also in my constituency. I have been fortunate to meet representatives from local organisations in Burnley, such as Olive High School, an independent Islamic school for girls. What all this showed me is that when we work together we achieve far more.

Last Friday, we held a local memorial service for Sir David Amess. I laid a wreath, alongside our council leader, who was representing the local imam, and Lord Khan, who is the first Muslim peer for Burnley, both of whom I consider to be friends. It sent a powerful and moving message to constituents in Burnley and people across the country that the more we can work together, the better.

Islamophobia is a scourge on society, and I hope that what we do in this place and the words that we use help people realise that we can find a better way of discussing things and finding solutions. Sometimes, we need to take the politics out of it. If we take the politics out of it, we can work cross-party, as we all do locally in our constituencies. The words that we use in the Chamber are very different from how we engage in our societies and communities. If we take a little bit more of that engagement and community focus here, we will find a much better solution.

3.5 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing the debate during Islamophobia Awareness Month.

I want to set something straight on the record. Bolton South East does not need the help of other MPs to deal with the issues of taxi drivers. I deal with them, meet them regularly and do not need to set up an APPG for them. I am interested to know why no Conservative MP in Greater Manchester ever wants to join an APPG on Greater Manchester, which is much wider. No Conservative MPs will join that. That was rather a silly comment from the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) in making that point. To repeat, my taxi drivers do not need any help from anyone else.

Returning to the topic of the day, I want to talk about international Islamophobia. In Myanmar, decades of hate speech and persecution culminated in 2017 with more than 700,000 predominantly Muslim Rohingya people having to flee to neighbouring Bangladesh after a vicious campaign of ethnic cleansing; and our Government did nothing about it. In China, close to a million Uyghur Muslims are believed to be interned in so-called re-education camps. There, too, Islamophobia is rife across the country and our Government have done nothing about it.

In India, with every passing year, Islamophobia has become more normalised and mainstream. Narendra Modi was a member of the RSS, a neo-Nazi group, and his Bharatiya Janata party is making India into an authoritarian, Hindu national state. Regular, unprovoked attacks on Muslims by Hindu mobs have become routine in India, along with the destruction of mosques and the taking away of Muslims' human rights.

Last month, the BBC reported that a video had gone viral on social media showing a terrified girl clinging to her Muslim father as Hindu mobs assaulted him. That is not a one-off. That kind of violence is overwhelming. I have never heard a word from the Foreign Office or Government Ministers on that issue. When they talk about wanting to deal with Islamophobia, I would like to hear from the Government.

In Europe, Muslims are being made the other. Constantly in France and other countries, every time there is a general election, they bring up the subject of Muslims, take women's veils and bring in new laws that say that Muslims are forming a counter-society. Again, we hear nothing in this country from the Foreign Office. I would like our Government to do something about that.

3.7 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I refer to my unremunerated chairmanship of the advisory board of Conservatives Against Racism For Equality. I begin by saying how proud I am to have the support of thousands of British Muslims in Wycombe, including Conservative councillors, who have been mayors of High Wycombe and chairs of the county council. I am incredibly proud of British Muslims in Wycombe.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and I put out a photo of us standing together against Islamophobia. Of course, as soon as I put that on social media, it was viciously trolled by Islamophobes. I am afraid that happens time and again, every time that I stand up for my British Muslim constituents. That is not going to stop me standing up for them and against Islamophobia.

I want to say to those Islamophobic trolls that it is categorically wrong to condemn innocent people collectively for the crimes of others, because sometimes that is what is done overwhelmingly. I am Christian and, with humility, recognise that over the course of 2,000 years, terrible things have been done in the name of Christianity. People have been tortured to death, murdered and persecuted, even today. We know from the campaign around LGBT conversion therapy that Christians still persecute others.

That does not mean that I am responsible for it, and I would not accept anyone else holding me responsible for it. It would be wrong and unjust of them to do so. All I am asking for is that British Muslims enjoy the same treatment: that they be judged on the content of their own character and behaviour. I am very proud of the contribution that British Muslims make to our society.

I turn briefly to the APPG's definition of Islamophobia. I understand that the Government object to the use of the word "racism" because racism refers to race, not religion, and there therefore might be a conflict with the Equality Act 2010. I can understand that. The meaning of words does matter, and it is important that we get the definition right, but I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that we have a real problem with Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hatred—whatever term we want to use—and we need to do something about it. Notwithstanding where some of the debate has been, I ask the Minister to meet the APPG officers and see whether we can find some way to work through the definition and pick up something that the Government can adopt. Finally, I ask her to engage with the MCB. I think it has some new leadership that I suspect she would very much approve of.

3.10 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing it.

Today we have the opportunity to address and acknowledge Islamophobia Awareness Month and to reaffirm our collective determination to challenge and eradicate hate speech and discrimination, but we are also here to celebrate and champion the many thriving Muslim communities in all parts of the country. Newport West is one of the most diverse communities in Wales—a fact that I am very proud of—and its greatest strength is its diversity. From my visits to the Jamia Mosque on Commercial Road, the Islamic Society of Wales and the Newport Central Mosque in Stow Hill, which is at the heart of our city, I know the contribution that they have made to our local community. It is so important to acknowledge the key role that our Muslim communities have played in the last 18 months. From looking out for neighbours to providing food and support to people of all faiths and none, Newport's Muslim community has shown that it cares, has a big heart and is committed to bringing our communities together. I am very grateful for the warm welcome that I have always received at our local mosques, and for the steadfast support provided to me personally.

Islamophobia is not just verbal or physical abuse; it is structural. In many ways, it is entrenched in our society, so we parliamentarians have a real responsibility to shed light on the problem and tackle it head-on. One of my team here in this place, Adam Jogee, is the first Muslim Mayor of Haringey. I have heard from Adam, who I know is watching the debate, about some of the experiences that he has had to face as a Muslim. The abuse he has had ranges from having his faith questioned on social media to being called "Jihadi Jogee".

Mark Eastwood: I appreciate that social media has been mentioned a lot, but there are also concerns about headlines in newspapers and print media. Does the hon. Lady agree that the print media need to take more responsibility for how they report Muslims in society?

Ruth Jones: I agree 100% and I thank the hon. Member for his intervention.

It is completely unacceptable that abuse takes place on social media and that it is often elected representatives who engage in it. There are tangible things that the Minister can do, and I would be grateful if she outlined precisely how the Government plan to lead by example in the fight against Islamophobia. Has she met the excellent, new and young secretary general of the Muslim Council of Britain? If so, when did they last speak? Lastly, I would be grateful for an update on the discussions with the devolved Administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland about the fight against Islamophobia. There are vibrant and thriving Muslim communities in all four countries of the UK, and the Government must stand up for all of them.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton for his leadership and for calling this important debate. I thank all Muslim colleagues in this House and the other place for their perseverance. To the Muslim community in Newport West, in south Wales and across the UK, I say this: please be assured that I stand with you against hate, now and always.

3.13 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate.

It is ironic that when we consider the word "Islamophobia", we think about the word "Islam". "Islam" means "peace". "Salaam alaikum" means "peace be unto you", and "Alaikum salaam"—the reply—means "unto you be peace". It is deeply ironic that, as the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) said, we have the evil of Islamophobia out there. I, too, have seen some very ugly stuff that I never want to see again. Islamophobia exists.

In the short time available, I want to tell an anecdote. As a student, I was fishing about for a subject to make up my degree, and one of the subjects I chose, by great good fortune, was the history of Islam and Islamic culture. That was one of the best things that I ever did, because I learned everything about the life of the Prophet.

[Jamie Stone]

I learned about the Hegira in 622. I learned about the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the hadith literature—I was talking to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton about this earlier today—the sunnah of the Prophet, and so on. In doing so, we met Muslims. They came to lectures. We worked with them. We ate with them and learned about food. It is a very simple thing, but when you know somebody and you like them, it is hard to hate them. I was very fortunate with my education. I think that we can build into education in the future a greater understanding of Islam, Judaism and other religions, which will make for a more tolerant society.

One of the things that came out of my lectures was the expression that we all know—that we are all the sons and daughters of Abraham. The similarities between Christianity, Judaism and Islam are there to be seen, and they are strengths that we should build on together. Wherever we are today as a nation, we will have to play to our strengths and really work together. It is a difficult world for us. That means mobilising everyone of all creeds and religions in this country. Therefore, stamping out something like Islamophobia can only help to build a better country for all of us.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I may have to drop the time limit to two minutes because of all the interventions. I did alert colleagues to that. For the moment, however, I call Anum Qaisar, who has two and a half minutes.

3.16 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Dowd; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing the debate, and thank the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) for his reasoned contribution.

I had a speech prepared and I have ripped it up, because there are a few matters that I want to put on the record. I will start by saying this: if you want to tackle Islamophobia, you need to listen to the lived experiences of Muslims. Our contributions and lived experiences will help you to shape policy to tackle Islamophobia. I know what it feels like. I was nine years old when I was asked if my dad was a terrorist the day after 9/11. Only a couple of months after that, our mosque was burned to the ground in a suspected Islamophobic attack. Those are my lived experiences, and I know how that feels.

To be perfectly frank, I will not accept a debate in which we are told that we have to take the politics out of it, because the Prime Minister peddles dangerous rhetoric when he says that veiled Muslim women look like "letter boxes". I am a Muslim. I know how that feels. As the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton said, attacks against Muslim women increased after those comments.

Catherine West: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Qaisar: I am sorry, but I do not have enough time to take interventions. When people say, "I don't see race. I don't see religion," they might not, but I do, because there are other people out there who ensure that I know how it feels that I am a little bit different from the rest of you. To be perfectly frank, I really do not care what party Members are in. The Scottish National party is in government in Scotland and the Conservatives are in government in Westminster. More needs to be done across all four nations to tackle this. The Scottish Government recently passed legislation that expanded the definition of hate speech and makes it easier to hold to account those who express prejudice in a threatening or abusive way. That is a step in the right direction, and the UK Government need to do more. We are saying, "Listen to our lived experiences. It's not party political."

This has been really difficult to speak about. I will say just one more thing: I am so proud of my identity. I am a Scottish Pakistani Muslim. In the month of Ramadan, you will find me fasting, and breaking my fast by drinking a cold can of Irn-Bru and eating samosas.

3.19 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on leading it in the extremely effective and passionate way that he has. The statistics that the Muslim Council of Britain has published for Islamophobia Awareness Month underline the urgent need for greater education and awareness about Islam, the Muslim community and Islamophobia. They underline the need for those of us in positions of authority to speak out. Crucially, they underline the need for the Government to demonstrate leadership on this issue.

Muslims have just as much right to be safe and be given the opportunity to fulfil their potential as those of us who are not Muslims. Almost 50% of all recorded religious hate crimes are targeted against Muslims. Survey after survey shows Muslim adults held back from even getting interviews, never mind full-time work, and we know from the evidence that the MCB published that it costs more to live if someone is a Muslim. They pay more to insure their car, for example, and those with an apparently obvious Muslim name who seek a flat get fewer replies.

In Harrow, there are too many examples of Islamophobia, from casual graffiti in tube stations and men spitting at Muslim women wearing the jilbab in north Harrow to the Muslim woman from Harrow called a terrorist, a bomber, while travelling on the train. There are examples, too, of job discrimination against Muslims and in local politics, with—I say this gently in the context of what has gone before—Conservative councillors partly responsible. It is that day-to-day reality that needs to change.

