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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 6 January 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Streaming Content Providers: BBFC Rating System

1. **Nick Fletcher** (Don Valley) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential merits of requiring streaming content providers operating in the UK to use the British Board of Film Classification rating system. [904862]

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to the House. I also welcome the new shadow team.

The Government launched a consultation in August last year to level the playing field between traditional broadcasters and video-on-demand streaming services, to provide a fair competitive framework and ensure that UK viewers receive equivalent standards regardless of the tech they use. That included looking at audience protection measures such as the role of the British Board of Film Classification age ratings. That consultation closed in October. We are now considering our response to the consultation and will publish the next steps in due course.

Nick Fletcher: Does my hon. Friend agree that these certifications not only protect our young people, if they are adhered to by responsible parents, but help us as adults to determine what we want to watch in our own homes?

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for his tremendous campaigning work to protect children online and for sharing with the Department details of his recent meeting with the BBFC. We have great trust in its best practice age ratings and, as I have set out, we are currently considering its role, as part of the VOD consultation. We are trying to strike the right balance between freedom of expression, protecting audiences from harm and making sure that traditional broadcasting and streaming services are held to the same standards. If my hon. Friend has additional ideas on how best to do that, I have sent him the details of the lead official in this area and we would welcome his further engagement.

Online Safety Bill

2. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What recent discussions she has held with (a) Cabinet colleagues and (b) civil society groups on the proposed Online Safety Bill. [904863]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): May I echo my colleague's warm welcome to the shadow Front Bench team, particularly the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell)? I am quite sure that we support different football teams and I know that we are from different cities, but we are both north-westerners and I look forward to a positive working relationship.

I have met a range of stakeholders, including civil society groups, to discuss the Online Safety Bill. I have also had regular meetings with my ministerial colleagues, and I have heard a wide range of opinions on the Bill. I am taking those options into account alongside the recommendations of the Joint Committee.

Allan Dorans: There has been widespread support throughout this House for the Online Safety Bill, and yet it has been subject to contradictory messaging and delays. None of that is helpful for the Department or good government. Will the Secretary of State finally provide a clear timetable so that the vital work of scrutiny and improvement can begin?

Ms Dorries: There have been absolutely no delays. The Joint Committee reported on 10 December and the Bill will come to the House very shortly. We have taken time to consider the recommendations carefully, and the recommendations of the Law Commission, and the Bill will be here very shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call Julian Knight, the Chair of the Select Committee.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Select Committee system is the jewel in the crown of Parliament and well capable of providing the right scrutiny. Those are not my words but those of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House. With that in mind, in the upcoming Online Safety Bill will the Secretary of State proceed with utmost caution over the proposed permanent standing Joint Committee, which would curtail her own powers and those of Ministers across Government, and if the precedent were followed to its logical conclusion, it could lead to the dilution of the Select Committee system? If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I thank him for his question. The Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is the jewel in the crown, as is the scrutiny of all Select Committees, but the Online Safety Bill is groundbreaking and novel and will legislate in an area in which we have never legislated or enforced before. I am quite sure that the place for the debate about whether or not there will be additional layers of scrutiny will be when the Bill comes before the House.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State may have seen the excellent research in *The Guardian* newspaper this week showing that search engines such as Google are disguising advertisements as search results, particularly those linked to fossil fuel companies, so much so that ClientEarth describes it as "endemic greenwashing". Will the Secretary of State assure the House that she will use the Bill to crack down on these over-mighty, arrogant tech platforms?

Ms Dorries: That is a central purpose of the Bill. As a result of the work by the Joint Committee and others, including the Law Commission and those who have examined the first edition of the draft Bill, when we bring the Bill to the House there will be improvements and enhancements that will go even further in relation to those who use their power on the internet—those big tech companies and others—and the legislation will be there to provide the reassurances that I think the hon. Gentleman is looking for.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): Last year, with 50 of my colleagues, I wrote to five of the major social media companies calling for meaningful change and asking them to recognise their moral duty to make this change. Only three of the five even bothered to reply to the correspondence, which makes me concerned that they are not taking the matter seriously enough. Will my right hon. Friend be characteristically robust about ensuring meaningful change in the forthcoming legislation?

Ms Dorries: I am disappointed to hear about the response from the tech companies, but frankly not surprised. We will bring forward legislation that introduces criminal sanctions, including pretty steep fines—10% of global annual turnover, which could be as much as £18 billion, so they will be considerable. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should not be having to do this. Those organisations have a moral responsibility to provide the protections that young people require. It is their responsibility to ensure that illegal material is no longer placed online, that they remove content that is legal but harmful, but most of all that they protect young people and children. The Bill will have those three considerations at its heart. The companies could be doing what they need to do right now—they do not need the Bill. They could be removing those harmful algorithms right now.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the shadow Front-Bench team, starting with Alex Davies-Jones.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Happy new year to you and to the whole House.

After years of Government delay, we still do not have a confirmed timetable for implementation of online safety legislation. With thousands of unvaccinated covid-19 patients in our hospitals, appalling attacks on NHS workers, and misinformation about the vaccines circulating readily online, what is the Secretary of State doing now—not in a year's time, not when the legislation is finally enacted—to properly address misinformation about the covid-19 vaccines online?

Ms Dorries: The disinformation and misinformation unit is working, and we have done everything possible. I know there have been—accusations is a strong word; perhaps concerns. Concerns have been expressed by Opposition Front Benchers that the disinformation and misinformation unit is no longer in existence. That is not the case; it is not true. The unit is there and it is working. We had a pilot, which ran for six months and stopped, but the work from that pilot continues with the disinformation and misinformation unit. That work takes place daily. Daily, we work to remove harmful online content and, particularly when it comes to covid-19 vaccinations, content that provides misinformation and disinformation. Daily, we have contacts with online content providers, and the work is ongoing.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans) raised a strong point about scrutiny and good government. Before Christmas, the Secretary of State appointed her preferred candidate as chair of the Charity Commission. Within a week he was gone, after it was discovered that he had behaved inappropriately to women colleagues, sending one a picture of himself in a Victoria's Secrets store—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not think that is linked to the question, which is about the Online Safety Bill. Your question has to be linked; that is why it is taken. I will call you on topicals, so you can ask the question then. *[Interruption.]* They are not my rules. They are rules the House has set so it is no use getting angry with me. The question has to be relevant.

John Nicolson: I am not angry with you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Covid-19 Plan B: Tourism Industry

3. **Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the effect on the tourism industry of the covid-19 Plan B advice for people to work from home where possible. [904864]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the vital tourism sector. He is right that some of the new rules, including the guidance to work from home, can be difficult for the tourism sector, because movement of people and social interaction is pivotal to a thriving tourism industry, but we have committed to provide support and over £35 billion has already been provided to tourism, hospitality and leisure businesses.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response and his recognition that the advice is causing problems for a number of businesses. He is quite right. People who go out to work often use cafés, restaurants, pubs and shops outside their normal working hours. I know the Chancellor has brought in a package of measures to help businesses, and I do not advocate that businesses be closed, but when they are open but suffering from lower trade, how much they are losing is intangible and difficult to assess. Will my hon. Friend speak to the Chancellor again to see whether any further help can be given where it is necessary?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank my constituency neighbour again for raising these important points. We have ongoing dialogue with the Chancellor and the Treasury. The new grants the Chancellor announced just before Christmas will be very important in helping the businesses affected. Many will get the grants automatically. I encourage others—perhaps those on the edges of supply chains—that do not get the grants automatically to apply for the additional restrictions grants. The impact on them may not be obvious, and I appeal to local authorities, which have discretion in the allocation of those grants, to be sympathetic to such claims by the businesses affected in the way my hon. Friend describes.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. The theatres, festivals and live events that are such an important part of our tourist offer have all been hit by the uncertainty around plan B, and Government support is not working. The live events reinsurance scheme was meant to protect the music, theatre and live events sector from the impact of covid, but it has been a total flop. It does not cover cancellations due to covid outbreaks, nor does it provide support outside a full national lockdown, which no one wants to happen. Given the demand that will be caused by the continued uncertainty well into the new year, will the Government urgently review the scheme and repurpose it to give businesses and workers the support they need now?

Nigel Huddleston: Of course the scheme is really important. We do want to make sure that it works as intended, but it is part of an overall support package for the arts sector, which includes the theatre tax reliefs that were announced prior to Christmas and the all-important culture recovery fund. Again, more money has been released from that. I am confident that the overall package will be of great support to this vital sector.

TV Licence Fee: People over 75

4. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): On what date she last held discussions with the BBC on the enforcement of TV licence fee payments for people aged over 75. [904865]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): I meet the BBC regularly to discuss a range of issues, including enforcement, and I will meet the chair and director-general next week. The BBC confirmed recently that no enforcement action has been taken against anyone over 75 years of age at this stage. I am clear that the BBC must support those affected by the decision to end free TV licences for over-75s, and I expect it to do so with the utmost sensitivity.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that response, but do we trust the BBC? Would it not be much better to remove the power of the BBC to enforce sanctions through the criminal law against those who are over 75 and who are supporting a policy that the Government say they also support?

Ms Dorries: I reassure my hon. Friend that the entire issue of over-75s and decriminalisation remains very much under review and on my desk. The BBC has confirmed that no enforcement action has been taken. It recently began customer care visits to people aged over 75 who may need additional support in paying the TV licence. Those visits are to assist the over-75s to get appropriately licenced, with the fee paid. I expect the BBC to handle those visits with the utmost sensitivity. I reassure him that this issue is under review.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): About six years ago, a previous Government entered into a two-way agreement with the BBC regarding the over-75s. The BBC's part of the agreement was that it would continue to fund free licence fees for the over-75s. The Government's part of the agreement was to agree to an increase in the licence fee and to some other

aspects that advantaged the BBC. The BBC has broken its part of the agreement. What are the Government doing about our part?

Ms Dorries: As I said in my previous answer, this is something that I am continuing to review. I reiterate that the BBC has taken no action against anyone over 75 years of age—no one. This is something that I am watching very carefully. I cannot say much more at this stage, but I do have a close eye on it.

Levelling-up Agenda

5. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support the Government's levelling-up agenda. [904867]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): My Department is making an enormous contribution to levelling up that positively impacts on people's lives across the country. Our £1.4 billion investment in digital infrastructure is connecting people wherever they are in the UK; we are investing £850 million into local culture and £560 million into youth clubs in the places that need them most; and we are levelling up through sport with £205 million for community sport pitches, plus our flagship 2022 events such as the Commonwealth games and the rugby league world cup.

Tom Hunt: The Secretary of State will know that grassroots football clubs, particularly those in deprived areas, are very important for levelling up. I had the pleasure before Christmas of visiting Bourne Vale social club, which helps to sustain Ipswich Vale Exiles, who have 22 youth teams and four men's teams in one of the most deprived parts of Ipswich. The football teams are dependent on the social club, but the social club is going through really hard times and is struggling to raise enough money to continue to exist. That puts at risk all those football teams. Will the Secretary of State meet me to try to find a way through? Potentially, some of that money might go to the social club, because by helping the social club we would be helping Ipswich Vale Exiles, who are critical to Maidenhall and Chantry, which are up there among the best parts of the town.

Ms Dorries: I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that we have paid a huge amount of attention to local football clubs, particularly over the past year, not least as a result of the fan-led review that has been undertaken by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who is here today.

We continue to provide considerable support for hospitality businesses this year. That is part of around £400 billion of direct support for the economy, which has helped to safeguard jobs, businesses and public services. We have also provided an unprecedented £1 billion to ensure the survival of grassroots professional support and leisure sectors. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this further.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The current Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities is the fourth to promise this House a White Paper on devolution initially and then a White Paper on levelling up. Indeed, we were absolutely promised that the levelling-up White Paper was coming before Christmas. I will not ask the Secretary of State to gaze into the future and predict whether we are actually

going to get the White Paper this year, but given that she has answered a question about the levelling-up agenda, could she explain to the House precisely what it is?

Ms Dorries: It is about levelling up—I am very sure. Equality and opportunity for all is probably the best way to describe it. It is certainly an ethos that is overlaid as a filter on every policy in my Department: equality and opportunity for all. I am very sure that the paper he is looking for will be here shortly, too.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that an important part of levelling up is to strengthen local and regional media? They are under terrific pressure at the moment, yet do an important job in holding local institutions to account. Will she look at other ways in which we might do that? Perhaps by extending the local democracy reporting scheme, funded by the tech platforms.

Ms Dorries: I bow to the expertise of my right hon. Friend, who has served in my job and in the Department for many years, and served as Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I do not think anybody in the House knows as much about this as he probably does, so I bow to his expertise. I would like to talk to him about his ideas on how we can move forward, and I pay tribute to him for having always championed local media throughout his career. I am happy to meet him to discuss that further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for your warm welcome to me and my new team. I am delighted to be here for my first DCMS questions. May I thank the Secretary of State for her very warm welcome? In the tradition of the Manchester-Liverpool rivalry, I look forward to us fiercely disagreeing at times, but also to us joining forces to advance much-needed change in this agenda.

Does the Secretary of State agree that sport and culture, and the fast-growing creative industries, are absolutely central to levelling up, to place and belonging, and to ensuring that creative jobs are across our regions and nations? If she does agree, now that—I hope—she has read up on the funding of Channel 4 and found that it is not actually funded by the taxpayer, perhaps she could explain how privatising that public service broadcaster will not diminish its crucial role in levelling up, given its unique funding model and its strong track record in creating jobs and opportunity across our regions and nations?

Ms Dorries: I think Mr Speaker might call me to order if I start discussing Channel 4 on the back of a sports question.

Lucy Powell: It is not a sports question; it is a levelling-up question.

Ms Dorries: I am absolutely grateful to her for giving me the opportunity to explain my answer about Channel 4, which was misrepresented on social media. Channel 4 does take its public borrowings from the Government and the taxpayer, and that is what I was referring to. Channel 4 borrowings do not come from investment;

they come from the Government, and that is what I was talking about in my answer to the Select Committee. I really thank her for the opportunity to put that right.

To go into Channel 4 in more detail—

Lucy Powell: Levelling up.

Ms Dorries: I think it is very loosely connected to levelling up. I am happy to have a discussion with the hon. Lady about Channel 4 and its impending privatisation, or indeed, whether that happens or not. A consultation has taken place, and we have had over 60,000 responses. We have been working hard in the Department on the unprecedented number of responses; we have been working our way through. We will reach a response very shortly on what we will do with Channel 4, but I give her my assurance that it will be what is best for the sustainability of Channel 4 in the future.

TV Licence Fee

6. **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): What plans she has for the future of the TV licence fee. [904869]

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): The Government are in the process of determining the level of the licence fee from April this year. We need to deliver value for money for the licence fee payer while ensuring that the BBC can continue to provide high-quality services. We have been having constructive discussions with the BBC, and I believe we are close to reaching an agreement, but I cannot comment further while those negotiations are ongoing. An announcement will be made in Parliament in due course.

Jacob Young: The Minister will know that there is growing support for scrapping the licence fee or axing the TV tax, not least in Redcar and Cleveland, where the Bilsdale mast fire left people without TV reception, yet most were not given any sort of refund. Does the Minister agree that this is not an acceptable situation and that if the BBC were a satellite, broadband or phone provider, a refund for time without service and, in some cases, even further compensation would have been expected? Given that the BBC is using my constituents' licence fees to pay celebs hundreds of thousands of pounds—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister got the question.

Julia Lopez: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the plight of his constituents after the mast fire in Bilsdale. I have been working very closely with Arqiva to try to restore those services urgently, and I believe 98% of households have now had their Freeview restored, but I believe the BBC has also been issuing refunds. It has got to something like 11,000 refunds now; if my hon. Friend wishes to take this issue up with the BBC, I recommend that he do so.

Gambling Act 2005: Review

7. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress she has made on her review of the Gambling Act 2005. [904870]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. The Gambling Act review is a priority for the Department. We are currently working very carefully through the evidence, including the 16,000 submissions that we received. Our intention is to find ways of introducing reforms to prevent the serious harm caused by gambling addiction while allowing those who can bet safely to do so, and we will publish a White Paper setting out our plans in the very near future.

Rachael Maskell: With gambling firms grooming and sucking vulnerable people into a web of debt and despair, it is crucial that the Government outlaw their exploitative practices as soon as possible. As for their victims, will the Minister commit to talk to Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care so that, alongside his strategy, a comprehensive public health strategy is generated to provide support for people who have experienced gambling harm and to protect people from being sucked into that place?

Chris Philp: I agree with the hon. Lady. There are some extremely troubling practices, particularly among online gambling firms, that, as she says, lead people down a path to a very dark place that sometimes leads to suicide. I have met many of the families whose sons, daughters, husbands or wives have tragically committed suicide as a result of gambling addiction.

On co-operating with DHSC, I have already met my colleague the Health Minister to discuss this issue and will be meeting her again on this topic. I have also met NHS clinicians such as Dr Matt Gaskell, who runs the Northern Gambling Clinic in Leeds, to discuss these issues. I have received his very interesting, constructive and useful ideas, which are feeding directly into the review.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): While taking evidence from fans during the football review, I was struck by their unprompted concern about the amount of gambling-related content in football. I appreciate that the Minister is new in his role, but could he tell the House whether he or his predecessor have had a chance to meet football fans to discuss their concerns ahead of publication of the review?

Chris Philp: I thank my hon. Friend for her work in this area, and particularly for her work on the fan-led review. As a fan of Crystal Palace—a proud south London club—I am very keen to make sure that football fans' voices are heard. Next week, I am meeting a number of sporting organisations, including the Lawn Tennis Association, the England and Wales Cricket Board, the Rugby Football League, the Football Association, the Football League and England Golf. Following the conversation that my hon. Friend and I had on the phone a day or two ago, I have already asked my office to arrange a meeting with the Football Supporters Association, which I hope will happen in the coming days or weeks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister's commitment to the changes that we all wish to see, but does he believe that the review will result in a strengthening of measures to prevent under-age gambling? When can we expect to see the desperately needed changes come before the House?

Chris Philp: Yes, I expect that we will see a strengthening of age-related measures and, indeed, a strengthening of measures more widely, for the reasons that we have mentioned already. Because it is urgent, as the hon. Member says, we intend to publish the White Paper as soon as possible in the coming months.

UK Film and Television Industry

8. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support the UK film and television industry. [904872]w

15. **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support the UK film and television industry. [904879]

Julia Lopez: The Government's actions helped the film and TV industry bounce back from the pandemic, with production now stronger than ever. Our support includes the £500 million production restart scheme, supporting over 88,000 jobs, and the cultural recovery fund, supporting over 200 independent cinemas. We have also built on the UK global screen fund.

Andy Carter: One reason why we have such a successful TV and film production sector in this country is the broad ecosystem of large, medium and small businesses that all contribute to that global success. Could I take the Minister back to the point raised earlier about Channel 4? Can she reassure me that specific regard is being given to the small and medium-sized businesses in my constituency and across the north of England who rely on Channel 4 for their first entry into network television commissions? What steps is she taking to ensure they are not disadvantaged?

Julia Lopez: I would like to provide him with those reassurances. That is very much on my mind, and that of the Secretary of State, as we look at this issue. I read with interest my hon. Friend's piece in *The Times* on Channel 4 and levelling up, and the contribution that the broadcaster makes in that regard. In so far as we are minded to sell—no decision has yet been taken—it would be done in order to secure the future of the broadcaster and looking at the wider sector. I assure him that the independent production sector is doing incredibly well and is moving away from a reliance on the public service broadcasters anyway.

Mark Eastwood: I appreciate the support given to our TV industry. However, a big question remains on the viability of the BBC licence fee in today's modern society. With hundreds of commercial and subscription channels currently available, I urge the Minister to look at the possibility of phasing out this outdated payment model and to consider other options for the BBC to be able to fund itself.

Julia Lopez: The current licence fee funding model is fixed for the rest of the charter, until 2027, but we will be reviewing the model well in advance of the next charter period. We are considering all options. I appreciate the concerns he raises, which I know are shared by a number of others.

Topical Questions

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, Mr Blomfield is not here to ask the first question. I would like the Secretary of State to answer the question about departmental responsibilities, and then I will move on to the next one.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not think I said happy new year to you at the beginning of questions. Happy new year to everyone here today.

I know it has been a tough few weeks for our world-class arts and culture sector, which has found itself grappling with omicron and covid rather than the festive rush. We have supported the sector throughout the pandemic and in December we doubled the emergency funding available, to £60 million, to overcome this latest challenge.

In the meantime, UK tech enjoyed another record-breaking year in 2021—I think this country had three times the tech investment of any other EU country. As we head into 2022, it promises to be a historic year for the future of the UK. We continue to make fantastic progress on our three showstopper events—Birmingham Commonwealth games, Unboxed and Her Majesty's platinum jubilee, all of which will bring the whole country together in a year of celebration and renewal.

T2. [904856] **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): So-called conversion therapy is a horrific abuse of some of the most vulnerable people in society, specifically targeting LGBT young people. The introduction of the online safety Bill will hopefully coincide with progress on banning conversion therapy. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that online promotion of this terrible abuse will be banned in all circumstances in the Bill?

Ms Dorries: The online safety Bill will be before the House very shortly. I do not think I can answer the hon. Lady's particular question, because that is not a policy of the Department—it is not our policy area—but the online safety Bill will be here shortly and we can discuss it further.

T4. [904861] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): Last month, I was lucky enough to attend Keighley's very own rugby league world cup, organised by Joe O'Keeffe and his brilliant team at the Keighley Cougarmania Foundation, which involved 12 local primary schools each representing a different country. The energy and enthusiasm was absolutely fantastic, but we can do much more to support grassroots sport. What more can the Department do to support primary schools and grassroots sports foundations?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): I congratulate my hon. Friend's constituents on organising what sounds like an incredibly successful event. He and I know just how important sport and physical activity is for our physical and mental health.

At the recent spending review, the Chancellor announced an additional £205 million for up to 8,000 community football pitches and multi-use sports facilities across the country. Every year, our arm's length body, Sport England, distributes millions of pounds to support grassroots sport right across the country, including more than £180,000 in my hon. Friend's constituency since 2019.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to all in the House.

There is a total lack of ambition to make Britain a world leader on high-speed broadband. Reforms made in 2017 are holding back 5G connectivity in many areas across the country. Instead of paying a fair price to sports clubs, churches and local authorities to host and upgrade masts, the telecoms companies are slashing rents and holding community and sports groups to ransom through the courts, to boost their bottom lines—multibillion-pound organisations making profits on the backs of groups that have kept our communities going during the darkest days of the pandemic. Will the Government look again at the scope of the telecoms Bill that is due before the House shortly, to make rent evaluations fairer, rebalance the market and ensure that we can get 5G broadband across the UK improved?

Mr Speaker: Order. I had the greatest respect for the hon. Gentleman as a Whip, and we used to have this challenge of Front Benchers' questions needing to be short in topicals, so I was hoping he would set the right example, as I am sure he will next time.

The Minister for Media, Data and Digital Infrastructure (Julia Lopez): We have put forward an important piece of legislation on this, to get our ambitions out there on improved wireless and broadband connectivity. I would be keen to engage with the hon. Gentleman further on these issues, but we think we have struck the right balance between the mobile network operators and those who receive rents.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will agree that the singing of the national anthem is something that provides a great sense of unity and pride in our nation. In this year of the Queen's platinum jubilee, will he take steps to encourage national broadcasters to play the national anthem and ensure that the BBC restores it at the end of the day's programming before it switches to News 24?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): We fully support the singing of the national anthem, Her Majesty the Queen and other expressions of patriotism, including the flying of the Union Jack. The more we hear the national anthem sung, frankly, the better. Of course, organisations such as schools are free to promote it, and the more we can do in this area, the better it will be.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have only got 10 minutes for this and some Back Benchers have not got in yet.

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): You may have a sense of déjà vu, Mr Speaker, when I tell you that before Christmas the Secretary of State appointed a preferred candidate as Charity Commission chair. Within a week he was gone, when it was discovered that he had sent a photo of himself in a Victoria's Secret store. Does the Secretary of State do no vetting when she appoints candidates? When she appoints a new candidate, can she promise us that it will be less chaotic a process than last time round?

Ms Dorries: As I have said before, all our interview processes are undertaken in full compliance with the governance code and the principles given by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. We asked Martin Thomas at interview whether he had anything to declare, which he said he did not. He has rightly apologised for his error of judgment during the application process. I have accepted his resignation. The Select Committee will examine this matter and the error of judgment, but of course he also passed through the cross-party Joint Committee process. We are reviewing our processes; we review them constantly. I am afraid there is not much more I can say about this.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): On Monday I visited Harefield United football club in my constituency, which told me, as many other grassroots football clubs do, of its frustration at being unable to access excellent facilities in local schools. What discussions have taken place between the Department and the Department for Education about opening up those brilliant facilities to a wider range of grassroots sports clubs?

Nigel Huddleston: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have to open up school facilities for more sporting activities. I have already had several conversations with DFE Ministers about opening up school facilities. We are also working together on the school sport and activity action plan, and in the spending review additional money was allocated to support the opening up of school facilities and the teaching of PE in primary schools. My hon. Friend is raising a really important point; more action will be taken.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We know that over Christmas children and young people would have been watching mainly streaming services rather than terrestrial TV, so can I press the Minister? Would it not be an easy and quick win to require all streaming services to use the British Board of Film Classification age verification system? We know that Netflix does, but Disney does not, which causes confusion for parents. This would be an easy, quick win for the Government, as well as everyone else.

Julia Lopez: I know that the right hon. Lady is passionate about this issue, which is something we are actively looking at, as I mentioned earlier. Those ratings are already voluntarily taken on by the likes of Netflix and others, but we are looking at what more could be done.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): If there is evidence that officials in the Department have inadvertently advised the Secretary of State on the application of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the HMRC film production company manual, would this be of concern to her, and would she agree to meet me and my constituent about this matter?

Ms Dorries: I have met my hon. Friend in my office and we have discussed at length the situation regarding transport between film venues. It seems to fall into a difficult area. I have written to the Secretary of State for Transport and am awaiting his response. When I have had his response, I will revert to my hon. Friend further.

Mr Speaker: I will chase it up for you, Secretary of State.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The minor reforms made as a result of the collapse of the Football Index by the Secretary of State's Department are thin gruel for my constituents who lost thousands through that scam. What are the Government doing to ensure that both the Gambling Commission and the Financial Conduct Authority are fit for purpose, and that my constituents get the justice that they deserve after the collapse of that scam, the Football Index?

Chris Philp: The Gambling Commission has revoked the licence of the Football Index's operator. The individuals have surrendered their personal licences. The matter has been referred to the Insolvency Service, which is investigating allegations of directors' misconduct. It has the power to conduct criminal investigations and criminal prosecutions, including for fraud if appropriate. On the broader question of compensation, there is no statutory basis upon which compensation can be paid to people who have lost money as a result of the collapse of a betting firm, but the investigations by the Insolvency Service are ongoing.

ATTORNEY GENERAL

The Attorney General was asked—

Spending Review 2021: Law Officers' Departments

1. **Scott Benton** (Blackpool South) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications of the Spending Review 2021 for the Law Officers' departments. [904910]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. May I begin by congratulating the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) on her new role? She is familiar with the position of shadow Attorney General. I look forward to working with her in the future. The Government committed to improving performance across the criminal justice system in the spending review. For example, funding for the Crown Prosecution Service will increase by more than £80 million a year by 2025, which will be used to drive improvements in the prosecution of rape cases and to help to tackle the court backlog.

Scott Benton: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her answer. What assessment has she made of the way in which that funding will support the police uplift programme, which will in turn help to deliver safer streets in towns such as Blackpool?

The Attorney General: The Government will not rest until we have improved public safety. The recruitment of 20,000 new police officers will cut crime and get criminals off our streets. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that there are more than 300 new police officers in Lancashire, his own region, all working to keep our community safe. Of course, the success of those extra police officers will depend on corresponding increases throughout our criminal justice system, so that we have enough resources to deal with the increased workload created. That is why I am pleased that the CPS has recruited more than 300 more prosecutors since 2019, thanks to the Government's funding.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome the shadow Attorney General, Emily Thornberry?

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and happy new year. It remains to be seen whether the funding allocated is sufficient to tackle the record backlog in court cases facing our country, but may I ask a specific question about one particular aspect of the backlog? This week, magistrates across the country will resume hearing the backlog of cases relating to breaches of covid restrictions over the last two years. Whatever we may think of that process, we know that those magistrates will be put in an impossible position if the laws that the Government are asking them to enforce are not applied equally to individuals working for the Government themselves. Will the Attorney General guarantee that, if Sue Gray concludes that covid restrictions were broken by individuals in Downing Street, there will be no barrier to those individuals facing the same legal consequences as everybody else?

The Attorney General: The right hon. Lady makes it clear that she is more interested in scoring political points, frankly, than dealing with the court backlog. When it comes to the primary issue of the court backlog, I am very pleased to see that in the magistrates courts, where, let us be clear, the vast majority of criminal matters are dealt with, we are now seeing a fall in caseloads, going back to pre-pandemic levels. On the question that she actually asked, the process is being led appropriately by Sue Gray. That is the right response. Of course, all recommendations made by that independent process will be considered in the right way.

Strength of the Union

2. **Rob Roberts** (Delyn) (Ind): What recent steps her Department has taken to help strengthen the Union. [904912]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): As the Attorney General for England and Wales, I have the Union at the heart of my work. I am pleased that, for example, CPS Wales performs very well: a recent inspectorate report concluded that the Wales CPS area has the highest magistrates court conviction rate across England and Wales. I take this opportunity to thank all our prosecutors based in Wales for their excellent work.

Rob Roberts: Over the past 18 months, my inbox has been full of people who are frustrated and confused by the differences between the England and Wales covid rules, my constituency being close to the border. As part of the devolution settlement, under the Wales Acts, there is provision for devolution to be suspended temporarily during times of national crisis in order for decisions to be made by Westminster for the whole of the United Kingdom. Will the Attorney General confirm whether she gave any advice to the Government along those lines? If not, what would a national crisis that would trigger such a clause be?

The Attorney General: We must respect the arrangements set out in each of the devolution settlements, but I agree with one aspect of the hon. Gentleman's question, which is that sometimes the rules of other Administrations can be confusing. This week, for example, under Welsh Government guidance it is okay to go to the pub, but

not to the office. The vaccine roll-out and the immense financial support provided by the UK Government are two outstanding examples of what can be achieved when we work together as one United Kingdom, co-operating for the good of the Union.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): A happy new year to you, Mr Speaker. A key aspect of the Union of which the right hon. and learned Lady is so fond is Scotland's separate and distinct legal system. Does she agree that any actions taken by the UK Government on legal human rights remedies must continue to respect that, and that any attempt by Westminster to alter those protections against the will of the devolved Administrations would be contrary to the devolution settlement and yet another example of this Tory Government helping—thanks very much—rather than hindering the cause of Scottish independence?

The Attorney General: The Law Officers are always concerned about any legislation promoted by the Scottish Parliament and Government that falls outside legislative competence. That is why I was pleased that the Supreme Court agreed with the Government earlier this year on the Bills proposed by the Scottish Government on the UN convention on the rights of the child and on local self-government. Ultimately, we are a United Kingdom. The people of Scotland have voted to remain as part of that United Kingdom, and I only wish that the hon. Lady and her party would respect that will of the people.

Violence against Women and Girls/Hate Crimes: Successful Prosecutions

5. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What steps she has taken to increase the number of successful prosecutions relating to (a) violence against women and girls and (b) hate crimes. [904918][R]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): This Government take tackling domestic abuse and hate crime extremely seriously, as shown by the introduction of the landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021 and our commitment to publishing a new hate crime strategy later this year. The CPS is working hard to deliver justice and to protect the public, and it has recently published an ambitious 12-month domestic abuse programme to help narrow the disparity between reporting and criminal justice outcomes.

Matt Western: Clearly not that seriously, certainly in Warwickshire; according to the CPS data, Warwickshire has the lowest conviction rate—47% conviction against prosecution—at 1.3%. Dame Vera Baird, the Victims' Commissioner, criticised that as the “effective decriminalisation of rape”. She is right, is she not?

The Attorney General: No, she is not right. We understand, of course, that we need to do better when it comes to charging rape and to RASSO—rape and serious sexual offences—outcomes. The Director of Public Prosecutions accepts that and I accept that. However, we must be fair about where the problem is, so that we can be frank about the solutions. About 10% of police referrals make it to the CPS and, in the most recent data, we see a slight increase—nationally—in the CPS

charging rate when it comes to rape, so there are some early signs of improvement. Above all, we have a great commitment by the CPS and criminal justice partners to improve the situation. The rape review was published last year, and we have seen the RASSO 2025 strategy. Innovative processes around Operation Soteria and Operation Bluestone are changing the way police and prosecutors work to better tackle rape and serious sexual offences, so that victims are better supported through the process.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is important that the CPS and her Department invest in ensuring that we have the best-quality prosecutors for rape and serious sexual offences, as well as the manpower and the technology to deal with delays in disclosure, which is of particular relevance in these cases; but, equally, that we need a whole-systems approach to avoid the very considerable level of attrition that comes before, as she rightly observes, cases ever get to the charging stage? That means co-operation, above all, with the police at early stages of the investigation.