In my experience, the Muslim community in Harrow is astonishingly generous. Harrow Central Mosque has helped to raise money for a primary school in need of new computers and an overhaul of the books in the school library. The Sri Lankan Muslim Cultural Centre, one of the contenders for best-run mosque in the UK, played a critical role during lockdown in helping to get food and clothing to those in need, and the remarkable Mahfil Ali community in north Harrow, as well as helping to run a soup kitchen, has been attending midnight mass on Christmas eve at its nearest Anglican church for the last 12 years. By any definition, that is a remarkably generous gesture of interfaith respect and love.

Muslims in Harrow walk the same streets as I do and shop in the same supermarkets. Their children play in the same playgrounds and they use the same public services as I do, so why should they not have the same opportunities as I and those who look like me do?

3.21 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your stewardship, Mr Dowd. Although I do not agree with everything that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) has said, I thank him for securing this debate.

A huge number of people, identities, cultures and heritages celebrate their day, week, month or whatever—in particular, the black community celebrates Black History Month—which is about the achievements they have made in communities and society. I want Islam to be recognised as a positive religion. I want us to look at the holy Prophet, peace be upon him, whose message had a profound effect and changed the entire Arabian society from warring tribes into people in the worship of God. He preached moderation and social reform. He advocated social reform on many levels, including gender and racial equality, religious freedom and education for all. His efforts to this day have allowed Islam to prosper. A huge number of people were the best medical advisers. For many years, Europe used the scriptures from Islamic scholars to base modern medicine on, so there was a huge advantage in what has gone on in terms of what Islam does.

In my local community, we have fantastic mosques that have provided food banks and events to support the local community. Also in my constituency, a very good friend of mine, Raja Khan, has delivered more than 250 tonnes of food to communities. This is about promoting positive Islam. If we are to get away from people who are anti-Muslim, we must show them what is positive about us and the positive things that we do. That is really what this debate should be about. We are not here to promote negative issues or go into victimisation mode. We need to be positive. We are no lesser than anybody else. We are British citizens and we are Muslims, and we are here to stay.

3.24 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate during Islamophobia Awareness Month.

I speak as a humanist and as vice-chair of the showing racism the red card all-party parliamentary group. I want a tolerant society in which we collectively advocate for people's freedom to practise their faith or belief so that everyone may live in a fair and equal society without discrimination. Religious education and anti-racist education play important parts in that.

Being born and bred in Luton, my home town, I am proud to represent Luton South, including our significant and vibrant Muslim community. Luton's hyper-diversity and the contribution of all faith and belief groups is our strength. We have to use our strong community cohesion to stand against all forms of discrimination and racism. As the hon. Member for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) said, the scourge of Islamophobia has no place in society.

Conspiracy theories and tropes perpetuated by the far right seek to dismantle that community cohesion to threaten the safety of Muslims across Luton, the UK and the world. As we have heard, British Muslims are victims of the highest proportion of religiously motivated hate crimes. The Home Office hate crime statistics for 2020-21 show that 45% of religious hate crimes recorded by the police in England and Wales were against Muslims, with 22% of crimes targeted at Jewish victims and 9% at Christians, while 16% of offences were unknown.

Excellent organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, MEND—Muslim Engagement and Development—and Tell MAMA support and empower British Muslims. This year's Islamophobia Awareness Month theme is "Time for Change". As other hon. Members have said, it is an apt time for the Conservative party to change its approach by conducting a genuinely independent investigation of Islamophobia in the UK, engaging with the British Muslim community to root out Islamophobia wherever it occurs and accepting the definition of Islamophobia of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims. I look forward to hearing what plans the Minister has in place for Islamophobia Awareness Month.

3.26 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I express my solidarity with the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and with all Muslims in Bath and across the UK. I join him in calling on the Government to adopt the APPG on British Muslims' definition of Islamophobia, as we Liberal Democrats have done.

British Muslims and those perceived to be Muslims have been subjected to the highest proportion of all hate crimes committed this year. The Government must take an active role not only to punish discrimination, but to ensure that it does not happen in the first place.

I have to say that I was a little disturbed by the—initial, at least—aggression of some Tory Members in this debate. It behoves those of us, like me, who have not faced discrimination because of our skin colour or religion to listen carefully to those with the lived experience and not to call it politics, but to recognise it as hurt that has been caused.

Paul Bristow: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: No, I will not give way. *[Interruption.]*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Lady is not giving way. There are two more Members to speak. Their limit will go down to two minutes if people do not keep to time and stop interrupting. It is as simple as that.

Wera Hobhouse: We need to listen to those who have lived that experience, to recognise it as hurt and not to call it politics. That is wrong, and I am ashamed, as someone from the white Christian community. I do not share those views, and I stand in solidarity with all Muslims who have faced discrimination, and with those who are perceived to be Muslim only because of their skin colour.

This month is about raising awareness of the discrimination faced by British Muslims and the hate that drives that discrimination. It is also time to celebrate the many contributions of British Muslims to our society in Bath and beyond, from politics and media, through sport and entertainment to local business and our community life.

[Wera Hobhouse]

I must mention Mr Diya Al-Muzaffar, who allowed people into his house on Pierrepont Street in Bath for prayer, where they still go today—it is the site of the Bath Islamic Centre and mosque. The Bath Islamic Society mosque offers interfaith workshops, alongside churches and synagogues in Bath, bringing interfaith communities together. The success of those sessions shows how we can join together to protect and support one another. It is a powerful reminder that there is so much more that unites us than divides us.

3.29 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) on securing this important debate and on his tireless work. We have been here before many times. Islamophobia is not a new phenomenon but one that has sadly entrenched itself into significant segments of our society. As the Muslim Council of Britain noted, 70% of Muslims have experienced religious-based prejudice in the past 12 months and just under half of all religious hate crimes recorded by police in 2020-21 were Islamophobic. I also highlight that abuse can happen to Muslims or even those perceived as looking like Muslims, such as turbaned Sikhs like myself.

I personally called on the Prime Minister to do more over two years ago, and asked for an apology for his derogatory and racist remarks describing already vulnerable Muslim women as looking like bank robbers and "letter boxes". Those comments led to a 375% spike in hate crimes and, more widely, showed that to openly abuse Muslim women was acceptable. All that was without an apology, except for a half-hearted one during the heat of an election and only when pressed to do so. That is characteristic of the Government response—denial, delay and avoidance.

Given the increased prevalence of such Islamophobic incidents in the Conservative party, where is the independent inquiry into Islamophobia, as promised on national television by the Prime Minister and his now Health Secretary? In fact, when the all-party group on British Muslims, of which I am proud to be a vice-chair, agreed on a definition of Islamophobia, all major parties accepted and adopted it with one notable exception: the Conservative party. We cannot simply accept the unacceptable status quo. If we do, we fail millions of Muslims because, without action, this is the message that Muslim communities are hearing.

I hope that the Minister, for whom I have time, has come with more than just warm words, because the persistent failure of the Government, particularly the Prime Minister, has real consequences and fails the people of our country.

3.31 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Every single day, people of Muslim backgrounds like me face discrimination and prejudice. I am never allowed to forget that my presence in Parliament, as the first MP to wear a hijab, makes many uncomfortable, from the regular mispronunciation of my name to being mistaken for other hijab-wearing women who work in Parliament, to being asked, even, if I am related to Shamima Begum.

Too often, we are cynically used as a focal point for people's anxieties, as scapegoats for the failings of the political and economic system. It should therefore be no surprise to anyone that I constantly have to cope with a vicious torrent of abuse. Just to give hon. Members a few examples, this is the kind of material that I receive: "Vile and filthy religion…importing vile and filthy creatures like Apsana Begum"; "Muslims should be banned from public office…we can't trust their allegiances"; "Muslims are the masters of lying. They are the bane of our Christian society. They do not belong and should be deported"; "Deport the Filth"; "Throw her and her family back to where they came from"; "Chop her hand off"; "This could be one of your last statements". Those are not even, by any measure, the worst of what I receive.

All too often, Muslims live with a constant, persistent fear overshadowing our lives, especially given that the latest data shows that Muslims are the largest target of religiously motivated hate crimes. The rise of the far right, in particular, is a very present danger. I just want to pick up on the fact that Government Members have been talking about taking politics out of this. I wonder what they would say to what the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief reported—that institutional suspicion and fear of Muslims has escalated to "epidemic proportions" and that "numerous" states, regional and international bodies were to blame. Perhaps the Minister can address that point.

It is important to remember that, across the world, under the auspices of fighting terrorism and extremism, we see people of Muslim backgrounds facing persecution and the denial of basic citizenship rights, from the Rohingya refugees to the escalated harassment of Muslims in France, for example. The evidence is very clear. Islamophobia is on the rise. But there is hope and I am inspired by the history of anti-racist struggles in east London. I am proud to represent the constituency that I have lived in all my life and I pay tribute to the contributions of Muslims all across Britain.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I have allowed three or four minutes extra to give all the Back Benchers their two and a half minutes, so I accept that there is much to cover, but I exhort Front Benchers to take that account in their responses.

3.34 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd, and to participate in such an important debate secured by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Those people who pay attention to the parliamentary calendar might notice that we had a debate quite recently on the definition of Islamophobia. We are debating a not dissimilar topic today, which is important and welcome. We need to be much more focused and relentless in looking at this issue, and this debate today is part of that. The recent high-profile cases of racism in cricket are just one example of why that really matters.

I am a member of the APPG on British Muslims, like a number of other hon. Members here today. The APPG is a good example of cross-party work, which is really important: collective purpose is absolutely necessary when we are dealing with Islamophobia, given the significant harm and detriment caused to so many people, some of which we have heard about today.

We have heard powerful speeches today from several hon. Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar) is a strong woman. I am proud to be her friend and colleague. What she had to say today was really important; I am grateful to her for saying what she did. Tackling Islamophobia absolutely requires us to listen to the lived experience of those who are affected. It is absolutely not on for those voices to be minimised in any way.

There are other people whose powerful work in this area is making a difference. We heard about Tell MAMA, which supports real change and works closely with the Community Security Trust. Joint working between Muslim and Jewish bodies is really important. It is a shame that such work is needed, but it is assuredly needed. From what some people might describe as low-level discrimination or harassment—presumably, those people have never experienced it themselves—to very serious crimes, the way that Islamophobia touches lives is broad and ever evolving. We heard from the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton about his worries for his grandchildren and the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) talked about her own children. We heard about the online space, which is a bin fire of abuse and harassment, with anonymous trolls spreading bile and threatening people in a terrible way. The impact on women is greater, online as it is offline. This is not a straightforward issue, however, and it requires all of us to focus.

Somebody whose work we have heard about in this area—somebody who will deliver change—is Zara Mohammed, the new general secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain. The call from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) for the Minister to discuss with Zara is sensible. Zara is a young, Scottish woman on a mission to deliver real, positive change. She is absolutely committed to pressing for action to deal with Islamophobia and improving lives. Part of how we can do that is to be open and encourage dialogue, to make sure that people are focused together. She was good enough to spend some time recently with me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), explaining the issues she is dealing with. I am grateful to her for that.

Of course, these issues reach far beyond this place. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton hosted some visitors earlier in the week, including Rahima Mahmut, whose work on behalf of the Uyghur Muslim community is so important. We owe her huge thanks.

It is also worth reflecting on the work that other groups are doing, including groups led by young people. In my local area, Kirsty Robson is a co-founder of Yet Again, a group of young people who work to prevent genocides such as that faced by the Uyghur Muslim population in China. There is the work of Never Again Right Now, another youth-led movement, spearheaded by the European Union of Jewish Students, including my colleague, Olaf Stando. It is international in membership, and calls out the treatment of those who suffer human rights abuses because of their religion. I note its campaign in support of Uyghur Muslims, calling for a diplomatic boycott of the Beijing games.

I mention those groups in particular because solidarity is important. Tackling Islamophobia is not something that only Muslims should have to deal with and it is not something that is the responsibility of Muslims. We need to be open, all of us, to the fact that it is an issue everywhere. I have heard some comments today that make me think that I need to emphasise that point. I live in a fantastically religiously diverse community. I live in a country where there is a lot of work going into delivering fairness and social justice and stamping out racism in all its forms, but we do not have a magic wand. We cannot wish away the reality that Islamophobia remains and is an issue in Scotland just as it is everywhere else. We need to be alive to that and we need to be willing to work hard to deal with it.

The Scottish Parliament has a cross-party group working hard on this issue. It has been working with Professor Peter Hopkins and his team from Newcastle University, has conducted an inquiry and has adopted the APPG definition of Islamophobia. As we have heard, all parties in the Scottish Parliament have agreed to do that.

We need to define Islamophobia; we need to be clear what we are talking about and what is unacceptable, and we cannot do that if we do not define it. We need to be confident in our language.

It is welcome that the Scottish Parliament has got to that place. I am really keen to hear from the Minister the UK Government's plans to look at this again and push ahead with this. I do not think they should get to keep kicking this into the long grass, particularly given the Prime Minister's past comments, which are indefensible. The tone of some comments from Government Members today is regrettable. That is not the way we should conduct ourselves in here. Some of the eye-rolling and the language used was most unfortunate. However, I have to say that the contributions from the hon. Members for Burnley (Antony Higginbotham) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker) were eloquent and welcome. We need to see and hear more from the UK Government on this. We need to be mindful of the broader environment that we are in: there is a changing climate across in the world. We have a part to play here, using the platforms that we have, in making sure that we make a difference, because there has been a surge in respect of how the Muslim community is treated.

I conclude by returning to something the Minister said, which others have reflected on. She said that this is not political, or should not be, but her comments were. We need to take a step back from some of that. We need to accept that this is an issue for all of us in this Chamber and across the House; we all have a responsibility and duty to deal with Islamophobia. We will do that better if we can have discussions without raising the temperature in the way that it was raised, regrettably, today. I hope the Minister has something positive to say on that.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I want to give Afzal Khan two minutes to wind up the debate.

3.41 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing the debate. I thank all Members who contributed to the debate and the many others, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who could not make the debate but wanted to put on the record their commitment to tackling Islamophobia.

[Naz Shah]

Islamophobia is a dark reality, with three Muslim grandfathers murdered here in the UK, while terrorist attacks in Christchurch, Quebec and multiple others around the world emphasise the serious nature of Islamophobia if left unchallenged. In the UK, Islamophobic hate crimes against Muslims and their places of worship have sadly become far too common. The latest data for 2020-21 show that 45% of all religious hate crimes recorded by police in England and Wales were against Muslims, although a large number of cases are simply not reported to the police. Data from the crime survey of England and Wales suggests the actual number is approximately six times the number of recorded offences. According to the same data, Muslims were the most likely to be victims of religiously motivated hate crimes in 2017-18 and 2019-20.

That is not Muslims complaining about Islamophobia. That is the police collecting data on Muslims being attacked. One would think, when Muslims are the most likely to be the victims of religiously motivated hate crimes, that Islamophobia would be a top Government priority but, tragically, it is not. Islamophobia does not manifest itself only in hate crime. Islamophobia is not always a visible attack on mosques or Muslims. Someone does not have to vigorously hate another person to discriminate against them. Discrimination comes in many forms, including conscious and unconscious bias. Let me explain how.

When 15-year-old Azeem Rafiq is forced in a car to drink alcohol, that is of course a hate crime and an assault. Later, when he feels he has to drink alcohol to fit in, to be the best that he can be, to have an opportunity to progress, where is the hate crime then? He is in an environment in which he cannot be the best or achieve his dreams while adhering to the faith that he chooses to follow. Listening to his evidence at the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, it was evident how much trauma he faced later on in life through being forced to be someone he was not just to fit in.

Many Muslims face similar barriers daily. A sizeable percentage of British Muslim women do not wear the headscarf, not because they do not want to but because they fear that, by wearing one, they may be attacked, or due to prejudice, will have lower chances of succeeding and reaching the top. They, too, feel that they have to fit in to avoid abuse, discrimination or their chances being limited. Their fear is not misplaced. A 2016 Women and Equalities Committee report found that Muslim women face a triple penalty. Some of the vilest vitriol I have received online is coupled with a picture of me wearing the headscarf while being at a place of worship.

As Muslim women, we often recall praise such as, "I am impressed to see how empowered you are as a Muslim woman"—as if being a Muslim was a barrier to empowerment and we even beat it through our archaic faith to become a symbol of success. Although this is often done unknowingly, it is done through people accepting a trope about Islam being a faith that is deeply misogynistic. Contrary to that trope, I want to put on record that as a Muslim woman, my empowerment as a woman comes from my faith and the life and teachings of the Prophet of Islam, peace be upon him.

A report by the Centre for Media Monitoring that analysed media output over a three-month period in 2018, which comprised analysis of over 10,000 published articles and broadcast clips, found 59% of all articles associated Muslims with negative behaviour and over a third misrepresented or generalised about Muslims, with terrorism being the most common theme.

When such perpetuated tropes and false conspiracies about Muslims are allowed to develop, it enables an environment where people are otherised and demonised. Not everything I have mentioned is a hate crime, but it all can have an impact. Islamophobes and those who consciously or unconsciously discriminate against Muslims often use anything and everything that links to a person's Muslimness as a factor for their negativity, be that religious practices, ways of dressing or customs, or even sometimes something that is not part of Islam, but is perceived as Muslim, such as a Sikh man wearing a turban. The reality is that Islamophobia is rampant across society, and purely basing Islamophobia on hate crimes like this Government wish to do deprives us of the ability to tackle the full extent of Islamophobia.

We have to tackle the environment in which Islamophobia is normalised. Today, a former England captain, Michael Vaughan, can ludicrously suggest a Muslim England Cricket player like Moeen Ali should go around in between test matches asking random Muslims if they are terrorists—as if he too was somehow liable—and still continue to be a mainstream pundit. The former editor of *The Sun*, Kelvin MacKenzie, can openly brand Muslims as antisemites and say that it is a nice change from a Muslim making a bomb or trying to kill hospital visitors, and still get invited as a mainstream guest on media shows. In fact, people like Trevor Phillips can generalise an entire community by saying:

"Muslims are not like us",

that they will never fit in and are

"becoming a nation within a nation",

without an apology or remorse, and get a special programme in their name on Sky News.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. On her point about institutionalised Islamophobia in certain parts of society—she mentioned cricket and the media—should we not be looking at the governing organisations, whether that is Ofcom in the media or the England and Wales Cricket Board, and seeing whether they are fit for purpose? I do not think they are in this regard.

Naz Shah: I absolutely agree and thank my hon. Friend, because that brings me nicely on to my next point. In 2011, the former chair of the Conservative party, Baroness Warsi, said that Islamophobia had "passed the dinner table test". A decade later in 2021, Islamophobia has now passed the mainstream media test. It has become normalised. In fact, it has become fashionable to demonise Muslims and gain from the political capital of hate. That is why it is so important to adopt a definition of Islamophobia to enable us to at least understand and tackle Islamophobia in all its forms.

The Labour party was one of the first parties to accept the APPG definition of Islamophobia. Again, last week, the chair of the Labour party and my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton wrote to the Government urging them to rethink and adopt the definition. I welcome the intervention by the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) on trying to do that in a collegiate way.

The Government's record on a definition of Islamophobia is horrific. The Government refused the Muslim community a definition of Islamophobia, they then refused to accept a cross-party definition, and now two and a half years after promising a definition, they have failed to produce one. While the Minister may try to regurgitate the same old falsehoods about the APPG definition, I ask her one simple question. The APPG officers, before publishing the definition and in good faith, gave sight of it to Ministers. Since the definition has been published, can she tell me if the Government have ever reached out to the APPG to address any questions or concerns with the definition and in good faith try to come to a solution together on the matter? Have they even reached out, even once? The dangerous message that it sends to British Muslims is that this Government simply do not care.

When it came to the covid pandemic, this Government played with people's lives; when it came to levelling up, they played with people's future; and, again, on the issue of Islamophobia, they are playing with people's lives. Minister, I urge this Government to show some leadership and good faith. This issue is far too serious to be ignored. As the theme for this year's Islamophobia month suggests, it is time for change.

3.50 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. It has been a very feisty debate, and it is quite clear that concerns about anti-Muslim hatred transcend party lines.

I thank the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) for securing this debate. I say to him that I am not afraid of using the phrase "Islamophobia". We are not going to have a semantic argument, but there are good reasons why we refer to anti-Muslim hatred. It is partly to do with the APPG finding that the definition is not in accordance with the Equality Act 2010. If the hon. Gentleman wants more correspondence on why that is the case, I am very happy to provide it. I stand here not just as the Minister for faith but as the Equalities Minister. We must not allow those who seek to divide our diverse and multi-faith society to succeed. We are united here today in our determination to protect people and end discrimination.

I would like to use this occasion to remind colleagues about the tragic murder of our colleague and friend, Sir David Amess, whose funeral was yesterday. I attended it, as I think many others in this room did. He died at the hands of someone seeking to divide us all; someone claiming to act on behalf of Islam. However, if ever people needed reminding of the real values of Muslims in this country, they need look no further than the tributes paid by the Muslim community of Southend to the life of Sir David. His murder could have fanned the flames of fear and resentment, but instead of opening new fault lines between people, it was met with an outpouring of love and good will.

That is at the heart of what we are here today to discuss. The freedoms to say what we feel and to worship as we please are both fundamental to the character of this country. Those democratic values are reinforced by our staunch belief in equal rights and the rule of law. These are the principles that underpin debates such as this.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Kemi Badenoch: I barely have time to finish my speech, so I am afraid not.

No one in our society should be discriminated against because of their religion. In the spirit of remarks of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), I will talk about the contributions of Muslims to our public life.

Dr Allin-Khan: Will the Minister give way?

Kemi Badenoch: I am afraid I do not have the time.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. The Minister clearly does not want to give way.

Kemi Badenoch: The UK is one of the best places in the world to live, no matter who you are or where you come from. It is full of opportunities. We have a large and thriving Muslim population who have made contributions to our country and society. The country's first two mosques were founded in 1887, and now there are almost 2,000 mosques serving a Muslim population of more than 3 million. Wherever we look, we see Muslims enriching our public life, including as politicians in the Cabinet, as doctors and nurses keeping our NHS going, and as sporting heroes dominating on the world stage. Their prominence is testament to our openness as a country, and proof of something that has long been true: when someone lives in Britain they can become anything they want, whether that is Health Secretary, Education Secretary or growing up to win gold medals representing Team GB.

I now turn to the remarks made by hon. Members during the debate. I am afraid that I will not be able to cover all of them, but I will try to go through as many as I can. The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton invited me to visit the country's first green mosque. I will have a look at my diary and see if that is something I can accommodate. He also asked what we are doing to keep people safe online. He knows that we are progressing the online safety Bill. If there is anything specific he would like to mention, I would be very happy to take them forward on his behalf—it is a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport competency, but I am sure that we all can work together.

The hon. Gentleman also asked what we are doing to protect places of worship. I am told that we are funding, through the places of worship protective security funding scheme, quite possibly well over £100 million. Is that correct? It is quite a lot. I will confirm the amount, but we are putting several millions into the protected security funding scheme. I do not have the exact figure in front of me.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned his letter to the Prime Minister. This has caused quite a bit of confusion. The hon. Gentleman wrote to the PM and received a response from the party chairman. I often respond on behalf of the Prime Minister. I am informed that, after the hon. Gentleman made a point of order, the Prime Minister responded to his letter, so I hope that we can put that matter to rest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) made some really good points about individual action; it is not just about words or definitions.