The Attorney General: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he puts his finger on the problem. That is why the additional funding that the CPS received last year will partially be dedicated to improving its resources and firepower in dealing with RASSO. We will see a bolstering of specialist RASSO units. A hundred new prosecutors have already been trained in RASSO within the CPS, and within the next three months 70 experienced staff will be appointed into RASSO posts in the pathfinder areas.

I highlight the fact that Operation Soteria and Operation Bluestone in Avon and Somerset are being rolled out more widely throughout the CPS areas. They are pioneering better working between police officer and prosecutor, earlier investigative advice and greater support for victims to turn around the decline when it comes to victims' withdrawal from the process; that is critical to the success of a prosecution.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for that response. Not only is there clearly a need for successful prosecutions, but women—ladies—and girls feel particularly vulnerable and fearful in society today. What is being done across the UK to ease, protect and restore confidence among ladies and ensure that they feel safe on the streets of this country?

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that question. He is absolutely right, and that is why we have rolled out an increased number of independent sexual violence advisers. That is why we are rolling out a victims code, because complainants—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is a supplementary to the original question. Normally it is taken by the same person who answered the first question. I believe in job sharing, but this is taking it a little bit too far.

The Attorney General: I apologise, Mr Speaker. I wanted the Chamber to enjoy the oratory and eloquence of my hon. Friend, but we will be denied that for a few moments longer.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is right, but I want to emphasise the commitment to fighting violence against women and girls that this Government have not only talked about, but demonstrated through actions. Not only have we introduced new offences—for stalking, coercive and controlling behaviour, revenge porn and upskirting—but, as announced this week, we are making a new criminal offence of non-consensual photographing of breastfeeding women in public, and we have provided support on domestic abuse through our landmark Domestic Abuse Act 2021. This Government have pioneered a plethora of historic changes to show that we support women and girls and to make Britain a safer place for them.

Nationality and Borders Bill: Compatibility with International Law

6. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the compatibility of the Nationality and Borders Bill with international law. [904919]

The Attorney General (Suella Braverman): To be clear, the UK prides itself on its leadership within the international system and the fact that it discharges its international obligations in good faith. The Nationality and Borders Bill brings in vital changes to enable this Government, and our immigration and Border Force operatives, to stop the illegal and dangerous trafficking of illegal migrants. I encourage everybody in this Chamber to get behind this vital Bill and support it.

Gavin Newlands: Happy new year, Mr Speaker. The Attorney General may well pride herself on international leadership, but does she therefore agree with the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who recently corrected the Home Secretary's claim that British citizenship is a privilege, not a right, and pointed out:

"Having a nationality is not a privilege—it's a human right" that is protected by UN treaties to which the UK is a party and which the UK is obliged to protect?

The Attorney General: What is clear is that we need to take tangible action to deal with the problem of illegal migrants crossing our channel and dangerous traffickers exploiting some of the most vulnerable people in the world, while we also need to fix our broken asylum system. That is why the Nationality and Borders Bill addresses some of these very important issues through tangible proposals. The Home Office will continue to evaluate and test a range of safe and legal options for stopping small boats, and I support that activity.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the Bill helps protect our fight against human trafficking? It will be very interesting to see what the Lords sends back to us, but will the Government continue to commit themselves to ending this evil trade?

The Attorney General: There are no two ways about it, and I am proud to say to my hon. Friend that I really support this Government's attempts to end this evil trade, as he puts it. It is immoral that the criminal people traffickers are taking advantage of people and putting their lives at risk. The people making these

crossings do not have the skills or the equipment to traverse some of the busiest shipping lanes in the world safely, and it is of fundamental importance that the Government disrupt this business model and make it untenable.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Over the Christmas holidays, I read “The Lightless Sky”, the account by Gulwali Passarlay of his journey as a child refugee from Afghanistan to the UK. After reading that book, I would ask the Minister—and I recommend that she reads it, too—whether she accepts that human traffickers only exist because of the absence of the safe and legal routes that this Government continue to deny to those who are in desperate need and fleeing for their lives?

The Attorney General: We are subject to international obligations that make it clear that, if people have legitimate claims for asylum, there are safe and legal routes through which they may pursue those. To get on an illegally manned vessel and to try to break through our borders illegitimately is dangerous, immoral and unlawful.

Criminal Justice System: Disclosure between Parties

7. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to improve working practices on disclosure between all parties in the criminal justice system.

[904920]

The Solicitor General (Alex Chalk): Effective disclosure is a vital part of the criminal justice process, and it is inseparable from the right to a fair trial. The Attorney General is now undertaking the first annual review of the disclosure guidelines to ensure that this complex area is continually monitored and that issues that can have such profound implications for securing justice for victims are identified and resolved.

Rob Butler: I entirely agree with the Solicitor General that providing defendants with full disclosure of the evidence against them is extremely important, but it is also vital to ensure that police are not taken away from their frontline duties by overly bureaucratic requirements. Currently, for example, local officers in Aylesbury have to spend many hours redacting video evidence they send to the CPS before a charging decision is made just in case it is eventually shared with the defence. What can be done to reduce this burden so that police can be where they are most needed, which is on the streets?

The Solicitor General: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for once again raising a really powerful point. In my discussions with police officers up and down the country, this issue of redaction has arisen again and again, and he is right that this is creating a serious administrative burden that absorbs resources that could profitably be deployed elsewhere. That is why I can

assure him that this issue is receiving very close and current attention, and I expect to say more on that shortly.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): While the digital data extraction forms that were imposed on survivors of rape are now, thankfully, a thing of the past, the culture that led to their introduction by the CPS and the police is, sadly, not. Could I ask the Attorney General how she is ensuring that women who come forward to report being raped receive the dignity, privacy and respect to which they are entitled?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It is incredibly important that when complainants are brave enough to make these allegations, they are not then subject to intrusive, unnecessary and disproportionate disclosure inquiries. Getting that balance right is extremely difficult. There is clear guidance in the Attorney General's guidelines, and the case of Bater-James and Sultan Mohammed is there as well, but we need to go further to make sure that correct, proportionate and fair decisions are made.

Mr Speaker: I welcome to the Dispatch Box the shadow Minister, Andy Slaughter.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. It is a pleasure to be shadowing the Solicitor General—we have missed him in Shepherd's Bush.

Last month the Court of Appeal ruled the conviction of Ziad Akle, prosecuted by the Serious Fraud Office, unsafe because there was a material failure of disclosure that significantly handicapped the defence. The court described this as a serious failure by the SFO to comply with its duty and said it was particularly regrettable given that some of the documents withheld had a clear potential to embarrass the SFO. It is difficult to imagine a more damning series of judgments on a prosecuting authority. The Attorney General, having recently expressed full confidence in the director of the SFO, has belatedly announced an inquiry, but the Attorney General superintends the SFO and her office line-manages the director, so will the Solicitor General confirm that this inquiry will be fully independent so that it can examine the Attorney General's own role in this fiasco as well as that of the SFO and the director?

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his kind welcome. That judgment was a significant one and we take it extremely seriously, but he is wrong to say that there was a delay, because the Attorney General moved very swiftly to institute a far-ranging and sweeping inquiry. That will take place, and it will take its time because we will need to consider extremely carefully what emerges from it. The SFO is an important prosecuting authority; it needs to do its job properly and fairly, and we will make sure it does exactly that.

Business of the House

10.31 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 10 January will include:

MONDAY 10 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill, followed by a debate on motions to approve the charter for budget responsibility: Autumn 2021 update and the welfare cap as specified in the autumn Budget.

TUESDAY 11 JANUARY—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 12 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill, followed by motions to approve a money resolution and a ways and means resolution relating to the Glue Traps (Offences) Bill.

THURSDAY 13 JANUARY—General debate on the effectiveness of the Government's education catch-up and mental health recovery programmes, followed by a general debate on the report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 14 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Splendid.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The provisional business for the week commencing 17 January will include:

MONDAY 17—Remaining stages of the Elections Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business—and it was lovely to hear the dulcet tones of the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on the subject of private Members' Bills. First, I would like to wish everyone a happy new year, and I hope that everybody had a well-deserved break over the recess.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister said not once but twice that the warm home discount is £140 pounds per week. I checked, and it is actually £140 per year. There is quite a significant difference there, so will the Leader of the House ask the Prime Minister to correct the record or, better yet, cut the VAT on energy bills—something that we on the Opposition side of the House, and now some of his own Back Benchers, are calling for? That would help with the soaring energy bills for working families.

Talking of working families and concerns about their bills, perhaps the Leader of the House is more socialist than he has hitherto let on, given that, according to the *Financial Times*, he is now asking his own Government to scrap the national insurance tax rise, which is something that we have been calling for since it was announced. I wonder whether he is about to cross the Floor, because there is space. [*Interruption.*] There is some space; I am happy for us to swap sides completely if that is what he would like.

I have asked the Leader of the House numerous times for the location of the Online Safety Bill. I see that it appears in the Backbench business, but last year the Prime Minister said that it would have completed all

stages by Christmas; then it was just Second Reading; and then it was just a vague commitment that it would happen at some point during the Session. The pre-legislative scrutiny Committee has reported, yet nothing is forthcoming. Could the Leader of the House please confirm when the Bill will be brought forward?

As the right hon. Gentleman will be aware, over four years ago his Government promised a crucial anti-corruption and anti-tax-avoidance measure, with a public register of beneficial ownership of overseas legal entities, yet the Government have dithered and delayed. Could he tell us which black hole in the Treasury the Bill has fallen into?

Before Christmas, the Home Secretary published a written statement on the Home Office's record of delivery for 2021. I have read the statement, and there did not seem to be any mention of the fact that under this Tory Government there are 10,000 fewer police officers than in 2010, that a woman is killed every three days in this country, that less than 1.5% of all reported rapes are prosecuted, or that prosecutions overall have plummeted. Tens of thousands more criminals are getting away with their crimes under this Tory Government. Recorded violent crime is up, and antisocial behaviour is up.

In the Home Secretary's statement, there were hollow words too on Windrush, as there has been no compensation for 95% of the victims. Some have died without ever seeing justice, including my own constituent Stanley. His cousin Trevor is still with us, and he is still waiting for compensation. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to do the decent thing by coming to the House and correcting the record? This Government appear to be soft on crime and soft on the causes of crime.

It is not just the Home Office that is failing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) has found that the Ministry of Defence has wasted at least £13 billion of taxpayers' money over the last decade. The current Defence Secretary has presided over £4 billion of that wasted money. The Public Accounts Committee concluded last year:

"The Department's system for delivering major equipment capabilities is broken and is repeatedly wasting taxpayers' money".

A staggering £64 million has been wasted on admin errors since 2010, including nearly £33 million in fines from the Treasury for poor accountancy practices. This Government clearly have no problem wasting taxpayers' money and failing British troops. Without this careless wastage, funding could have been available to strengthen the UK's armed forces, and the cuts forced by financial pressures to troops, planes, ships and equipment might not have happened. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Defence Secretary to come to this House and explain why his Department wastes so much public money?

So this year, for their new year's resolution, it is time for this Government finally to put the people of this country above their own self-interests, to serve and protect the people of this country, and to stop wasting taxpayers' hard-earned money, because all we have now is a Government who have lost their grip. It is working people who are paying the price, and they deserve better.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady's seasonal wishes for a happy new year did not seem to last very long, but may I perhaps be more good natured and wish

[*Mr Rees-Mogg*]

people not only a happy new year but a happy feast of Epiphany, which is an important day in our Christmas celebrations?

The hon. Lady thinks that I might be converted to her way of thinking, but that is wishful thinking. As her questions went on and on, it became clear that she was referring to taxpayers' money, which is a good Tory principle. We always call it taxpayers' money because we recognise that there is no money from anywhere else. Also, she is becoming a Eurosceptic; she has become a staunch Brexiteer. The only reason our socialist friends can advocate cutting VAT on fuel is that we have left the European Union. If we were still in the megalithic state that she used to campaign for—and that I think her constituents almost entirely voted for—we would not be able to cut VAT on fuel. I am delighted that she welcomes these flexibilities that come from Brexit. Not only do we have happy fish, having left the European Union, but we have increasingly happy socialists who realise that taking back control is a very useful thing to do.

The hon. Lady then complains—she moans and berates me—about there being no development in respect of the Online Safety Bill, when I have just announced a debate. This may have passed her by, because she quite likes to work remotely sometimes, but the amazing thing about debates in this House is that they are responded to by a Government Minister, so when we have a debate next week on the draft Online Safety Bill, if she listens carefully and bates her breath, she will be able to hear the views of Her Majesty's Government on that Bill. I am grateful to the Joint Committee for its important work.

We then come to crime. The Conservative party has always been the party of law and order. I am sure, Mr Speaker, that you do not want or need a history lesson, but it is worth bearing in mind that the Peelers—the Bobbies—were founded by a former Conservative Prime Minister in his distinguished period as Home Secretary. Sir Robert Peel was a Conservative.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): You chucked him out.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Actually, he was chucked out by the Whigs, who voted against him on an Irish coercion Bill. The hon. Gentleman is forgetting his history for once; he normally likes to burnish his historical knowledge for the erudition of the House. We have recruited more than 11,000 police officers since 2019 and are more than halfway to meeting the promise of 20,000 more by 2023. We have done a great deal to tackle violent crime: from 2019 to 2022, in the 18 areas worst affected by serious violence we have spent more than £105 million of taxpayers' money to develop 18 violence reduction units, and more than £136 million to support an enhanced police response.

If we really want to compare crime, let us look at two Mayors. The office of the Mayor of London—once a noble office held with distinction when it was graced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—is now sadly traduced as we see the record number of teenagers stabbed over the past year because of the failures of the Mayor of London, who cannot run a proper police service. When we had a Conservative Mayor of London,

homicide fell: we had safer streets in London when they were Conservative streets. Now, with the socialists in charge, not only can we not move about because the Mayor hates the motorist, but we cannot be safe because he cannot run a proper police force.

We then have the audacity: if you thought, Mr Speaker, that the Labour party now advocating Brexit so that we have the freedom to set our own tax rates showed a bit of gall, the hon. Lady talks about expenditure in the Ministry of Defence when there was a £35 billion—that is serious money—black hole when the Conservatives came into office because Labour could not get the procurement systems right. Procurement is now run by the Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who is one of the most distinguished Ministers in Her Majesty's Government.

Yes, we need new year's resolutions, and our new year's resolution is to welcome those who have now become Eurosceptics and those who have now become Conservatives and to keep on with good Conservative measures that lead to better government and the protection of the British people.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): May we have a debate in the Chamber on the establishment of local flood control centres that residents can call directly, 24/7? Yet again we have had very heavy rainfall in Staffordshire this winter, and farmers in Penkridge have advised me that the clay soil is fully saturated. Stafford residents need to have somewhere local that they can contact at any time, day or night, to help them when flooding occurs.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend—actually, my hon. kinsman—for her question. I understand the devastation that flooding can cause for individuals, families and businesses. The Environment Agency operates the helpline and I will certainly bring her question to its attention. The helpline is a 24-hour service and covers the whole of England. The Environment Agency does have local knowledge of flood and environmental risks through its staff based in 14 geographic areas, but I will make sure that both the agency and the Secretary of State know of the concerns that my hon. Friend has raised for her constituents.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I wish you, Mr Speaker, and all the staff around the estate a good and happy new year.

Yesterday, the Scottish Parliament sat in an emergency session to discuss the omicron crisis in Scotland. It was all virtual, all elected MSPs could participate and the sitting provided absolutely no risk whatsoever to the staff on the Holyrood estate.

Yesterday, this House also met for the first time after the Christmas recess. It met entirely in person in a 19th-century building with practically no social distancing measures in place. All 650 Members could attend if they wanted to and a good proportion decided to come to a packed Chamber to listen to PMQs and a prime ministerial statement. Next week, we will find out the true consequences of that and how many people were infected on their journey down to the House of Commons.

It is estimated that one in 15 people in England, and one in 20 in the whole United Kingdom, now have covid. From my very bad arithmetic and calculations, I

have come to the conclusion that some 50 MPs must now be off with covid away from the House, which means that 50 MPs cannot represent their constituents, participate in legislation going through the House, participate in the proceedings of the Glue Traps (Offences) Bill next week, question the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster or help the Leader of the House to destabilise his Prime Minister if they cannot come here.

With one simple measure, the Leader of the House could resolve all that: turn it back on. He should bring back the hybrid Parliament and proxy voting. For the sake of democracy, turn it back on. For the sake of keeping everybody on the estate safe and secure, turn it back on. For the sake of all of us being able to represent our constituents, turn it back on, turn it back on, turn it back on.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought genuinely that the needle had got stuck on the last bit of the question. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman does not like doing his job, that he wishes to enjoy himself sitting at home and that he does not want to do what Members of Parliament are expected to do, and turn up in the House of Commons to be here—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Can we just calm it down? We had enough yesterday—[*Interruption.*] No, you had your chance, Mr Wishart. That is the reply. Sometimes we have to accept the reply, even if we do not like it.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I remind the House that the SNP Government have decided to take a different route. They do not believe in trusting people to make decisions for themselves. They believe in constant perpetual lockdown which, as I understand it, the leader of the SNP has accepted did not go as well as anticipated, which sounds slightly like the comments of the Japanese Emperor at the end of the last war. What they have done in Scotland has not been a success. What we have done in the rest of the United Kingdom, in England, has worked better by trusting people. We should trust people and we should continue to trust people. People such as the hon. Gentleman should not be afraid to do the work that they have to do.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Can we have a Government review, followed by a statement, of the desirability of ending the ridiculous ritual of putting our clocks back every autumn, thereby plunging the nation into darkness and misery by mid-afternoon for a period of several months? Is there not a good case for keeping summertime in winter? It would cut the number of road accidents, cut energy use and boost tourism.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I invariably agree with my right hon. Friend, but not on this issue. As we all know, time was unified across the United Kingdom with the coming of the railways, otherwise my county of Somerset would be 10 minutes behind London. The way of doing things was to have midday when the sun is at its highest point, which always seemed to me to be a sensible principle.

I think that if we were to change, as we did in the late '60s, we would simply change back again, because we cannot make the days any longer in the winter. They simply get dark. They are either dark in the morning or dark in the early afternoon, and whichever way it is,

people will want it the other way round. Unless God is to give us more daylight, however, I think it is a problem beyond the competence of Her Majesty's Government.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I wish you, Mr Speaker, Members on both sides of the House and all the staff of the House a very happy new year. We all deserve a better go at it this year than we had last year.

I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, and within that the Backbench business for Thursday 13 January. I give him advance notice that we have preliminarily filled slots for 20 January, with a provisional debate on the Chinese Government's Uyghur tribunals, and a debate on the Committee on Standards' review of conduct of Members of Parliament sponsored by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). On 27 January, we have lined up a debate on Holocaust Memorial Day. I give advance notice that I anticipate a request for a St David's Day debate, which, if we are allocated the time, will probably occur on Thursday 3 March. May I also thank the Leader of the House for writing to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on behalf of my constituents and me, following our exchanges just before Christmas?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am very grateful also that he has filled various dates. I will pay attention to all of them, but particularly to 27 January, which I know is so important for many people across the country.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): From Belthorn to Haslingden and from Great Harwood to Oswaldtwistle, my residents in Hyndburn and Haslingden are still blighted by fly-tipping. They report it to the local council, but no action is taken. Will the Leader of the House allow for a debate in Government time on what more we can do with legislation to make sure councils are enforcing action on those who blight our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend. Fly-tipping is an absolute blight on society. It is illegal and there are penalties for it. Obviously, the primary responsibility lies with local councils. What my hon. Friend has done by highlighting the issue on the Floor of the House of Commons is to put pressure on her local council to get its act together. I hope her local newspapers will join her in campaigning to get the local council to do its job properly.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the four people who demanded racial justice with the removal of a slave owner's statue in Bristol on being vindicated of charges of public dissent? We know that the Home Office has confirmed that records exist of contact between the Home Secretary, the Crown Prosecution Service, and Avon and Somerset police on this case. What we do not know is what is in those records. Given that it stands contrary to constitutional convention for politicians to be involved in legal matters while they are going through the courts, will the Leader of the House ensure that those records are shared with the House and allow time for Parliament to scrutinise this matter further, because our constituents want answers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: One of the great glories of this nation is the jury system. It is worth bearing in mind that Magna Carta was viewed as a reconfirmation of rights, not a creation of rights. Juries must be free to come to the decisions they choose to come to on the facts that are in front of them in relation to a specific case, and on what they hear from the prosecuting counsel, the defence counsel and the judge. We should always glory in the jury system as one of the foundation stones of our liberties in this country, whether we like individual judgments or not.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Energy costs are not a luxury; they are a necessity. They cannot be avoided: we need to heat our homes. My right hon. Friend will have heard that the official Opposition are now adopting Conservative views. They believe in lower taxation and in leaving the European Union. Would it be possible for this Government to believe in Conservative views? Will the Leader of the House lay a statutory instrument next week removing VAT on energy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend knows perfectly well that that is a matter for the Chancellor and not a matter for the Leader of the House. What I would say is that Conservatives have always believed in fiscal good sense. We have always recognised that taxpayers' money must be spent wisely. There is not an unlimited pot of other money and if we wish to provide the public services the country expects then that has to be paid for somehow. There is no magic money tree. It is very easy in opposition to point at any individual tax and say that that one should be cut, because there is no overall responsibility for ensuring that things are broadly in balance or heading towards balance. The responsibility of the Government and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer is to put all taxes and all expenditure together in a way that ensures that the country is able to live within its means. That responsibility sometimes means that individual taxes have to exist even though the Opposition may call against them, because they think there is short-term political advantage in doing so.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Both of Barnsley's levelling-up bids were rejected. In answer to the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), the Leader of the House said that there is no magic money tree—which is curious, because a millionaire hereditary Tory peer received £330,000 to level up the potholes in his mansion driveway. Can we have a debate in Government time about how levelling-up funding is allocated?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Levelling-up funding is allocated to help level up. Great things are happening: £4.8 billion in the levelling-up fund is being spent to help regenerate town centres and high streets, upgrade local transport and spend money on cultural and heritage assets; £2.4 billion of taxpayers' money has been provided for 101 town deals, with a £150 million community ownership fund to protect valued community assets; and freeports are being opened up, which will be an incredibly good way of helping economic activity and helping to level up. I am sorry that not every application for funding will be successful, but I say to the hon. Lady, "If at first you don't succeed, try, try and try again."

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind good wishes for Epiphany. If he and you, Mr Speaker, wish to join us on Margate seafront on Sunday for the blessing of the seas, I am sure that you will both be most welcome.

Shortly before Christmas, the Government reaffirmed their decision to introduce legislation to ban the import of the products of trophy hunting. Next Friday, the House will debate the Hunting Trophy Import (Prohibition) Bill, a private Member's Bill with cross-party support. Will the Government consider giving that Bill their support? Alternatively, will they announce when they propose to introduce their own legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are committed to a ban on trophy hunting, which was a manifesto commitment. I will therefore ensure that my right hon. Friend's comments are passed on to the Secretary of State. I can assure him that it is Government policy to proceed with a ban.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and hon. Members across the House wrote to the Leader of the House this week to tell him how they have been affected by the lack of proxy voting or virtual participation and how they are looking for their reintroduction. This is not just a covid issue, but we can see now why it is so needed. The Leader of the House's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) just now was woeful: he suggested that people do not want to do their work. The opposite is true, as I am sure the Leader of the House knows, so can I ask him for a statement in Government time on how he intends to remedy the issue so that all Members can represent their constituents fully and equally?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer that I gave some moments ago.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): A few minutes ago, the Leader of the House referred to knife crime across London. He will be acutely aware that 30 people died in knife attacks in London last year—an all-time record. Knife crime has certainly affected my constituency profoundly, but it is not just a London phenomenon; it is a curse across the country, and has been raised across the House by Conservative and Labour MPs and those of other parties. Is it not time that the Home Secretary came to the House and gave a statement on the increase in knife crime?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a serious issue. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is in the House of Lords at the moment, which should help to give the police more powers. It includes provision to ensure that stop and search can be used effectively, and we have announced the relaxation of voluntary restrictions of stop-and-search powers under section 60 of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 in all forces across England and Wales. We are also introducing a new court order that will make it easier for officers to stop and search those convicted of knife crimes. Stop and search has continued to remove more weapons from the streets as its use increases: almost 16,000 weapons were seized and almost 79,000 criminals were arrested in the year to March 2021. It is a question of effective and

determined policing and supporting the police. The additional 11,000 officers will obviously be an important part of that, as will supporting the legislation that is going through the other place.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Further to that point, just a week ago a 15-year-old boy was stabbed in my constituency, but non-fatally. A few hours later in Hillingdon, a 15-year-old was fatally stabbed and, a few hours after that, a 16-year-old in Croydon was fatally stabbed. The problem that I and seven other London MPs in this Chamber have is that we cannot scrutinise the Mayor of London, whose responsibility knife crime in the capital is. I therefore call on the Government and the Home Secretary to take back the powers so that she is able not only to scrutinise the Metropolitan police, but to ensure that we have a proper knife crime strategy, as we did under previous Policing Ministers and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when he was Mayor of London.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. It is important that this House retains its right to hold to account people who exercise power in the land. It is surprising that with the rise in knife crime and the terrible incidents that he refers to, we are seeing at the same time a relaxation of drug laws. The two do not seem to me to go together.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I hope that the Leader of the House will join me in sending condolences to the family and many friends of my constituent Karl White, who died just before Christmas. Karl spent 32 years as a youth worker, including running the Meadows youth centre in my constituency. He was Mr Meadows—a role model, mentor and friend to hundreds, if not thousands of young people in Nottingham. Even after he retired, he was as busy as ever, volunteering for local community organisations and setting up free football sessions for local children just last summer. There could be no more fitting tribute than a debate in Government time on the urgent need to reverse cuts to youth services, which are so vital in supporting our communities.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I hope that the family will be comforted by the wonderful tribute that the hon. Lady has paid to Mr White, the 32 years of service that she mentioned and his continuing to inspire people, even in his retirement. I think it is right that Members honour their constituents and their families in this way. I suggest this may be an opportunity to seek an Adjournment debate and I hope that in that debate, the hon. Lady will expand on her moving tribute.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In North Devon, an ever-growing number of residents are unable to see a NHS dentist. Wait lists are now many years long. Although I recognise that work is going on through the Department of Health and Social Care to increase the number of home-grown dentists, that is at least five years away. Will my right hon. Friend allocate Government time to debate how we can rapidly take full advantage of Brexit to ensure that international dentists, particularly where they are plentiful, as in India, can more easily come and work here as NHS dentists in areas of severe shortfall, such as North Devon?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. In my constituency, I visited a dental practice in Peasedown St John, which has a brilliant Indian dentist providing fantastic service to the local community. The Government recognise that the registration process for some internationally qualified dental professionals can be bureaucratic and inefficient. The NHS is working with the General Dental Council on legislative proposals that will allow greater flexibility to expand on the registration options open to international applicants, including the overseas registration exam. The proposals will be subject to public consultation, and the Department is also working with NHS England to reform the NHS dental system to improve patient access and oral health and offer value for money for the NHS, and it will be designed with the profession in mind. Health Education England's "Advancing Dental Care" review programme has recently started and seeks to develop dental education and training infrastructure to produce a skilled, multi-professional oral healthcare workforce that can better support patient and population needs.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Government finally published the national disability strategy last July, but it has been met with disappointment by a number of my disabled Vauxhall constituents, and there were no practical measures or funding outlined within it. The Leader of the House will be aware that the strategy was released just before recess, so there has been no parliamentary time for it or scrutiny of it. Given its importance, will he commit in this Chamber to our having a debate on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are committed to ensuring that disabled people have the support that they need. It is worth pointing out that since 2013 we have reduced the disability employment gap by 4.9%, helping to get 1.8 million more disabled people into work. There is also extra taxpayer support of £780 million a year for special educational needs and disability education. Things are being done, and the health and disability Green Paper proposals will be detailed in the White Paper that is set to be published in mid-2022. I assure the hon. Lady that things are taking place. If she wants a debate, I suggest that she refers to the Backbench Business Committee, because there is a great deal to be said about the subject and that would help contribute to the White Paper's development.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The *Grimshy Telegraph* website currently shows an article headed, "Free NHS prescriptions 'to be axed' from April", which I believe to be misleading. My understanding is that Ministers are considering whether to charge the 60 to 65 age group for prescriptions that they get for free at the moment. Could a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to clarify what is proposed? Many of my constituents are emailing me because they are confused and worried.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. Clearly, when local journals run with such stories, they create concern among people who are most unlikely to be affected, and my hon. Friend is right to give them the reassurance that they need and expect. I encourage journals of record to be more responsible and accurate in what they produce. I

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will ensure that he gets a full answer from the Department for Health and Social Care about exactly what may be proposed.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I also wish everybody in the House a happy new year?

In Bath, our fantastic Royal United Hospital declared a critical incident over the new year—it is ongoing—due to covid and non-covid patients, staff sickness, absences and the availability of beds because of the social care crisis. The Government have clearly been asleep at the wheel. May we have a debate in Government time—not just covid statements—on the acute crisis in our hospitals to ensure that our hospital leaders are heard? Their experience at the frontline of the hospital crisis does not chime with the Prime Minister's assurance that the NHS is not overwhelmed.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I agree with the hon. Lady that the RUH does terrific work. I went to see it recently, and it is a well-managed hospital that does its best under difficult circumstances. However, I think that her charge against the Government is ill-founded. Taxpayers have provided an extra £5.4 billion to the NHS to respond to covid-19 over the next six months, which takes the total this year to £34 billion. We have also given ambulance trusts an extra £55 million, as ambulances have been one of the issues. When I visited the RUH, I was conscious that it has an issue with the number of people who ought to be released into social care being considerably higher than normal. That pressure often occurs in the winter, but the very competent management at the RUH is doing a first-class job.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): May we have a debate on the impact of NHS covid protocols on cancer sufferers? I was disturbed when a constituent got in touch to say that she needs weekly vital life-saving treatment at a hospital, but she has been told that if by any chance she comes into contact with someone who has tested positive for covid, she will not be allowed that treatment.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I always say to right hon. and hon. Members across the House that if they raise specific constituent issues at business questions, I will always take them up directly afterwards with the relevant Department. Treatment rates for cancer are now back to usual levels, and since the pandemic began more than 480,000 people have started treatment for cancer, but there is record spending of £2 billion to deal with the backlog and £8 billion over the next three years to deliver an extra 9 million checks, scans and operations for patients across the country. I reiterate my offer to take up my right hon. Friend's specific case directly.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Children with disabilities often require specialist equipment to meet their needs but, because of lengthy delays in assessments, their conditions may worsen, resulting in complex surgery or interventions that could have been prevented. In a survey carried out by the charity Newlife, 68% of families reported that their child is living without the essential equipment they need

right now. May we have a debate in Government time on the desperate situation in which disabled children find themselves because of delays in getting the equipment they need right now?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and I have already set out what the Government have been doing in our disability strategy. I think it is better to deal with the individual cases, which we as MPs are well positioned to take up when they come to our attention. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), I am always happy to try to facilitate that. Sometimes citing the headline figures from surveys is not particularly illuminating.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): Since coming to this House two years ago I have raised on numerous occasions my concerns about the level of borrowing by Warrington Borough Council. The Labour council now has debts of about £1.6 billion. Today there are reports in the national newspapers that Together Energy will be the 26th energy company to enter administration. That is particularly relevant to people in Warrington because £52 million of public money has been invested in that loss-making company by the borough council, and there would potentially be a catastrophic impact on local services were the company to enter administration. Can we have a debate in Government time on how councils are using public money to invest in private companies? I again urge the Government to launch an inquiry into this gambling by local councillors.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this question. Just before the 2017 general election I was on the Treasury Committee, and I lobbied the then Chairman for an inquiry into exactly this subject. Councils are not there to speculate; they are there to run public services and to handle taxpayers' money well. I have a great quibble about using the word "investment" for local government expenditure, because actually it is spending taxpayers' money. Local government should not be talking about investing; it should recognise that it is using other people's money and therefore has a great fiduciary duty to spend it wisely. Councils that do not spend it wisely should be held to account both by Members of Parliament and, as they ultimately will be, by their electors.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): During yesterday's covid statement the Prime Minister made certain assertions, in response to the shadow First Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), about the UK Government's support for the domestic diagnostics industry that were patently untrue. In my Adjournment debate last night, the Paymaster General failed to answer any of my questions other than to demonstrate his enthusiasm for profiteering. The UK diagnostics industry only wants a level playing field. That is all it is asking for. Will the Government bring forward a debate in their time to set out in detail the support they claim to be giving to the domestic diagnostics industry?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The purpose of business questions is to ensure that Members have the opportunity to raise the issues they wish to raise for debate. The hon. Gentleman tells me he has had the chance to question the Prime

Minister and the Paymaster General on exactly this question. The fact he does not like the answers does not mean that the answers have not been given and that satisfactory parliamentary time has not been spent on the issue.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I am working hard with key partners in Wolverhampton to secure all the funding for the Wolverhampton city learning quarter. We still need some of that funding to come through, but we are delighted with what we have received so far. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate to ensure that all Wolverhampton children have the right start in life by setting up the city learning quarter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I commend my hon. Friend for the brilliant work he is doing on behalf of his constituents in Wolverhampton. As I understand it, the city learning quarter is a most impressive project that supports the council's objective to boost adult learning in the area with new facilities. The Government appreciate the importance of adult education to improving people's life chances, so this project supports our wider aims to boost adult learning and reskilling, which we are doing through the adult education budget, the skills bootcamps and free level 3 courses for jobs, which are funded by the new national skills fund. We are spending taxpayers' money on education across the country to give every child the best start in life, and we are targeting support at the most disadvantaged so that no one is left behind.