[Kemi Badenoch]

My hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) also made the point that this should not be a party political issue, and talked about the trust that people have in different political parties. This is not just a Conservative party issue, and people should not make it out as such.

I thank hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for sharing her experiences of anti-Muslim hatred. I found them quite shocking and will come on to what the Government are doing to tackle that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) asked me to meet the APPG officers. He will be pleased to know that my office has already reached out to the shadow Minister's office. We have not yet had a response, but I am sure that we will in due course and that we will find a time to meet the APPG. I am happy to meet its chair as well.

Although I admire the passion expressed by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Ms Qaisar), I disagree with her fundamentally when she says that we should not take the politics out of the debate. We should take the politics out of the debate—in fact, we must. I grew up in a country where people did not take the politics out of the debate and can tell hon. Members now that when we do not do that and allow politics to infect religions, countries burn. As faith Minister, my approach will be to take the heat and the politics out of the debate. *[Interruption.]*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order.

Kemi Badenoch: It was disappointing that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) used her speech to make partisan attacks on colleagues on the Government side of the House. She said that she does not have the lived experience of racism and that we should listen to those who do. I can tell her of my many lived experiences of racism at the hands of Liberal Democrats who made disgusting and vile comments, which I am sure she would be happy to apologise for. We should be able to have this debate without making partisan attacks such as hers. *[Interruption.]* I did not intervene on Opposition Members, so I will not give up my time to take interventions.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) made a fair point, which I accept. He said that it is fair to talk about action. I accept that he has made a good point that things have been slow. A commitment was made several years ago and we did lose momentum. We had a change in Administration, Brexit and covid, which, fingers crossed, we are coming out of. I think he will find a different change of tone and pace with me as faith Minister.

We all share the view that hatred of Muslims is a vile social ill. We have no time for people who seek to divide us. As I said before, we will not tolerate anti-Muslim hatred any more than we tolerate antisemitism or any other form of hatred, but the reality is that, despite this and our continued condemnation, stubborn pockets of prejudice exist.

Home Office figures show that 45% of religiously motivated hate crime recorded by the police was perpetrated against Muslims. The fact that Muslims—*[Interruption.]*

Dr Allin-Khan: Take an intervention!

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order.

Kemi Badenoch: I would like to conclude my speech without being talked over. I can barely hear myself. This is not the spirit in which we should—*[Interruption.]*

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Can we stop interrupting? We have two and a half minutes. The Member in charge is not going to get to speak and we may not even get to put the question. That is how serious this is. I have tried to be as honest and delicate as I can in this debate and give people the opportunity to speak.

Kemi Badenoch: It is shameful that Muslims can still face verbal or physical attacks and are made to feel like outsiders in their own country. Political parties are granted a rare standing in public life, and it is our job as politicians to demonstrate leadership and set an example for others to follow in everything we do, from our public discourse to our constituency surgeries.

To that end, it was incredibly disappointing that the hon. Members for Manchester, Gorton and for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) used their speeches to attack William Shawcross with defamatory remarks that would be actionable if made outside this Chamber. William Shawcross is an outstanding public servant, as is Trevor Phillips, who the shadow Minister mentioned.

Yasmin Qureshi: On a point of order, Mr Dowd. I do not make this point of order flippantly. The Minister has just said that Mr Shawcross is a great man and she started her speech by using a trope about Muslims and terrorism, yet she is meant to be talking about Islamophobia. Shawcross has said that the Muslim faith is a fascist faith. How can she say that he is a person to lead a review that impacts on Muslims?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): You know that is not a point of order. Carry on, Minister.

Kemi Badenoch: Debates such as this are symbolically important to show our shared commitment, but symbolism does not improve lives on its own. The Government have done a lot and we have some of the strongest legislation in the world for tackling hate crime, and it is working.

I will give a few examples. In 2019 a man who posted violent messages about Muslims alongside photos of him posing with a fake shotgun was jailed for four years. That year, two brothers attacked a group of men outside a Cardiff mosque: one was sentenced to five years and three months in jail, the other to 18 months in jail.

Our approach to discrimination is something that we should be proud of. In July, the European Court of Justice gave the green light to employers in the European Union to ban their workers from wearing hijabs or other religious insignia. We have taken control of our laws and are no longer subject to the ECJ's jurisdiction. I am sure that all hon. Members will agree that that kind of prohibition is thoroughly un-British.

I recognise that the debate is concluding, Mr Dowd, so what I will say in closing is that this is an issue that I am prepared to work on with all Members of the House, but what I will not do is be intimidated or bullied, and—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Body Image in the Media and Online

[Relevant Documents: Sixth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee of Session 2019-21, Changing the perfect picture: an inquiry into body image, HC 274; and the Government Response, HC 359.]

4.2 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in this debate. This is 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 they are coming on to the parliamentary estate. This can be done either at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please also give each other space when you are seated, and when leaving or entering the Chamber.

I will now call Dr Luke Evans to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for Dr Evans to sum up at the end, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government action on body image in the media and online.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I welcome the Minister to his role. This is the first time that I have formally met him to discuss this issue.

I will open with a description of an advert put out about a year ago by Dove, called "Reverse Selfie". It starts with a young girl looking at her phone. On that phone, there is a picture of her. She may be in her late teens or early twenties. She starts to scroll backwards. She sees the comments underneath the photo suddenly disappearing, with all the "likes" going away and the comment, "You look amazing", disappearing. Suddenly, the filter changes and so does her hair colour. The size of her face, including her nose, changes, and the blemishes on her skin all suddenly reappear. The process goes further. She puts the phone down, lies backwards and there is a picture of her family, which she has scrubbed off the back of the wall, and a picture of her favourite teen band. Furthermore, the image shows her makeup, including her lipstick, coming off. Finally, what is left in front of us is a girl no older than 13 or 14. The advert then finishes with the line:

"The pressure of social media is hurting our girls' self-esteem".

The advert is only a minute long, so if people have a chance I encourage them to look at it, because it encapsulates perfectly the kind of world in which we now exist, and the problem is getting worse.

Over the next few minutes, I will set out three points to address when it comes to debating this issue of body image and what the Government can do. The first is the scale of the problem; the second is why it matters; and the third, and most important, is what we can do about it.

There are so many statistics out there, but I will quickly go through the scale of the problem. Evidence from Girlguiding shows that two in five girls between the ages of 11 and 16 have seen images online making them feel insecure or less confident about themselves, rising to 50% for those aged between 17 and 21. Some 55% of girls aged between 11 and 21 say that these images make them feel insecure by showing unattainably wealthy lifestyles or expensive clothes, and 94% agree that more should be done to protect them from body image pressures online. Some 90% of girls agree that there should be stricter rules for online advertisers. The Women and Equalities Committee heard that more than six in 10 women feel negative about their bodies. Factors including diet culture and being bombarded with images of photoshopped, sexualised women have negative impacts.

It is not just women; it is men as well. Some 35% of men aged between 16 and 40 say that they are unhappy with how they look; 48% say that they have struggled with their mental health because of unhappiness; and two in every five men feel pressured to have the perfect body.

It goes further. Work by the Mental Health Foundation found that 85% of under-18s thought that appearance was either very important or important, but it led to one in five adults and one in three teenagers feeling actual shame about the way they looked. The Women and Equalities Committee report said that the triggers include social media, stereotypes and, of course, conventional media. Those are just some of the survey results that give a flavour of what people in this country feel like.

Why does this actually matter? Let us take the worst-case scenario. As a clinician, I have seen more and more men —but also women—with concerns about body image. At worst, they suffer with eating disorders. There are 1.25 million people suffering with anorexia or bulimia. There are also 1 million people, particularly men, who are using steroids to bulk up, to try to get those stereotypical big shoulders or tight abs. That was brought home to me when UK Anti-Doping saw my campaign about body image and came to me with evidence of how much of a problem it is causing. It is finding that people who are using drugs for aesthetic enhancement are then turning up to play rugby only to then be banned from the sport.

On eating disorders, there has been a 50% increase in the number of people accessing services since 2016-17. We are seeing the worst extremes, but this is the thin end of the wedge. Combine those factors with what we have just talked about—the way the nation is feeling—and we see that there is an obvious cause for concern.

This matters and I do not believe that social media companies are doing enough. Many have filters, educational content, and ways of trying to filter out some of the problems they face, but, fundamentally, we need to go further, because the problem is getting worse and it is young people who are bearing the brunt of it. Other countries have started to make strides in addressing the problem, most notably Israel and France, and Norway has recently said that it will look at labelling digitally altered images. There is a precedent, therefore, not only here but across the western world, to make a difference.

What can we do? I am completely aware that the Minister is from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and that this problem cannot be solved with one single hit, because there is a chain. It involves parental responsibility and educating our children to be aware of the content they are looking at. Of course, when people go on to a platform, they need to

[Dr Luke Evans]

have the tools to protect themselves, the platform needs to take responsibility and show them due care, and if things go wrong, a regulator, backed up by legal statute, needs to be able to deal with it.

For the purpose of this debate, I will concentrate on three solutions that I think could make a difference. I proposed the first one last year—namely, labelling digitally altered images. It is a very simple process and we already have a precedent for it, with "PP" appearing for paid product placement advertising on TV. This is in line with the health aspect of providing information about calories and content on food labelling. It provides parity for mental health by saying that the image is not quite as it seems. We already have a precedent in advertising, as well, with video game adverts stating, "This is not actual video footage", and, of course, political advertising is labelled as such.

I often use this example when people ask what that means: if someone wanted to sell their house or rent a room, it would be absolutely justifiable to paint the walls, put out a new throw and change the lighting. However, what they fundamentally could not do is digitally alter the size of the garden, the roof or the living space. That is what I am asking the Government to look at. We are creating a warped sense of reality that drives young people to believe they can be something that they can never achieve. I am all for aspiration and people improving their aesthetics—I am a GP by trade and I welcome heathy, promotional sport and exercise and people taking care of their bodies—but not if that is a goal that they can never achieve.

Critics of my position often say, "Hang on a second. Isn't that the nanny state?", but I would say it is not, because a perfect market needs perfect information. Others ask how it would work practically. The online space already distinguishes between organic and commercial activity according to the number of followers and what accounts use in their content, holding them to a different category of rules. I am not asking for a bride with a blemish to suddenly be punished or banned from dealing with that. I am simply asking for digitally altered images where biceps are made bigger and promoted online—or indeed in magazines—to carry a label.

Of course, that is my wish as a Back Bencher, but we have the draft Online Safety Bill, and I credit the Government for grabbing the bull by the horns and including a world-leading attempt to try to deal with some of the perils of the internet. That is really important, but there are some difficulties. How do we decide what goes in? How do we build a framework? Where does responsibility lie? I am pleased that there is a framework that covers social media companies with a duty of responsibility.

What I am talking about is not illegal, and that means that interpreting what is detrimental is mired in difficulty. Although an individual picture might not be detrimental, we start to have a problem when we are bombarded with 100 pictures of people with abs and shoulders the size of a fridge. However, I see a solution. Clause 46(3) of the draft Online Safety Bill, which sets out the meaning of content that is harmful to adults, states:

> "Content is within this subsection if the provider of the service has reasonable grounds to believe that the nature of the content is such that there is a material risk of the content having, or indirectly having, a significant adverse…psychological impact on an adult of ordinary sensibilities",

with roughly the same wording in place for children as well. I put it to the Government that body image could well be a legal but harmful issue, and should be counted among the priority harms.