My hon. Friend asks when the money will come, and he is right to ask that question. I will make sure he gets an answer from the Department for Education on when the cheque will clear.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituents and many others have been incorrectly subjected to large fines, have incurred debt and are being chased by bailiffs for alleged non-payment of the toll at our Tyne tunnel since it changed to an open-road system. Last year I wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport and was advised that these problems had nothing at all to do with the Government, yet some of these issues relate to byelaws that can only be changed by statutory instruments. Will the Leader of the House please explain if, as the Secretary of State indicated, the Government are no longer responsible for changing this legislation, who is?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I have enormous sympathy on the issue that she is raising. There is nothing more vexatious for our constituents than being fined by officious bodies for doing things that are perfectly normal to do, whether they are private road or private parking companies, who seem to specialise in this, or people chasing for tolls. She is quite right to stand up on behalf of her constituents on this. It would be most helpful if she would set out to me in writing precisely what byelaws need changing and then I can take that up with the relevant Department.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Can we have an early debate on the operation—or should I say the lack of operation?—of the vaccine damage payments scheme? In the year in which it has been operating, not a single payment has been made in respect of any victim of covid-19 vaccine. We know from recent inquests and

from other detailed material from professors at Bristol University of the link between damage caused by vaccines and the need for compensation for those who are in the unfortunate minority of having so suffered. Is that not fundamental to improving vaccine confidence?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There should be huge vaccine confidence. What has happened with the vaccine programme and the booster programme has meant that this country has been able to get back to normal faster than almost any other country in the world. My hon. Friend and I would particularly note that it is thanks to the fact that we are not in the European Union that we were able to move so quickly. I encourage him to indicate his own confidence in the vaccine and support the vaccine roll-out, because that really has been essential to our economic reopening, to the health of the nation, and to the ability of the NHS to cope with covid. Of course everything else will be looked at in due course, but the success of the programme is fundamental.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to everybody across the House.

Before Christmas, Virgin Care, which had contracts to deliver a number of NHS services, was taken over by a private equity firm called Twenty20 Capital. Yet we know little about the company's priorities or strategic approach to delivering services other than the statement on its website that says that it looks for

"significant returns in 2-5 years."

That will sound alarm bells for people working for it. What is more, the Health and Care Bill will allow integrated care boards to delegate functions, and even devolved budgets, to non-statutory bodies that could include such private equity firms. This has huge implications for patients and staff. So will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on the impact of the Government's NHS privatisation agenda, and will he ask the Prime Minister to come to this House and be straight with people in England by explaining to them that he is in fact dismantling the national health service as a public service and handing it gift-wrapped to big business? [*Interruption.*]

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am afraid the heckle from the back answered the question.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): Last June, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood) and I submitted a bid to the levelling-up fund to upgrade the Penistone line. This would result in much-needed improvements in train services between Huddersfield and Sheffield and double the number of trains serving stations in my constituency such as Penistone, Dodworth and Chapeltown. My constituents desperately need these improvements to travel to work, leisure and college, so will my right hon. Friend provide an update as to when we might hear whether our bid has been successful?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for the terrific effort she is making in supporting levelling up and in backing her constituency. I understand from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities that a letter detailing the outcome of Kirklees Council's application to upgrade the Penistone line was sent to the council in October,

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and I will therefore ask my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to speak to my hon. Friend. I must warn Members that not every levelling-up fund application is successful, but I should also say, as I said to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), do keep on persevering.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Like many Members, perhaps even including the Leader of the House, I have many constituents who have been hit by increasing delays in, for instance, the commencement of state pension payments and the processing of applications to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, as well as by various Home Office delays. New figures suggest that the reason is, in large part at least, the slashing of more than 6,000 civil service jobs in the last decade while the proportion of civil servants in the highest grades has nearly doubled. May we have a debate on better support for our overstretched civil service operating at the coalface?

Mr Rees-Mogg: During these sessions I normally find myself trying to be as helpful as I can to the hon. Gentleman, but I am afraid I have a slightly different view of why things have not been working. I think that many of those delays have been caused by problems with working from home, which is why it is so important for those who need to go into the office to do so.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Mayor of London is proposing to sell Notting Hill police station to the highest bidder, which will mean that there is no physical police presence in the north of my borough. I have been working with my council and with local community groups, including the Kensington Society, to put together a bid for community uses, which could include a police station. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is completely wrong that the Mayor of London is selling a police station in London—in north Kensington—and that if he persists in this wrong action, he should prioritise the bid from a community group?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think that a sentence involving the Mayor of London and wrong action is almost by definition tautologous, as his failures are manifest and emerge in these sessions week after week, particularly in relation to crime. It seems strange that at a time when crime is rising, police stations are still being sold off. I encourage my hon. Friend to persist in her advocacy of an alternative consortium which may be able to keep space for the police, and I also reiterate the points that I made about our right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. When he was Mayor of London, crime fell by 23%. That was a triumph of leadership, and London needs better leadership.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I do not know whether the Leader of the House has had a chance yet to read today's edition of the *New Musical Express*, but it contains a long article setting out the continuing problems—12 months after Brexit—for touring artists wanting to work across the European Union visa-free and without unnecessary costs and bureaucracy. In that article, the chief executive officer of the Featured Artists Coalition said:

“To get all of this information we’ve had to get it from multiple sources, but none of them were the government.”

Now that the major obstacle is out of the way with Lord Frost's welcome departure, may we have a debate about focusing on solving this problem once and for all?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I must disagree with the hon. Gentleman about my noble Friend Lord Frost, a most distinguished figure and servant of this Government and of the nation.

The hon. Gentleman knows that these matters are being discussed between Her Majesty's Government and individual member states of the European Union, which have responsibility for them. As I think he acknowledges, considerable progress has been made, with a number of countries being very willing to have reciprocal arrangements. May I confess, however, that I have failed, in that I have not read the *New Musical Express* this morning or, indeed, on any morning that I can recall?

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The Environment Agency is now formally investigating alleged criminal activity at Walleys Quarry landfill in my constituency. It is ultimately owned by Red Industries, a company controlled by Mr Adam Share, who in the past has been convicted and sent to jail for bugging the Environment Agency over another landfill. I also note the recent media reports about illegal fly-tipping—which was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe)—and rogue waste dealers. One journalist had successfully registered his dead goldfish as a waste dealer with the Environment Agency. May we please have a debate on the regulation of, and the criminality within, Britain's waste industry?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those appalling and absurd crimes. How could somebody register a goldfish as a waste dealer? The Government are preparing significant reforms to continue to increase the pressure on illegal waste operators. Our planned electronic waste tracking reforms will make it harder to misidentify waste or dispose of it unsuitably. Our planned changes to the carriers, brokers and dealers licensing regime will improve licensing and make it harder still for rogue operators to escape detection, but I suppose it is to some extent reassuring to my hon. Friend, and to me, that the gentleman he referred to has been found guilty, convicted and sent to jail. Sometimes the law does take its course, in all its majesty.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Some 8.5 million people entered this year in debt. With one in six people struggling to pay bills, escalating food, fuel and housing costs mean that the situation is getting more and more acute. In York, we have launched a poverty truth commission to start addressing the issues, but we know that a lot of the solutions lie in this House, so can we have an urgent debate about the impact of poverty and the solutions that need to be brought forward urgently?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I wonder if I may divide the question into two parts—one on providing support for people in debt, and the other on what the Government and taxpayers are doing to support people in poverty—because I think the two questions, though related, are not identical. Some people get into a spiral of debt for which there are very good organisations in all our constituencies that do amazing work. We should all, as individual MPs, try

to point our constituents in the right direction to get help. Often interest rates and repayments can be significantly reduced simply by entering into a conversation with the lenders.

With regard to what the Government have been doing on poverty, the Government are aware of the difficulties, and there is £4.2 billion of support available. Raising the national living wage to £9.50 next year will help. Giving nearly 2 million families an extra £1,000 a year through the cut to the universal credit taper and the increase to work allowances will also be important. Both of those things will help work to pay, and work is unquestionably the best way out of poverty. There are a number of other schemes, but time is pressing, so unless I get another question on the matter I will not go into them all.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware of research that was published on 23 December in *The BMJ*, just after we all voted for plan B, that suggests that a triple dose of the vaccine, three months after the third dose, offers pretty much zero protection against transmission of the Omicron variant. I hope that he agrees that it would be unthinkable to insist that NHS workers should have a jab every three months by law. If that research is accepted by the Government, will he make time for this House to repeal the compulsory vaccination of health workers before it comes into effect on 1 April, thereby saving the NHS tens of thousands of staff and restoring the principle that, in this country at least, vaccination is the free choice of a free people?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My reading material was not the *NME* nor *The BMJ*. If somebody asks me about *The Spectator* I may be able to give a more positive answer. My hon. Friend raises a very difficult issue. We are a free country, and it is important that we maintain essential liberties. Enforced medication has been extraordinarily rare, though there were examples of compulsory smallpox vaccination in the 19th century. The Government are absolutely of the view—this view is held much more broadly than simply by members of Her Majesty's Government—that vaccination is our best defence against covid. Vaccination reduces the likelihood of infection and therefore helps to break chains of transmission, and is safe and effective. Any increase in immunity of workers from vaccination will reduce the risk of harm to patients and service users, as well as to our valuable health and social care workforce. Therefore, I am sorry to disappoint my hon. Friend, but Her Majesty's Government do not agree that the regulations on the vaccination of health and care workers should be revoked.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Happy Epiphany, Mr Speaker, and I hope that the Leader of the House has many epiphanies. May we have a debate on drug and alcohol services in the country, partly so that we may celebrate the amazing work that is done by the clinicians in those services, often in difficult circumstances, partly so that we may encourage more people to take up that profession, because there is a massive shortage of clinicians across the whole country, and partly, perhaps more importantly—because I suspect every single one of us knows someone who might have been affected by such services—to celebrate those extraordinary people

who might have had a problem with drug or alcohol but absolutely have managed to turn their lives around? Should we not celebrate them?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In a spirit of good will on Epiphany, may I say how much I agree with the hon. Gentleman? I cannot promise a debate, but we should certainly celebrate people who either through their own actions recover from a dependency or help others to recover. I am a great believer that people should have a second chance, a third chance and a fourth chance, and that everything that can be done by parts of the state or voluntary bodies to help that is worth celebrating. I am glad to see that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee is still in his place, and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has asked once and been successful so, if we are keeping to the biblical theme:

“Ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find”.

Mark Eastwood (Dewsbury) (Con): Since being elected, I have met a large number of parents and community organisations, including the West Yorkshire ADHD Support Group, asking for my help to improve special educational needs provision in our schools. Following those discussions and after much research, it is apparent that some schools offer far better SEN provision than others. That disparity should not exist. I therefore ask my right hon. Friend for a debate on SEN provision in our education system to ensure that all children, regardless of need, are provided with the same opportunities in life?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This is so important—I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The recent spending review makes available £2.6 billion of new funding across the next three years for new school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities. That represents a transformational expenditure of taxpayers' money in new high-needs provision and it will help to deliver tens of thousands of new places. What my hon. Friend is asking for is happening, but I will ensure that his comments are passed on to my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): We have heard a lot this morning about what the Leader of the House does not read, but I hope that he is reading the Health and Social Care Committee report on the challenges facing the NHS workforce, which has just been published. This week more than ever, we recognise the challenges that the NHS and social care workforces are facing with the omicron surge, the backlog in treatment and already being exhausted. Is this not an ideal opportunity for the Government to take up my idea of an NHS and social care covenant, just as we have for the armed forces and for the police, to recognise society's responsibilities and obligations to that important part of our social infrastructure in this country?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is an opportunity—I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for making her point—to thank people working in the health service and social care for the work that they do, in particular in winter when it is very difficult. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) raised that in relation to the RUH in my constituency but, if we went around this Chamber, every single Member could pay tribute to their local hospitals and GP surgeries, and to those who work above and beyond

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

the call of duty, in particular at this time of year. I note—for the benefit of the *Hansard* reporters, who cannot see this—that even you, Mr Speaker, are nodding. You ran a great campaign for your own local hospital, which was ultimately successful. What the right hon. Lady says is important, that we recognise the contribution made, but whether a covenant is the answer we will need to discuss more. Her idea is certainly one that is worth considering.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): May we have a debate on the importance of the A5 to the UK? The road runs from London to Wales and is so important, in particular in joining the east and west midlands. It is blighted by narrowings and, most importantly, one of the most bashed bridges in Britain, right by Hinckley where I am. A decision point on RIS3—the third road investment strategy—is coming in March. Will it be possible to have a debate before then to say how important this House feels the A5 is?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Yes, of course—that is not a promise of a debate—but am I not right in thinking that the A5 goes along one of the old Roman roads? Therefore, it has been important to our history for generation upon generation. Where I think my hon. Friend is saying something of the greatest relevance is that we need to consider our roads as a United Kingdom, because they do not conveniently stop when they get to the boundary between counties or even the constituent parts of our great kingdom. He is right to call for a debate, but I suggest that on a specific road, even one as important and as ancient as the A5, that is probably most suitable for an Adjournment debate.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I know that the Leader of the House likes nothing more than to elicit a response from a Minister than an hon. Member has previously failed to elicit, so he will be alarmed to know that yesterday both my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) and I asked the Secretary of State for International Trade how, when and why she would seek to deploy the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 to ride roughshod over devolution, but she refused to answer. Will he get an answer for us, please?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I can give an answer very directly: Her Majesty's Government have no intention of riding roughshod over the devolved settlement.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): When I met the National Deaf Children's Society recently, it outlined the challenges that many deaf children have had to deal with during the pandemic. It is those children, as well as Rose Ayling-Ellis, who won "Strictly Come Dancing" last month, who have inspired me to learn British Sign Language as my new year's resolution. Would the Leader of the House like to join me, and if not—because time probably does not allow—what is his new year's resolution?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am afraid I have never been very good at learning languages—even English I only just about manage to get by with. [Interruption.] No, I am afraid my Latin is absolutely hopeless. I therefore think that my new year's resolution, in support of my hon. Friend, should be to campaign more in Westminster for

the local elections that are coming up in May, because the council that she used to lead with such distinction is one of the great Conservative councils in the country. It keeps the council tax down; it keeps good services running; it is a model of its kind. We even managed to hold it in 1990, and I can assure her that I have forgiven the council for the 20 mph speed limits.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House for a debate on the merger of councils and local democracy? I am sure he would be concerned if there was suddenly an announcement that Somerset and Bristol were to merge. In Warwickshire, the Conservative-controlled county council is arguing for a unitary authority. Meanwhile, we have Stratford-on-Avon and Warwick District Councils voting to merge themselves, albeit without any public vote. Surely we should be putting these sorts of decisions to the people, as I am sure my example earlier would have demonstrated to him.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman knows my weaknesses only too well, because this dreadful idea was tried with the county of Avon, which was abolished, I am glad to say, to general rejoicing in 1996. They have sort of half-tried it again with the west of England combined authority, which had no support beyond bureaucrats in my area—none of the people of North East Somerset wanted it—so I have a great deal of sympathy with what he is asking for. However, any change in council status usually requires a statutory instrument; therefore, there are ways of ensuring that it is discussed.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Statues and monuments located in the public realm are an important part of our cultural heritage. May we have a statement from the Leader of the House and the relevant Departments about the ongoing presence of these statues and monuments: that their reappraisal or removal needs to be determined by lawful means, not by mob rule? If the Government do not make this clear, those monuments that some people do not like are now, as a result of the recent court case in Bristol, at greater risk of defacement, destruction or removal.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I do not think the result in Bristol does do that, because the decision does not set a precedent. It was a case decided by a jury on the facts before them. I shall therefore not be going out of here immediately afterwards and drawing a moustache on the statue of Oliver Cromwell outside, much though I am opposed to regicides in principle and think that they deserve to be removed from pedestals broadly speaking. I think we should recognise our history even when the figures in that history are not ones that we individually admire. Our island story is a complex one, and there are varieties in all people of good intentions and less pure intentions. My hon. Friend is right that we should protect monuments and that they should be removed only by a due process, but one of our greatest monuments is the jury system, which is the great, sublime protector of our liberties.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thanks to funding from the Mayor of London, Hounslow council will be buying over 500 homes and bringing them into council ownership, including a number of former council homes sold under right to buy. These

will provide secure, affordable homes to over 500 families in housing need, with 25 going to young care leavers and 20 going to Afghan refugees to whom this country owes a debt. Will the Leader of the House congratulate the Mayor of London and the London Borough of Hounslow, and find time for a debate on the importance of public investment in truly affordable and secure housing?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, I would say that the Mayor of London has no money; it is taxpayers' money. The hon. Lady needs the conversion that has worked on the shadow Leader of the House. It is of course important to have affordable housing. The Government are increasing the supply of housing, with £10 billion being spent on housing supply since the start of this Parliament, which will unlock over 1 million homes, including £300 million of locally led grant funding to unlock small brownfield sites and improve communities, and with £12 billion of expenditure on affordable housing from 2021. These things are happening and they are led by central Government, but it is taxpayers' money.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): Mr Speaker, my question has been asked, so I was actually going to duck out, but I thought I would just, you know, ask it anyway. Again, as somebody who has concerns about this country's heritage, I, too, was disturbed by this judgment. I think the key point is that it is fair enough to feel strongly about that particular statue, but there are legal and democratic processes one can engage with to make the case that that statue should be taken down. This really, from what I can see, was lawlessness, and I think it could set a dangerous precedent. So will my right hon. Friend assure me that the Government will consider whether any changes can be made to protect our heritage, and that if so, that they are made, because I think he would have seen in the media today that there is great concern and I do not think it is all misplaced?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am going to come back to the jury system in, I hope, giving some reassurance to my hon. Friend, because it is an ancient right and a great protector of freedom. That does not mean that every decision made by every jury is one that is welcomed by some people in some circumstances, but it is such an important protector of our liberties that we must take the rough with the smooth.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): On 18 March, my private Member's Bill on statutory paid bereavement leave for all who lose a close family member will be before this House. It builds on the excellent Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which came into effect in 2020. Estimates show that grief costs the UK economy £23 billion per year and the Treasury £8 billion in lost revenues. Indeed, without the space to grieve, some drop out of the workforce altogether. A statutory paid right for all workers to have the time to grieve will produce a more productive and resilient workforce with a greater sense of wellbeing. So will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out whether he will support my Bill for statutory paid bereavement leave for all—the Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill—as many across the House already do?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for the approach she is taking to this. I cannot on Thursday mornings give off-the-cuff commitments to private Members' Bills,

but I think I can say that the way Members get those Bills adopted is, as the hon. Lady has done, by courteously campaigning for them and building up a head of steam of support. Some private Members' Bills that start with remarkably little Government support end up getting on the statute book because of the effectiveness of a Back-Bench campaigner.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House knows that Doncaster has fantastic rail links and has a rich rail heritage. I am sure he also knows that it is the birthplace of both the Flying Scotsman and the Mallard. Therefore, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that Doncaster is by far the best place for the headquarters of Great British Railways?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend asks me to do something for which I do not have the authority, but I can say that Doncaster is a wonderful place and has a superb Member of Parliament, who ensures that it is very well and effectively represented in this House. As I understand it, the Great British Railways transition team will be running a competition to identify the national headquarters, which will be based outside London, demonstrating the Government's commitment to levelling up. I am not immediately aware of any competition coming from North East Somerset, so may I wish Doncaster extremely well?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Leader of the House consider providing time for a debate on the persecution of Christians in India? According to a recent report by the United Christian Forum, 2021 was the most violent year for India's Christians, and their attackers continue their brutal targeting with impunity. Does the Leader of the House agree that a debate on this topic would be timely because this House should not continue to blindly implement the UK-India 2030 road map while neglecting India's human rights record on freedom of religion or belief?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who campaigns tirelessly on this issue. India is a great friend of this country; it is an important and powerful ally, but I confess I was concerned to read that donations to the Mother Teresa Foundation have been limited from overseas recently, as the work of Mother Teresa, and since her death of the organisations she was involved with, has been very important. They have done wonderful and good work so I was sorry to read that, but our relationship with India is one of our most important foreign affairs relationships.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): In November, Stroud midwives marched through the town as part of co-ordinated marches across the country to raise awareness of pressures on midwifery and concerns about safety. There is also a petition with over 100,000 signatures, and I have met with Stroud midwives. I came in today to ask for the help of the Leader of the House to get a debate on this issue, but such is his presence that I have had a message from my team saying that I have just been granted an Adjournment debate on 17 January, so may I pivot to ask my right hon. Friend to join me in praising midwives across the country and to encourage people to join my debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is, of course, Mr Speaker who gives Adjournment debates, and therefore we pay homage to you, Mr Speaker, for your beneficence, wisdom and perspicacity in realising this was about to be asked for and granting it before it had even been requested formally on the Floor of the House. May I say to my hon. Friend that as the father of six children I hold midwives in the highest regard?

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Many Blackpool residents are extremely concerned about increases in the cost of living and the likelihood of large rises in their fuel bills from the spring. Scrapping VAT and the green levies on fuel bills would go a long way towards easing the pressures on their household budgets, so will my right hon. Friend look to hold a debate in Government time on how we can mitigate these costs being passed on to consumers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We have already discussed the VAT issue and the difficult decisions any Chancellor always has to make on where taxation falls to ensure that what the country wishes to afford can be paid for. But there is targeted support for those being hit most, such as the £500 million household support fund and the warm home discount, and I have already mentioned the £4.2 billion being spent to help people suffering from the rising cost of living. So the Government are very conscious of this, but my hon. Friend is a very effective campaigner, and I am sure this is not the last we will hear of this important issue.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): In 2021 more than 28,000 people left the safe haven of France and arrived illegally in the UK by small boat. Will the Government consider declaring this crisis in the channel a national emergency, and in addition to the Nationality and Borders Bill currently in the House of Lords will they consider emergency legislation so that in 2022 we are able to control our borders, no more lives are needlessly lost at sea and the criminals profiteering on the backs of human misery are brought to justice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I wonder how often France has been called “safe” in this Chamber over the centuries, but I think we can accept that it is safe for most refugees—except for those who do not like garlic, who may need to escape. What has been going on in the channel is appalling and should concern us all, because it is led by people smugglers; it is led by evil people and it has led to deaths, and we need to prevent further lives from being lost on this dangerous crossing and break the business model of the criminal gangs who exploit desperation.

Since the joint intelligence centre was established in July 2020 we have, with France, dismantled 17 small boat organised crime groups and secured over 400 arrests. UK immigration enforcement has secured 67 convictions of the criminals driving small boat crossings since January 2020, resulting in sentences totalling over 54 years. Our Nationality and Borders Bill will give us more powers, including being able to do things like check people’s age so we know the facts when people claim asylum, which should make our system firmer and fairer.

Russia

11.50 am

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): Before I start, I welcome the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) to his new role, and I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) to his new position as Minister for Europe.

I want to update the House on what we are doing to tackle Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine. In December I set out how, together with our allies, we will build a network of liberty to ensure that democracy does not just survive but thrives. Of course, as a free, democratic country in Europe, Ukraine is a crucial priority. Thirty years ago, Britain was one of the first countries to recognise Ukraine’s independence, and today our commitment to Ukraine is unwavering. We stand with our friend against hostile actors. We will defend democracy at the frontier of freedom in Eastern Europe and around the world. Britain and its allies made this clear at NATO in November and at the G7, which I hosted in Liverpool last month. Any Russian military incursion into Ukraine would be a massive strategic mistake and would come at a severe cost.

We will not accept the campaign Russia is waging to subvert its democratic neighbours. It is accompanied by baseless rhetoric and disinformation. The Russians have falsely cast Ukraine as a threat to justify their aggressive stance, and they falsely accuse NATO of provocation. This could not be further from the truth. Ukraine’s restraint has been commendable, and NATO has always been a defensive alliance. Russia is the aggressor here. It has amassed a huge number of troops along the Ukrainian border and in illegally annexed Crimea.

There is no justification whatsoever for Russia’s bellicose stance towards Ukraine. It is unprovoked, and it is part of a wider pattern of behaviour by the Kremlin, reliant on disinformation and mistrust to seek to gain the upper hand. Moscow has long run a campaign to subvert freedom and democracy in Ukraine, from the invasion of 2014 to cyberattacks, disinformation and the weaponisation of energy supplies. At the same time, Moscow is backing the repressive actions of the Lukashenko regime in Belarus, sowing the seeds of discord in the western Balkans and threatening our friends in the Baltics.

I urge Russia to end its malign activity and stick to what has been agreed. That means the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, in which Russia signed up to dispute resolution by dialogue rather than force. It means the 1994 Budapest memorandum on security assurances, in which Russia agreed to uphold Ukraine’s territorial integrity. Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in exchange for this security guarantee. And it means the 2014 Minsk protocol, in which all parties agreed to a ceasefire in the Donbass region. These agreements, based on the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law, must be upheld.

The free world must rise to meet this moment. Britain is stepping up and leading by example. I have spoken out against Russian aggression at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and NATO, and bilaterally with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Last month I chaired a meeting of the G7 Foreign Ministers in Liverpool. We called on Russia to de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels and abide by its commitments on the transparency of military activities. We made it

clear that any further military incursion into Ukraine would bring massive consequences, including co-ordinated sanctions to impose a severe cost on Russia's interests and economy. The UK is working with our partners on these sanctions, including high-impact measures targeting the Russian financial sector and individuals.

We are also providing crucial economic and security support to Ukraine. I am working closely with Foreign Minister Kuleba. I spoke to him on Tuesday, and last month I welcomed him to London for high-level talks. We are helping Ukraine to strengthen its defences with joint exercises and maritime support and by training over 20,000 members of its army, with more to come. We are ramping up support for trade in priority areas such as technology and clean energy to £3.5 billion. This includes £1.7 billion to boost Ukraine's naval capability. I look forward to visiting Kiev later this month. We are also supporting stability in the western Balkans, where the Prime Minister has appointed Sir Stuart Peach as special envoy. In Belarus, we were the first European country to put sanctions on the Lukashenko regime, and we were also the first to send in engineers to assist Poland.

This next week will be absolutely critical for peace and security in Europe. Tomorrow I will join an extraordinary meeting of NATO Foreign Ministers. The US-Russia dialogue begins on Sunday, followed by the NATO-Russia Council on Wednesday and the OSCE Permanent Council on Thursday. We will be in talks on the basis of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. It is vital that NATO is united in pushing back against Russia's threatening behaviour. Together we must hold Russia to its longstanding obligations. There can be no rewards for aggression.

Finally, Europe must reduce its dependence on Russian gas. Britain remains opposed to Nord Stream 2, and I am working with allies and partners to highlight the strategic risks of this project. We are reaching a crucial moment. The only way forward is for Russia to de-escalate and pursue a path of diplomacy. We will continue to stand together with our allies, steadfast in support of Ukraine and its future as a free and sovereign democracy. I commend this statement to the House.

11.56 am

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her warm words as I take up this post. I am also grateful for advance sight of her statement and for the briefing that she has given me on Privy Council terms.

Let me begin by saying that on this side of the House there is absolutely no doubt about the threat posed by the current Russian regime to our own national security and to that of our allies and other countries in the region. It is Russia's actions that are driving this dangerous escalation of tensions. We face a moment of acute danger, with more than 100,000 troops massed on the border and alarming rhetoric and unreasonable demands emerging from the Kremlin. We know that Putin is not afraid to act to undermine Ukraine's integrity, overtly or covertly.

The situation remains fraught with risk. It is right that this whole House should send a clear and unified message today that we fully support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and that Russian action to

further undermine this will be met with severe consequences. We must be crystal clear in our commitment to NATO and to the security of our allies. That commitment must be unshakeable. It is also right that we support dialogue to achieve de-escalation consistent with the security of our NATO allies and the integrity of Ukraine. We welcome the crucial ongoing diplomatic efforts from President Biden, Secretary General Stoltenberg and others. It is important that Ukraine is fully engaged in the diplomatic processes, and I understand that the Foreign Secretary has spoken to her counterpart. Has the Prime Minister spoken to President Zelensky? Does the right hon. Lady agree that Russia's proposed treaties make unreasonable demands and are completely incompatible with the sovereignty of NATO allies and the independence of Ukraine?

These developments remind us of the importance of security in our own backyard in Europe. What consultations has the Foreign Secretary had with European partners and with the European Union, which will be crucial to the strength of any sanctions regime and to ending dependence on Russian gas?

The Foreign Secretary spoke about severe economic consequences for Russia should it act against Ukraine, but we all know that the ongoing role that the UK plays in international money laundering and illicit finance is important in that regard. For too long, our country has been a soft touch for corrupt elites that help to sustain the Putin regime. Will she commit to a renewed effort to tackle that threat and finally implement the Russia report?

Finally, may I ask for the Foreign Secretary's assessment of developments in Kazakhstan, not least because we have seen reports of deaths in the past two hours? For too long, Kazakhstan's Government have been unaccountable to its people. Does she agree that the people of Kazakhstan have the right to choose their own Government without interference or intimidation from their Government or from outside forces, and that it would be deeply troubling to see another example of Russian-backed forces overtly or covertly seeking to quell democratic movements in other independent countries, with scant regard for human rights?

Elizabeth Truss: I welcome the support of the right hon. Gentleman and of the Opposition for Ukraine and for the importance of maintaining its sovereignty, territorial integrity and democracy. I look forward to working with him and his colleagues to show the strong support of the United Kingdom House of Commons at this important time. That support is very welcome.

I can confirm that the Prime Minister has spoken to President Zelensky. I am in regular touch with Minister Kuleba, the Foreign Minister of Ukraine; in fact, I met him at the NATO summit last year, as well as when he visited in December. I will shortly be travelling to Ukraine as well.

I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on the subject of Moscow's completely unreasonable demands. I am absolutely clear that in the face of this aggression we should not see any concessions made. The important thing is that we make sure that Moscow is following the commitments that it has made in agreements. In the 1994 Budapest agreement, in exchange for Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons, it was agreed that Russia

[Elizabeth Truss]

would stand behind Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. That must be upheld and Moscow must be held to account.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about working with the EU and other partners. I had a call with Josep Borrell over the Christmas period; he was at the G7, and the UK co-ordinated a G7 statement making it very clear that all the G7 back the stance that is being taken. I have also had a number of calls with other European counterparts, including Ann Linde, who was then chairing the OSCE; the role has now passed to Minister Rau, and I will shortly be visiting Poland. The UK is very engaged, and all our allies stand together in repudiating the disinformation that we are seeing coming from Moscow. We stand together in backing Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about Kazakhstan. We are concerned by the violent clashes in Kazakhstan, and we are following developments very closely. Our thoughts are with those who have lost their lives in what has happened, and we condemn the acts of violence and destruction of property in Almaty. We will co-ordinate further with our allies on what further steps we should take.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement—her clear statement that this country and this Government stand against the Russian aggression that we see not just in Ukraine but in Georgia; against some of the Baltic nations; and, via Belarus, against countries such as Poland, Latvia and Lithuania through the use of migration as a weapon against free people.

Among the conversations that my right hon. Friend has had—I welcome those she listed—has she spoken to our German and French colleagues about training teams in Ukraine? Has she spoken to those who are part of the Normandy process about involving a British representative in that process? Has she spoken to Secretary-General Stoltenberg about the fact, which we all recognise but needs to be stated more clearly, that NATO is a free association of free people to defend freedom? It is not an aggressive alliance; it is a defensive alliance. There was no agreement by any party or any nation to prevent any free people from joining the NATO defensive pact in 1991 or, indeed, at any time. Let me be clear: President Putin is lying when he says that there was. It is not true.

Will my right hon. Friend please work with NATO partners to make sure that free countries and free peoples who wish to guarantee that freedom through a defensive alliance can do so as part of NATO, whether they are threatened by Russia today or, like Sweden and Finland, have been threatened in the past?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his points. I have been working closely with my French and German counterparts to tackle this issue. Tomorrow, we have a virtual meeting of the NATO Foreign Ministers at which, again, we will be co-ordinating ahead of the meetings next week—namely, the meetings between Russia and the United States, but also the Russia-NATO meeting.

We are all very clear that NATO is a defensive alliance. Joining NATO is a sovereign decision for NATO and relevant applicant states; it is not a decision for Russia, which has no auspices over it whatsoever. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the disinformation that has been coming from the Kremlin on this subject. Jens Stoltenberg, with whom I have also been co-ordinating, will make a very strong statement about NATO and its purpose and reaffirm the fact that it is a defensive alliance to support the countries within it.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Happy new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to colleagues throughout the House.

I am grateful for advance sight of the Foreign Secretary's statement, which I welcome, as far as it goes. I have to say, in a constructive spirit, that I do not find much new in the statement, but I do welcome the fact that we are having this discussion, because the Russian Government's actions are concerning. There is a pattern of behaviour in the Baltic states, the Balkans, central Asia and Belarus; the manipulation of energy markets; and disinformation. On Ukraine especially, the SNP will be part of the coalition to defend Ukraine and international law—the Foreign Secretary has our support on that.

I urge the Foreign Secretary to go a bit further. She mentioned financial consequences to the continued incursion into Ukraine; will she confirm today that the suspension of Russia from the SWIFT payment system is on the table and will be a consequence? That would be a top-level sanction that would take effect and have an influence.

In a constructive spirit—I have already said that the SNP supports the Foreign Secretary's efforts—I urge her to heed seriously what the Labour spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), said about the implementation of the Russia report. Her own credibility in the eyes of Moscow is surely weakened by the fact that so many members of her own party are in hock to dirty Russian money. There are Members of the House of Lords who simply should not be there, having bought their places in the legislature of these islands. The Intelligence and Security Committee raised serious concerns about the extent to which dirty money is influencing UK politics. Integrity starts at home and there are a lot of things that we should be doing to strengthen the Foreign Secretary's credibility. She will have the SNP's support in that respect as well.

Elizabeth Truss: I have been clear that Russian military aggression will be met with strength, including massive economic consequences through co-ordinated economic sanctions by allies and partners that target Russian financial transactions and individuals, but I cannot speculate on future sanctions.

In July 2020, the UK used its global human rights sanction regime to impose sanctions on 25 Russian nationals who were responsible for appalling human rights violations. We have shown that we are absolutely ready to use those types of sanctions where it is appropriate. On the ISC report, we published our response immediately on its publication. Since then, we have introduced a new autonomous cyber-sanctions regime, set out a national cyber-security strategy, and announced new legislation to provide security services and law enforcement with additional tools to tackle evolving state threats.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I certainly welcome the statement, but on the bigger picture I do not believe the west has a coherent strategy to deal with Russia's increasing aggression. Sanctions will not deter Russia and Ukraine remains hugely exposed. With the west looking ever timid, ever divided and ever risk-averse, and with the United States looking ever distracted because of domestic issues and NATO bruised after its retreat from Afghanistan, has there ever been a better time for Russia to invade Ukraine than the forthcoming new year of the Orthodox calendar?

Elizabeth Truss: We have been united with our partners not just in the west, but in the free world. The G7 put out a very strong statement after Liverpool, being clear that there would be severe costs and massive consequences in the event of military aggression against Ukraine. That was followed by an announcement at the December European Council meeting which also made the same points, so we have seen a united front from allies around the free world. Freedom, democracy and security within Europe is vital, but my right hon. Friend makes the right point that this situation will be watched by aggressors around the world. This is about not just Europe, important though that is, but the signal we send to the rest of the world about what we do in the face of aggression. That is why partners such as Japan have also signed up to that statement, and why we are working more broadly with partners across the world to challenge this aggression and to ensure there are no rewards for this type of aggressive behaviour.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree that we have to stand foursquare with Ukraine. We also have to see off every kind of aggression—there are many different kinds—that comes from the Putin regime in Russia. What I do not understand is why the Government have spent so long trying to bring in the cleaning-up of the banking system in this country through a fully public register of beneficial ownership—one exists, but it is still not public—not just of companies but of property and trusts; why we still have not made all the overseas territories, where lots of Russian money is presently hidden, have public registers of beneficial ownership of all three categories; and why Ministers still allow exemptions for some Russian oligarchs in the register of beneficial ownership of companies. It seems entirely hypocritical.

Elizabeth Truss: As I said, we do have a very tough anti-corruption regime and we have used our global human rights sanctions regime to sanction people within Russia, including 25 Russian nationals. We, of course, continue to review that legislation.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On the question of the recommendations made by the ISC, may I welcome the steps taken by the House of Lords to clean up its act in relation to the registration of work undertaken for foreign Governments? On the NATO guarantee, does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is a solemn commitment by each member of NATO to, if necessary, go to war if any other member of NATO is attacked? Ukraine is not a member of NATO. Does she agree that it is important that we do not elide from the situation in Ukraine to the next step, which will be the Baltic states that are members of NATO. We have to be very clear about what our commitments really are.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the NATO guarantee and its importance for NATO members, including the Baltic states. In December, I visited British troops forming part of NATO's enhanced forward presence at Tapa in Estonia, where allies are helping to protect the border with Russia. We are working with our NATO partners to ensure that that protection remains in place and is enhanced so that we can fulfil our commitments.

With Ukraine, we are ensuring that it has the capability to defend itself. That involves training, and the UK has trained more than 20,000 troops in Ukraine. We are also supplying extra capability for naval defences as well as support in areas such as cyber-security and other services.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement. She comes to the Dispatch Box and talks tough, which I agree with, but it is now two years since the ISC report. The Putin regime did not come to power by accident; it did so through the use of corruption and, as the ISC report spells out, enablers in this country and the west. The only recommendation that has been implemented is the one for the House of Lords of a register of interests of Lords with Russian companies. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), I ask the Foreign Secretary: when will the Government get tough and real and implement the Russia report recommendations? I also urge her, before she has lunch again with a Russian donor to the Conservative party, to think and ask where that money came from originally.

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, we have a very tough anti-corruption regime, and we have used it. As a result of the work that we are doing with our allies, we have been clear that Russia would face massive consequences if there were to be an incursion into Ukraine.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, I lead the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, of which Russia is a member, and where we have to deal with Russia on an almost daily basis. Will she join me in getting the Council of Europe, which is responsible for democracy and the rule of law across Europe, to take a firm stand against Russia?

Elizabeth Truss: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that the Council of Europe takes a strong stand on this issue.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): While Russia's actions undoubtedly represent a threat to its neighbours, as the Foreign Secretary said, President Putin attempts to justify his unacceptable demands by claiming that his country is somehow threatened by NATO's defensive presence in countries including the Baltic states and Poland. In standing in solidarity with Ukraine—the whole House does that—does the Foreign Secretary think that any steps can be taken in the forthcoming talks to try to show Russia that it faces no offensive strategic threat from NATO?

Elizabeth Truss: It is very important that we do not buy into the false narrative that Putin has been peddling that somehow there is a security threat. NATO has always been clear that it is a defensive alliance, responsible for defending the sovereignty and interests of its states,

[Elizabeth Truss]

and Vladimir Putin is well aware of that. It is important that we do not buy into that false narrative. I do want to see progress made in talks, but that must be on the basis of freedom and democracy and of what Russia has committed to in the past. It simply has not fulfilled its commitments, whether those made in the Budapest agreement or the Minsk agreements. I see next week, when there will be a series of crucial meetings, as making sure that Russia is holding firm to the commitments that it has made.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): It is great to hear a Foreign Secretary speaking with such clarity, so I thank my right hon. Friend. When it comes to our two allies, France and Germany, may I ask the following: is she worried that Germany's appalling dependence on Russian energy undermines a clear and united western approach? When it comes to the Minsk and Normandy processes, is she worried that if we give in to Russia's demand for a highly federalised Ukrainian state, that will allow Russia to carve up and collapse the Ukrainian state over time, and it will simply have been allowed to achieve its end slowly, rather than quickly?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Europe needs to reduce its strategic dependence on Russian gas. It is a broader issue about the dependence of freedom-loving democracies on economic support from autocracies, which then makes it very difficult to make the political progress that we need to make to challenge Russian aggression. I have been very clear about our position on Nord Stream 2. More broadly, we need to reduce dependence on Russian gas. On the discussions taking place in various formats, we cannot have a situation in which Russian aggression is rewarded in any way. It has no auspices over Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and we are very clear on that. What we are working on, and what tomorrow's meeting of Foreign Ministers is about, is making sure that we are co-ordinating our positions across NATO, and we are very clear on those red lines.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Foreign Secretary referred in her statement to her opposition to Nord Stream 2, but we know that as Putin turns off the gas taps in Moscow, there is an impact here in the UK, where families are facing a potentially crippling 50% increase in their energy bills. Gazprom is owned by the Russian state and has its international trading arm based in London. It is cashing in—it announced a £179 million dividend earlier this week. Today, the Liberal Democrats have proposed a Robin Hood tax on the super-profits of those oil and gas barons, with the money raised being used to support the poorest households. Having talked about not rewarding Russia for aggression, does the Foreign Secretary agree that the tax will not only help British families, but send a powerful message to Moscow that we can and will counteract Russian interference in our energy market?

Elizabeth Truss: It is clear that we need to reduce Europe's dependency on Russian gas. In fact, I think that 3% of our gas is from Russia, but I agree with the hon. Lady that it is desirable to reduce that. The way that we need to reduce that dependency is with more investment in areas such as nuclear energy, which we are

doing with small modular nuclear reactors, as well as more investment in areas such as renewables and ensuring that we are using alternative gas sources to supply our domestic energy needs.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Some of us are sadly old enough to be able to remember Hungary in 1953, the subsequent removal of Alexander Dubček in Czechoslovakia, more recently the annexation of parts of Georgia, and then the invasion and annexation of Crimea. All were with impunity, so far as the Soviet Union and the neo-Soviet Union are concerned; the free world simply failed to act. Further to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), Russia and Ukraine are members of the Council of Europe. Will my right hon. Friend use the platforms available to her within the Committee of Ministers and in person within the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to make it plain that the United Kingdom will no longer stand by and simply talk, but that we will act?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend about using all platforms available, and also about the fact that the free world needs to stand up against aggressors. The UK has played a leading role in bringing together the G7 to make a very strong statement, as well as working with our NATO allies to make clear the basis of the talks taking place next week. We are very ready and willing to use our position to make the case for severe consequences, should Russia seek to stage an incursion into Ukraine.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The pressure on Ukraine is immediate, but it is part of a pattern of behaviour towards former Soviet satellites and Warsaw pact countries, many of which are now members of NATO or the EU—most of them are members of both. Many of these countries have post-war experience of Soviet tanks rolling in to crush protests, as we are seeing again in Kazakhstan. It is slightly concerning that, although the shadow Defence Secretary was here for this statement, I cannot see anyone from the Ministry of Defence, unless I am wrong. Will the UK not only argue for tough talk in next week's discussions, but be prepared to provide material support to Ukraine in order to prevent an invasion or subversion?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working very closely with the Ministry of Defence. In fact, the Defence Secretary recently visited Ukraine. We have been providing support, including training troops, providing intelligence and security assistance, and helping Ukraine to build its naval capability.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend has talked about massive consequences, including co-ordinated sanctions, should there be further Russian military incursions into Ukraine. Will she listen to the call of the Ukrainian ambassador that the behaviour of Russia, which she outlined in her statement, merits taking further measures now? Will she consider that during her meetings next week?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend makes a fair point about the appalling behaviour of Russia, including with respect to Ukraine. Russia is also stirring up problems in the Balkans, as well as helping the Belarusian

regime to use migration as an offensive weapon. As I said earlier, we need to make sure that we reduce economic dependence on Russia. We are also strengthening our security ties with like-minded allies, including the Baltic states, so that we are able to repel these types of aggressive activities over the longer term. We are working on that as well as making sure that Russia understands the severe consequences of any action it might take.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): I will not ask the Foreign Secretary to go into the detail of our co-ordinated sanctions plans, because quite rightly she would not reveal them, but does she agree that there is very little point in using economic sanctions to apply pain and suffering to the broader economy of states such as Russia, because I think we can agree that a direct link between broader society and the ruling elite does not really exist? That being the case, will she confirm that it would be much more apt to apply sanctions to the Russian elites around the world—in Manhattan, London and Paris—that have a direct link to the Kremlin? Their pain will cause problems for the Russian ruling elite.

Elizabeth Truss: I was clear in my statement that the co-ordinated economic sanctions by our allies and partners are looking at Russian financial transactions and at individuals.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have visited Bosnia twice in the past eight months, and I have a deep and long-standing personal interest in what happens there. I am very concerned about reports of Russian involvement with Republika Srpska to encourage the break-up of Bosnia. In particular, there are some reports of the Russians providing weapons to Republika Srpska. Will my right hon. Friend comment on that possibility?

Elizabeth Truss: It is vitally important that the hard-won peace and security that my right hon. Friend did so much to help to achieve in the western Balkans is not lost. That is why I met High Representative Christian Schmidt and we are giving him our full support. We have also appointed Sir Stuart Peach as our special envoy to the western Balkans. Recently I hosted the western Balkan Foreign Ministers at Lancaster House to discuss peace and stability in the region. I completely agree with my right hon. Friend about malign Russian involvement in the western Balkans. We need to do more to bring the western Balkans into our circle, including by expanding trade and security relationships so that those countries have alternatives to dealing with Russia.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary mentioned in her statement that the next week will be absolutely crucial for peace and security in Europe. As I am sure she will hear from Members across this House, strong statements and signals will not work with Russia if we are to ensure that the conflict does not escalate. Does she agree that Russia's actions against Ukraine show a pattern of recent hostile activity, and that she needs to work to bring forward a co-ordinated response with our European partners on a deal to ensure that Russia's actions in Ukraine and Bosnia come to an end—co-ordinated action that this House should have sight of once agreed?

Elizabeth Truss: That is absolutely the work the UK is doing. That is why we had a very extensive discussion on this subject at the G7. We announced that there would be severe consequences, and we are absolutely working on co-ordination. That is vital. It is very important that the United States is involved. It is very important that the EU is involved. It is very important that the wider world is involved, because this is not just a threat to peace and stability in Europe; it is a global issue about whether we are clear that aggressors will not benefit from aggressive behaviour.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for her statement, which will inform the debate that we are having later about Russia's grand strategy. We keep saying that Russia's aggression must not be rewarded, but the past decade and a half has seen Russia's aggression effectively rewarded and go unpunished again and again. To that extent, how can she ensure that the meetings taking place on 9 and 10 January in Geneva will actually mark a significant departure in past practice from the west so that from now on we will act much more decisively and be completely united? We cannot succumb to the divisive way in which Russia is attempting to separate the United States from its NATO allies.

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend: we do need to step up our efforts as the free world. In fact, in a speech I made before Christmas I said that there had not been enough action, and that peace and security in Europe and beyond had been taken for granted not just by the western alliance but more broadly by the free world. That is why we are stepping up in the work we are doing to challenge Russia and encourage our allies. We are encouraging the United States and the EU and working with them to develop the very clear consequences of any Russian action.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary claims that we have the toughest regime, but if we follow the money, it seems that the Russian oligarchs see the UK and its dependencies as the preferred safe deposit box for their investments. Will she outline what military involvement she and the Defence Secretary have considered might be put into play from the UK? Will she update the House on her Department's advice to UK nationals who either live in Ukraine or are considering travelling to Ukraine?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the Defence Secretary visited Ukraine in the autumn. We are providing all the support we can to Ukraine in terms of both economic resilience and security—namely, helping with training troops, providing intelligence services, and providing support for its naval vessels. We continue to work to do that and I am co-ordinating very closely with the Defence Secretary.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the robust tone of the Foreign Secretary's statement, and the evident absolute unanimity on both sides of the House, in support of the Ukrainian Government and their people. If something were to go horribly wrong in Ukraine, however, the next domino in the chain would be the Baltic states, with which we have an article 5 guarantee. When she meets other NATO Foreign Ministers tomorrow, can she absolutely assure

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those from the Baltic states that they have our complete support and that Estonia will never become a far-away country of which we know nothing?

Elizabeth Truss: I welcomed the Baltic states to the UK last autumn and I was very clear about the UK's complete support for them and our complete commitment to our article 5 obligations. That is why we have the enhanced border presence, which I visited in Tapa in Estonia. Alongside the discussions that are taking place about Ukraine through the NATO Foreign Ministers, we are of course also talking about how we strengthen our defensive capability to support our members, including the Baltic states, which really are on the frontier of freedom.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her fulsome statement. I am mindful of the early morning reports of Russia sending armed troops to Kazakhstan, which has led to death and destruction. As we watch Russian imperial aggression towards Ukraine, the voice of the west needs to be heard—it must be heard. What discussions has she had with the United States of America and key NATO allies to respond to what could be a powder keg, the fuse of which is in Russian hands?

Elizabeth Truss: I have had regular conversations with my counterparts, such as Tony Blinken in the United States. I have talked to many of our NATO allies directly and to all of them at the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting. We are all very much aligned in being clear that there will be severe consequences for Russia should it stage an incursion into Ukraine. It is important to maintain that unanimity as we face further Russian rhetoric and aggression.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Unlike in Soviet times, Russia is no longer a viable candidate for world domination. Indeed, recently declassified documents from the United States make it clear that in February 1990, Secretary of State James Baker gave President Gorbachev a categorical assurance that NATO would not, and had no plans to, move east. Given that the reality of the situation, despite everything that has been said today, is that we are not prepared for a single British soldier to die in a war to defend Ukraine, will the Secretary of State confirm that there are no plans to admit Ukraine to NATO? Indeed, to do that would be a needless and dangerous provocation.

Elizabeth Truss: I do not agree with my right hon. Friend. The UK remains supportive of Ukraine's NATO membership aspirations, in line with the 2008 Bucharest summit declaration. As I have already pointed out, NATO is a defensive alliance, as the Russians know perfectly well. We should not buy into the narrative that somehow NATO is the problem. The problem is the troops that are being amassed on the Ukrainian border. We have to be absolutely clear that those troops are being amassed by Russia, not by NATO.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement, but I encourage my right hon. Friend to be far more robust in defence of pro-democracy forces in Kazakhstan and to condemn

unequivocally the collective security treaty organisation intervention there in support of a highly questionable regime. What discussions has she had with players in the wider region about the instability that may be caused by Russia's intervention in mid-Asia, in particular Azerbaijan, in which we have significant interests? What are the implications of what is going on in the region for the recently concluded ceasefire in relation to Nagorno-Karabakh?

Elizabeth Truss: On the subject of the violent clashes in Kazakhstan, as I have said, we condemn those acts of violence, but I think it important to remember that Kazakhstan has a sovereign choice when it comes to whom it chooses as its allies. Any forces deployed must have a clear mission and must act proportionately in any use of force to defend the legitimate security interests in Kazakhstan. It is important that, while regretting these acts and ensuring that our thoughts are with those who have lost their lives, we respect the fact that Kazakhstan has that sovereign choice.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for a strong and clear statement. I agree with her that we should not accept the suggestion that NATO is, in any sense, anything other than a defensive alliance. Neither, indeed, should we accept the suggestion—and I do not expect her to say this today—that there is any imminent prospect of Ukraine's becoming a NATO member. The Kremlin does not believe these things; they are merely pretexts to undermine a democratic and free society.

The immediate concern is altering the cost-benefit analysis currently being undertaken by the Kremlin, and that is why the conversations that my right hon. Friend will have in the coming days are so important with respect to sanctions and other actions. Will she confirm that she has had a direct conversation with the new German Government about Nord Stream 2 and that she will ask them to halt its operationalisation, given that that is the single most important bargaining chip in the hands of Europe and NATO today?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend is completely right about the pretext. That is exactly what is happening. Disinformation is being used and pretexts are being claimed that simply do not exist, because NATO is indeed a defensive alliance. I did meet my German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, on the margins of G7, and both the Prime Minister and I have made it very clear that we do not believe that Nord Stream 2 should go ahead.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for her robust and very clear statement on Russian aggression. It is fairly clear that Putin is peddling a particular narrative to the Russian people, trying to explain that the west is anti-Russia. The Kremlin's publication of its extraordinary demands regarding Ukraine last month was a clear move to attempt to split the west. We must not bow to such pressure. We cannot show the Kremlin an ounce of weakness. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we must stand firmly with our allies such as Ukraine and Bosnia, and with any other ally that is under the threat of Russian aggression?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We have to defend the hard-won freedoms in the Balkans, in Ukraine and in the Baltic states. She is also right to point out that the issue here is not the Russian people. I am a great admirer of Russia and the Russian people. The issue is the Putin regime, and what is happening and what he is saying, and the false pretexts that he is trying to create. We must be resolute to defend democracy and freedom in Europe, and that is why we are taking this strong stance on Ukraine and working with our allies around the world to challenge Russian aggression.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Let me first warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's world leadership on this issue, and congratulate her on putting the UK firmly at the heart of it. She mentioned the 1994 Budapest memorandum, to which we were also a signatory. In the light of that, may I urge her to ensure that when we enter the negotiations no false lines are drawn in respect of how far we are willing to go, and that we do not explicitly say that we are not willing to go beyond a certain point? Some worrying statements that have been emerging from the Ministry of Defence might cause my right hon. Friend's hands to be clamped in the negotiations.

Elizabeth Truss: The 1994 Budapest memorandum is very clear. It was done on the basis of Ukraine giving up its nuclear weapons and ensuring that it maintained its territorial integrity and sovereignty. That is a very important principle that will absolutely be upheld in the negotiations and discussions taking place next week.

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement and strong approach. What seems like a lifetime ago, I saw at first hand a breakdown in the Balkans when I served in Bosnia and Kosovo. Even though it seems like a lifetime ago, I never want anyone to witness that again. However unlikely it may seem, can we ensure that the best statecraft and diplomacy are used to allow Russia, if it should so choose, to de-escalate and follow a route out of where this could be heading?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his service in the Balkans. He is so right that that peace and security was very hard earned, and we are determined not to allow it to slide away from us. That is why we have appointed Sir Stuart Peach, and it is why we are working on closer economic and security ties with the Balkan states so that they have an alternative to working with Russia.

I believe that the best way to challenge Russia is from a position of strength. We have to be clear that there would be severe consequences if there were to be an incursion into Ukraine, and we have to reduce European strategic dependency on Russia. That is how we will succeed. There cannot be any sense in which Russian aggression is rewarded, because that would, of course, have further consequences in terms of Russia's behaviour, but it would also encourage other aggressors around the world and damage peace and democracy globally.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): The Crime and Security Research Institute has found evidence that 32 media outlets across 16 different countries have

been targeted by Russia, via their reader comments section, peppering stories with anti-western and anti-NATO statements. Can my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary assure me that we are doing everything we can to tackle the Kremlin's reliance on misinformation and online manipulation?

Elizabeth Truss: We have very strong cyber-security forces here in the UK, and we are doing all we can to tackle Russian disinformation, including working with allies and partners. We have recently signed a number of cyber agreements, and we are working on these issues precisely with the Baltic states, which face a lot of Russian disinformation. At the NATO Foreign Ministers' meeting, we specifically talked about how we will make sure that NATO as a whole focuses more on cyber, and on areas such as hybrid attacks and the use of migration as an offensive weapon. That is to ensure that NATO operates not just in traditional spheres, but in many of the areas where modern combat is carried out.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): I very much welcome the firm stance that the Foreign Secretary has outlined on the UK's response to Russian intimidation of Ukraine. She has also set out clearly her own vision for global Britain and her aim to build a network of liberty. Does she agree that in order to ensure that freedom and democracy thrive around the world, our global partners will need to step up and join us in providing Ukraine with the support it needs; and that that involves not just words, but actions that might sometimes be difficult?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to reduce economic dependency on Russia, and we need to make sure that our words are followed up by the actions we have outlined. We also need to make sure that all our like-minded allies—whether it is the United States, the EU or, indeed, allies around the world, such as India, Australia and Japan—are part of building those closer economic and security ties so that we can deal with authoritarian regimes and make sure there are no rewards for aggression.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): In 2015, I visited Ukraine and Kiev with the then Defence Secretary, when I was a special adviser, to see Operation Orbital begin. We have now trained 20,000 soldiers in Ukraine through that operation. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is now time for our partners to step up and to start to provide some of the resources that we are providing, because only by acting together in that international arena will we stop Russia's aggression, not just in Ukraine, but across the western Balkans and in parts of central Asia?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. We are co-ordinating closely with the United States on providing support to Ukraine, including on security and economic resilience, and making sure that Ukraine has the energy supplies it needs. I have also had a conversation with Josep Borrell of the EU about making sure that the EU is doing what it can to support Ukraine, whether by reducing economic dependency on Russian gas or by more direct support to Ukraine in areas such as trade, as well as security.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

12.51 pm

The Minister for Afghan Resettlement (Victoria Atkins):

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House a happy new year, and I welcome the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) to her place. With permission, I will update the House on the Government's continuing support for Afghans.

The United Kingdom has always been generous to those fleeing persecution. Last August, as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated rapidly and dangerously, we worked at great speed to evacuate about 15,000 people to the United Kingdom and offer them immediate sanctuary and support. That number was the second largest number evacuated by any country, behind only the United States of America.

Our priorities during Operation Pitting were clear: to save as many lives as possible, while keeping the British public safe. The people evacuated included courageous Afghans who had worked closely with the British armed forces, as well as other vulnerable people at risk and British nationals and their families living in Afghanistan. Since that evacuation, we have helped a further 1,500 people enter the UK, including female judges, human rights defenders and LGBT Afghans.

Today, I am pleased to inform the House that the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme opens formally. We will resettle up to 20,000 people under the scheme. I emphasise that it is in addition to the Afghan relocation and assistance policy, which provides a route to safety for any current or former locally employed staff working with the UK Government. About 7,000 people have already been helped through that scheme alone. The United Kingdom therefore has one of the world's most generous humanitarian offers to vulnerable Afghans. This is the Government's new plan for immigration in action, through which we help those in greatest need via that safe and legal route.

In September, we announced our aim to settle 5,000 people in the first year of the ACRS. In light of the emerging situation and the success of our evacuation efforts, we will exceed that aim. The first to be resettled under the new ACRS will be those already evacuated and in the UK, who include women's rights activists, journalists and prosecutors, as well as the Afghan families of British nationals. We are supporting those British nationals who have been assisted by Her Majesty's Government to the UK, as well as their families who require such help, because we recognise that they experienced the same trauma and have the same needs as their Afghan neighbours fleeing Kabul alongside them.

While this policy work has been developed, we have got on with the job and now granted the first people indefinite leave to remain under the ACRS, and we will open two further referral pathways under the ACRS this year to bring more people here safely. From the spring, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will refer refugees in need of resettlement who have fled Afghanistan. The UNHCR has the global mandate to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees. We will continue to receive such referrals to the scheme in coming years.

The third referral pathway will resettle those at risk who supported the UK and international community effort in Afghanistan, as well as those who are particularly vulnerable, such as women and girls at risk and members of minority groups. In the first year of this third referral pathway, the Government will honour our commitments and offer ACRS places to the most at risk: British Council and GardaWorld contractors and Chevening alumni. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office will be in touch with those eligible to support them through the next steps of this process. Beyond the first year of the ACRS, we will work with international partners and non-governmental organisations to design and deliver this unprecedented third pathway further. This will allow us to welcome wider groups of Afghans at risk beyond year 1.

As I have said before, the capacity of the UK to resettle people is not unlimited. We have had to take some very difficult decisions about who will be prioritised for settlement, and it is, frankly, for other countries to step up and follow the United Kingdom's ambitious lead. This scheme reflects the realities of the scale of the challenge, our previous pledges and our endeavours to resettle people well in the UK. We continue our international efforts in Afghanistan and the region. In addition to continuing to bring at-risk people to the UK, we have been co-ordinating closely with international partners, including through our presidency of the G7. We have doubled our aid for Afghanistan to £286 million, including vital humanitarian assistance to save lives this winter.

In conclusion, in the four months since Operation Warm Welcome was launched, we have worked across 10 Government Departments, and with all devolved Administrations and around 350 councils and local agencies, as well as with charities and volunteers, to offer a new start to our new citizens and the freedom to succeed in the United Kingdom. We have provided immediate sanctuary for more than 1,200 people, including with accommodation, food, healthcare, education and support. More than 4,000 people have moved, or are being moved, into their new homes since the first ARAP flights in June. This is an unprecedented pace of resettlement. I am pleased to confirm to the House that, contrary to some reporting over Christmas, all children who were evacuated under Operation Pitting are now in school, and those children who have joined us since Operation Pitting closed are of course being placed in schools as quickly as possible.

Ninety-seven per cent. of evacuees are registered with GPs and everyone has been offered covid vaccinations. We have launched a brand-new housing portal on gov.uk for members of the public to offer accommodation. We are working with the regulators and professions to assess and recognise Afghans' qualifications, especially in sectors that need recruits, such as teaching and healthcare. We have made it easier for local community groups to support Afghans through the community sponsorship scheme, which will begin welcoming Afghan families later this month. We have developed a new integration programme tailored to the needs of this traumatised group of people, which has been piloted and which we will be rolling out shortly. We are also creating, from scratch, a new approach to employment, housing and integration to help Afghans to become self-sufficient as quickly and as well as they can. This is the new plan for immigration in action.

I have always acknowledged that resettling such large numbers of people will take time and demands care. I therefore urge colleagues across the House to work with their councils and communities to help us to build bright futures for our new Afghan citizens. I commend the statement to the House.

12.59 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement today and advance sight of it.

It is now five months since the devastating scenes at Kabul airport and the shambolic withdrawal of UK, US and other troops, leaving the Taliban in charge and putting those who had worked for our armed forces and on our Government projects, and who had stood up to the Taliban, in danger and at risk of retribution and persecution. I welcome Operation Pitting and pay tribute to the armed forces who ran it to get so many people out at the last minute, but all of us in this Parliament know that the operation between Government Departments was chaotic, lacked proper senior support and should have been planned many months previously, and all of us know many more lives have been put at risk because of those Government failings.

The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary rightly promised that we would both help those to whom we owed direct obligations—British citizens, their families, those who worked for us and on our projects—and do our bit alongside other countries to resettle others whose lives were at risk through the Afghan resettlement scheme, and they reassured us many times that the resettlement scheme would cover 20,000 people in addition to those to whom we owed direct obligations. They also rightly promised:

“The UK Government will always stand by those in the world in their hour of need when fleeing persecution or oppression.”

Five months and thousands of hours passed until the resettlement scheme has now opened. Since then we have seen a truly dire humanitarian crisis escalate in Afghanistan, with those we promised to help still in peril. British nationals, British Council staff and others are still in hiding, family members have been executed, and non-governmental organisations with staff who worked on UK contracts say that 95% of those staff not only did not get out but still have not even had replies from the British Government to their ARAP applications. That is shameful. So does the Minister accept that the delays in setting up the resettlement scheme and the complete failure to respond to so many of those ARAP relocation applications from people who worked on UK projects have broken some of those important promises and put lives at risk?

On the resettlement scheme, at the heart of the Minister's statement appears to be the announcement that the first to be helped will be people who are already here, and she appeared to suggest that that would include the Afghan families of British nationals and British nationals themselves. Will she clarify: clearly British nationals and their families should get support, but why are they being counted in the resettlement scheme? Can she reassure us that those Afghan family members and British citizens are not being counted in the number of resettlement places the Government have promised?

Can the Minister also tell us how many of the places now counted as part of the resettlement scheme are going to people who were previously counted in the relocation scheme? She will know that there is huge concern about rumours that Government Departments have been trading people and trying to shunt people around in order to reduce the numbers who would be supported, and she will understand how deeply shameful that would be if true. Can she please clarify that?

Can the Minister also give us a clear fact: how many people will additionally be arriving in the UK as part of the resettlement scheme between now and September? She must have a figure for that further number to be helped this year.

Can the Minister also tell us about the detail of the scheme? Why are the UNHCR referrals not starting until the spring, and how many will there be? The third pathway, which refers to the British Council and Chevening scholars, is very welcome, but what about the other NGOs and contractors that had staff working on UK contracts: is she saying they will not get any reply or help until next year? What are people currently in hiding supposed to do until then?

The Minister has also not included an additional family route within the resettlement scheme; she will know I have been pressing her on that—for those who have family here in the UK to be able to apply to be included in the resettlement scheme if their lives are at risk because they have family in the UK, and who could indeed care for them. I say to her that I am really worried that those at risk now from the Taliban who have connections to the UK are at risk of exploitation by people traffickers and smugglers as they get desperate.

We have already heard of increasing numbers of Afghans arriving in Calais. We have had a report of an Afghan soldier who arrived here with his family in a flimsy boat, having been exploited by traffickers and criminal gangs. Those who helped our armed forces should not end up in a flimsy boat, in peril from the cold sea of the English channel. Does the Minister accept that the Government need to urgently sort out the resettlement places, the relocation of those we have no obligation to, and support and routes for family members? Otherwise, more people will be exploited by the criminal gangs and more people will be at risk. Finally, what are the Government doing to show international leadership, in partnership, to ease the terrible humanitarian crisis that is escalating in Afghanistan? Without such action, we will see not just the humanitarian crisis but the refugee crisis get worse.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the right hon. Lady for her questions. I take issue with her description of the evacuation of 15,000 human beings from Afghanistan in the incredibly dangerous circumstances that we all saw on our television screens in August as “shambolic”. That is not a word that I would have used to the brave soldiers and armed forces personnel who arrived in this House only a month ago, and whom we all thanked for their very significant and brave efforts.

Flights started in June and the ARAP scheme started in April last year. To give an idea of the scale of it, we have received more than 99,000 applications to the scheme since April. We are working at pace to assess them on a case-by-case basis. As this House has heard before, we have to be very careful about the security

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situation. There are sadly some who claim to be eligible for the schemes who are not. I remember particularly an intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), in a previous statement, setting out the circumstances of an individual who was claiming to be someone they were not. We therefore need to ensure that security checks are conducted and that the right people, accurately identified as having been eligible under ARAP, are brought over and helped. We have a dedicated team working seven days a week to process and bring eligible Afghans to the UK. We completely reject the accusation that the ARAP programme has been ineffective. The work of the Ministry of Defence and others continues to identify those who are eligible under ARAP.