As I have said, the draft Online Safety Bill tries to cover a whole load of issues that are not related to body image. My final point and plea to the Government is about the thrust of the issue—what it all boils down to—which is the algorithm driving the content. I am interested in fitness, and I follow CrossFit on Instagram. If I log into my account, it sends me to hundreds of pictures of gents with their tops off, training harder than ever before. It is not an issue having the one image, but there is a real difficulty when hundreds of images are being driven to people. When I raise the issue with all the big social media companies and ask them how the algorithm works, the first thing I hear is, "That is commercially sensitive," and therein lies the problem. If we do not know what the algorithm is driving to people, and if we do not understand it or have any clarity on it, how can we address the problem in the first place?

I am so pleased to see that Ofcom is in line to deal with the problem. I have met with it to see that it has not only the resources and the legal backing but the ability to punish companies, demand that they open up their algorithms and demand papers from them so that we can get to the bottom of this problem. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that that is indeed the Government's intent, and whether or not algorithms will be included in the online harms Bill. While I have come to this from body image, it would help to deal with all sorts of other issues, be that fraud scams, self-harm or suicide.

I hope that in the past 10 minutes I have demonstrated the scale of the problem, why it matters—because the most vulnerable young people are the ones facing it—and some of the solutions for dealing with it. I look forward to the online safety Bill coming forward. I am aware of the Advertising Standards Authority's call for evidence about body image and the Government may know that I have launched a petition called #recognisebodyimage to make sure that body image is recognised in UK law for the first time. I hope that might just make a slight bit of difference for the young girl or boy who enjoys spending their time on social media.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. We used to appear opposite each other on occasion, so it is nice to serve under your chairmanship now. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on tabling this important topic for discussion this afternoon and for speaking with such eloquence. The examples he gave were powerful and make a strong case for the need to do more in this important area for the sake of all our children and, indeed, many adults who suffer problems and issues as a result of images they see online. I take the opportunity to assure the House and, indeed, the public that the Government take those problems seriously.

There are two projects under way designed to address exactly those issues, which provide useful platforms for doing more. My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth touched on both. The first is the online advertising programme, which, as the name implies, is designed to address the content of paid-for online advertising, where some of the images he describes appear. As he said, the Advertising Standards Authority launched a call for evidence on 21 October that remains open until 13 January, so there are opportunities for people to make their views known. I hope that the ASA will be able to do more in this area in response to that.

In the coming months, the online advertising programme consultation will be launched and, again, that will be an extremely useful vehicle into which points such as the ones made today can be fed. That will likely lead in due course to further measures in the online advertising space. It is clear that there is a real opportunity through the programme to do more in this area. Given the call for evidence and the consultation in the coming months, the issues raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth are extremely timely and very welcome. He has picked his moment with a great deal of good fortune.

There is not just the question of advertising but that of user-generated content, and that is in the scope of the draft Online Safety Bill, which my hon. Friend mentioned. It was published last May and I can see he has a copy of it in front of him, which is diligently tagged up. I am delighted he has been studying it so carefully.

As hon. Members will know, the draft Bill is currently going through a pre-legislative scrutiny process. A Joint Committee of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), is looking very carefully at it. The Committee has taken extensive evidence and will be publishing a report on or before 10 December, which may well address some of the issues. The Government are certainly in listening mode on the draft Online Safety Bill and we are ready to make changes, amendments and improvements to the Bill where there is a case to do so. There is scope for us to do more in this area. The Bill has a number of important mechanisms that will directly help address some of the issues that have been raised.

Let me pick up a couple of the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth. First, he mentioned the importance of algorithms. As he said, this applies not only to matters of body image and the fact that he has lots of pictures of well-built men appearing in his timeline, for the reasons that he explained, but elsewhere. These algorithms drive all kinds of content, some of which is harmful. In fact, Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, explained how the algorithms promote content that is often harmful, or even hateful, to individuals for purely commercial reasons. The algorithms do that not through any exercise of editorial judgment, but simply to drive user engagement, and therefore revenue, for the companies concerned. It is a purely commercial, profit-driven activity.

My hon. Friend made a point about transparency. When they are asked to talk a bit more about what these algorithms do, the companies very often refuse to disclose what is going on. Therefore, some of the most important measures in the draft Online Safety Bill are to do with transparency. There is a transparency duty on the category 1 companies—the largest companies—to be transparent about what is going on.

There are also powerful information rights for Ofcom, whereby Ofcom can require the companies concerned to provide information about a whole range of things, including algorithms. Companies will have to provide that information to Ofcom, providing the transparency that is so woefully lacking. If they fail to meet either the transparency duty or the information duty, that is, responding to an information request, they can be fined up to 10% of their global revenue. In the case of the information disclosure duties, not only can the company be punished by way of extremely large fine, but there will also be personal criminal liability for named executives. There will be a big change in the transparency about algorithms and how information is provided.

In the context of the draft Online Safety Bill, my hon. Friend also mentioned content that is legal but harmful. There is clearly a strong case to say that material that causes either young people or adults to develop anxiety about their body image can potentially be harmful. Once we have passed the Bill, the Ofcom consultation process will define the priority harms, which will be the harms where category 1 companies will have to take particular care. They will have to lay out in their terms and conditions how they will address issues with priority harms. There is a mechanism through which representations can be made, and the argument can be made that matters concerning body image ought to included.

Dr Luke Evans: I am very grateful for the comprehensive answers that the Minister is giving. On that secondary point, will the consultation be coming back to the House of Commons to determine those priorities or will they be set out after a consultation that will be delivered straight to Ofcom for it to make its judgment?

Chris Philp: There will be an extensive consultation run by Ofcom, both on the matters considered to be priority harms and on the codes of practice that go alongside those. The Bill, as drafted, will see those codes of practice and the list of harms come back to the Secretary of State, and there will then be a parliamentary procedure, so Parliament will have an opportunity to look at the list of priority harms and the codes of conduct to be sure that Parliament is happy with them. There are various debates about whether the mechanisms to do that can be fine-tuned in some way, but it will not just disappear into a void with no further interaction with Parliament at all. In providing evidence to Ofcom, there will be an opportunity for my hon. Friend and for people who are campaigning with such passion on this issue to make representations.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I join the Minister in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) on introducing this debate so eloquently. Can I take the Minister back to advertising? I spent many years working in British advertising agencies in London. I was a little concerned about the advertising ban in the Health and Care Bill, which we have been discussing in the last couple of days. We have a world-leading industry, and I gently say to my hon. Friend and to the Minister that if advertising is labelled in this way—I am talking more about the traditional media

[Mr Jonathan Lord]

than online advertising—then either the health warning is so small that no one notices it or it is large enough to have a lot of notice. At that point, certainly the larger advertising agencies will ensure that they do shoots to get what they want without any retouching. I urge the Minister to be cautious and protect our world-leading advertising industry, which sets higher standards than virtually anywhere else in the world.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, given that it is built on years of expertise in the industry. These issues require careful thought and there are balances to strike. We do not want to cause unreasonable problems for the advertising industry.

That is why the Government and various regulatory authorities are looking at this in such a careful way, with the call for evidence that is running at the moment, the consultations in the coming months on the online advertising programme and the consultation on the priority harms and codes of conduct that Ofcom will conduct in relation to the online safety Bill. Through those consultations, there will be an opportunity for campaigners to put forward their point of view on body image. Obviously, the advertising industry will have extensive opportunities to put its case. There will be opportunities for regulators and Parliament to think about how that balance can most appropriately be struck. We fully recognise that, as in so many areas, there is a balance to strike in ensuring we reach the right solution.

Dr Luke Evans: I absolutely agree on striking that balance. To address the earlier intervention, I hope that no one would ever see a label on these images, because companies would be socially responsible and choose not to doctor them. However, should those images be doctored for any reason, having that label—a small "p", a small "b", or whatever it happens to be—alerts the user to the fact that, when they are scrolling through hundreds of images, particularly on social media, all is not as it seems. I think that is a fair balance.

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. His comment is probably directed as much at my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Lord) as at me. Clearly, there are important points to debate.

In conclusion, the Government take the issue extremely seriously, not just in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport but across Government, such as in the Department of Health and Social Care and other Departments. We recognise that serious psychological harm is potentially being caused, particularly to young people but more widely as well. We want to ensure that reasonable steps are taken to avoid harm being inflicted.

I hope Members across the House, with opinions on both sides of the argument, will fully engage with the consultation on the online advertising programme and the call for evidence from the Advertising Standards Authority. I hope they will also fully engage, after the Bill passes, with Ofcom when it consults on the priority harms and codes of conduct. Some extremely important issues and arguments have surfaced on both sides in today's debate. We look forward to debating the matter further in the coming months to ensure we strike that balance. We need to protect people who need protection, so that the internet is not an ungoverned, lawless space where anything goes, but equally we need to ensure that industries, such as advertising, are not unduly penalised or circumscribed. I am confident that the House, on a cross-party basis, can apply its collective wisdom and strike that balance. I look forward to working with colleagues to achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

Bus Services: North-east England

4.30 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate, 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 give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the Chamber.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered provision of bus services in the North East.

It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair in this important debate, Mr Dowd. Bus services keep our local communities moving. They provide connections between our homes and communities and our place of work. They allow us to travel, to do our shopping and to attend health and other appointments, and they form an essential link to mainline train services for onward travel. They allow us to socialise safely. For those without cars, they are essential. For those of us with cars, they offer an opportunity to reduce car journeys and so reduce our carbon emissions.

Some 160 million bus journeys were made across the north-east immediately pre covid, and I would hazard a guess that most Members of Parliament will know the high level of concern from constituents when local bus services are changed. Earlier this year many constituents contacted me and their local councillors about changes to the No. 47 bus services from Chopwell to Consett, telling me how the changes had disrupted their journeys to work and other services. Of course, our bus services have faced a huge impact from driver shortages and, like the rest of us, from staff catching covid or facing isolation, causing short-notice cancellations, which all add to the problems.

Speaking of covid, our bus services, and in much of Tyne and Wear our Metro services, have been dramatically affected by covid-19. Those services continued to run throughout lockdown to keep key workers moving. They continued to run as we opened up, then closed down again, and as restrictions changed, to keep us moving, but at a huge cost and with a huge drop in usage. I am a regular bus user myself, as I travel to and from Westminster, around London and at home, and I have seen the fluctuation in bus usage. I say a huge thank you to all the staff who kept our buses, Metro and trains going for those of us who needed to travel, often exposing themselves to greater risk of infection. Their work is appreciated.

Those services, running economically due to low usage, could keep going only through the financial support from Government. The covid-19 bus service support grant ran to August 2021, and local transport authorities paid additional moneys for concessionary travel payments to bus operators, although concessionary usage had in fact dropped very significantly. On the Metro system, the same effect can be seen, with less usage of the system, meaning less income and increased financial pressure.

Why have this debate about buses in the north-east now? Bus services across my constituency face a very real threat. Still suffering from a reduced number of passengers, suffering again from driver shortages and now experiencing increased congestion on our roads, as many of us, even previous bus users, use our cars to avoid the risk of catching covid—

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I did not mean to cut my hon. Friend off mid-sentence, because she is making a powerful and timely speech, but she brought to my mind the fact that my constituents in the outer west of Newcastle already have quite poor public transport links. They do not have access to the Metro, and a bus from Throckley, for example, can take an hour to get into the centre of Newcastle, whereas it takes 15 minutes to drive. Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Government are telling people to get back into the office, increasing the traffic on our roads even further, they should at the very least make sure that we have the funding in our region to support good public transport for all?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I certainly agree. Her constituency mirrors mine on the other side of the Tyne and we face many of the same problems.