I am very happy to clarify the situation for British nationals and their families. British nationals are still being supported. Ordinarily, British nationals arriving in the United Kingdom would not receive the level of support that they receive at the moment, but we have been realistic. We have understood that their needs are such that, if they have been assisted by the Government to come to the United Kingdom before the launch of the scheme, they should be treated in parity with those who flew next to them in planes across from Kabul and so on. Non-British families—Afghan families—are being included in the ACRS, because the scheme is about helping those who are at risk. People have been evacuated because they are at risk, and we want to give them that support. Helping their families, as well as British nationals, is a very generous offer to residents. That is why we were able to exceed our initial, very ambitious, intention to rehome 5,000 people in the first year.

There were comments about trading people. I do not think that that is appropriate phrasing for officials who are working very hard across Government to try to bring to this country human beings whose safety we understand is at very grave risk. As I have said throughout, this is very difficult. We will have to make some very difficult decisions. There is a population of approximately 40 million people in Afghanistan, and very many of them are very scared. We must apply the principles, and do so knowing that there will be some people whom we cannot help, very sadly.

In terms of the UNHCR, we are hoping that we can begin to bring people forward from the spring. We have been working with the UNHCR and other international organisations throughout the process to stand the scheme up.

We agree with the right hon. Lady's very understandable concerns about illegal migration—the flimsy boats across the channel, people in desperate need of help, the plight of those who are in the hands of people traffickers. That is why we introduced the Nationality and Borders Bill and would love the Labour party to accept it.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I commend not only my hon. Friend's statement, but the deep commitment that she shows to the task; I am grateful, as we should all be, that she is here at this time. May I press her on the plight of Afghan judges? There is continuing concern about the safety of many judges who are frankly now a target for the new regime because of the decisions that they made under the previous

regime. Will my hon. Friend update the House on the safe progress of judges to the United Kingdom and on the work of the UK Government in helping to signpost judges to third countries as part of an international effort to safeguard their interests?

Victoria Atkins: May I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend on his further elevation? I am delighted that his skills and experience have been recognised.

The care of Afghan judges, particularly female judges, is a matter that I know interests many colleagues across the House. We have already offered a home to more than 20 senior Afghan judges and prosecutors and their dependants; sadly, we cannot offer a home to all Afghan judges, but we look to others in the international community to play their part in supporting those who have upheld the rule of law. We really must work together across the international community to support such people. I would be delighted to meet my right hon. and learned Friend and others to further discuss how we can signpost judges to third countries, as well as our own, to ensure that they are safe.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the SNP spokesperson.

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I welcome the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), to her place.

I welcome the fact that the scheme is finally starting, but it has taken far too long. The Minister talked about the “emerging situation” in Afghanistan, but it is not emerging. As she said herself, ARAP started in April and there was an emergency in August.

I welcome some of the specifics in the statement, such as working to recognise Afghan qualifications to enable people to work here in their profession. However, it feels as if there has been a bit of sleight of hand, and I want to know more about the figures. The Government cannot keep patting themselves on the back and talking about up to 20,000 people, because any number below 20,000 is “up to 20,000”. We have to be clear about that. I also share the concerns about restricting the ARAP criteria, which are leading to understandable suspicion about the reasons. I found the exposé in *The Times* deeply worrying.

I have a number of questions for the Minister. Will those who are here on ARAP but are being transferred to the ACRS retain the right to family reunion? I hope that she will answer that question today, and I very much hope that she will be able to allay our fears.

I was a bit confused on reading through the statement. Do people have to be identified or can they apply for the scheme? My reading of the statement was that it could be 2023 before any new Afghans arrive in this country. Surely that cannot be right.

The Minister rightly said that British nationals in Afghanistan

“experienced the same trauma and have the same needs as their Afghan neighbours”,

but what about those who did it—those who got out and have arrived or will arrive here by boat? Are their traumas and their needs not the same? The

Nationality and Borders Bill says not; it says that they are illegal and could face up to four years in jail or be offshored, never to be reunited with their families.

The Minister talked about welcoming women and girls after year one. Nargis is 19. She and her husband fled to Pakistan, not realising that she would be in danger there, too. She is pleading with me, for the sake of her unborn baby, to help her escape. I told her that I would have news in January. Can the Minister please tell me what I should tell Nargis now?

Some of my constituents have family in hiding in Afghanistan. I have not heard anything today about how they can apply or whether anyone can apply—a crucial question, because the more vulnerable someone is, the less able they are to flee to a neighbouring country. How does someone in danger in Afghanistan apply?

Finally, I spoke this morning to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. It has been calling for details for some time, so it welcomes this confirmation, but it has a number of questions. The biggest question is whether everyone with indefinite leave to remain will get refugee status, which gives different rights. The families that COSLA is working with need to know so that they can make informed decisions. All 32 Scottish councils stand ready to support the Afghan schemes; I hope that the Minister can give them a bit more detail in her response.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. Just to help her understand, the ARAP scheme stands alongside the ACRS, so there is no question of people being transferred between the schemes. If people have met the eligibility under ARAP, they remain under ARAP. The ACRS is, as it were, the civilian scheme, whereas ARAP particularly looks after locally employed staff who worked with the Government and with the armed forces.

ARAP principals have been evacuated—some 7,000, including dependants. Throughout this, we have extracted not just principals, but their spouse, partner, children or dependants under the age of 18. One of the reasons why we have the issue of housing so many people at once is the size of some of the families we are having to rehouse.

We do have people arriving. Again, I hope the House understands that the security situation in the region is such that we cannot give definite numbers of who will arrive when each week because, by definition, there are many factors out of our control. However, some 1,500 people have already arrived since Operation Pitting was closed, both under ARAP and those who will fall to be eligible under the ACRS.

The hon. Lady speaks about the very troubling case she has raised. Again, I hope she will understand—I have made this clear in previous statements—that I cannot give advice off the cuff at the Dispatch Box for people who are in great danger. However, we are working closely with countries in the region to find safe routes for eligible Afghans to be evacuated from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. These efforts are ongoing and will continue as the situation changes and develops.

We are very keen to emphasise that the safety and security of eligible Afghans and their families is paramount. Indeed, the Minister for the Armed Forces visited the

region recently to identify what more we can do to work with both third-country and in-country applicants. We are exploring a range of options. I cannot go into details, but we are very much working with a wide range of allies and partners to see what more can be done.

Finally, I welcome—genuinely welcome—the support of Scottish councils in playing their part in our United Kingdom-wide effort to give homes to our new Afghan citizens. In relation to refugee status, those who come under the UNHCR scheme will be given refugee status by virtue of being referred by the UNHCR. We do not plan to do the same for others, simply because everyone who comes under ARAP and the ACRS will have indefinite leave to remain and will be as free to work, to enjoy their lives, to build their homes and to build their futures as any other person with indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Before we go any further, I do need to stress that a lot of people want to contribute on this statement and we have an important and well-subscribed Backbench Business debate afterwards. I would ask that colleagues put one question to the Minister to allow the Minister to give brief replies. This is very important, but we do need to move a little more quickly than we are at the moment if I am to have any hope of getting everybody in.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): May I return briefly to the point raised by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) about judges and prosecutors? The Minister will know that much work has been done by judges and lawyers in this country. People such as the noble Lord Goldsmith, Baroness Kennedy and Dame Maura McGowan, whom she and I both know, have done much to try to assist on this. There is concern about how the practical outworking of this will develop as the scheme goes forward. The scheme itself is welcome, but is she prepared to meet me and other interested parties to discuss the practical ways in which we can help these judges and prosecutors, particularly women? After all, many of them put their lives on the line to assist and protect British troops when prosecuting and judging those who had committed atrocities against our own people.

Victoria Atkins: I very much thank my hon. Friend, and I would be delighted to meet him and others involved in this effort. We are very conscious of the debt we owe to such judges. That is why I am very pleased that we have been able to welcome some already, but I do very much want to listen to the concerns in relation to others.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement this morning. I know that the Home Affairs Committee will want to look in detail at the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme in the coming months and take evidence from the Minister. May I press her on one issue that we raised in

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

a recent Select Committee meeting? It is the problem of those local authorities that do not put themselves forward for schemes such as these, resulting in the burden not being evenly shared across the country. Will councils be compelled to participate? When councils are involved in these schemes, can she guarantee that the Home Office will be constructive in consulting with those councils and providing the resources that they need?

Victoria Atkins: I welcome the right hon. Lady to her new place. I very much look forward, I think, to being scrutinised by her formidable Committee. I am very happy to thank those local authorities, some of which have gone way beyond what we could have hoped for in offering actual properties for people to move into. This is why we have already been able to achieve 4,000 people being moved into or about to move into their homes. This is an unprecedented scale compared with the Syrian resettlement scheme, in which 5,000 people were resettled in a year. We have now managed to resettle around 4,000 in just six months, but there is so much more to do. We are very much working with councils to encourage and persuade them, and to clarify the funding arrangements, because I know that some have had concerns about that. We really must have every council play its part, so that we can welcome people across the country and so that they can contribute to our local communities across the United Kingdom.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on everything that she is achieving. I listened carefully to the answers she gave to the Scottish National party on safe routes. I want to put before her the plight of people in Wycombe who have family in Afghanistan. They believe that those family members were eligible for visas before the evacuation, but those family members are now often in hiding and afraid, and they have no means of getting a visa and coming to join their family in the UK. What should we be telling those people? Will we honour the visas, and how?

Victoria Atkins: I know that this is an issue that is concerning many of our constituents. We have the safe and legal routes under the new plan for immigration, of which the ACRS and ARAP are a part. The family reunion rules will continue to apply, but I appreciate the difficulty that some are having in relation to still being in Afghanistan. That is why the work being done by the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey), is so important. It is through working with countries and regions that we will, I hope, be able to find other routes out, but we must emphasise to those individuals in Afghanistan that they will have a far better evaluation of their own safety and what they need to do to keep safe than I, sadly, can offer from the Dispatch Box today.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Back in the summer, when the Government announced the scheme, we were told:

“Priority will be given to women and girls, and religious and other minorities, who are most at risk of human rights abuses and dehumanising treatment by the Taliban.”

However, the Minister has just told us in her statement that women and children, LGBT people and people from religious minorities will not be able to apply until

year two of the scheme. Back in the summer, they were a priority. Now, they will feel betrayed and abandoned to persecution or worse. Will she reconsider her decision?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to correct the hon. Gentleman. He will know that we have already flown over people who fulfil those criteria. For example, three cohorts of LGBT Afghans have now been helped by the Government and civil society partners to leave Afghanistan. The Government are working with Stonewall, Micro Rainbow and other LGBT charities to support those cohorts and help them to set up their new lives in the UK. The point about recognising the vulnerabilities of those who have already been flown to the UK is significant because the groups that he understandably highlights in his question are among those who have already been evacuated and who, as I have made clear throughout my appearances at the Dispatch Box and, importantly, in our statement of 13 September, would fall to be eligible under the ACRS.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is clearly one of the most generous in the world, as my hon. Friend has rightly set out. Does she agree that 20,000 people is a very significant number that continues to reflect the fact that the United Kingdom has been one of the most hospitable countries in helping people in need, provided they come here by safe and legal means?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. Of course my hon. Friend knows that, in addition to the ACRS, we also have the ARAP scheme on which MOD officials and armed forces personnel continue to work very tightly. Although we have set the limit at up to 20,000 under the ACRS, the ARAP scheme sits alongside it and has no such limit. International comparisons are difficult, but the equivalent figure for the United States, for example, would be over 100,000 and we do not believe that any other country, thus far, will exceed 10,000. We believe we can be proud of what we have achieved, but we very much recognise that there is a lot of hard work ahead of us to ensure that people who are evacuated to the United Kingdom are given the warm welcome we have rightly promised.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is worsening by the day. Huge numbers of people do not know where their next meal will come from as they endure harsh winter conditions, and Islamic Relief is one of the few organisations working on the ground to provide emergency relief. Despite this, eligibility for ARAP was narrowed by the Home Office in December. The Government have a moral responsibility and duty to protect all vulnerable Afghans. Will the Minister now reverse that decision?

Victoria Atkins: May I take this opportunity to thank not just the hon. Gentleman but his local councils in Manchester, which have done a great job of looking after people in bridging accommodation? I know the councils also want to take people permanently.

On ARAP, I believe the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey), used the phrase “necessary housekeeping.” We had to clarify the rules and eligibility criteria to remove uncertainty on who qualifies. By making it

clearer for those who think they might be eligible, there will be more consistent decision making. Spouses and partners, along with children under the age of 18, will qualify as ARAP dependants under the immigration rules and will be eligible for relocation if the lead applicant is successful.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister mentioned former Chevening scholars being eligible under one strand of the new scheme. May I once again draw the House's attention to the scholars who are already fully validated and fully funded by the Council for At-Risk Academics, which has been rescuing scholars at risk of oppression since 1933? Most of the limited number of people CARA has validated and funded are applying for ordinary student visas, but it is taking a very long time. Will she look into that and speed it up?

Victoria Atkins: I am very happy to do so. I thank my right hon. Friend for his consistent effort to help these academics. We may be able to find a route through the expanded community sponsorship scheme, but I will meet him after taking it away and seeing what can happen.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know about the warm welcome in my Cardiff South and Penarth constituency from local authorities, the Welsh Government and community organisations, which is why it is particularly frustrating that I have not been able to resolve a number of the complex cases that I have raised with her and other Ministers. One case involves a British Council contractor who should have been eligible under ARAP. They are now out of Afghanistan in Qatar, but they are separated from their family in the UK. Are they supposed to continue under ARAP, or should they take this third route? Will she meet me to discuss that and the cases involving children under the age of 18 who are still separated from their families in the UK, which we raised in October?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to all local authorities that are helping, including those in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. I hope he will understand that I cannot give an answer at the Dispatch Box, but I will happily meet him imminently to discuss the case he raises.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her work on this hugely complex and important task. Stroud constituents have put me in touch with more than 100 Afghanistan people, largely in family groups, whose life and work in the Government in pre-Taliban Afghanistan mean that they are now in daily danger. Sadly, over the past few months I have made very little progress on these cases, particularly since we were told that cases were sent to the Ministry of Defence. For the sake of completeness, will my hon. Friend clarify what happens to those cases being held by the MOD now that the new resettlement scheme is live? What message would she give to those people and to my constituents whom we are trying to help?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for all the hard work and diligence she has shown in representing her constituents, who understandably have real concerns about their family members. I will happily meet her to

discuss the matter. Because the launching of the scheme is such a significant event and many, many constituents throughout the country have contacted their Members of Parliament, it will take us a little bit of time to sort through individual cases, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to clarify the situation and to see whether we can make progress. As I say, people who are already here in the United Kingdom will be on the pathway to settlement because we have worked so quickly after Operation Pitting.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): May I raise with the Minister again the particular vulnerability of women who were formerly judges and prosecutors in Afghanistan? She knows that I have been working with Marzia Babakarkhail, a former judge who is in the United Kingdom and is in touch with many of these women. The Minister said that some will have already come to the United Kingdom, but my understanding is that they are mainly very senior judges who were based in Kabul, at the heart of things; Marzia is particularly concerned about female judges and prosecutors in the provinces of Afghanistan. Will the Minister take some time to meet me and Marzia to discuss how the United Kingdom can help these women, whether by bringing them here or by helping them to get to a third country? Will she afford some time for such a meeting?

Victoria Atkins: I would be happy to do so. The hon. and learned Lady makes an important point. She has got the point, if I may say so, that sadly we will not be able to help every Afghan judge, but if we can signpost them to other countries that may be able to help, we will of course be pleased and keen to do so.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I, too, thank my hon. Friend for her excellent work on the scheme thus far. As was implied by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), the long-term success of the scheme will depend on the Minister and the Government persuading local authorities to participate and on giving them the tools to succeed. That is more difficult than it was with the Syrian scheme because local authorities currently have literally tens of thousands of people, mostly asylum seekers, in hotel accommodation. There are currently 60,000 to 80,000 individuals—almost a constituency-worth of people—in hotels. What is my hon. Friend going to do to persuade local authorities throughout the United Kingdom to participate and to ensure that they have the funding and support that they need to do so?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my right hon. Friend for his role at the beginning of Operation Warm Welcome. He did an enormous amount to energise and persuade councils of the benefits they could derive from having new citizens in their local areas. We are looking at a wealth of options to try to address the housing needs that my right hon. Friend has articulated so well. Those options range from the generous funding package that we have set out for some months now under the resettlement scheme to approaches such as a jobs-first approach—namely, trying to match jobs with those Afghans who feel able to work, and with accommodation. We are seeing whether we can get help from employers to offer accommodation as part of their employment offer and

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we are using the likes of Rightmove and others to tap into the private rental market so that we get these people into permanent homes as quickly as possible.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The change in the eligibility rules for ARAP has caused great concern to former British Council staff in Afghanistan, including those who are in hiding, in fear of their lives, because the Taliban are looking for them. What can the Minister say to them and their families about the help that the UK is able to offer, particularly given the fact that there is currently no means of issuing visas in Afghanistan to enable people to leave the country? Might the Government consider that in the not-too-distant future?

Victoria Atkins: As I said in my statement, the FCDO will be in touch with the three groups I described to advise them on the next steps of the process. We do, of course, have the security of the United Kingdom at the very heart of our approaches. I am told that the FCDO will be in a position to make contact with those people.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): My council, Kensington and Chelsea, has welcomed and continues to host many, many hundreds of Afghan evacuees in bridging accommodation. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need councils across the country to step up with permanent accommodation? It is clearly in the interests of our Afghan evacuees that they move into permanent accommodation as quickly as possible, so they can put down permanent roots in those communities.

Victoria Atkins: I thank the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea for the great work it has done in supporting many, many Afghans and their families. Indeed, it has been leading our efforts to work up integration packages, so that people understand the values and laws of our country, as well as the day-to-day practical measures they need. I completely agree with my hon. Friend that the more councils that offer houses, the quicker people are moved out.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): When will the Minister be able to tell us more about the arrangements for family reunion that she referred to earlier for people at risk in Afghanistan who have family here ready to support them? Will every effort be made to place people arriving from Afghanistan who have close family here wanting to help them in temporary accommodation close to their relatives?

Victoria Atkins: In relation to the first question, as I say, I am in the hands of my ministerial colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the FCDO as to what can be done internationally, but the family reunion rules are as set out in the immigration rules. On trying to accommodate people in bridging accommodation close to their families—I think that was the right hon. Gentleman's question—we are doing our level best, but I hope he and others will understand that, because of the scale of the evacuation and all the factors we have heard about, there are many factors we have to take into account, including the size of families, which we cannot always accommodate as quickly as we would like.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Statements are meant to take an hour or less. I will not let this statement run past an hour, so we need much shorter questions please.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I first pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend, who has done such an extraordinary job? The amount of joy it has given me to welcome friends into this country has been frankly overwhelming, but there are many who are still stuck in third countries. Please can she address with the Foreign Office the support of those who are waiting for exit visas or support? Secondly, those who have written to me for support, and to many other Members across the House and the country, have often applied for schemes that have now been replaced. Will those applications be rolled into this scheme, or will they require resubmission?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to the very moving speech he gave in this Chamber over the summer. On the schemes being superseded by the ACRS and ARAP, if I may, I will discuss that with him outside the Chamber, because I just want to be clear about what schemes he is responding to. Our aim throughout is to get eligible people to the United Kingdom as quickly and as safely as possible, and then to settle them well within our country.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Around 200 Afghan constituents have contacted me since August. In the main, they have either dependents stuck in Afghanistan or relatives who are at serious risk because they worked in support of coalition forces but do not qualify under the restrictions of the ARAP scheme. Can the Minister explain how those groups will be helped by her scheme? To me, and I suspect to them, it looks like a brick wall.

Victoria Atkins: Again, I hope the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I cannot analyse 200 cases off the cuff at the Dispatch Box. The ACRS has now been launched and the ARAP scheme was launched some time ago, and assessments are being conducted to refer eligible people to those schemes. The family reunion rules are set out in the immigration rules, and we are working with third countries and other international partners where we can to try to secure routes outside of Afghanistan to the United Kingdom.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Stoke-on-Trent has already contributed far more than our fair share to refugee resettlement, and we are now supporting Afghans with rehousing. Given that many other parts of the country have done little to support refugee resettlement up to now, does my hon. Friend agree that we should ensure that councils who have done little up to now pay and play their fair share with the Afghan resettlement scheme?

Victoria Atkins: May I pay particular tribute to the good people of Stoke? They have been incredibly welcoming not just to Afghans but to many other immigrants to the country and looked after them. I very much acknowledge my hon. Friend's point that it is for us all to play our part and to ask our councils to offer homes where they can and to identify properties. The quicker that we can get properties on our books, as it were, the

sooner people can move out of bridging accommodation and build real, permanent futures for themselves and their families.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am clearly not alone in dealing with large number of constituents with family members trapped in Afghanistan. They are increasingly desperate, because until today they did not have any further detail about the resettlement scheme's operation. Will the Minister now publish advice and guidance that we can provide to constituents with family members in Afghanistan whose lives are at risk? Having listened to the statement and knowing about the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan and the dangers of travelling to a third country, I fear that those constituents will be losing all hope.

Victoria Atkins: Again, we have been clear from the start—it was clear in the 13 September statement—that this is not a process open for applications. It is a referral process precisely because of the numbers involved. We know that an enormous number of the population of some 40 million will feel unsafe, and we do not have an unlimited capacity to help all 40 million citizens. I encourage the hon. Lady to help her constituents who are looking at the family reunion rules and the schemes to see if there is a route for them.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Government have rightly included minority groups, including those at risk due to their religious beliefs, in the eligibility criteria for the ACRS. Will the Minister reassure me that the ACRS is now open to those vulnerable religious minorities and that that could be combined with community sponsorship?

Victoria Atkins: Very much so. I am told that some people who fall into the criteria described by my hon. Friend have already been evacuated to the United Kingdom. I know that she has been a real advocate for the community sponsorship policy. Indeed, I am proud to say that one of my local churches is making efforts to participate in that. I look forward to seeing that in my constituency.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has repeatedly talked about the family reunion rules and pointed to the existing rules. However, there are families who cannot pass the English language test to try to get into the UK—how on earth will they learn the English language under the current Taliban regime? Are the Government looking at loosening some of the rules of family reunion for Afghan families coming to join their family member in the UK? The family members have got housing and the ability to support their families and help them to learn English here, but that rule is one of the many barriers to them coming here in the first place.

Victoria Atkins: I understand the House's focus on family reunion rules, because, as the hon. Lady said, so many already have family here. We have had to apply the rules as fairly and proportionately as we can, recognising the realities of the security situation in Afghanistan. We have no consular presence in Afghanistan, and the British Army withdrew at the end of August, so we are working with third countries and consulates in third countries to try to help people. I cannot pretend that

this is an easy process. I have tried to be clear throughout with the House about just how difficult it is to get out people who are already in Afghanistan.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Some 29 years ago, my battalion—my officers particularly—involved itself in getting our interpreters back to the United Kingdom from Bosnia. My battalion did it on its own; we often had to put people up. Eventually, we got accommodation, but we did not get support to help the people we brought in to get an education, medical care and jobs. I ask my hon. Friend to assure me that the system will follow all the way through to ensure that the people we are helping are helped all the way through the integration process.

Victoria Atkins: Again, I stand in awe of some of my right hon. Friend's military achievements. He is right that we are trying to be ambitious in our integration schemes. We have put forward generous funding packages for housing, education and healthcare and, importantly, to focus on helping people to understand our values, customs and laws so that they can get going and build lives for themselves as quickly as possible. For example, it is great news that all children who were evacuated during Operation Pitting are now in school, and that is very much the tone and the progress that we want to make with everyone we welcome through Operation Warm Welcome.

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): May I ask the Minister about individuals who already have the right to live in the UK but cannot reach the UK safely? I have cases of people who already have leave to remain in the UK but are trapped in Afghanistan and have not been able to access consular support as they are not UK nationals.

One constituent has children in Afghanistan who applied for UK citizenship but have not been able to travel to the consulate in Pakistan to complete their application. Can the Minister explain what support will be given to those individuals? I also remind her that she agreed to meet me in September and I have sent a follow-up request but I still have not received a response.

Victoria Atkins: On that point, I apologise and that meeting will happen in the next seven days. On the hon. Lady's point about people who are still in-country, as I said, we are working closely with countries in the region to find safe routes for eligible Afghans to be evacuated from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Those efforts are ongoing and will continue as the situation changes and develops. I am sorry that I cannot give her more information, but that, I am afraid, is the reality of the situation.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I very much welcome today's announcement, and in particular, the statement at the Dispatch Box in respect of resettling well. A key part of that for local authorities is ensuring access to education. What assessment has been undertaken to ensure the adequacy of the funding provided to local authorities so that every refugee child receives a good-quality education?

Victoria Atkins: We have published our support package for whole families, which of course includes children. It focuses on the needs of not just school-age children but,

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importantly, adults who may need support in learning English. We have a fund of £850 per eligible adult to help them to enrol on English for speakers of other languages courses.

The Department for Education has also announced that young people who wish to go on to higher education will fall into the system of having indefinite leave to remain, so they will not have to pay the sorts of fees that others from overseas have to pay. We are very keen that children be integrated as quickly as possible, because they are the future for ensuring that their families play an important part in our local communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I appreciate that the Minister is giving very thorough answers, but from now on, people will have to be satisfied with quick answers. If they do not ask quick questions, not everyone will get in.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): On 30 September, I received a letter from Lord Ahmad in response to the many cases of my constituents' families stuck in Afghanistan. It listed all those cases and said whether they were with the Ministry of Defence or the Home Office. Can the Minister give me an update on the status of those people and what I can tell my constituents?

Victoria Atkins: I think that is an answer that should be provided outside the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker, given your recent encouragement.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I thank the Minister for all her work to help those most at risk in Afghanistan. While it is of course right that we offer this support, it does come with a cost for our local authorities. Can she confirm that local authorities in our home county of Lincolnshire will be provided with additional funding for any resettlements that are made?

Victoria Atkins: Yes, very much so. I am delighted that local councils are responding as well as they are, but I very much encourage all councils to play their part in resettlements across the United Kingdom.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Can we get a bit more clarity, because many of us have large numbers of outstanding cases that are with various Government Departments? One problem has been all the various different schemes, and these are being pulled together. Will we get replies telling us where our constituents are in the system so that we can advise them, because many of those who provided services to the British forces, or indeed to the Afghan security services and the Afghan judiciary, even if they were not judges, seem to be being left out in the cold?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will no doubt recall my "Dear colleague" letter of around 13 September in which I set out that I cannot provide detailed casework answers for people who are still in Afghanistan. There are now two schemes—ARAP and the ACRS. We have set out the eligibility criteria, as I explained in my statement. I encourage him to look at

that statement as well as the statement that will come after this debate to see the details that we will be setting out.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement and for the opening of the ACRS today. Local authorities in my constituency are playing their part. The Corporation of London is supporting 500 Afghan nationals with covid and flu vaccines. It is also, in the Guildhall, teaching them the English language, and now we need to be looking at the employment side. Addison Lee, the transport business in my constituency, has asked me to make it known that it is desperately keen to support the Government in skills and jobs for Afghan refugees. Will the Minister therefore explain what the employment strategy is for Afghan refugees?

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend, and Westminster City Council and the City of London, who have done an amazing job in looking after so many people so well. I will refer her very good suggestion to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), who is responsible for employment. The DWP is working up plans and we are very keen to get people who are able to into jobs as quickly as possible.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Having had long experience of the delays and injustice meted out by the Home Office to my constituents seeking leave to remain or naturalisation, what is the Minister doing, in her cross-departmental role, to ensure that similar delays and injustice are not repeated for Afghan citizens applying for these schemes?

Victoria Atkins: The first families have already been granted indefinite leave to remain. The caseworking exercise continues and many thousands of people are being worked through at pace. But we are clear that anyone who is in this country under the ARAP or ACRS schemes will be eligible for indefinite leave to remain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I said that we would stop at one hour, but I cannot possibly leave out the last two people, who will be really, really brief.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): The UK has a very proud history of accepting people who are in great need. I think of the Ugandan Asian community, who I know very well. This scheme shows that we do have legal and safe routes to come and live in this country. Does that not reinforce the need to crack down on illegal routes, particularly the small boats? Does the Minister agree that the legislation that is currently in the House of Lords is vital in that fight?

Victoria Atkins: I am pleased to say that I do agree most wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, who has articulated very well the issues facing this House and the country as a whole. What a shame it is that the Opposition only oppose and never come up with proper answers to these very difficult issues.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The delay of this scheme has been very traumatic for many of my constituents who have family members at risk of being murdered or kidnapped as child brides for Taliban soldiers, which has happened to them. I will be meeting them next week. Can I tell them how they will know if they are in the system; how, if they cannot apply, they will know whether they are going to be contacted; and when is the earliest that they will be brought here if they are eligible for the third route that the Minister mentioned?

Victoria Atkins: I assume that the hon. Lady is talking about constituents here in the United Kingdom, because she is meeting them. If they are in bridging accommodation, they will be considered as part of either ARAP or ACRS, unless they are British nationals. In relation to people who are in Afghanistan, I refer the hon. Lady to my previous answers.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Minister for her assiduous answers to a great many questions.

Backbench Business

Russia's Grand Strategy

1.55 pm

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

That this House has considered Russia's grand strategy.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for safeguarding a touch more than the three hours that we were promised for this most important debate. I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for it at this most crucial moment, with developments in Ukraine and elsewhere.

The term "grand strategy" may seem something of a relic from previous centuries, and one that became irrelevant with the end of the cold war, but to think so would be to ignore what is happening in today's world. There are many Governments around the world today who practise grand strategy, but sadly very few are allies of the west. Most are despotic regimes that are constantly challenging the rules-based international order on which western security and the global trading system depend. The most immediately threatening of such powers is, undoubtedly, Russia.

Today's Russia has inherited an admirably precise and uniformly understood meaning of the term "strategy". "Politika", meaning policy, stands at the top of a hierarchy of terms and describes the goal to be achieved; "strategiya" describes how the goal is to be achieved. Military strategy is merely a subset of global, national or grand strategy.

So what is the goal behind Russia's grand strategy? Putin's goal is nothing less than to demonstrate the end of US global hegemony and establish Russia on an equal footing with the US; to change Russia's status within Europe and become the pre-eminent power; to put Russia in a position to permanently influence Europe and drive a wedge between Europe and the USA; and to re-establish Russia's de facto control over as much of the former Soviet Union and its sphere of influence as possible. As the strategy succeeds, Putin also intends to leverage China's power and influence in Russia's own interests. China, incidentally, will be watching how we defend Ukraine as it considers its options for Taiwan.

On 17 December, the Russian Foreign Ministry unveiled the texts of two proposed new treaties: a US-Russia treaty and a NATO-Russia treaty. Moscow's purported objective is to obtain

"legal security guarantees from the United States and NATO".

Moscow has requested that the United States and its NATO allies meet the Russian demands without delay.

This is, in fact, a Russian ultimatum. Putin is demanding that the US and NATO should agree that NATO will never again admit new members, even such neutral countries as Sweden, Finland and Austria, which have always been in the western zone of influence; that NATO should be forbidden from having any military presence in the former Warsaw pact countries that have already joined NATO; and that the US should withdraw all its nuclear forces from Europe, meaning that the only missiles threatening European cities would be Russian ones. The ultimatum is premised on a fundamental lie, which Putin has promulgated since he attended the

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Bucharest NATO summit in 2008 as an invited guest. That lie is that NATO represents a threat to Russian national security.

As Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov explained:

"The two texts are not written according to the principle of a menu, where you can choose one or the other, they complement each other and should be considered as a whole."

He described the NATO-Russia text as a kind of parallel guarantee, because

"the Russian Foreign Ministry is fully aware that the White House may not meet its obligations, and therefore there is a separate draft treaty for NATO countries."

Putin's intention is to bind NATO through the United States, and bind the United States through NATO. There is nothing to negotiate; they just have to accept everything as a whole.

Russian media are already triumphant, proclaiming:

"The world before, and the world after, December 17, 2021 are completely different worlds... If until now the United States held the whole world at gunpoint, now it finds itself under the threat of Russian military forces. A new era is opening".

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about Russian grand strategy and Russian grand design. I am sure that he will come on to talk about the way in which the Russians are using gas and energy to manipulate and coerce our key NATO partners in central and eastern Europe, such as Poland, with the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Does he agree that it is a disappointment that our own Government have not imposed sanctions on the companies involved in the construction of that pipeline?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I will not comment on that particular suggestion, but I will be coming to the question of gas.

This ultimatum is, in fact, Russian blackmail, directed at both the Americans and the Europeans. If the west does to accept the Russian ultimatum, they will have to face what Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko calls

"a military and technical alternative".

What does he mean by that? Let me quote him further:

"The Europeans must also think about whether they want to avoid making their continent the scene of a military confrontation. They have a choice. Either they take seriously what is put on the table, or they face a military-technical alternative."