As I was saying, we are still suffering from driver shortages, and we are experiencing increased congestion on our roads as many people, even previous bus users, use their cars to avoid the risk of catching covid. Congestion—even pre covid, and now—affects our buses and can reduce their reliability, which is so important to increasing bus usage, and also has an effect on our environment and air quality.

Earlier this year, the Government produced their national bus strategy for England, "Bus Back Better". I will not comment on the title, but the strategy recognised that the deregulated bus industry, in which commercial operators were free to provide services that ran at a profit, and local transport authorities were left to subsidise routes that they believed were essential, has not served us well. Chapter 1 starts by saying:

"Buses are the easiest, cheapest and quickest way to improve transport. Building a new railway or road takes years, if not decades. Better bus services can be delivered in months. Experience shows that relatively small sums of money, by the standards of transport spending, can deliver significant benefits."

We therefore need to look after and improve our buses, as important links between communities and towns and the train system.

The strategy required local transport authorities to submit bus service improvement plans by the end of October this year showing how they would achieve enhanced partnerships with bus operators to bring about better and more popular services. In the north-east, Transport North East, which brings together Northumberland County Council, Durham County Council, North Tyneside, Newcastle, Gateshead, Sunderland and South Tyneside, worked with the bus operators to submit its bus service improvement plan and set out a major programme of investment worth £804 million to tackle infrastructure

[Liz Twist]

and improve services, aiming to recover the ground lost during the pandemic and then to increase passenger numbers.

However, since the Government published the strategy and commissioned £3 billion to fund the bus improvement plans, the amount available has been cut to £1.2 billion—clearly a huge difference in funding, which calls into question the detailed plans submitted by Transport North East and other local transport authorities. As yet there has been no confirmation of how much funding will be allocated to Transport North East for the implementation of the enhanced partnership and the bus improvement plan. I hope the Minister will be able to update us on the timescale for allocating funding and on the criteria to be used, given that the funding available has been significantly reduced after bids had been developed and that plans were due to be implemented from April 2022—just four months away.

In the north-east there is a pressing financial issue threatening our bus services, which could see cuts to the local bus network of up to 20% of mileage from next April. Costs are increasing, for example, for fuel, labour and maintenance, particularly in the context of the shortage of drivers and the intense competition for them. Fare income is still down, due to reduced passenger numbers, which are estimated still to be at 75% of pre-covid numbers. Government funding to support the bus network in the light of that reduced fare income is due to end in March 2022.

Some bus operators are reporting that Government funding to support the bus network for the remainder of the financial year is inadequate and does not in any case cover the cost of their operations. Concessionary travel reimbursements have been paid by local government at pre-pandemic levels throughout the pandemic at the request of the Government. That will end in March 2022, and reimbursement will reduce towards actual levels of ridership, which is currently around 60% of normal rates, as this group of passengers remains uncertain about using bus services.

Nexus's financial challenges arising from the Government's decision not to extend covid-19 support for the Metro mean that its current forecast is to reduce expenditure on buses via the concessionary travel reimbursement by £7.5 million in the next financial year, which will inevitably mean a reduction in bus services, contrary to those positive plans developed for the Transport North East bus service improvement plan.

The Government's confirmation that emergency covid-19 payments for the Tyne and Wear Metro, paid through the pandemic, will cease at the end of March 2022 has created a real problem. As a result, a major shortfall of £20.8 million is forecast in Nexus's finances for the financial year 2022-23, largely caused by the impact of covid-19 on the passenger numbers of the Tyne and Wear Metro. That financial gap will need to be closed. Short-term savings from cutting Metro services would lead to the loss of yet more passengers, leading to an even bigger deficit and even more problems in maintaining bus services. Clearly, Nexus is looking at other measures, including cost savings, an increased levy on local councils in Tyne and Wear and the use of reserves, but the proposed reduction of £7.5 million in concessionary fare payments as part of the package will hit bus services really hard.

For bus operators, too, there are still real challenges. The bus recovery grant is set to end in March 2022, and bus usage has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels due to reluctance from some former passengers to get back on the bus. As I have said, increased car usage creates congestion, and driver shortages lead to bus cancellations, all creating a challenging situation even before the loss of that £7.5 million. The end of that funding has been described as a cliff edge for our bus services, so I ask the Government to look again before the budget for the next financial year is set in January and to continue to fund emergency payments to Tyne and Wear Metro because of the direct impact on bus services in my constituency and elsewhere in the north-east.

I understand that Nexus, the joint transport committee and the chair of the Tyne and Wear sub-committee have written to the Minister, Baroness Vere, but what is needed urgently is a discussion about the situation to find a way forward that avoids the 20% reduction in bus mileage. That request has the support of businesses in the north-east and the leaders of our health, tourism and education sectors, who want to build a better and greener local economy for the future and have written in support of that proposal.

I ask the Minister whether she, on behalf of Baroness Vere, will commit to meeting Nexus, the other parties involved and me to explore a way forward. This is all very dry and technical stuff, but what it means is important for my constituents and people across the north-east. The bus service improvement plan submitted by Transport North East offers a real chance of improvement for the future of the bus services that we rely on. To repeat the quote from the national bus strategy,

> "Buses are the easiest, cheapest and quickest way to improve transport."

My constituents need improvements to make sure that our buses offer a reliable, accessible and more environmentally friendly option for their travel needs. It makes a huge difference to their lives, so I ask the Minister again whether she can update us on the timetable for allocating funding for the bus service improvement plans, and how the funds will be allocated given the reduction that I have spoken about. Most urgently, my constituents cannot afford their bus services to be reduced by 20% or even more. The villages, small towns and communities across the Blaydon constituency, such as Chopwell and Kibblesworth and all the places in between, need to retain their vital links to our towns, our health services and our other essential services.

Any reduction in buses will make already difficult journeys impossible. We need additional funding to make sure that they continue to run and can improve. Without that funding, Transport North East's positive plans for improvements will be undermined from the start. Again, I ask the Minister to agree to set up a meeting with Baroness Vere, Nexus, Transport North East and me to find a way of continuing the covid-19 support to Nexus. We need action from the Government to prevent this bus funding crisis from hitting our communities. We really cannot afford to miss the bus. Action is needed now.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I am going to call the Minister at 5.18 pm. I would like to give the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) a couple of minutes to wind up the debate, so I ask colleagues to please bear that in mind.

4.45 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate. Many of us speak based on our experience of inhabiting two different worlds when it comes to public transport. I am sure you appreciate, Mr Dowd, that inside the M25 there is a plethora of public transport options: a frequent and reliable bus service, the underground, and black cabs and 24-hour taxis available in minutes. We also have access to a constant stream of real-time data.

Outside the M25, in my constituency, when I wait at a bus stop, the timetables are more aspirational than informative; the bus will arrive when it comes. Making plans that rely on the bus network in my constituency is what separates the optimists from the pessimists—that is not just about our choice of football teams. The only thing more unreliable than the buses is the Northern Rail coastal train on a match day—a most appalling service of two carriages, once an hour.

Independent analysis of the Government's transport spending by the Institute for Public Policy Research North think-tank shows that the north has received just £349 per person, compared with £864 per person in London, since the Conservative party took office in 2010. Far from the northern powerhouse, shared prosperity or levelling up, northern England has been short-changed by the Government over the last decade to the sum of £86 billion.

Public transport is too important to fail. Whether moving people to support the economy, to shop on our high streets or to work, unreliable and expensive bus services can have a significant bearing on an individual's life chances and living standards. We need a change in mindset from the Government. Buses, trains and metro systems are vital public services for strengthening and growing our economy—not secondary distractions if situated outside London. Regional transport services need to recover from the disastrous policy of deregulation and privatisation of the 1980s.

Decisions around the regulation and control of bus services should rest with local government and transport authorities—democratically elected and accountable to the public. These services should be run in the public interest, safeguarding vital routes, particularly in rural areas, rather than being run solely in the pursuit of profit, pricing people out from public transport and the life opportunities that good public transport links can deliver.

4.48 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to my former MP, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), for securing the debate. Bus travel is particularly relevant to my constituents in the city of Durham, which has a small city centre surrounded by many rural former pit villages that rely heavily on an underfunded and insufficient local transport network. In villages such as Pittington or Waterhouses, services are essentially non-existent at times.

In particular, home-to-school transport has become a real issue for families, with schools struggling to subsidise costs due to funding cuts and rising costs. For some children in my constituency, school bus travel now costs an outrageous £90 a month. At St Leonard's, for example, nearly a third of pupils can no longer afford the school bus and have had to seek alternatives, forcing many parents to rely on service buses, which are often unreliable, irregular, inaccessible or unaffordable. My office has received multiple reports of buses driving past stops because they are full, and of services that simply do not show up. One girl was quoted almost £900 per year for a school bus place, even though the stop was a three-mile round trip walk across dangerous roads and unlit wooded paths. Now she is forced to use a service bus, with frequent, unplanned cancellations that often leave her late for school or waiting in the dark for long periods. That has made her very anxious, and her parents have given her a rape alarm for the dark nights.

Headteachers have reported safeguarding concerns, such as bullying and inappropriate comments from adults that have led to police involvement. These problems impact on learning, with some people priced out of key educational opportunities. A headteacher in my constituency told me that talented students are having to miss extracurricular activities because they cannot rely on service buses to get home. The Government simply cannot say they are levelling up our region while children are struggling to get to and from school.

Unfortunately, the issues I have highlighted have a knock-on effect on the wider community. Increased demand around school-run hours is resulting in crowded buses and disruption to commuters, while many parents are now driving their children to school, causing more disruption to local residents and increased air pollution around schools such as Durham Johnston School and St Leonard's. In more rural areas, there is no public bus and no car, but only an expensive school bus that eats into household incomes during this cost of living crisis.

I am immensely grateful to the headteachers and parents who work tirelessly for a workable solution. However, when it comes to local and central Government, it is like banging my head against a brick wall, with both refusing to take responsibility. When I raised the issue with representatives of Durham County Council, they told me that they agree with the principle of more support for school transport but they cannot do anything to help. I then took it to the previous Schools Minister, who told me that he sympathised but that he, too, could not help me.

I am now working with schools and bus operators to find a solution, but it is only right that we get some support from this Government, who talk so much about levelling up places such as Durham. Can the Minister outline the steps that the Department is taking, alongside colleagues across Government, to ensure that every child and young person in my constituency has an affordable and reliable route to school?

4.52 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for securing this important debate.

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

The Government's lack of covid-19 support for our Tyne and Wear Metro means that bus services will certainly be cut in our region by £7.5 million next year, and I will explain why. As Members will be aware, the Metro is the third most used light rail network in the whole UK, with pre-pandemic passenger levels of 36 million per annum. Reducing service levels is just not an option for the Metro, but because central Government will not step in and play their part, our councils are being asked to take the burden of £4.1 million of extra payments to keep bus services afloat and help Nexus balance the books. We all know how cash-strapped our councils are, but they are having to pay more and more to cover the gaps that the Government are ignoring and widening. The Government would be wise to remember that our constituents can see that this is happening. It is not exactly levelling up, is it?

Again, our local authorities are being told to bear the brunt of keeping our public services afloat. Most recently, we were given nothing in the Budget on transport, because we have not got a metro Mayor. Meanwhile, down the road, £310 million is being pumped into transport in the Tees valley. I wonder what we should take from that. Are the Government going to hold our area to ransom because we do not have a devolution deal? People in our region have a specific need for bus services, and constituents frequently write to me about the poor bus provision across Sunderland and Washington.

During a recent roving street surgery in Oxclose in my constituency, nearly every household raised the issue of the poor bus service—in fact, it was the issue that was raised most on the doorstep. That was true not just for that area but across the whole of Washington. The issue was also raised at a public meeting I held in South Hylton, which is over in Sunderland, and I have been contacted by constituents in Usworth Hall, an estate with no bus services at all. With commercial companies providing bus services, it is little surprise that, despite being necessary, non-profitable services continue to disappear as local authorities struggle to fill the gaps.