After the publication of the draft treaty, the possibility of a pre-emptive strike against NATO targets—similar to those that Israel inflicted on Iran—was confirmed by the Deputy Minister of Defence, Andrei Kartapolov. He said:

"Our partners must understand that the longer they drag out the examination of our proposals and the adoption of real measures to create these guarantees, the greater the likelihood that they will suffer a pre-emptive strike."

Apparently to make things clear, Russia fired a "salvo" of Zircon hypersonic missiles on 24 December, after which Dmitry Peskov, the Kremlin spokesman, commented:

"Well, I hope that the notes—
of 17 December—
"will be more convincing".

We should be clear that Russia's development of hypersonic weapons is already a unilateral escalation in

a new arms race which is outside any existing arms limitation agreements. The Russian editorialist Vladimir Mozhegov commented:

"The Zircon simply does its job: it methodically shoots huge, clumsy aircraft carriers like a gun at cans."

An article in the digital newspaper *Svpressa* was eloquently titled "Putin's ultimatum: Russia, if you will, will bury all of Europe and two-thirds of the United States in 30 minutes".

How have we reached this crisis, with the west in general, and NATO in particular, so ill prepared to face down such provocation, when Putin's malign intent has been evident in his actions for a decade and a half? Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the west has too easily dismissed today's Russia as a mere shadow of the former Soviet Union. Yes, it has an economy no greater than Italy's; it has no ideological equivalent of communism, which so dominated left-wing thinking throughout most of the 20th century; it has very few if any real allies; and much of the rhetoric that emerges is bluster, reflecting weakness rather than strength. Nevertheless, we should not dismiss what Russia has done since 2008 and what Russia is capable of doing with its vast arsenal of new weaponry, and nor should we take a complacent view of Russia's future intentions. After all, just months after the Bucharest summit in 2008, where he was welcomed as a guest, Putin seized Georgian sovereign territory in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In 2014 he illegally annexed the Crimea. His aggression was rewarded, because we have tolerated these illegal invasions.

Many western leaders, and the bulk of the western public, have failed to understand that Ukraine is merely a component of a long-running hybrid warfare campaign against the west. They fail to appreciate the extent and nature of Russia's campaign or the range of weapons used.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I am following carefully what my hon. Friend has to say and agree with so much of it. Does he agree that the current Russian intervention in Kazakhstan is part of a piece? This is Putin running true to form. Although theoretically it is at the invitation of a Government that this country recognises, nevertheless it is likely to be classic Putin and expand into a long-term intervention, on the flimsy pretext that that country has a significant ethnic Russian population or one that speaks Russian.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Indeed, and I will be explaining how these apparently disparate events are integrated in Russia's grand strategy.

Beneath the cloak of this military noise and aggressive disinformation, in recent months—Kazakhstan is another example—Russia has been testing the west's response with a succession of lower-level provocations, and I am afraid that we have signally failed to convince the Russians that we mind very much or are going to do very much about them. They have rigged the elections in Belarus, continued cyber-attacks on NATO allies, particularly in the Baltic states, and demonstrated the ability to destroy a satellite in orbit with a missile, bringing space into the arms race. They continue to develop whole new ranges of military equipment, including tanks with intelligent armour, fleets of ice breakers, new generations of submarines, including a new class of ballistic missile submarine, and the first hypersonic missiles.

They have carried out targeted assassinations and attempted assassinations in NATO countries using illegal chemical weapons, provoked a migration crisis in Belarus to destabilise Ukraine, and brought Armenia back under Russian control, snuffing out the democratic movement there. They have claimed sovereignty over 1.2 million square miles of Arctic seabed, including the north pole, which together contain huge oil and gas and mineral reserves. This followed the reopening of the northern sea route, with Chinese co-operation and support from France and Germany, which also hope to benefit. Meanwhile, the UK has expressed no intention of getting involved.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He has just outlined some weapons that Russia has developed, but does he agree that the recklessness with which it has done so makes them even worse? The nuclear-powered Poseidon torpedo is cooled by seawater, and they feel that some of their hypersonic missiles are cooled by the air, so they have no concerns whatsoever about radioactive contamination from the delivery systems, let alone the payloads.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: My right hon. Friend is completely right. They are ruthless about pursuing what they regard as their own interests and disregard any other risk. Indeed, they are very far from being risk-averse, and the west has been far too risk-averse to compete with that. I will come to that later, but I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding us about the Poseidon torpedo, which is a nuclear-tipped torpedo—another escalation in the arms race.

Russia has also been rearming the Serbs in the western Balkans, including the Serb armed forces and the police in the Serb enclave of Bosnia, with the intention of destabilising the fragile peace that NATO achieved 30 years ago. Russia has stepped up its activity and influence in north and central Africa and has even started giving support to Catalan separatists in Spain. Russia uses its diaspora of super-rich Russian kleptocrats to influence western leaders and exploit centres such as the City of London to launder vast wealth for its expatriate clients.

Following the shaming chairmanship of Gazprom assumed by the former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, so Russia has now recruited former French Prime Minister François Fillon to become a board director of the massive Russian petrochemicals company Sibur, with its headquarters in Moscow. The Russians must have contempt for us for being so gullible and corruptible. Our unilateral withdrawal from Kabul also vindicates their narrative that the west is weak, pointing out that we failed to stand by our moral principles or our friends.

Closer to home, look at how Gazprom has gradually and quietly reduced the gas supply to Europe, running down Europe's gas reserves and causing prices to spike, leading to quadrupling gas and electricity prices in the UK. If Putin now chokes off the supply, it would take time and investment to put in place the necessary alternatives, which the Russians will seek to frustrate, as they already have in Algeria. Algeria was in a position to increase its supply of gas to EU, depending on the existing pipeline being upgraded, but a successful Russian influence campaign aimed at Germany and France prevented that from happening. Gazprom is enjoying its

best ever year, so Putin can not only threaten western Europe's energy supplies, but get the west to fund his war against the west.

Moreover, as gas supplies to Germany through Ukraine seem less reliable, so Germany continues to support Nord Stream 2, the pipeline that will bypass Ukraine, strengthening Russia's hold over both countries immeasurably. At least we have the option of re-exploiting our gas reserves in the North sea. For as long as we require gas in our energy mix, we should be generating our own, not relying on imported gas from Europe.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman's last statement will be very much welcomed by workers in the gas and oil industry, but was it not also remiss of the Government a few years ago not to continue with the gas storage facility in the North sea, which would have provided us with some resilience? We should also have been working with other countries to build up their reserves, to diminish the ability of the Kremlin and Gazprom to blackmail us.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: All I can say is, do not start me on the lamentable incoherence of 20 years of UK energy policy, because it is a disgrace, and something that we could have done so much better and that this Government are starting to repair, but it will take some time.

Daniel Kawczynski: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I have already given way to my hon. Friend, so I hope he will forgive me if I do not take up more time.

The constantly high level of Russian military activity in and around Ukraine and the attention being drawn to it have enabled the Kremlin to mount a huge disinformation campaign, designed to persuade the Russian people and the west that NATO is Russia's major concern, that somehow NATO is a needless provocation—I am looking at my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), because I cannot believe how wrong he is on this—and that Russian activity is just a response to a supposed threat from NATO. That is complete rubbish.

The only reason the west is a threat to the regime in Russia is who we are and what we represent. We are free peoples, who are vastly more prosperous than most Russians, liberal in outlook, relatively uncorrupted and democratic. The Russian narrative is nothing but a mixture of regime insecurity and self-induced paranoia. Putin feels that Ukraine becoming visibly and irrevocably part of the western liberal democratic family would show the Russian population that that path was also open to Russia as an alternative to Putinism. Let us remind ourselves that Russia's war against Ukraine in 2014 was provoked not by Ukraine attempting to join NATO, but by its proposed association agreement with the EU.

It is crucial to understand that Russia's hybrid campaign is conducted like a war, with a warlike strategic headquarters at the National Defence Management Centre at the old army staff HQ, where all the elements of the Russian state are represented in a permanent warlike council, re-analysing, reassessing and revising plans and tactics. The whole concept of strategy, as understood and practised by Putin and his colleagues, is as something completely interactive with what their opponents are doing. It is

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not a detailed blueprint to be followed. It is primarily a measure-countermeasure activity; a research-based operation, based on real empiricism; an organically evolving struggle; a continual experiment, where the weapons are refined and even created during the battle; and where stratagems and tactics must be constantly adapted; and plans constantly rewritten to take account of our actions and reactions, ideally pre-empting or manipulating them. It is also highly opportunistic, which means that they are thinking constantly about creating and exploiting new opportunities.

To guide such constant and rapid adaptation, the strategy process must include feedback loops and learning processes. To enable that, what the Russians call the hybrid warfare battlefield is, as they describe it, "instrumented." It is monitored constantly by military and civilian analysts in Russia and abroad, by embassy staff, journalists, intelligence officers and other collaborators, all of whom feed their observations and contributions to those implementing the hybrid warfare operations.

Meanwhile, western Governments such as ours still operate on the basis that we face no warlike challenges or campaigns. We entirely lack the capacity or even the will to carry out strategic analysis, assessment and adequate foresight on the necessary scale. We lack the strategic imagination that would offer us opportunities to pre-empt or disrupt the Russian strategy. We have no coherent body of skills and knowledge to give us analogous capacity to compete with Russian grand strategy. Our heads are in the sand. So much of domestic politics is about distracting trivia, while Russia and others, such as China, are crumbling the foundations of our global security.

Why does this matter? It matters because our interests, the global trading system on which our prosperity depends and the rules-based international order which underpins our peace and security are at stake. We are outside the EU. We can dispense with the illusion that an EU common defence and security policy could ever have substituted for our own vigilance and commitment. We must acknowledge that while the United States of America is still the greatest superpower, it has become something of an absentee landlord in NATO, tending to regard European security issues as regional, rather than a direct threat to US interests. Part of UK national strategy must be to re-engage the US fully, but that will be hard post-Trump. He has left terrible scars on US politics, and the Biden Administration are frozen by a hostile Congress, leading to bitter political paralysis. Nevertheless, the priority must be to reunite NATO.

Having initially refused to have a summit, President Biden has now provisionally agreed to a meeting with Putin on 9 and 10 January—this weekend—to negotiate what? We all want dialogue, and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) speaking from the Opposition Front Bench earlier said we want dialogue, but it should not be to discuss the Russian agenda. Being forced to the table to negotiate that way would be appeasement. It would be rewarding threats of aggression, which is no different from giving way to aggression itself. What further concessions can the west offer without looking like appeasers? The Geneva meetings have to signal a dramatic shift in the west's attitude and resolve, or they will be hailed as a Russian victory.

Some are now comparing the present decade to the 1930s prelude to world war two, where we eventually found we were very alone. If we want to avoid that, the UK needs to rediscover what in the past it has done so well, but it means an end to muddling through and hoping for the best. We cannot abdicate our own national strategy to NATO or the US. It means creating our own machinery of government and a culture in our Government that can match the capability and determination of our adversaries in every field of activity.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a brilliant speech, and thereby shortening the one that I will make very considerably. He has made the comparison with the run-up to the second world war. One of the key final shocks in that catalogue of disaster was the unexpected Nazi-Soviet pact. Would the equivalent to that be some form of Chinese move against Taiwan, which would so distract the United States as to be the last piece of the jigsaw in the picture that he is painting of a Russian plan to dominate the European continent?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I have no doubt that Russia and China are not allies, but they know how to help each other, and I think my right hon. Friend's warning is very timely. As I said earlier, how we deal with Ukraine will reflect how Russia regards Taiwan and, I suppose, vice versa.

I was talking about the need to create our machinery of government and our culture in Government that can match the kind of strategic decision making that takes place in Moscow. I can assure the House that there are people inside and outside Whitehall who are seized of this challenge, and Members will be hearing more from us in the months ahead.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I hope we can manage this afternoon's business without a formal time limit. If everyone speaks for between eight and nine minutes, we will do so. If people speak for significantly more than eight minutes, I will have to impose a time limit.

2.19 pm

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): As we made clear earlier, there is considerable concern about the rapidly deteriorating situation in Ukraine, particularly on its frontier. In today's debate, as has been well introduced by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), we need to look at that on a much broader spectrum—basically one of a revanchist Russia that is seeking to rewrite the end of the cold war. It is seeking to recreate the Soviet Union; to increase its influence, if not its direct acquisition—I do not think it would rule that out, however—of the former Soviet Republics; and to establish hegemony over the former countries of the Warsaw pact, as well as to keep Finland in a state of neutrality and to have considerable influence in the western Balkans. That is very clear. Most of those countries are members of NATO and of the EU, and some of them are members of both. I think that explains the Kremlin's enormous hostility to both those institutions, as it seeks to do everything it can to undermine them.

We need to recognise the nature of that threat, to which the hon. Gentleman drew attention very effectively. It is not just a military threat. We talk about the

100,000 troops on the border, and that is significant, although there might be a tendency to overestimate the efficacy of much of Russia's equipment. Although Russia may be making advances and developments in hypersonics and so on, quite a lot of its other equipment—we see this particularly with its surface fleet—is distinctly substandard. We need a strong evaluation of that, and that would be much easier had Whitehall not dispersed so much of its Russia-watching capability after the fall of the Berlin wall, leaving a great gap. There may be some attempts to recreate that, but I do not think we have anything like the ability we once had to observe and understand what is going on.

That is also tied to integration. The hon. Member described very well the integrating mechanisms within the system—it is very reminiscent of the Soviet system during the cold war—to integrate all areas: cultural life, political life and industrial espionage, so that they work together in a co-ordinated way. If I asked the Minister where in Whitehall was the UK's integration along those lines—I am not aware of it—I think he would be hard pressed to put his finger on it. What frustrates me enormously is that in the past, we had quite a good record on this. During the second world war, the Political Warfare Executive—headed up, interestingly enough, by Richard Crossman, subsequently a Labour Member of Parliament and Labour Minister—pulled together journalistic and psychological expertise, and it had an extremely effective record.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I want very briefly to relay two conversations that I have had about strategic thinking in Government. One was with a person who is now the former Prime Minister, who said, “Oh, Bernard thinks we should have a strategy, but I think we should remain flexible,” completely misunderstanding what strategy is. The second was with a Minister who is now serving in a very senior capacity in this Government, and who said, “What is our strategy? We think we have to work with NATO.” In this country, we are so far behind understanding what strategy is that we have a very great task in front of us.

John Spellar: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Of course, many people quote Eisenhower as saying that all strategic plans break down on first contact with the enemy. Of course, they forget the next sentence: nevertheless, it is still necessary to plan, and to have a framework.

It is also necessary to look at this issue, as our opponents do, in a broad spectrum to see how all the areas interlink. That is the problem that we faced for some years with industrial espionage, for example, although people are waking up to that to quite a degree. Traditionally, all the way through, there has been industrial espionage by the Russians, and more recently by the Chinese, but there has been a reluctance and a failure to see it in such a way. Many of those who criticise such an approach say, “You are trying to recreate the cold war.” No, we are not. The cold war has already been restarted.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): As far as I can see, President Putin reanimated a sense of hostility—people can call it a cold war, or whatever they like—in his Munich conference speech in 2007. Since then, what has been so blindingly depressing about western Governments, and specifically the UK Government, is that we desperately tried, really until 2014, to pretend that that had not

happened. I am afraid that that just shows that it is better to face the reality, however uncomfortable it is, than to behave like an ostrich.

John Spellar: Such behaviour, I am afraid, has been a regular feature. Everybody should be very clear. Putin only recently described the break-up of the Soviet Union as “a disintegration of historical Russia under the name of the Soviet Union”.

We should remember that he previously called its collapse the “greatest geopolitical catastrophe” of the 20th century. Oh that mine enemy would write a book! He has made it very clear where he stands, and therefore we have to respond to that effectively. We look at the troops in Ukraine, and talk about the little green men. We must also look right the way through the middle east and north Africa, and indeed further down into Africa. The Wagner Group is a so-called private sector operation, but it is licensed by, closely related to and deeply embedded in the Kremlin, and operates on its behalf and at its behest.

Slightly diverting from the Political Warfare Executive, in the post-war period under Ernest Bevin the information research department was created at the Foreign Office, precisely to run a full spectrum influence war in order to shape opinion in the UK and more widely in the western world and, as part of that operation, to look at and operate on the structural weaknesses within the Soviet bloc. If Soviet communism is an effective way of seizing power, it is a lousy way of running economies and societies. We therefore have to take the fight to them.

That is not just about agitation, propaganda and trying to mirror the disinformation and lies; one of the most effective weapons against such authoritarian and dictatorial regimes is to tell the truth about what is going on in their societies. We should always remember why the Russians, the Chinese and others are so afraid of their own populations knowing and understanding the truth. There is ample historical evidence from the last 100 years that many of those who run such societies and their secret police know much better than we do how unstable those societies are, and how thin is the level of support. That does not mean that they are not dangerous, because one of the ways of trying to mask that is external adventurism and trying to create the prospect of a threat abroad.

It has been rightly said that NATO is not an offensive alliance; it is a defensive alliance. I do not understand—I put this to the Minister—why we are not providing defensive equipment to the Ukrainian forces, not in order to take the fight to Russia but to allow them to defend themselves effectively against any incursion. Military doctrine should say that the defender has a significant advantage. We have seen, for example, in a number of recent conflicts that heavy armour can be severely impacted by the use of quite cheap drones.

I am not trying to create such an expertise, but merely questioning whether we are looking at providing defensive equipment to protect a sovereign country—a country guaranteed by the Budapest agreement, signed by Russia and ourselves—and why we are not supporting it in maintaining its independence. This is also because of the signals to elsewhere in the world, which others have talked about, such as the other countries formerly in the Soviet Union, particularly the Baltics, which have been

[John Spellar]

feeling the pressure both of military exercises and indeed of intelligence operations for a very considerable period.

I am mindful of your strictures on time, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I would just like to say this in closing. Some of those countries will be saying that this is destabilising. Actually, I think that recognising the nature of the system and being not aggressive or assertive but robust, while indicating that we stand by our rights and by our friends and negotiating in a proper and effective way with the Russians on that basis—not giving concessions just for having talks, but trying, as we did in the cold war, to reach containment and a *modus vivendi*—is the route ahead. However, that requires robust action, and, in the words of someone who was involved in those discussions previously, “Trust, but verify”.

2.31 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): It is a privilege to be called in this debate. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for having secured it, and indeed to the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), who has elucidated many points that I know many on all sides share. It is only a shame that those who were such strong advocates for Putin's murderous campaign in Salisbury are not in the Chamber today to defend their hero. However, we will have to address the issues that they would have raised anyway, because what we are dealing with here is not simply a foreign policy challenge—this is not a foreign adventure or a foreign land about which we know little—but, fundamentally, a challenge to the British people, the United Kingdom, our islands, our nations and our communities about how we defend ourselves in a changed world.

It is Christmas time, and I know many of us have children spoiled by grandparents who will try to force them in front of things such as “The Nutcracker” or “Swan Lake”, while we snooze quietly on the sofa pretending to concentrate, and moments like that remind us of the Soviet days. At moments of great difficulty, such as when the Soviet regime was under pressure—when various geriatric leaders were dying quietly in their beds, surrounded by even older members of the Politburo finding another one of their own to replace them—or when the Soviets were worried that coups were coming and change was imminent, Soviet TV played “Swan Lake”, “The Nutcracker” and, in fact, anything from Tchaikovsky.

Christmas will be a reminder for many of us that change is not necessarily that far away, and we are not alone in thinking that. Those sitting today in the Kremlin are aware of it. They know that their position is extremely vulnerable. They know that their claim to have the support of 70%, 80% or 90% of the local electorate is complete rubbish. They know that the reality of their support is very thin. What we are seeing today is not grand strategy in the sense of trying to do what the Soviets tried to do or Stalin tried to do, which was to try to move west as far as the Atlantic or to dominate parts of Africa. This is grand strategy for the Putin regime in the sense of surviving until tomorrow morning, then waking up and surviving until the morning after, and then doing it again and again and again.

This is a very fundamentally flawed regime. We are not really talking about Russia here; we are talking about a small cabal of kleptocrats, thieves and liars who have stolen one of the great countries of the world. It is a country, as I have said, that gave us so many artists, musicians, scientists, mathematicians and, indeed, even people who have advanced the life of the British people with inventions such as graphene, which Manchester University has done so well to develop. This is an amazing country. This is a country that really should have a grand strategy, and that grand strategy should be to invest in education, in connections and roads, in health and in the people who have made so much of Europe great, who have brought so many ideas to the world and who have brought so much joy to many hearts—not to mine perhaps but to my five-year-old daughter's, as she loves the ballet. The problem is that those policies are not being followed, and they are not being followed for the very simple reason that they do not enrich the small band of brigands who sit round the table today. Putin and his 40 thieves sit there, getting richer and richer.

The latest estimate I have heard, and it is only an estimate, is that Mr Putin controls somewhere north of the equivalent of \$200 billion. Of course that is not all in Russia—a lot of it is spread around the world—and very sadly, for those who read the works of Oliver Bullough, Luke Harding, Catherine Belton and many others, too much of it is here. Too much of it has flowed through our systems, our pipes, to be laundered, processed and channelled into areas where it can be redeployed and reused to further the advances of that same group of thieves.

This is a tragedy, and it is a tragedy for two reasons. One, it leaves the Russian people enslaved to a mob, the victims of a corrupt and despotic regime. Two, it is more tragic because the people we all represent and serve are also victims who are left damaged by this process. Our own financial system is harmed by that corruption, our own property networks are exploited by that corruption, our schools are devalued and our universities are stripped out. None of it is total, but it is certainly true that all our systems are damaged by the level of corruption that we see tolerated by a very small number of people in this country, and that is wrong.

I was privileged to work with many Members who are in the Chamber today on the 2018 Foreign Affairs Committee report, “Moscow's Gold”, on the spread of dirty Russian money through our organisations. I was privileged to highlight some of the areas where we can do better, and we have been discussing how we might update that report in the coming weeks and months. We know there is a lot to do, so we will be looking more at where this money is going. We will be highlighting, as others have today, the overseas territories. We will be looking, as many others have highlighted, at how energy projects are used to exploit our dependence on petrochemicals and our dependence on energy, and to turn that dependence against us.

Those are the key reasons why this is about us, but there is a third reason why this is not just about a foreign country or just about Moscow, and why it is not even just about Kiev and Ukraine, although we must stand with the courageous individuals who are today defending their homes against Russian aggression, or rather Putin's aggression. The third reason is that there

is a direct link to our interests here. The reality is that the priorities of our people are, quite rightly, healthcare, education and transport. The interests that we share rely on having a world that works within a system of rules that support and defend free people to exploit their talents and opportunities to grow the economy, to invest for the future, to plan and to reap what they sow. What Putin and his regime are doing is what dictators do all over the world: they shorten the horizon, they cut down investment angles, they make it harder to develop, they make it harder to co-operate and collaborate, and they push people over the border and through illegal migration routes out of fear of persecution at home. Fundamentally, for our people, we must stand up with other NATO countries to defend ourselves against what we are seeing today.

I come back to my initial point. This is not a grand strategy; this is a cheap trick by a two-bit hustler playing a shi—excuse me, a shyster's game. I believe that is acceptable. It is a shyster's game that is being witnessed around the world. It is pretending to be a genuine strategic play, but it is not—it is not. It is a very, very low-grade trick, but because we have not stood up, because we have not been willing to be as firm as we can be, and because we have weakened ourselves with our European NATO partners and partners around the world, we are seeing ourselves undermined by it. We can stand up. We can kick out the dirty money—it is not that much in UK terms. We can, with allies, defend ourselves. We can stand with the Russian people, and with great people around the world, and reject this band of thieves and kleptocrats.

2.40 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the be-knighted Member, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), on securing this very important debate.

I suspect I am going to agree with everybody and that everybody is going to agree wholeheartedly with one another today, but I think that that is important because it is important that Russia understands that the UK has a single voice on this matter. I am absolutely delighted that my political party has now returned to common sense on these issues. I welcome the new shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), and I am delighted that he is here for the whole debate. If I am honest, I wish that the Foreign Secretary were here, because this is the kind of debate that the Foreign Secretary should listen to. Let me start with some things I have said before. I have been saying some of them for a very long time, and when they were not very popular things to say in this Chamber.

In essence, there is a great lie at the heart of Putin's strategy. His lie, first of all, is that the west is threatening Russia. In fact, the first clause of Russian military doctrine states that the existence of NATO is the greatest threat to the Russian Federation. That is a lie. Everybody in this Chamber would agree that NATO is a defensive alliance. There is no aggressive intention whatever behind our alliance. The second part of the lie is that Ukraine is oppressing Russians. That is remarkably similar to what Hitler said about the Sudeten Germans in the 1930s. It is also a blatant lie. Thirdly, he says that Russia is interested only in self-defence and auto-determination, and that that is the policy it tries to

advance all around the world. That is a blatant lie. As we can see in all its activities, whether in Syria or the Balkans, it is very clear that Russia is always pursuing its own self-interest.

The last bit of the lie, repeated regularly in particular by Russian ambassadors to the Court of St James's, is that everybody who disagrees with Russia's attitude on any individual case is a Russophobe. It is almost an equivalent to antisemitism as far as they are concerned. That is a lie. Every single person in this House who takes an interest in Russia does so because we have a phenomenal respect for the Russian people, their history, their traditions, their arts and their culture. We only have to go to Russia for a day to understand what a phenomenal history they have. Whether we are talking about art, music, poetry or novelists, they have made such a phenomenal contribution to the world. None of us in this debate today is a Russophobe. We are all lovers of the Russian people.

What is actually happening in Russia, rather than Putin's big lie, is an aggressive campaign of destabilisation. It takes two forms. The first is a destabilisation of the democratic west. This is a repeated theme. It is quite cheap. It is much cheaper to try to destabilise us rather than to go to war with us. I will say a little bit more about that later in relation to some of the secret documents I have obtained from the Kremlin.

Daniel Kawczynski: The hon. Gentleman is a strong proponent of the European Union and campaigned for our membership of it; how does he react to Germany and France bypassing sanctions on Russia and supporting things such as the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that clearly undermine our NATO partners in central and eastern Europe?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman about Nord Stream—indeed, I regularly try to berate British Government Ministers for not being robust enough and decisive enough on that issue. My anxiety about our having left the European Union is that there is a danger, in respect of the Europeans' common security and defence policy, that they will renege on the kind of policies that we would like to see. I would like us to find a way of still sitting at the table so that we can influence such decisions. The Spanish Prime Minister once said to me that one problem with the EU maintaining its sanctions regime was that once Britain—frankly, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May)—was no longer in the room, everybody started to fracture apart. I come to the same conclusion as the hon. Gentleman but from a different perspective.

Others have talked about the pattern of behaviour, about South Ossetia and Abkhazia, about the problems in North Macedonia and Catalunya, about the destabilisation in the United States of America and, of course, about the invasion of Crimea, as well as about the recent problems in Montenegro. All that is, of course, a deliberate distraction from the real problems of the Russian economy. I say that because I have a copy of a document—as does the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely); he may refer to it later—signed by President Putin himself on 22 January 2016. It clearly outlines Russia's strategic aims. First, it notes the falling incomes of Russian people which, it says, could lead to significant social tension. It also notes the positive effect of the invasion of Crimea and the policy

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in the Donbass region on public opinion in Russia, but points out that that positive effect has been only temporary and may not last.

The document suggests that, consequently, Russia has to engage in a process of influencing other states in the world, particularly the United States of America and western democracies. It says it should do this, first, by the provocation of the emergence of a sociopolitical crisis in the United States of America; secondly, by the delegitimisation in the public consciousness of the state system in western democracies; thirdly, by instilling an internal social split in order to facilitate a general increase in the radicalisation of society in western democracies; and fourthly, by provoking the emergence of and strengthening non-traditional communities in the United States, with ideological focuses ranging from extremely right to extreme left but always with one message: they do not hear us. That is precisely what the Russian state has been doing for the past few years in the United States of America and in every western democracy, including the United Kingdom.

I know that the Intelligence and Security Committee looked at this issue, although I do not think it had that document. I do not understand why, when our own Intelligence and Security Committee has recommended changes in this policy area and the proper investigation of attempts to try to destabilise the British political system, the Government have simply refused to do so.

Frankly, we have been getting our policy on Russia wrong for two decades now. We vacillate and send off mixed messages all the time. We look weak and indecisive. We look as if we need Russia, rather than the other way round. We constantly make ourselves the supplicants—the demandeurs: “Please, don’t do that, Mr Putin. Please don’t do that!”

We tempt Russian oligarchs to the United Kingdom with easy visas: we had these golden visas that largely went to extremely wealthy oligarchs who had made their money corruptly in Russia, with no questions asked other than, “Do you have enough money?” We did not even ask, “Are you going to invest it in the United Kingdom?” We boast about our clever lawyers and accountants who can tidy things up so that assets are protected, however they have been obtained. We open up our high-end housing market to Russian billionaires even though we know that the best way to squirrel away a dirty fortune or, indeed, to launder £20 million is to buy a property that is worth £10 million for £20 million. Yes, £10 million is lost, but we have managed to clean up £10 million. That is precisely what has affected the London housing market so deleteriously. We even grant—Government Ministers do this—some Russian individuals anonymity in what is meant to be the public register in Companies House of beneficial ownership of companies.

Bob Seely: The hon. Member is, as always, making an excellent speech. He is talking about all the corrupt and corrupting facilitators in our society. Is he as concerned as I am by the use by Putin allies of very high-end libel lawyers to try to silence former Members of this House and people such as Catherine Belton who are trying to expose what Putin allies are doing in the west?

Chris Bryant: Absolutely. It is a real problem for us that the British libel courts end up being used to effectively silence dissent and the truth about Russia. Catherine Belton’s book is an absolute belter. I believe every single word of it to be true and I wholeheartedly support her campaign, which, in the end, is a campaign on behalf of the Russian people to ensure that Russia’s wealth is for the Russian people, not a few kleptocrats.

Our implementation of all the “Moscow’s Gold” report is long overdue, as referred to by the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. That means that we must have a public register of beneficial ownership that should apply to the owners of overseas companies operating or purchasing property in the United Kingdom. That still does not exist; I simply do not understand why.

The unexplained wealth orders seem to have fallen on stony ground and do not seem to be much use because there is a great difficulty in implementing them, so they need to be reviewed. We need to ensure that the overseas territories do not become a soft backyard where people can hide vast amounts of money corruptly, effectively under the British banner. That is not a patriotic commitment by the overseas territories. The patriotic commitment that the overseas territories should be making to Britain is to put public beneficial ownership registers in place as soon as possible.

Of course, we have to co-operate entirely with NATO and our allies in the United States of America, but we also have to take seriously the rest of the European Union. If Europe fractures on the issue, Russian territorial aggression will get worse rather than better. Russia will continue to think that we are weak, gullible and easily bought off unless we adopt a single clear, robust, serious and consistent posture that applies to dirty money, human rights abuses and territorial aggression.

2.52 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on securing this important debate on strategy, which we do not do as well as we should. At the moment, we are tactically responsive and react to events rather than shaping them and looking over the horizon.

Strategy is all about having an objective to maintain or alter the status quo using available means and, indeed, willing alliances. The plan is about how to achieve that outcome with energy policy, weapons treaties, cyber resilience and capabilities, the use of sanctions, our defence posture, what we want to spend on our military might, and the friendships that we then wish to stretch out and advance, such as with Ukraine.

When it comes to strategy, having worked in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Ministry of Defence, it is clear that we can and must do better, given what is coming over the horizon. Jack Welch, the former CEO of General Electric, once wrote that

“when the rate of change inside an institution becomes slower than the rate of change outside, the end is in sight. The only question is when.”

To transfer that to the world’s activities today, our world is moving very fast and we in the UK, and in the west more widely, are not keeping up. I would argue

that that change is happening 10 times faster than in the industrial revolution of the late 18th and 19th centuries, at 100 times the scale and with 1,000 times the impact.

This timely debate on strategically understanding and responding to the security threat from Russia centres on the three core themes that I have progressively promoted in this Chamber for some time: first, the increased disunity and timidity of the west; secondly, the rising influence of authoritarian states exploiting that timidity to ruthlessly pursue their agendas; and thirdly, the increasingly technological digital world and our ability to continuously adapt and harness the changing character of conflict.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Given my right hon. Friend's experience of working in both Departments, what meetings does he think are taking place daily in Government on a cross-departmental basis in response to the crisis and generally to monitor what Russia does?

Mr Ellwood: I will explore that in more detail. Certainly, our gathering of the intelligence picture is second to none—we do that extremely well indeed—but today I will make an argument about our appetite to step forward and fill the vacuum that, I am afraid, has been temporarily left by the United States.

To go back to the three key themes, first, we have the state of the west. I believe that in the last decade we witnessed the high tide mark of post-cold war western liberalism. That is quite a statement to make in this Chamber. Since 9/11, a new form of asymmetric warfare has dominated western attention, but it has distracted us from the international rules-based order and recognising and supporting the importance of bolstering and updating the rules that we want to follow, which we earned after the second world war. We have not kept up with shifting power bases, new technologies and emerging threats.

As I alluded to, the United States—the one country that we look to for leadership—is missing in action, distracted and polarised by what is happening in its domestic scene. That is likely to get worse with the coming mid-terms.

Daniel Kawczynski *rose*—

Mr Ellwood: I will not give way, as I have already done so once and I am conscious of the time.

The United States has temporarily retreated from the global stage, and there is a gap on the world stage for leadership that Britain should and—I hope—could fill.

Secondly, we have the rising influence of authoritarian states. Our adversaries are taking advantage of our weakness and becoming bolder, more confident and more assertive. They sense the west's weakness. That is why we saw Putin not hesitate to invade Georgia and the Crimea as he sought to strike back in concern about NATO's growing membership of former Warsaw pact countries. Such countries have joined both NATO and the EU. Retaliatory sanctions were of course imposed, but, given our reliance on Russia's oil and gas, their impact was limited.

Finally, as other hon. Members have touched on, we have the fast-changing character of conflict, which Russia is excelling at. The strategic context that we face today is increasingly complex, dynamic and competitive. We

face constant political warfare designed to erode our economic, political and social cohesion. Russia's goal is to win without war fighting: to break our willpower and harness attacks below the threshold that would normally warrant a war fighting response. Russia excels at constant political conflict, deception, economic coercion, cyber-interference, large-scale disinformation and manipulation of elections, all underpinned by strong-arm tactics and military intimidation. That is what hybrid war looks like.

I argue that any threat can be measured by a simple formula: the product of the ability and intention to engage minus our ability and commitment to defend ourselves and our interests. During the cold war, Russia backed down over Cuba knowing that the United States would not turn a blind eye. But Russia's ability to engage in conflict has dramatically improved in the last decade. It has made significant investments in all three of its military services—its army, air force and navy—as well as spilling out into the weaponisation of space, hypersonic missiles, as have been mentioned, and cyber capabilities. It is also developing a worrying alliance with China, sharing protocols and doctrines.

We need to understand Russia's desire to engage and cause conflict. That requires an appreciation of its leader. Putin has long held the view that the west is to blame for the demise of the Soviet Union, not least because the privatisation of Russia's nationalised industries saw so much Russian money leaving the country for the west. He believes that the west deliberately seeks to keep Russia weak; his goal since coming to power has therefore been to revive Russia as a global power that will again command respect from the west. Putin has long held the view that the west is to blame for the demise of the Soviet Union, not least because the privatisation of Russia's nationalised industries saw so much Russian money leaving the country for the west. He believes that the west deliberately seeks to keep Russia weak; his goal since coming to power has therefore been to revive Russia as a global power that will again command respect from the west.

Putin's strategy is very clear indeed. First, he needed to secure his own domestic power base by silencing his critics, controlling the message and providing an enemy for the nation to rally against. That is straight from the authoritarianism playbook: procure an external enemy on which domestic shortfalls can be blamed, and against which the population can rally when fed propaganda via state-controlled media. With that largely achieved, his second mission is to return Russia to superpower status, using its well-harnessed grey zone skillsets to expand Russia's influence to counter the expansion of NATO and the European Union, specifically focusing on the Russian-speaking diasporas in neighbouring states.

Last month, an ever-confident Putin went further, effectively declaring that he wanted a new Warsaw pact to turn back history—back to the USSR. His ultimatum to the west starts with the obvious—the renunciation of any further enlargement of NATO to the east—but then demands that the US withdraw its protection from the 14 eastern European and Balkan states that have become members of NATO in the last 24 years.

All this, of course, is unacceptable to the west and to NATO members, which makes the prospect of an invasion ever more likely. That is the immediate threat to Ukraine. After the loss of the former Ukrainian President, Putin's ally, it was clear that Ukraine would eventually join

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both NATO and the EU, which would see the western organisations rubbing up against the Russian border. That, for Putin, was unacceptable.

Let us put ourselves in Putin's shoes. Would there be a better time to invade eastern Ukraine than right now? Over time, Ukraine will rearm and move closer to the west, making any invasion more of a challenge. That is why there are not just 100,000 infantry on the border, but special forces, field hospitals and missile systems—way beyond what would be needed just as a leveraging chip in discussions with the United States.

Russia is aware of the financial sanctions, but they will be limited because any impact on Russia will also affect its trading partners. Russia will, of course, retaliate with its energy provision to Europe, and in the long term it will simply expedite a closer relationship with China.

This is about more than just Ukraine. Russia is restoring its authoritarian clout in the international arena to the point that it is able to dictate its own terms in shaping the international community. It would not have taken NATO much hardware to deter Russia and make Putin think twice. I hear the argument that NATO is a defensive organisation and Ukraine is not a member, but that is a simplistic view of the threat picture, with potentially grave consequences for eastern European security, and it will embolden other authoritarian regimes to pursue their agendas to expand their own influence.

Where does that leave the west and the UK? We need to wake up and recognise just how fragile and dangerous our world has become. A question that I pose regularly to this House is whether we think the world will be more or less stable in the next five years; we know the answer. We have so many fires that have been left unextinguished—for example in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen and even Bosnia and Kashmir, where governance and security are starting to erode and fail. The bigger geopolitical threats, of course, are Russia and China. With two Presidents for life sitting in Moscow and Beijing with more power and time than they know what to do with, it is obvious that we must wake up to this crunch point in our history.

How we in the west conduct ourselves over the next five years could determine how the next five decades play out. If America chooses to step back, it does not mean that Britain should do the same. We are a nation that steps forward when others hesitate, as our history illustrates. If we do not, who will? That does not mean that we do all the heavy lifting, but our hard and soft power assets remain strong. What we are missing is the appetite once again to play a more influential role and offer the statecraft and thought leadership that the west is currently missing.

I make it very clear: we need a reality check. We need to stop kidding ourselves that we garner so much influence as senior members of the United Nations Security Council, NATO, the G7 and the Commonwealth, when those very organisations no longer harbour the clout or the vision to handle our modern and complex world. Power bases and alliances are shifting fast, but we seem to be in denial. The west needs to quickly remind itself what it stands for, what it believes in and what it is willing to defend.

To conclude, we need a Russia strategy. Our current trajectory on Russia is to see it slide progressively ever closer to China. I make the bigger point that this will be China's century. How the world adapts to that is a whole other debate, but as we debate today what Russia is doing, would it not be easier to contest and challenge where China is going if we turned Russia 180° over the next decade, so that it is closer to the west than it is to the east? That would be a strategy that I think we could all agree with.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We are not doing very well on the eight to nine minutes, so I am afraid I will have to put on a time limit of eight minutes—which is quite a long time.

3.5 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At the beginning of March 1946, less than a week before Churchill delivered his iron curtain speech in Fulton, Missouri, the joint intelligence sub-committee of the chiefs of staff concluded:

“The long-term aim of the Russian leaders is to build up the Soviet Union into a position of strength and greatness fully commensurate with her vast size and resources.”

The JIC admitted that firm intelligence was difficult to obtain, as

“Decisions are taken by a small group of men, the strictest security precautions are observed, and far less than in the case in the Western Democracies are the opinions of the masses taken into account.”

Whilst

“likely to be deterred by the existence of the atomic bomb”,

of which the Americans then had a temporary monopoly, “in seeking a maximum degree of security, Russian policy will be aggressive by all means short of war.”

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? “In brief,” the JIC warned

“although the intention may be defensive, the tactics will be offensive, and the danger always exists that Russian leaders may misjudge how far they can go without provoking war with America or ourselves.”

That was in 1946. Here we are, many decades later, but one can see resonances and the relevance of that analysis to the situation that we face today.

We have had two excellent speeches from Labour Back Benchers—I am only sorry that there are not more Opposition Members here, although I am hopeful that, if there were, they would have been largely singing from the same song sheet. However, it is one thing for us all to agree on a bipartisan basis on the analysis of what is wrong and quite another for us to be able to take steps to ensure the safety of the west, which seems to be imperilled rather more than at any time I can think of since at least the 1980s, when there was a huge movement to try and disarm the west of nuclear weapons unilaterally. What are we going to do, what steps are we going to take, and have we got confidence in the leadership of the western world to stand up for the values that seem to be common to all participants so far in this debate?

We have heard a masterly summary of the way in which Russia has been issuing ultimatums to the west that are truly extraordinary. I must make a slight disclaimer at this point and say that I am speaking entirely in my capacity as a former Chairman of the Defence Committee, and certainly not as the current Chairman of the Intelligence

and Security Committee. Nothing that I say in this debate is predicated on anything that I have read, heard or discussed in that more recent capacity.

What I am about to say is the same message that so many of us have been trying to put forward for many years, which is that there is no real defence for Europe without the involvement of the United States. I was very interested to hear the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) about the fact that people should not denigrate the cold war. The cold war was a strategic success for democracy. There were two alternatives to the cold war: one was surrender and the other was nuclear war, so of those three, I think I know which was the preferential outcome. I also agree with the earlier observation that all the talk about grey zone warfare, and all the rest of it, is a sign that we are already involved in a cold war. It is a good thing, if we are faced by adversaries, to confront them, to stand up to them, and hopefully to prevent that from escalating into an open war: a hot war; all-out conflict.

How best can we do that? Well, it worked rather well from the mid-1940s until the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a mixture of two concepts: deterrence and containment. Deterrence involved two main elements: the involvement of the US, as I said, in European security, and the fact that there was a nuclear umbrella that might not deter all forms of aggression but could certainly protect us from nuclear blackmail. The point about containment is that, if you are not going to go to war with your adversary but you want to stop him taking you over and destroying your way of life, then you have to be prepared to hold him in check for decades on end. What a pity that somebody did not explain this recently to President Biden, who kept talking about “forever wars”. Are the Americans involved in a forever war in South Korea? Should they withdraw their limited military presence from South Korea? What do we think would happen then?

John Spellar: Surely that is exactly the wrong analogy. In Korea there is a stalemate and there are two societies. That is very different from fighting a forever guerrilla war in unfavourable territory. It is more about President Biden's predecessor, who gave everything away to the Taliban in the same way that he encouraged Putin.

Dr Lewis: All analogies are risky and no analogies are perfect, but in one sense my analogy stands up: if North Korea now knew that America would not be prepared to go on indefinitely defending South Korea, does one honestly think that South Korea would have much of a future in the face of the regime that it faces across that parallel? Of course it would not.

I am not being partisan about this, because I believe that we are speaking on the very anniversary of ex-President Trump's disgraceful behaviour in relation to the riots and the invasion of the Capitol, but I am very concerned that we are now faced with the prospect of someone who is manifestly not up to the job of taking on a ruthless, villainous gangster like Vladimir Putin and is going in to negotiate with him on the basis of an ultimatum put forward by Putin that effectively states that the NATO alliance has a take-it-or-leave-it offer: either it withdraws all its troops from the territory of any country that has joined NATO since the end of the

cold war or it faces the prospect of military action in Europe. I believe that the great American people and the great American political system depend on more than any individual in the top job, but all I can say is that, if there are wise strategists around President Biden, they had better brief him a lot better, a lot more quickly and in a lot more depth than they did in the run-up to the disastrous unilateral withdrawal from Afghanistan.

3.15 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) on obtaining this timely debate on this extremely important subject. I want to start by making it clear, as one or two others have done, that we have no quarrel with the Russian people. Indeed, we have a considerable history with and affection for them. That dates back to the time of Queen Victoria, and since then this country has supported Russia. Immediately before the revolution, the Anglo-Russian Hospital was established, in which my father served as a medical orderly, first in Petrograd, as it was then called, and then on the eastern front immediately prior to the revolution. In the second world war, this country supported the Arctic convoys, which supplied essential food to the Russian people, with the loss of 85 merchant ships and 16 Royal Navy warships. I am glad that the Russian Government have more recently acknowledged that by awarding medals to those who survived.

When I worked with Margaret Thatcher, I saw the establishment of her relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev. He saw that the system over which he presided was flawed and would ultimately fail. History should give him credit for the fact that when the Soviet Union began to break up and Lithuania became the first Soviet country to declare independence, Gorbachev decided not to release the troops from their barracks. As a result, those countries obtained independence. All of that has changed and deteriorated under Vladimir Putin, as has already been set out.

There was a brief time when there were signs of hope. Those who have read the book by Michael McFaul, the former US ambassador to Russia, on the attempt by the Obama Administration to obtain what they called “reset” will recall that there was a brief period when it appeared that things were becoming slightly more liberal. That did not last. It was principally when Medvedev was President, but things deteriorated very quickly when Putin came back as President. Indeed, Mr McFaul was then declared persona non grata in Russia. Since then, there has been ruthless suppression.

The first victims of Putin are the Russian people. The strategy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex and others have described, is multi-faceted and pursued on a number of fronts, but it is firstly a ruthless suppression of any opposition or dissent within Russia itself. That extends as far as murder. We have seen Boris Nemtsov killed and Alexei Navalny poisoned and detained in a corrective labour camp. In this country, we have seen the murder of Alexander Litvinenko and the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal, which led to the death of a British citizen, Dawn Sturgess. There are suggestions that a number of other deaths in this country are linked to the activities of the Russian security services.

[Mr John Whittingdale]

There has also been massive suppression of human rights. Most recently, Memorial, the international human rights organisation, has been closed down by the courts. My own particular area of interest has always been media freedom. Media freedom does not exist in Russia. A recent assessment by Reporters Without Borders has stated:

“With draconian laws, website-blocking, Internet cuts and leading news outlets reined in or throttled out of existence, the pressure on independent media has grown steadily”.

There are currently 373 journalists imprisoned in Russia.

Then there is the strategy adopted towards Russia's neighbours. Mention has been made of the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, Transnistria in Moldova, and of course Crimea and Donbass in Ukraine, and threats are made to neighbours. When I was in Lithuania, we were shown the Suwalki gap, the short stretch of land along the Polish border linking Belarus and Kaliningrad, which is under Russian occupation—it is part of Russia itself. If the Suwalki gap were taken, it would cut off all three Baltic states completely from the west. There are already reports of migrants being driven into that gap, which some fear is such an attempt.

Of course, it is Ukraine that is currently in the frontline. It committed the cardinal sin of wanting to move towards becoming a more free and democratic society, and when Yanukovych attempted to suppress that, the Ukrainian people turned out in their thousands to protest, and 100 died under sniper fire in the Maidan. Shortly after that, Putin occupied Crimea. He first denied that he had any responsibility—the famous little green men—but subsequently he celebrated it. That was followed by the activity in the Donbass region, and of course there was then the appalling murder of 283 passengers and 15 civilian crew members who died when MH17 was shot down as part of that. Putin now is pursuing a policy in the Donbass of issuing passports; over 600,000 have been given to Ukrainian citizens within the Donbass region. As President Zelensky has pointed out, that was the precursor strategy used in Crimea. I visited, with Michael Fallon, the two ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol on the sea of Azov, which have now been cut off as a result of the building of the bridge across the Kerch strait, which allows Russia to squeeze those ports and stop any shipping going through.

Ukraine is on the frontline. We heard the Foreign Secretary's very welcome statement earlier today. However, as I suggested earlier, the threat of massive consequences is extremely unspecific and at the moment the only concrete statement made by the Government as to the precise results of any Russian military action against Ukraine was the statement by the Secretary of State for Defence that it was “highly unlikely” that anyone was going to send troops.

I agree that Ukraine is not a NATO member at present and I do not think there will be great willingness to deploy military troops, but we need to do far more in terms of military assistance and setting out very clearly the consequences of Russia's current tactic, which is not just to threaten Ukraine but to repress its own people internally and pursue an aggressive strategy of expansion outside.

Putin respects strength, but currently we are not showing much. I fully endorse the call of my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex and others that we need a clear strategy to demonstrate to him that we cannot accept the current behaviour of the Russian Government.

3.23 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): As the leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe, I have a major problem: we have to deal with the Russians all the time, almost on a daily basis. The question I have asked, and to which I have not received a proper answer from anyone, is how we should deal with them, and in a way that takes the debate further. We as a delegation have spent our time hassling the Russian members by challenging their credentials and making life very uncomfortable for them, but the question I have above all of that is this: why is Russia so bothered about being a member of the Council of Europe; about being a member of a multilateral organisation that, as we have already heard, it does not really want to be part of? I can think of a number of reasons, but I am not sure they are adequate. I can think of reasons such as giving it the ability to interfere in other countries in a way that it would not otherwise have. If that is the reason, why does it put up with us and others in the Council of Europe making life fundamentally uncomfortable?

From my perspective, it is important that the members of the delegation know something about issues before we go over to meetings of the Council. I arranged two discussion groups, one with a leading service person who is one of our service's chief Russia experts, and another with a leading dissident. One of the key messages of the leading service person was that we should not continue simply to hassle and harass Russia, which was a wasted opportunity; we should instead use the opportunity to gather intelligence from the Russians on what their real objectives were.

I have tried that on a number of occasions. My life in doing so has been difficult, because some of those people are not the sort with whom one might like to have conversations in the normal course of a general and friendly discourse—some are really ugly characters. Nevertheless, we make an effort to do that, and it is important to try to get to grips with what the Russians are doing and what the thinking behind them is.

One of the other key messages of that service person was not to look at Russia from a western perspective, but to buy an atlas produced in Russia. If we looked at that, we would see that the Russian perspective is very different from the perspective of Russia that we would get from looking at a western atlas. Putting Russia at the centre of those atlases shows, among other things, how important the Arctic is to Russian thinking and to their strategic objectives.

The other person we invited over was a leading dissident, Vladimir Kara-Murza. He has been poisoned twice in Russia. I came across him at the Council of Europe when we were both attacking Belarus on the issue of the forced landing of the Ryanair flight from Athens to Lithuania. I got on well with him and thought it would be a good idea to invite him to speak, as a counter to the clear messages we had from the service chief.

The leading dissident put a lot of stress on the fact that, as has been mentioned in the debate, the support that Putin has in Russia is very thin and that one of the chief motivations for Putin is to justify to his own people how he has managed to change the Russian constitution to allow him to stand for election again. That was not allowed in the past and, apparently, Putin is nervous about that. Vladimir Kara-Murza, being a Muscovite himself, spoke about how, travelling around Russia to have meetings, it was impossible to tell whether he was in Moscow or somewhere else, because the level of dissidence was the same across the whole of Russia. That is an important point to make in analysing what is going on, and why it is so.

We asked Vladimir Kara-Murza why he thought that Putin had supported Belarus. He said, "They are the last two dictators left in Europe, and if one of them goes, it makes the position of the other more dangerous—more critical." I thought that was interesting, because we might have taken the view that if one of them went, the other would just continue, but so nervous is Putin of being the last dictator in Europe that he chose to support Belarus.

So where does that leave us? It leaves me asking the same question about what we should do. I was interested to hear the comment from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) that we do not have an overall strategy for dealing with Russia, and certainly, in my experience, that is exactly the position that we are in. It leaves us facing a significant military power, but one, I think, that is slightly weakened by the fact that it still wants to participate in these multilateral organisations. I have a clear idea of what the international order should be and what it should consist of, and I try to make sure that I continue with that objective in the Council of Europe. Does this situation make Russia more or less dangerous? I think that it makes it more dangerous, and from that perspective this debate is very useful.

3.31 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Under Vladimir Putin, Russia is obviously testing the west, and we can rest assured that nothing of significance done by Russia will happen without Putin's agreement. I am sure many Members will agree with me that from the Kremlin's point of view, it is already at war with the west; we just do not recognise that. It considers war to consist of all elements of society pointing towards the west to get what they want. It is not a grey area; the Russians just slide into war, whereas we would expect some sort of declaration of it.

Because of my background, I am particularly interested in what happens in eastern Europe, and I declare that interest again. I visit Bosnia relatively frequently, and there is no doubt that Russia is fully supporting Republika Srpska's bid to break up Bosnia. That is very dangerous for Europe. Indeed, it is highly likely that Putin has authorised Serbia to send weapons to Republika Srpska.

I was also detained in Crimea in 2005. During my involuntary extended visit to the area, I was somewhat worried when I was told just how many of my jailors were talking Russian. The warders were clearly Russian. I was surprised by that, because Crimea was still, then, very much a part of Ukraine. After the annexation of Crimea by the Russians in 2014, a referendum was held

with—they claim—an 83% turnout, in which, apparently, 97% of voters supported the region's being integrated back into Russia. Although we may question whether the referendum was fair, on the basis of my limited experience of being incarcerated in Crimea—when I was up to good, by the way, not bad—I am pretty sure that most people in Crimea are very content to be Russian; and, given the Russian Black Sea Fleet's position in Sevastopol, I cannot see Crimea ever being returned to Ukraine, because the locals just do not want it.

Eastern Europe is a perfect playground for Putin, in which he can irritate and taunt us. For our part, we are rather hamstrung, particularly in Ukraine. Ukraine is not a part of NATO—we have established that—although it has been a member of the Partnership for Peace since 1994. Indeed, I remember in that year, when I had the grand title of chief of policy at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe—doesn't that sound great?—having dealings, for the first time, with its armed forces. There is no article 5 commitment to defend the territorial integrity of the country, but, as we have all discussed this afternoon, what happens there really matters to the rest of us in Europe. The trouble is that Europe is divided on this issue, again as we have discussed, and the United States is distracted by China. How about the doomsday scenario? China moves in on Taiwan at the same time as the Russians move in on Ukraine. Guess who will be hamstrung? It will be the United States.

A lot of European Union countries are heavily dependent on Russian gas and, as I just mentioned, the Americans are fixated by Chinese expansionism into the Pacific area. In truth, we in the United Kingdom have been very good friends to Ukraine. We have given it economic support and, through Operation Orbital, have provided considerable military training. As the European Union is so divided on what should be done, the United Kingdom can play a pivotal role in trying to sort out the problem—by that I mean trying to stem Putin's aggressive foreign policy.

We could lead on getting co-ordinated European action against Putin. It is totally unacceptable that Germany, obviously fearing Russian retaliation of stopping gas supplies, refuses to allow the sale of defensive weapons to Ukraine. We have discussed that we should increase those defensive weapons. It worries me too that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) keeps jumping up to mention, the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline really puts such countries as Poland and Ukraine in a Catch-22 situation. I was very pleased when, earlier today, the Foreign Secretary announced that we categorically do not support Nord Stream 2, but what does that mean? The answer is not very much, because it looks as if it will go ahead anyway.

After the Salisbury poisonings, Europe worked collectively in punishing Russia. We got some sort of joint action. That was a signal of success and it worked. Surely we should be up to acting collectively to impose hard-hitting economic sanctions on Russia, if Putin continues to push his luck in Ukraine, the rest of Europe, and especially, from my point of view, Bosnia. I have achieved a strategic success, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I have finished in less than seven minutes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. I call Mark Francois.

3.37 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for calling me to speak in this timely debate, which the Backbench Business Committee should be commended for granting so early in the new year and which was so ably introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin).

To start as I mean to go on, I fear that the European skies are now darkening, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with the winter weather. Perhaps I might explain why. When I was enjoying war studies at King's under Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman many years ago, I learned that during the cold war the Soviets often referred to the concept of the correlation of forces—effectively a comparison of strengths and weaknesses, both political and military, between opposing blocs. If we adopt that conceptual approach, at least for the purposes of this debate, what does the current coalition of forces look like, specifically between NATO and Russia, particularly when viewed from Moscow?

Without wishing to be unkind, the United States has an ageing President with isolationist tendencies whose popularity is now waning barely a year into the job. In addition, only a year ago the American Parliament, Congress, was stormed by its own citizens—admittedly in bizarre circumstances, but it was overwhelmed nevertheless. The United States, once the proud leader of the western democracies and advocate of the Pax Americana, now seems increasingly absorbed by its own internal divisions—more worried by the politics of identity than those of global security.

The growing obsession of the American strategic community with China may arguably be unwelcome in Beijing, but I suspect that it is very welcome in Moscow. As just one simple example of that, despite the presidential election being 14 months ago, and regardless of the UK traditionally being America's strongest and most consistent ally in NATO, the United States has still not formally appointed a new ambassador to the Court of St James's to replace the popular and charismatic Woody Johnson. Do we really believe that these signals just go completely unnoticed elsewhere?

How about some of the other major NATO allies—how are they perceived in the east? For many years during the cold war when the Berlin wall was up, the German armed forces were highly operationally capable, held at high readiness and poised to vigorously resist any incursion by Warsaw pact forces across the inner German border. Today, despite the wall having come down, Germany's armed forces are a shadow of their former selves, with severe equipment problems and worryingly low levels of operational availability. Politically, the long-standing and relatively stable Merkel era is now over. The former German Chancellor, a fluent Russian speaker, who reportedly had a strong personal relationship with President Putin, has now been replaced by a new and inexperienced traffic light coalition, including a pacifist Green party drag anchor that is unlikely to countenance any meaningful German military reform. Moreover, Germany continues selfishly to pursue a “beggar thy neighbour” energy policy sympathetic to Nord Stream 2, making it potentially even easier for Russia to deploy the gas weapon.

France, another key NATO member, with high readiness and military capabilities analogous to those of the UK—including, crucially, its own independent nuclear

deterrent—is largely absorbed with the forthcoming presidential election this spring. The outcome of that election is highly uncertain, but some of the candidates, such as Éric Zemmour, who in 2013 declared Vladimir Putin as his own man of the year, worry me.

Overall, NATO, the most successful defensive alliance in history, which the Soviet Union once respected and even feared, has recently been defeated in Afghanistan, much as its Soviet forebears were many years ago. Despite all the emphasis on satellite technology, multi-domain operations, artificial intelligence, the integrating operating concept and all the other buzzword bingo that peppers the MOD's lexicon these days, NATO was still defeated for all the world to see. Indeed, for all its supposedly dazzling advanced technology, NATO was ultimately run out of town by “a bunch of country boys” without an ability to fight credibly in four of the five established domains—space, cyber, air or sea—and armed mainly with AK-47s, Motorola radios and RPGs.

That outcome has surely not gone unnoticed in Moscow or Beijing, nor indeed in Tehran. While the west indulges in paralysis by analysis, the Russians build more tanks, tactical and strategic aircraft and hypersonic missiles and renew their nuclear arsenal. As the Defence Committee, on which I serve, has highlighted many times before, we need to be spending more on defence in this country, not less. Moreover, weighed down with covid-related debt and with international gas spot prices now at near record levels, and despite frequent entreaties from the United States as the leader of the alliance, the majority of NATO members still do not meet even the basic target of spending at least 2% of GDP on defence, with Germany at only around 1.7% this year, and Spain barely at even 1%.

Given all that, the correlation of forces is now moving in Moscow's favour, at least in its eyes, and that smacks of opportunity. The recent presentation of a draft security treaty by Russia to western nations—primarily to the United States—has to be seen in that context. Accompanied by the overt pressure on Ukraine, which does not possess an article 5 guarantee, were that treaty to succeed, the next step will probably be to exert pressure on countries, some of which contain significant ethnic Russian minority populations which do possess such a guarantee, and that probably means the Baltic states, with the obvious aim of dividing and ultimately breaking NATO in the process. I sincerely hope that we are not going to be told, perhaps some months or years from now, even from that famous Dispatch Box, that Estonia is, after all, “a far away country...of whom we know nothing”.

That is exactly what the Russians want.

Russians traditionally admire strength and despise weakness, and what they now perceive is a weakened NATO lacking in resolve to assert its democratic right to collective self-defence. The next few weeks are likely to be very telling in that respect. I still hope and believe that President Biden, who as a young senator actively supported Britain during the 1982 Falklands war, can recover his leadership role and, with support from European NATO allies, face down any potential Russian incursion into the heart of Ukraine and, indeed, any further adventurism elsewhere.

History tells us again and again that appeasement does not work and that countries that wish to remain free have consistently to assert the right to defend themselves against potential aggression. I say as the proud son of a D-day veteran who fought the Nazis, as

did the Russian people, that we forget that lesson at our peril. Or to quote the Prime Minister's other hero, Pericles of Athens, and I am looking directly at the Minister:

"Freedom is the sure possession of those alone who have the courage to defend it."

The House has been unanimous today that we must retain that courage, and I hope we do because Pericles's lesson holds true, two and a half millennia on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): After the next speaker I will have to reduce the time limit to seven minutes.

3.46 pm

Stuart Anderson (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), with whom I serve on the Defence Committee. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this important debate, which has been a delight to listen to so far. I will try to maintain that standard.

I have served on the Defence Committee and in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly for the past two years, and the threat of Russia comes up in many of our discussions. Each time there are differing viewpoints on what Russia's grand strategy is. There are many ideas and thoughts and, as have heard today, although we are united on what the threat is, there are differing views on the grand strategy. We need to establish the ultimate goal that Russia or President Putin, which is the same thing, is looking to achieve. If we can understand this strategy, it will be easier to work backwards, allowing us to counter any possible threat that the grand strategy could pose.

We tend to look at what has happened in the past and think it will be replicated in the future, which is not always the case. I am not saying it will or will not be replicated, but we should look at what happened in Georgia and Crimea, and at the build-up of troops on the Ukrainian border. We could take the viewpoint that, logically, Ukraine will follow the same route as Crimea and be taken over by Russia. I am not saying that will or will not happen; I am trying to have an informed debate on the overall grand strategy of Russia, not necessarily Russia's next steps.

We have heard numerous Members say today that we are taking a tactical approach, and not necessarily a strategic approach. For example, if Ukraine is the next play for Russia but not the end goal, we are no wiser about the grand strategy and we will always be playing catch-up. We will always deploy ineffective deterrents or countermeasures, and we will always be working on a reactive approach rather than a proactive approach to counter any threat to our nation.

I do think Russia has a grand strategy, and I do not take the argument that Russia is just continuing on a whim. I believe that President Putin has a clear view of what he is trying to achieve, whether it is day to day or in the longer term. He knows what he is trying to do, and the reason I take that view is not just because of the build-up of troops on the Ukrainian border.

I recently visited Kirkenes near the Norwegian-Russian border with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly to see the threat that Russia could pose in the High North. The Arctic ice is melting far quicker than most people believed it would, which has opened a huge commercial trade area, as well as a larger area for conflict, in the High North. Russia has amassed a navy and a nuclear capability that we have not seen in that region since the cold war.

I also believe there are many inaccuracies in the general viewpoint on the current state of the Russian armed forces.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: One thing I did not have time to mention is that the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty, which was concluded by Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev, has fallen into disrepair because Putin has deployed a new missile—an intermediate nuclear missile, which NATO calls the Screwdriver and which we believe is stationed in a position to threaten western European powers in breach of that treaty. The Russians are now calling for us to remove all nuclear weapons from European soil. They have breached the INF treaty, and now they accuse us of doing so by refusing to withdraw nuclear weapons that do not breach it. That shows the inequality of the analysis that Russia presents in its propaganda.

Stuart Anderson: Yes; what Russia is trying to do is completely incoherent and unbalanced, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

As I have said, Russia's military is not what it was two decades ago. While we have spent the last 20 years in the middle east with our allies, Russia has invested heavily in a capability far beyond what it has ever had. I am not for one minute trying to make Russia appear 10 feet tall, but let us look at what it is doing. It has modernised its naval capability, and it understands the importance of sea warfare. It has made an advance in its hypersonic missile capability. I do not think it is as advanced as some media reports make out, but it is getting there. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly has recently produced a report on the matter, if anybody would like to have a look at it.

Russia has increased its nuclear capability at a rapid rate, and, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, the development of the Poseidon nuclear weapon is of major concern. We talk about the Wagner Group, which everyone refers to as being in Africa. Its advance parties were recently seen in the High North and on Svalbard. No weapons were seen there, but it is of concern that the group is expressing an interest in that area.

Russia's cyber capability and its disinformation—operating in the grey zone, with sub-threshold hybrid warfare in that space between peace and war—should give us a huge inkling that we are not at the stage of peace with Russia. Many examples have been highlighted in this debate, and I am sure there will be many more. It is of the utmost importance that we understand the grand strategy of Russia to ensure that we can counter any threat that should arise.

I will finish on this point. The former Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nick Carter, has said that the biggest concern that kept him awake at night was miscalculation. I have recently read the book "Countdown to War" by Sean McMeekin, which describes the build-up to the first world war—35 days of probably the biggest

[Stuart Anderson]

miscalculation we have ever seen. That was the time it took from no war being expected to the start of a war, with catastrophic events. That happened very quickly. If we had had effective statecraft, it could have been avoided. Let us learn from history and understand the grand strategy of Russia, but it is vital at this time that the highest level of diplomacy is used to prevent another miscalculation.

3.53 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We have spent a lot of time on Russia, and we have heard from a lot of people who claim to understand the Russian mentality, but I am not sure it has been mentioned that in the Orthodox calendar, tomorrow is Christmas day. I shall be joining my Russian Orthodox wife at the service this evening and tomorrow morning, and I wish you a very happy Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I make no apologies for President Putin. Although I am a former chairman of our all-party group on Russia, I certainly gave it up in the light of what happened at Salisbury and before. No doubt he is running a corrupt regime, although I did go with a Council of Europe delegation to look at a previous election that President Putin won, and there was no doubt that there were a lot of people voting for him because people felt that he had restored the pride and the greatness of Russia after the terrible, infinitely corrupt and useless years of Yeltsin, when we took Russia for granted.

I make no apology for President Putin and I do not defend him in any way, but I think the mistake of this debate is to assume, if there was any other conceivable leader of Russia, that their strategy would be very different. Many Russians felt deeply humiliated at the loss of territory that formerly belonged to the Soviet Union, and we constantly hear about the invasion of Crimea and the Donbass region. We hear very little in this Chamber about the fact that Crimea was of course part of Russia for 200 years. It was signed away by the pen of Khrushchev, without the Crimean people being consulted at all, in the 1950s. There is no doubt at all that Crimea is overwhelmingly Russian and wants to be overwhelmingly Russian, and we have to respect its self-determination, and the same applies to many areas of eastern Ukraine.

Bob Seely: I am not going to disagree entirely, because I think my right hon. Friend has a useful alternative voice, but what he is saying about eastern Ukraine is not really true, because ethnic Russians are not in the majority. I think he is getting confused between Russian speakers and ethnic Russians—even in Crimea. He talks about the Russian people in Crimea, but Crimea was historically Crimean Tatar, which was the indigenous population. There has been an awful lot of infill of Soviet military pensioners, but that is different from the indigenous people.

Sir Edward Leigh: I know that entirely, but when people go on about the fact that Crimea was originally Tatar—no doubt America was originally populated by Red Indians, but we do not say that America does not belong to Americans—the fact is that we have to deal with the situation on the ground. All I am saying is that there is an overwhelming feeling among Russian people

of a deep sense of humiliation during the Yeltsin years, and as in all countries, they yearn for strong government and leadership.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The correct way for this to have proceeded is for Crimea to have held a referendum about its status in or out of Russia before the transfer of a territory back to Russia, but that did not happen. It was like the Sudeten Germans being polled about rejoining Germany and being annexed out of Czechoslovakia by Hitler. It was exactly the same as that. I think that for my right hon. Friend somehow to excuse what happened on the basis of historical populations really provides spurious credibility to a dictator.

Sir Edward Leigh: But we are where we are, and one of the mistakes of these sorts of debates is to equate Putin, for all his faults and his corruption, with Hitler. I would suggest that we are where we are in Crimea, and there is no doubt about the fact that the majority of the population want to be Russian. They may not have been transferred in the right way, but that is the fact. But Putin is not Hitler. It is true that, whoever becomes the leader of Russia, they will try to hold and to build on the influence in territories that were part of the Soviet Union. That is Russian grand strategy. People may not agree with it and they may not understand it, but it is a fact of life.

On the NATO point, I am confused about why people constantly argue that the way to solve this problem is for Ukraine to become part of NATO. In recently divulged documents, US Secretary of State James Baker said to President Gorbachev on 9 February 1990:

“We understand that not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO not an inch of NATO’s present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction.”

The truth is that Ukraine is not going to join NATO. It would be a provocative act, and in constantly talking about it in this Chamber and in the west as if it is likely to happen, we are simply providing an excuse for President Putin to play the game of being the underdog and of Russia being threatened, so why do we do it? When we know NATO is never actually going to absorb Ukraine, why do we go on talking about it?

Tom Tugendhat: My right hon. Friend is making a reasonable point about whether something may or may not happen, but does he at least accept the point that free countries can choose to associate with whomever they like? Some join the European Union, some join the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, some join NATO and some join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Do the Ukrainian people not have a say in this, or do they actually belong to Russia?

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, but it is not going to happen, for this reason: President Biden is not the sort of President who is ever going to do it. He is a weak President and he is not going to suddenly elect Ukraine into NATO. We all know that, and that is the reality. We should let Ukraine into NATO only if we are prepared to fight for it, if we are prepared to spill American and British blood for the frozen steppes of eastern Ukraine, and nobody wants to do that. By the way, if we did do it, we would lose our nerve very quickly. Look at Iraq.

Look at Afghanistan. After a few years, if there were just 300 dead British soldiers there would be tremendous pressure in this House of Commons to withdraw. Russia would simply stay—it does not mind if it has to wait 20 or 30 years. So it is never going to happen. Ukraine is never going to join NATO, and if it did join NATO it would be potentially disastrous. In talking about Ukraine joining NATO, we are simply playing Putin's game.

Now, the other talk we have had is about Russia being a mortal threat to our country, but this is not the Soviet Union. Russian armies are not placed in the middle of east Germany. Where is this mortal threat? We hear about all this hacking. No doubt Russia hacks. No doubt it has rather ineffective campaigns on Twitter. Are we so lacking in our faith in our own parliamentary democracy that we think we are going to be overthrown or are under threat from President Putin? This is not a strategic interest of the United Kingdom. Of course all Russian Governments will seek to extend their influence. Any Russian Government will be mortally opposed to NATO expanding eastwards. This rotten Russian Government might try to subvert aspects of our life, but why do we not have self-confidence? Why do we not look to our own proper strategic interests? We have no historic or strategic interest as a country in Crimea or eastern Ukraine. We do not understand it. We do not understand the history. We do not understand the complexities of the region. We do not understand the Ukrainian state itself, which is divided.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Edward Leigh: No, I have given way three times already.

Ukraine is divided. The second-largest party in Ukraine is a pro-Russian party. It ranks very high on the corruption index. When it controlled eastern Ukraine, it did everything it could to deny autonomy to Russian speakers in eastern Ukraine. Members can agree with me or not, but they have to understand that that is the point of view of many Russian people, and they are entitled to their view as much as we are.

Learn from history: look at Afghanistan. Look at Iraq. We in the west are not prepared to fight for these people. Why are we destabilising the region by pretending we are when we know perfectly well—everybody in this Chamber knows perfectly well—that we are not prepared to risk a drop of British blood? We have to live with this Russian Government. We have to stop talking about expanding eastwards. We have to stop playing Putin's game.

I know this is realpolitik. I know it is not redolent of great liberal imperialist speeches about how we must make the world safe for democracy, and that the Iraqi people, the Afghan people or the Ukrainian people have a right to live under a democratic regime. What nonsense I am talking—these are the facts of life. This is realism. Are we really prepared to muck up eastern Ukraine in the same way we have mucked up Iraq and Afghanistan?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The wind-ups will begin prompt at 4.30 pm, if not before.

4.3 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Following on from my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), it is worth saying that the Kiev International Institute of Sociology did a poll in eastern Ukraine and found that support for Russia had halved from 80% to 40% since Donbass was effectively invaded by Russia.

Nobody in today's debate has stood up and said that Ukraine should join NATO. I accept my right hon. Friend's argument that others have suggested it. NATO is one argument—my right hon. Friend says that is music to President Putin's ears and he can exploit that—but this country is also a signatory to the 1994 Budapest agreement, which allowed Ukraine to give up its nuclear arsenal and have its borders protected by Russia, by us and by other countries, so I argue that we have a responsibility to Ukraine that falls outside our membership of NATO.

It is also worth putting on the record in the House that there are many reports of the ethnic cleansing of Tatars in Crimea. There are reports that 25,000 people have disappeared. There is a complete lockdown on the verification by outside international media of what is taking place in Crimea. To follow the comment by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) about the population of Crimea, I do not think we can simply dismiss the matter by saying that the people of Crimea want to remain in Russia, because there are many aspects to it.

One thing that has been overlooked in today's debate so far is that we have talked about the geopolitical consequences of the grand strategy but we have not spoken about the consequences of the murder that is happening on the ground in various areas where Russia has a malign influence, whether that is Crimea, the Donbass, Georgia, Armenia or other regions. We should be careful not to soften how we describe the situation today.

Bob Stewart: This is just a quick point: the 1994 Budapest accord referred not just to Ukraine but to Kazakhstan, and today Russians have gone into Kazakhstan. If we look at the accord, we see that we have guaranteed the sovereign integrity of Kazakhstan.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, because he reinforces the point that I am trying to make: this is not just about whether Ukraine should join NATO and whether we should support Ukraine. We have committed ourselves to other countries, but today's debate seems to be saying, "Well, tough luck. There's nothing we can do about it."

On the grand strategy, if we try to summarise what Russia is trying to achieve overall, let us look at the EAEC—the Eurasian Economic Community—which was formed in 2000 and is now known as the Eurasian Economic Union, which Putin holds dear. The analysis is that it needs 250 million people to work as a viable internal trading bloc that could then challenge other areas. To achieve that, the union needs the 43 million Ukrainians and their powerful agricultural output to succeed. When we look at the countries Moscow wants to bring into that pact, we see that it is in effect a neo-USSR. As has been said many times today, we have

[Alec Shelbrooke]

to stand up to the idea that Russia can come to the table saying, in effect, "Troops must be withdrawn from all the east European NATO countries; otherwise, we are going to invade."

My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made an important point about the political situation in the USA. Let us not forget that then Vice-President Biden had an enormous fallout with President Obama about the surge into Iraq. He was always opposed to a lot of the interventions that took place. If we in this House know that, we can be damned sure that President Putin, sat in Moscow, knows that and he will be making that analysis.

I come back to where this all started: in the summer of 2013, when President Obama had said, "If you drop chemical weapons in Syria, that is a red line that we will not tolerate." They dropped chemical weapons in Syria and President Obama pretty much just wrote a stiff letter to *The Washington Post*. We can track exactly what happened from that point: in less than a year President Putin walked into Crimea. Again, what did we do? Nothing. We did not do anything.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: May I briefly remind my right hon. Friend of what happened with the invasion of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008? President Bush moved the sixth fleet into the Black sea, ready to confront Russian aggression, and the invasion stopped. We are going to need that kind of response now; of course, the two treaties and the hypersonic weapons are intended to pre-empt any possibility of that kind of response.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend, who reinforces the point that I was making. This is where we get the Jekyll and Hyde—or the paradox, if you like—of President Trump. In early 2017, there was another chemical weapon attack in Syria and, within a short space of time, the American Administration under President Trump launched 26 Tomahawk missiles on strategic targets in Syria. For the rest of that presidency, nothing else happened in that arena. However, President Trump's actions exactly a year ago today were manna from heaven in Moscow, because that idea of undermining democracy, destabilising the west and creating divisions in societies is one reason why there is such ambiguity about whether the USA would support its NATO allies in Europe, as it is dealing with such a split society at home. We could say that, over the last 10 to 15 years, Russian objectives in the USA were invited by President Obama, created by President Trump and too much of a concern to tackle for President Biden. The debate should not be about America and its entirely different Government, but I am afraid that it is relevant to the conversation.

We must accept a couple of things. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) often talks about Nord Stream 2, and he is right to do so. I do not believe for one second that it will be switched off or not commissioned. It will be switched on—that will happen—and that will put the Poles and people in eastern Europe in a very difficult position. However, that boat sailed 20 years ago and we are where we are. This country and its leadership have tried to

point out the folly of that programme, and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly talks about it all the time, but I do not see how anything will change. That is where we are today.

We must come to some conclusions. As the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) said, the cold war exists again—it started the moment that Putin walked into Crimea. The invasion of Crimea changed the last 25 years of policy at NATO in Brussels. It obviously had a defensive policy up to the end of the cold war and then more of a political one, but that changed everything. It is now both political and defensive. However, the progress made in a very short period—almost, if you will, in a panic about what happened—shows that we are back in a cold war status, and NATO recognises that. As we are in a cold war status, let us not even entertain the argument of people saying, "We don't want another cold war." It is there—accept it.

Now, we lived through a cold war for 50 or 60 years—what did we do? Surely everything is about counterbalance. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said, when the invasion of Georgia came, President Bush sent the sixth fleet in. That was a counterbalancing, reactive measure. Many of us across the House recognise the importance of renewing Trident, because that is about counterbalances. There are those who say, "Trident will never be used," but we know that it is used every single day. It would be a failure of policy if we ever fired the weapons—but by then none of us would care because we would be at 10,000° F. The reality is that that weapon works every day, and counterbalance is what we must do.

We come, therefore, to a simple conclusion. Today, our constituents—especially the poorest in our constituencies—are suffering from gas prices that are being manipulated from Moscow. That is a fact. There was a big argument about what the Treasury can do, but the reality is that we are allowing these things to happen because we are not standing up against them. A simple message must go to the Treasury today. In the cold war, we spent 5% of GDP on defence. We cannot carry on with today's level of defence spending. It must increase, because we are back to where we were 30 years ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough said that it is realpolitik, and it is. We must realise that we are in a cold war and that we must increase defence spending. Counterbalance is the only way to stop the situation escalating.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. The wind-ups will start at 4.30 pm, so I am afraid that the limit is now five minutes.

4.14 pm

Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this important debate, in which colleagues have raised important issues relating to Russia's grand strategy.

It is particularly timely that we are talking about energy security and the extent to which we are dependent on Russian gas exports. It is clear that Russia has the power to influence the rising energy bills that affect many of our constituents. I very much hope that we will continue to increase our domestic energy production so that we become less reliant on Russian exports.

I share colleagues' concerns about Ukraine's fate. The events of 2014 and the tragic effects of the war still being fought in the east of the country today should leave us in little doubt that Russia is prepared to violate sovereign territory to further its own aims, as the brief five-day war of 2008 in Georgia had earlier indicated.

I also appreciate the increasing concerns about Russia's actions in cyber-space, which is perhaps the most complex and difficult of the areas that have been covered in the debate. When cyber-war is discussed, it usually seems to include everything from a Russia-attributed attack on Estonia's Government and financial institutions in 2007 to the NotPetya ransomware attacks against Ukraine in 2017 and even the SolarWinds espionage of 2020, in which UK Government computers were among the millions across the world on to which Russian agents quietly sneaked, remaining to listen and gather intelligence.

The last point sounds rather alarmist. We are right to make every effort to clamp down on and weed out digital Russian spies wherever we find them. We know what to do when we find a physical spy, so when spying is done via a digital medium, why do we hear respected voices announcing that there has been a "cyber-attack"? When a Russian spy is detected in the UK, we do not claim that Russia has launched an attack; rather, we use the existing tools at our disposal to deal with the situation in the established way. Applying the term "cyber-attack" to cyber-espionage is extremely unhelpful, especially in relation to Russia: rather than seeking to develop and promote the norms that countries should follow when they detect cyber-espionage operations, we lose ourselves in needless sensational hysteria, abusing terms such as "cyber-war" and "cyber-attack".

When we want to understand Russian cyber-espionage and how we respond to it, we do not need to look much past the rules and norms that we have already established with conventional espionage to understand the role that cyber-espionage plays in Russia's grand strategy. However, while looking towards traditional espionage helps us to understand some of Russia's strategy in cyber-space, the fact that the area is still widely misunderstood and lacks rules and norms for operation means that there is still ample scope for Russia to navigate and pursue its grand strategy in what many people call the grey zone.

Let us take the international response to the Russia-attributed denial-of-service cyber-attack on Estonia in 2007. Despite effectively cutting off Estonia from the rest of the world and cutting off its citizens from their Government and financial institutions for some three weeks, it was not deemed an attack under article 5. Qualifying as such an attack would have seen the NATO alliance rise to Estonia's defence in a war with Russia. Although there was no loss of data or money and no physical damage to resources, it seems plausible to say that it was an attack, but that was not how NATO saw it. That issue needs to be addressed.

Denial-of-service attacks are not rare. Russia launched similar denial-of-service attacks against the Georgian Government in 2008 as part of the five-day war, although

this time they were aimed solely at Government and military sites. In 2017, Russia launched the ransomware NotPetya against Ukrainian banks, energy companies and infrastructure. It combined that cyber-sabotage with kinetic troop movements on the eastern border, again to display power. Attribution is not overly complex: the UK's National Cyber Security Centre has said that Russia was "almost certainly" responsible for the attack.

As many of us in the House remember from seeing North Korea's WannaCry ransomware unintentionally lock an estimated 70,000 NHS machines in May 2017, the rules and norms that exist in kinetic war, such as not attacking a hospital, simply do not exist in cyber-space. That is something that we clearly need to address. While it is clear that Russia sees cyber-espionage as part of reasonable statecraft in the present day, as the 2020 SolarWinds hack indicates, and while it is clear that Russia was perfectly happy to conduct clear cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007 and Georgia in 2008, the international jury is still out on what is acceptable in cyber-space.

We must avoid alarmist declarations of "cyber-attack" or "cyber-war" every time we detect cyber-espionage attributed to Russia. Let us use the tools already in our arsenal to react to such cyber-espionage as and when we detect it. Let us mobilise the culture and machinery of government to determine how we view Russian action in cyber-space, building on recent publications. Most importantly, let us lead the international community in clearly laying down rules and norms to which Russia will feel an international obligation, so that no school or hospital ever need fear an indiscriminate cyber-weapon wreaking havoc, as happened to much of the NHS at the sloppy hands of North Korea in 2017, and so that we are ready to act proportionately as and when a cyber-attack may occur. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South West (Stuart Anderson) said, we also need to avoid miscalculation.

4.19 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I will crack on through as many points as I can in the next few minutes. To answer the central question of the debate about Russian grand strategy, in the realm of Europe at any rate, it is probably down to four things: first, the reabsorption of Ukraine and Belarus into Russia's sphere of interest and control; secondly, the shattering of NATO; thirdly, the establishment of a sphere of influence line from Kaliningrad in the north to the Baltic and Transnistria in the Balkans, to the east of which is Russia's sphere of interest out of which it will fight to push any western influence, including from Russia, Belarus—obviously, by now—and potentially the Baltic republics in future; and fourthly, the re-establishment by President Putin of a Russia that is virulently illiberal, hostile to the western interest and, in the Russian historical term, a Slavophile rather than a westernising nation.

The idea peddled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who to be fair, made some valid points, that that was inevitable, is simply nonsense. It was not inevitable at all and it is incredibly tragic that it has happened. More broadly, as several hon. Members have said, there is a battle this century between open and closed societies. Open societies are not yet prepared, but China and Russia are effectively engaged in forms of hybrid conflict—I will come to that

[Bob Seely]

term, if I may, because I think we are slightly misusing it—with the west. It is non-military at the moment, but there is no doubt that it is happening.

Some people say that Russia is a great mystery—as if we need to have some great cosmic understanding of it—but to be fair to the Russians, they signal clearly. Putin's essay this summer on the historical unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people was a signal that he does not respect Ukraine's borders—it is a no-brainer.

To return to the point about hybrid war, if anyone wants to understand what the Russians think contemporary Russian warfare is, I respectfully suggest that they read the Russian military doctrine that is available on the Russian MOD website in English and Russian. If they fancy a weekend project reading it, they will understand that the first characteristic of contemporary warfare, which we sometimes call hybrid war, is the combination of military and non-military effects in the service of state power with popular protests and special operations, combining the economic, political and military. It is all there written down. It is not a secret and we do not have to interpret it.

Hybrid war, as laid out by Frank Hoffman when he was originally talking about Hezbollah about 25 years ago, is the combination of military and non-military. It is not the non-military or the grey zone war, which is different to hybrid war. The purpose of hybrid war—the true definition that is used in academic circles—is the combination of military and other tools.

To be fair to my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough and to President Putin, the Russians are under intense threat. In the past two political generations, they have experienced profound shock: the loss of the Warsaw pact, the loss of their buffer territory, the loss of former Soviet republics, two putsches, absolute economic decline and an utter change in their world. Since the end of the cold war, our view has been a rather woolly liberal internationalism. Their view has become a hardened aggressive zero-sum realist game. They sleep well when others do not. The great strategic conundrum is how to overcome that in the next two decades without war.

I have run out of time, because other hon. Members spoke for more than 10 minutes, which is a shame, so I will wind up with three points about Russian strategic culture. Historically, most historians and strategists would say that there are three elements of Russian strategic culture or three pressures that feed Russian strategic cultural thinking.

First, there is the sense of external threat—to put it bluntly, no borders. To be fair to them, they have been invaded by the Tartars, the Swedes, the Poles, the French and the Russians. Nowadays, that sense of threat is not only physical but more psychological, hence the need to control the internet and shut down non-governmental organisations that are pro-western or funded by the west. The sense of psychological threat is sadly reaching paranoid conspiracy theory levels among the Russian elites. Secondly, there is the defence of its autocratic political system. Thirdly, there is its desire to be a great power.

Those pressures feed into the nexus that is Ukraine, because without Ukraine, Russia feels less of a great power. It is threatened because if democracy works in

Kiev, it can work in Moscow, and it is losing its buffer territory. For those three strategic reasons, so much of Russia's strategic angst is focused on Ukraine. I will leave it there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): To resume his seat no later than 4.30 pm, I call Daniel Kawczynski.

4.24 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): As the sole Conservative Member of Parliament to have been born in a communist country, I know what the Russians are capable of on our continent. I remember returning to Poland to see my beloved grandfather in 1983, when martial law was finally lifted, and saw at first hand what the Russians did to the country of my birth in the coercion, manipulation and control of this country of central and eastern Europe.

Yet today we see a different form of manipulation on our continent by the Russians. There is no greater manifestation of that than the Nord Stream 2 pipeline. I have tried to raise this issue on a number of occasions. I had a debate on it last year. However, there seems to be little appetite from our own Government to take a lead on our continent in stopping this project, and I feel that it is now a missed opportunity. We have heard many times about the current poor American leadership and the flip-flopping that has occurred on the part of President Biden on the issue of Nord Stream 2, and indeed his pandering to Germany and others in allowing this pipeline to materialise. It gives the Russians unprecedented access to the very heart of our continent, not only in terms of their ability to control and manipulate gas prices, their main export commodity, but the blackmail and coercion they seek to put countries such as Ukraine under, as well as our NATO partners, the Baltic states, Poland and others. When he was President of the United States, President Trump, at a breakfast meeting with Jens Stoltenberg, made a very interesting comment that I strongly support. He asked what is the purpose of Americans sending troops and equipment to central and eastern Europe when one NATO country, namely Germany, completely ignores and bypasses the spirit and the letter of the law of NATO membership in terms of common energy security and common strategy, thereby giving hard currency to our main opponent in Moscow, which uses that money to put rockets, tanks and other aggressive equipment on the borders with Poland and other countries.

That is in stark contrast with Poland and Croatia. I want hon. Members to know that Poland has invested billions of dollars in a liquefied gas terminal in Świnoujście on the Baltic coast, and so has Croatia. These very sensible NATO partners are taking a lead in demonstrating that if you have the privilege of NATO membership—a situation peculiar to only 30 nations in the world—with that also comes responsibility. We need to start thinking, as NATO partners, about how we ensure that we follow the Polish and Croatian policy, which is to build liquefied gas capacity and to be less dependent on Russian gas. Where do you think the Poles are buying their liquefied gas from? From fellow NATO partners. They are building a pipeline directly to Norway, a fellow NATO partner, to buy their gas from there. They are buying liquefied gas from America, a fellow NATO partner. These are the sorts of examples that other countries such as Germany ought to follow.

Sweden, Finland, Ukraine and Georgia are the last major countries in Europe that do not have the benefits of NATO membership. I am very fond of my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), but I disagree with him fundamentally on this issue. We need to look as to how to incorporate and support these last four countries in joining the NATO partnership. This week—for the first time ever, to my knowledge—Finland started to talk about potentially joining NATO, because of Russia's nefarious conduct in Ukraine.

Lastly, when Poland and the Czech Republic joined NATO in '99, we heard the siren calls: that it was a step too far; that it would cause world war three. When Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2004, we heard those same calls. That did not lead to war, and we now need to support Ukraine and others in joining our organisation.

4.29 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to wind up for the SNP in what has been a good debate. I commend the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing it and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. We have heard a number of very thoughtful contributions, and I hope to reflect some of them in my remarks.

The first thing we need to stress is that not a single one of the contributions has been Russophobic in any sense. None of us, of any political persuasion, has any difficulty with the Russian people or quarrel with them. I have a number of connections to Russia—my grandpa was on the Arctic convoys, which were mentioned earlier; and Scotland and Russia share a patron saint in Saint Andrew. We all of us have deep personal connections to that fascinating country and those wonderful people. However—I was struck by this point a couple of times during the debate—in the same way as at the end of the second world war Germany's defeat was also Germany's liberation, the problems begin and end with the regime in Moscow, and the first victims of that regime are the people of Russia themselves.

This is a kleptocratic authoritarian regime that oppresses and impoverishes its own people. It treats minorities, especially LGBT minorities, appallingly. It imprisons, harasses and poisons journalists and democratic activists. It keeps the population in fear of the other at home and of us in the wider world. The fact that fear of invasion and war regularly tops the concerns of the people of Russia—opinion poll after opinion poll should give us pause—means that a successful disinformation campaign has been waged against the people of Russia by their own Government, to keep that regime in post.

Abroad, we see that pattern of behaviour, which is always testing boundaries and exploiting weaknesses, territorially in Russia's near abroad, in central Asia, Belarus, the Caucasus, the Balkans, the Baltic states and Ukraine—just wait until the Arctic gets going, because we have seen a number of worrying developments there as well. We also see more thematic interference by the Russian regime in the internal affairs of other countries elsewhere. We see that in exporting corruption; exploiting weaknesses in transparency and the checks and balances of domestic systems; manipulating energy markets, causing social unrest in various places; and the weaponisation of disinformation, used to foment unrest

and to sow political discord, taking over elements of domestic politics. We have seen that in a number of European countries, in the States and here.

What to do? We have heard a number of analytical points, but I would like to take some action points away from the debate. To my mind, defence needs to be discussed in much closer connection with resilience. Resilience is about resilient societies and informed democracies. Informed and prosperous democracies are less vulnerable—more resilient—to the sorts of tactics used by the Russian regime to destabilise its neighbours and those elsewhere. The fact is that the law is simply not where it needs to be for the UK's resilience and integrity in democracy, political financing and resistance to disinformation. I include Scotland in that, because many of the laws concerned are reserved to this place.

Resilience begins at home, so credibility and integrity matter. I made the point earlier to the Foreign Secretary that, in the eyes of Moscow, her credibility is undermined by the reality that far too many politicians—I will not name a political party—are in hock to dirty Russian money. Members of the other place have bought their seats in the legislature of these islands. I am an SNP politician, so I have a clear constitutional agenda, but I do not want our nearest ally, closest friend and best neighbour to have a weak and vulnerable democracy, and I believe that it does.

Two credible reports—the Foreign Affairs Committee's "Moscow's Gold" and the Intelligence and Security Committee's "Russia" report—have not been taken remotely seriously enough by this Administration. I do not blame the Minister personally for that, but this Administration need to take the recommendations in those reports a damn sight more seriously than they have, because weakness in resilience and integrity will be exploited by the Russian regime.

The SNP has a clear constitutional agenda. We have a different world view from many right hon. and hon. Members of this House, but above all else we are democrats. We believe in the peaceful resolution of democratic processes, and we believe in the rule of law at home and abroad. An SNP Minister will never talk about resiling from an international commitment in a "specific and limited way"—a phrase that should live on in infamy. How can we possibly say that we are credible abroad when we are weakening the rule of law at home? We believe in the importance of the rule of law and also in the importance of the international rules-based order, which matters more to smaller states than to bigger ones. We have a clear interest, because Russia is a threat. The Russian regime is a threat to the international rules-based order, to the territorial integrity of other states and to the internal workings of our friends and allies. We have a common agenda in facing it down, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's comments later.

4.35 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I would like to start by thanking the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for convening this debate, and Members on both sides of the House for their contributions. It has been one of the most satisfying and interesting debates that I have participated in, and frankly it could not have come at a more crucial time,

[Mr David Lammy]

given the events in Ukraine, Belarus and the Balkans, and in recent days in Kazakhstan. I want to be clear from the outset that on this side of the House there is no doubt about the threat posed by the current Russian regime to our national security and that of our allies. Britain must therefore demonstrate robust and consistent leadership and careful judgment, and we must be crystal clear about our commitment to ensuring security in Europe.

Christmas day marked 30 years since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since 1989, a new Europe has emerged from behind the iron curtain, with a reunited Germany at its heart and a swathe of newly free countries in central and eastern Europe. Many chose to join the European Union and NATO, or to act in partnership with them. Millions of Europeans have grown up with new liberties and new opportunities. But we need to be frank: in the eyes of President Putin, this liberation was an historic catastrophe.

Putin wants to re-establish Russia's status and influence, including dominance over the sovereign countries in its near abroad. He longs for parity of status with the United States and sees Russia as locked in an ongoing confrontation with the west. To that end, the Russian Government push our boundaries and constantly test our resolve, threatening or using force, targeting dissidents abroad, spreading disinformation and seeking to take advantage of our open economies through illicit finance and corruption. There are some who believe, wrongly, that the provocation of Russia into an aggressive stance begins in the west, echoing Putin's view that through the enlargement of the European Union and the expansion of NATO, Russia has somehow been cornered.

The truth is that NATO and the European Union's enlargement was not the west moving east, but the east looking west. These were free, sovereign states seeking a future of security, prosperity, co-operation and peace in a democratic Europe. It is the Russian regime that seeks to deny these states autonomy and independence; it is the Russian regime that has invaded its neighbours and annexed their territory; and it is the same Russian regime that seeks to veto the democratic aspirations and undermine the rights of people outside its own borders, in the way that it has done to Russian citizens within them.

At present, Russia's hostility is focused on Ukraine. We must be clear that we face a moment of acute danger, with over 100,000 troops massed on the border and alarming rhetoric and unreasonable demands emerging from the Kremlin. We know that Putin is not afraid to act to undermine Ukraine's integrity, overtly or covertly. It is right that the whole House sends a clear and united message today that we fully support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and that Russian action to further undermine it will be met with severe consequences. It is also right that we support dialogue to achieve de-escalation consistent with the security of our NATO allies and the integrity of Ukraine.

The Putin regime's hostile actions go far beyond Ukraine. There is a much wider pattern of destabilising, threatening behaviour and overt hostile action. It is a charge sheet that runs roughshod over international norms and Russia's own commitments: targeting dissidents and critics abroad with the appalling and irresponsible

use of chemical and radiological weapons; committing state-based cyber-attacks against public institutions and private companies in the UK and elsewhere; annexing Crimea and supporting separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine; invading Georgia and sustaining its breakaway entities; propping up the butcher Bashar al-Assad in Syria; sustaining the dictator Lukashenko in Belarus; fomenting dissent in the fragile Balkans; using private military companies to pursue national agendas from Libya to Mali; and overtly or covertly squashing democratic movements in neighbouring states, such as Kazakhstan potentially next.

Too often, efforts to engage Russia have been based on the belief that the Russian Government see the world as we do, or on the hope that they will do so in the future. If we are to interpret Russia's intentions, respond to its behaviour and hope to deter aggression, we must be realistic about the worldview in the Kremlin. We should understand that the Putin regime feels threatened by NATO's expansion and Ukraine's democratic transition, however illegitimate we think those feelings are. It seeks a sphere of influence, whether we like it or not. It will try to enhance Europe's energy dependence, so that it can manipulate those who might sanction its actions. It believes that domestic survival depends on total dominance of the political sphere, financial security, the elimination of opponents, and the fanning of nationalism and nostalgia. He will ruthlessly pursue its interests as he sees them, in zero-sum terms. We may hope that Russia under Putin changes, but we should not expect it to. In response, we must be strong, consistent and resolute—active at home and abroad on its challenge.

First, that means being a dependable ally. We must be crystal clear in our commitment to NATO. That commitment must be unshakeable. We should collectively send clear and consistent messages to Russia about unacceptable behaviour and ensure that there are consequences, not rewards, for efforts to threaten or intimidate. Secondly, the UK must play a consistent and key leadership role in European security and defence. While Ministers are focused on the Indo-Pacific, these developments remind us about the importance of security in our own backyard in Europe. We have unique responsibilities, both as a member of the UN P5 and as the guarantor to agreements from the Budapest memorandum to the Dayton accords. The UK should give the highest priority to security in Europe and the north Atlantic. Instead, we have seen a decade of decline for Britain's defence, with billions of pounds of waste and mismanagement, the number of tanks cut by a third and the Army cut to its smallest size in 300 years.

That leadership should also mean rebuilding ties with our European partners, including in the European Union. Today's debate puts into sharp relief the recent petty and unedifying diplomatic squabbles between the UK and French Governments. France is our closest defence partner in Europe. It is in all our interests for those relationships to be managed, conscious of the real global threats to all of us. We must and should work to build a more consistent approach to Russia across Europe and reduce dependence on Russian gas, and that, of course, includes cancelling Nord Stream 2.

Thirdly, we must strengthen our defences at home. More than 18 months after the Russia report was published, none of its recommendations has been fully implemented. Most damning is the fact that the

Government have failed to get to grips with the role of the UK in money laundering and illicit finance, leaving our country a soft touch for corrupt elites that help to sustain the Putin regime. It is past time to get serious, and that is why Labour is creating a taskforce on illicit finance to make Britain a truly inhospitable place for dirty money and to address finally the problem robustly.

Lastly, we must always make it clear that our disagreements with the Russian Government and its actions, and with Putin's regime, are not with the Russian people, millions of whom want peace, stability and mutual respect with their own neighbours and with the west. Indeed, my own wife's maternal grandmother and great-grandmother fled from Russia and the Bolsheviks, and my children have Russian blood running through their veins. We must promote continued dialogue, mutual respect and diplomatic engagement—hard-headed, clear-eyed, and rooted in a framework of international law and human rights. The alternatives are too dangerous to contemplate, for Russia and ourselves.

4.46 pm

The Minister for Europe (Chris Heaton-Harris): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing the debate, and congratulate him on that and on his very well-researched and well-delivered speech. He made many points, but one theme that I spotted—and have spotted throughout the various briefings I have had during my two weeks in my current role—is that the west seems to operate in the relatively short