The point of public transport is to offer a safe means of getting places, even during unsociable hours. That is especially necessary as car ownership levels in the north-east's left-behind neighbourhoods are among the lowest in the country, while rail services range from being limited to being non-existent for the majority of the areas that I represent. So there is high reliance on bus services.

However, as we have heard, bus provision is declining and the communities that I represent are literally being left stranded. Limited rail services for many communities in the north-east only heightens the need for immediate and good bus provision, especially with the Government snubbing rail improvement projects such as the much-needed reopening of the Leamside line, which I know a lot of people in this room support.

The Chancellor has often said that no Government could budget for a pandemic. Well, neither could Nexus or our local authorities, and the effects of the pandemic are still being felt. It is surely the duty of Government to support public transport in its recovery. This is not a Government without money, as was made very clear by the Chancellor's Budget just last month, with its announcements of tax cuts on short-haul flights and champagne. The decision not to support the Tyne and Wear transport network is a political one, which will see residents lose out every day and the local economy lose out in the long run.

So why are the Chancellor and his team so scared of putting their money, which we know they have, where their mouth, which we also know they have, is? For all their talk about levelling up, they are making their intentions clear by their inaction. Therefore I implore the Government to listen to Nexus, local authority leaders and all of us here today, and to ensure that bus provision in the north-east sufficiently serves our constituents every day of the week.

4.57 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I start by wholeheartedly congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate. From the many colleagues who are in the Chamber, we can see how much support there is for a debate on this very important subject.

Nevertheless, we should not be having this debate. I and many colleagues from the north-east have spoken many times about the lack of effective and convenient bus services in our region, and I have often spoken about the huge disparity between the cost of bus tickets in Newcastle and the cost of bus tickets in London. I have said it before and I will say it again, until it stops being true: for £1.55 in London, I can get up to two buses to carry me anywhere across the capital for over 30 miles; but in Newcastle, £1.55 will not even get me three stops up the West Road. If I want to go to beautiful Ashington, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), which is only 18 miles away, a single ticket will cost me £6.

More than that, while here in London we can see when buses are coming, in Newcastle, at Eldon Square bus station, there is a sign that says, "Working with bus operators to bring you real-time travel information." That sign has been there for years—they have been working together for years—and we still do not know when buses are leaving from where. That has a real impact on the friction of taking a bus journey; it reduces the useability, functionality and accessibility of buses for my constituents.

As well as comparing with London, we also need to compare with the unfortunately often more convenient and cheaper alternative that my constituents have: the car. As we recently saw at COP26, we want to move away from car journeys towards more journeys on public transport. However, it is cheaper for a family of four to take a car into the centre of Newcastle to go and see the latest Peppa Pig film—I am sure the Prime Minister will approve of that, given that most of my constituents cannot afford the 700-mile round trip to Peppa Pig World—than it is for them to get a bus there and back.

In Newcastle, our buses are critical all the same. Many people rely on them to get to work or school, but the fares that they have to pay are prohibitive. The extortionate bus prices are part of the cost of living crisis facing my constituents and many others across the north-east. Can the Minister tell us when the Government will level down fares in the north-east?

My constituents are not even guaranteed a good service. As we have heard, our bus services are facing rising fuel and maintenance costs and labour shortages, leaving passengers to face enormous disruption. Pay disputes are potentially leading to industrial action across the region and, as we have heard, Transport North East estimates that there will be a 20% reduction in bus mileage from next April.

Catherine McKinnell: I am sure that my hon. Friend will share my frustration and disappointment that we still have really noisy, pollution-emitting buses running around our streets. We love buses, but we do not love the pollution, noise or impact on our environment, so much more urgent investment must be put into creating much cleaner, greener buses to drive around our very busy cities.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for that intervention; she is absolutely right. As well as the challenge of climate change, the quality of air in Newcastle is of great concern to my constituents and hers. It is not rocket science—the technology is there to have cleaner, greener buses. The Secretary of State for Transport keeps on saying that there are thousands of such buses about to come on to our streets, but we have yet to see them in Newcastle. That is part of the investment that we need to see.

The promises of investment simply do not materialise for the north-east. Speaking of the most recent Budget, Lucy Winskell, the chair of the North East LEP, said that

"government has announced significant transport investment across the rest of the North but not in the North East."

Whereas other parts of the country received hundreds of millions of pounds in funding, with some even receiving over £1 billion, the north-east lost out yet again.

Before deregulation in the '80s, we had a transport network. Some of us are old enough to remember that people could travel across the region, from bus to Metro, on one transfer ticket. That system worked brilliantly, partially because we had control over our buses. When Margaret Thatcher privatised buses, she knew that an entirely private bus service would not be good enough for London. Why was that thought to be good enough for the north-east? We need control over our buses, which is the only way that my constituents and the people of the north-east will get a fair transport deal. As we heard earlier, the North East Joint Transport Committee recently published its bus service improvement plan, setting out a major programme of investment worth £804 million over three years. I want the Minister to tell us that she will be supporting that plan and the buses that my constituents deserve.

5.4 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for arranging this important debate.

I live in Northumberland. For those people who mentioned the north and the north-east, Northumberland is something like 15 miles north of Newcastle. It is a rural area, but the south-eastern strip of Northumberland is heavily populated and always forgotten. We have to remind people that we are always left behind. People now expect to be left behind because of where we live. It really is not good enough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) mentioned prices. We live in an area of high social deprivation, where we might get a bus every now and again, and if we are lucky enough to get one we have to pay through the nose. We have just passed the Stagecoach phase; we are on to the deregulated buses if and when stage. I wish we were even somewhere near having a Metro. It is a case of isolation for many people. They cannot get out of the communities in which they live. To travel in my constituency, it is £1.55 for a minor route. To travel seven miles in my constituency from Ashington to Morpeth, it is £6.40. Imagine someone on universal credit or unemployment benefits of around £70 paying £6.40 to get from A to B. There is no cap on it. It is £6.40.

As I mentioned, it is about social isolation. I went through my constituency on a Friday trying to get into different surgeries using public transport. I travelled to North Blyth, Cambois and East Sleekburn, where the first bus service was at 10.14 am. We then travelled from there seven miles—one stop—to the local hospital. It took more than an hour. The return journey for anybody at the hospital, whether they work there or are looking to visit people, must be made before 12.46 pm, because there are no bus services after that. That is outrageous and unacceptable.

I do not have that much time, but this discussion deserves much more debate. I put on the record my thanks, and those of all my colleagues in the northern region, to the key workers and the transport workers, who have worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic. Many of them were exhausted before the pandemic and still are. We have huge issues, and we need more investment in bus services and integrated transport policy right through the region. We should not forget Northumberland as an area, but we need plenty of investment in the integrated transport plan and regional funding, because buses are a lifeline for many people in our regions.

5.8 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate. Considering that more journeys are made on buses than any other form of public transport, we do not really give them much attention in this place. Perhaps it is because those who live and work in London are not aware of their luck in having an inexpensive and reliable bus network, unlike much of the rest of the country.

London successfully resisted the Thatcher Government's deregulation of buses in 1986, but in the north-east we were not so fortunate. Thanks to the maintenance of regulation, London's franchised services outperform the rest of the country, with Transport for London and the Mayor setting routes and fares, and therefore ensuring that buses in the capital are run for people, not simply for private profit. Under a regulated system, bus routes are not restricted to narrow, profitable corridors; people are provided with crucial and necessary services, which means that wider benefits are reaped in both social and economic terms.

[Andy McDonald]

By connecting people with each other and their schools, workplaces, shops and hospitals, we can build flourishing communities. Ensuring that we make the most of new industries also requires planning for bus service provision. For that joined-up thinking to work, re-regulation is required. Yet for all their talk about giving local authorities and people more power over their lives, the Conservatives have slashed funding for council services that pays for our vital services, such as buses. They have also continued to deny local authorities the powers they need to serve their communities.

In Middlesbrough and across Tees Valley we have, in effect, a duopoly of Stagecoach and Arriva, whose principal purpose and duty is the extraction of profits for their shareholders—ironically, in the case of Arriva, the German state-owned transport company. We are left with the situation where bus passengers in London can pay fares of as little as £1.55 to travel across the city with that money going back into TfL's coffers, while for those in the north-east and certainly in Middlesbrough, £2 will get you about a mile and a half down the road if you are lucky.

The Tory 2019 manifesto also promised to match the money in the Tees Valley that would otherwise have been received from the EU shared prosperity fund. The reality is that we are losing out to the tune of £900 million, just as we have done over the past decade of Tory rule, as we have received well below the average in transport investment in terms of current and capital spending.

Last year, our region received the lowest amount of transport investment overall. Compared with almost £8 billion spent by the Government on transport in London, the north-east received around one-tenth of the amount, which works out at almost one-third as much per head.

We also have a problem with what Conservative politicians in our region are choosing to spend money on. The decision of the Tees Valley Mayor to purchase Teesside airport initially cost the taxpayer £40 million, but with a £14 million loss last year, it required a further injection of a further £10 million at the taxpayers' expense.

At the general election, Labour brought forward a comprehensive plan to electrify all buses operating in England at a cost of about £114,000 per bus. A rough estimate of the cost of electrifying the 330 buses operating in the Tees Valley comes to under £38 million. Instead of obsessing about the airport, the Tees Valley Mayor could and should have paid attention to using the powers he has to re-regulate our buses and make them work for passengers and not private profit, and to decarbonising our fleet to improve the air quality of our communities and help us meet our broader climate commitments.

The Government talk a great deal about "taking back control" but that is really about them and corporate entities having control over people's lives, not about giving power back to the people, as evidenced by the Government undermining Transport for the North. They brag about levelling up, but after 11 years of Tory Government, the reality is that the inequalities in transport provision and the betrayal of the north continue unabated. We see that in the disastrous integrated rail plan and the continuing failure to invest properly in bus services.

Bus services are massively important in my community and I urge the Minister to encourage her Mayor to break away from this failed deregulated system and embrace the success and opportunities that re-regulated and municipal services present to our local economies and communities, and that have been widely embraced in so many developed nations across the world. If we look across the channel, there are endless examples of how that has revitalised communities. I urge the Government to take heed.

5.14

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd; I hope to do justice to the points that have been raised. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate on the provision of bus services in the north-east. It is rather refreshing to hear all the support for buses. As a fellow northerner and a fellow rural MP, I, too, welcome the intensive interest in bus transport. As the Prime Minister set out in his 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, buses—

Andy McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: I have only just begun, but I will give the hon. Gentleman the honour.

Andy McDonald: I am very grateful. The Minister is applauding the interest in bus service provision in the north-east of England. It will not have escaped her attention that the Opposition Benches are full of Labour MPs from the north-east, but there is no one on the Government Benches. How is that a commitment to transport in the north-east of England?

Trudy Harrison: Let me talk about the commitment from this Government. Connecting people every day to jobs, studies and vital local services is absolutely why we value buses. The benefits are clear. They are at the very centre of our public transport system, and in 2019-20 there were more than twice as many passenger journeys by bus as by rail.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact here, as it has elsewhere, and the Government have provided an unprecedented amount of support for the bus sector, which the hon. Member for Blaydon referred to. Through the pandemic, more than £1.5 billion has been announced to date. That has been essential to keep bus services running and to get workers to jobs, children to schools and people to vital services. Without that support, bus services would have operated at a loss or would have stopped running entirely.

But we do not just want to go back to how bus services were before covid. There are huge opportunities to change the way that bus services operate and we want to make them better. That is why the commitment to buses is evident in the already mentioned "Bus Back Better" national bus strategy, which was published in March this year. It explains how we will see these services being more frequent, more reliable, easier to understand and use, better co-ordinated and cheaper. The point about comparing and contrasting London prices with those elsewhere in the country has been made many times.

Our central aim is to get more people travelling by bus—to not just get patronage back, but increase it—but we will achieve that only if we can make the bus a practical and attractive alternative to the car for many people.

Ian Lavery: The Minister mentioned a number of issues, but one of the real problems is affordability. Opposition Members have mentioned this twice: it costs £6.40 to travel seven miles in my constituency, but travel in the capital is capped at £4.65 a day. The Minister is from the north. When she considers levelling up, she should do what is right for her constituents and mine and ensure that it is affordable for people to use public transport. Affordability is so important.

Trudy Harrison: I do not need to be told that; I am quite aware of it. That is why the "Bus Back Better" strategy will look at how we make those fares cheaper and how we will adopt the London-style approach to fares across all parts of the country, but particularly in the north, which I also represent, as the hon. Member said.

Liz Twist: Will the Minister give way?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Member will be able to come back in at the end, if she allows me time now to get through my response.

Liz Twist: I have a specific question.

Trudy Harrison: I will give way briefly.

Liz Twist: The key thing is this: we share those objectives to try to improve buses—that is good for everyone—but we need the financial commitment to be able to do that, both to tackle the problems that we face locally and for investment in the improvement plans.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I remind Members that I will want to put the Question, so I exhort them not to intervene too much at this stage or I will not get to do that and it will affect the ability of the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) to wind up.

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Mr Dowd. Hopefully, I can set the hon. Member's mind at rest. There are already examples of great bus services across England, where we have really seen passenger growth, with local authorities and bus operators working together to put passengers first, which is critical. Strong local plans are being delivered through enhanced partnerships between authorities and bus operators or franchising arrangements; those are crucial to achieving the goals that we have set out in the strategy. All local transport authorities in England, including the North East Joint Transport Committee, have confirmed that they will pursue one of these approaches—as the strategy asks. They have all published bus service improvement plans, setting out how the goals of our strategy can be delivered in their local areas and be driven by what passengers—and would-be passengers—want.

We set out in our guidance on bus service improvement plans our high expectations of what those plans should include. We have heard what priorities Members from across the House would want to see, as well—it is tackling congestion; it is speeding up services; it is reducing fares; it is simplifying ticketing, and it is decarbonising bus fleets. At the Budget we announced £1.2 billion of dedicated funding for bus transformation deals, which is part of an over £3 billion fund of new spend on buses over this Parliament. This level of investment represents more than a doubling of dedicated bus funding when compared with the previous Parliament. The hon. Member for Blaydon asked for clarity on the funding allocation; we shall be announcing more details on how that funding will be announced very shortly. She also asked for a meeting with the Minister responsible, Baroness Vere, in the other place. The Baroness would be delighted to confirm that meeting between Nexus, Transport North East and herself.

The spending review and the Budget also confirmed that the Government will be investing £5.7 billion in the transport networks of eight city regions in England, including in the north-east, through the city region sustainable transport settlements. It represents an unprecedented investment in the local transport networks, and will play a key role in driving forward the country's national infrastructure strategy, as well as delivering transformational socioeconomic and environmental change in those areas. The north-east will be able to submit a programme of schemes that it intends to fund using its prospective settlement, which could include improvements to bus provision. The Government look forward to working with the region to unlock and deliver the many transport benefits that the CRSTS will provide.

The new funding comes on top of the support that Government already provide for buses. Each year, the Government provide £250 million in direct revenue support for bus services in England, via the bus service operators grant. Without that support, fares would increase and marginal services would disappear. Around £43 million of the bus service operators grant is paid directly to local authorities, rather than bus operators, to support socially necessary bus services in their area that are not commercially viable. The funding also supports the approximately £1 billion spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes every year. The Government are committed to protecting the national bus travel concession, which is of huge benefit to around 9 million older and disabled people, allowing free off-peak local travel anywhere in England.

The national bus strategy is the biggest shake-up of the industry in a generation. It sets out what we want for passengers and how we will achieve it. I am sure that everybody would agree that only by working together can we provide the bus services that people want and need. The hon. Member for Blaydon asked a question on driver shortages; I wanted to reassure her that we now have a further 50,000 test slots annually, thanks to the changes that the Driving and Vehicle Standards Agency and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency have recently made.

There is, of course, our commitment to 4,000 zero-emission buses, which was set out by the Prime Minister and is very much part of the Department for Transport's transport decarbonisation plan. It was raised that nobody has seen these buses; well, I certainly have. I have had the joy of riding on those buses during COP26—both hydrogen and battery-electric. I have also had the pleasure of visiting Wrightbus, near Ballymena in Northern Ireland, to see the buses being manufactured.

Chi Onwurah: I, too, have seen the buses when they were parked in Westminster for a show and tell by the manufacturers. What I have not seen is the buses on the streets of Newcastle.

Trudy Harrison: I am sure that the hon. Member will look forward to taking a ride on one of those buses. I certainly found them to be smooth and they provide a far more enjoyable driver experience; and it is not just about the drivers, but the pedestrians and the people who live in the communities where the bus routes run.

I am proud of what the Government are doing on the decarbonisation agenda. I welcome the support for buses generally, and I hope that Members across the House will join me in encouraging increased patronage of bus services. I again thank the hon. Member for Blaydon for calling the debate and for the passion that has been displayed throughout.

5.25 pm

Liz Twist: I have the luxury of a whole five minutes to wind up.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame Morris), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for their speeches and interventions. As the Minister said, they have clearly demonstrated the passion that there is for good bus services, which are essential to keep our communities going, and they gave examples of difficulties in their particular areas.

I welcome the opportunity to meet Baroness Vere to discuss the issues that we are facing in the north-east, in particular with Nexus. I look forward to that meeting taking place quickly because this issue is hugely important and very urgent, so I hope that we will be able to follow up on that very quickly. I hope that we will be able to persuade Baroness Vere that we need the additional support that I talked about for our Metro system, and to prevent our bus services being drastically cut; they are absolutely essential.

I raised the question of our aspiration through the bus service improvement plan. Certainly, people in Transport North East are very keen and have the support of the community to pursue that improvement plan, but it takes money. I am concerned about the fact that there is only £1.2 billion.

As the Minister was speaking, I was looking at the bus service strategy, about which there has been much discussion. Within the bus strategy, there is the commitment made in February 2020 by the Prime Minister to £3 billion of expenditure for buses in England. Other measures mentioned include

"£300m of funding to support the sector recover from the pandemic,"

£25 million for skills, bus priority schemes and

"accelerating the delivery of zero emission buses with £120m in 2021/22."

That seems to me to not quite add up to £3 billion, when the £1.2 billion is added.

The strategy says:

"The bulk of the £3bn transformation funding will be paid after the transformational changes begin in April 2022."

So, I would be interested to know exactly what has happened to the gap between the £3 billion that was promised and the £1.2 billion that is still available for the transformational change that we need.

As I say, I look forward to the meeting. Some of our transport operators are looking at better, more environmentally friendly buses and electric vehicles, and those are hugely expensive. I look forward to the meeting and I very much hope that we can get a positive outcome for the Nexus funding crisis and for our bus service improvement plan.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered provision of bus services in the North East.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 November 2021

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Data Strategy Mission 1 Policy Framework

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government are today publishing the "National Data Strategy Mission 1 Policy Framework: Unlocking the value of data across the economy", which sets out the Government interventions needed to make private and third sector data more usable, accessible and available across the economy, while protecting people's data rights and private enterprises' intellectual property.

A commitment to developing this framework was set out in the "National Data Strategy". Published in 2020, the strategy outlined for the first time in a single publication our ambitions to unlock the power of data. Since then, we have launched a monitoring and evaluation framework against which we will check our progress in delivering these ambitions. We have also begun a public consultation on reforms to the UK's regime for the protection of personal data.

The publication of this framework underlines our commitment to a thriving and responsible data economy where the power of data from the private and third sectors is unlocked. The Government now have a set of levers for intervention and principles for when to apply them, as well as seven priority areas for action to take forward. These include making sure we have good data standards, encouraging the use of privacy enhancing technologies and data intermediaries and developing international co-operation to support the UK's data agenda on the world stage.

We will continue to engage widely to implement the national data strategy, including working through the National Data Strategy Forum.

A copy of this update will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS415]

JUSTICE

Sentencing Update

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): I am today announcing the Government's decision to bring forward "Harper's Law".

PC Andrew Harper was tragically killed responding to a theft in July 2019. The defendants in the case, two aged 17 and one aged 18, were convicted of the unlawful act manslaughter of PC Harper, with two receiving a sentence of detention of 13 years, and another receiving an extended sentence of 19 years. These sentences correctly reflected the law at the time, but I do not believe the law goes far enough here.

PC Andrew Harper's widow, Lissie Harper, has campaigned tirelessly for justice for her late husband, alongside the Thames Valley Police Federation and with support from other police federations across the country and Members across this House.

Following detailed discussion with the Home Secretary, I am today announcing "Harper's Law". This measure will extend mandatory life sentences to those convicted of the unlawful act manslaughter of an emergency worker who is exercising their functions as such a worker.

This sentence will apply to 16 and 17-year-olds as well as adult offenders. It will include judicial discretion to allow for the imposition of an alternative sentence in truly exceptional circumstances. The minimum term of the life sentence, or the minimum amount of time the offender must spend in custody before being considered by the Parole Board for release on licence, will still be for the courts to determine.

This measure reflects the vital role which our emergency workers fulfil in protecting all of us. It recognises the risks that emergency workers face. I will bring forward this measure at the earliest legislative opportunity.

[HCWS416]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 24 November 2021

	Col. No.
PRIME MINISTER	340
Engagements	340
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	331
Autistic Children: Educational Support	337
Conversion Therapy Ban: Faith-based Settings	337
Diversity and Freedom of Belief: Public Institutions	333
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—*continued*	
Ethnicity Pay Gap	335
Health and Care System: Women's Experience	334
Islamophobia	335
Public Sexual Harassment: Legislation	336
Rape and Sexual Violence in Conflict	331
Topical Questions	338
Women in the Workplace	332

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 24 November 2021

	Col. No.
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	11WS
National Data Strategy Mission 1 Policy Framework	11WS
JUSTICE	12WS
Sentencing Update	12WS

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
Wednesday 1 December 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.

Volume 704
No. 77

Wednesday
24 November 2021

CONTENTS

Wednesday 24 November 2021

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 331] [see index inside back page]
Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Bulb Energy: Administration [Col. 353]
Answer to urgent question—(Kwasi Kwarteng)

Transport for the North [Col. 361]
Answer to urgent question—(Andrew Stephenson)

Hate Crime (Misogyny) [Col. 378]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Members of Parliament (Prohibition of Second Jobs) (Motion) [Col. 378]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure [Col. 378]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Social Media Platforms (Identity Verification) [Col. 379]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Siobhan Baillie)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Commericial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill [Col. 383]
Motion for Second Reading—(Paul Scully)—agreed to
Programme motion—(Rebecca Harris)—agreed to

Prevention and Suppression of Terrorism [Col. 402]
Motion—(Damian Hinds)—agreed to

Captain David Mockett [Col. 426]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Energy-intensive Industries [Col. 75WH]
Great British Railways: Headquarters [Col. 100WH]
Islamophobia Awareness Month [Col. 108WH]
Body Image in the Media and Online [Col. 135WH]
Bus Services: North-east England [Col. 143WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 11WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers]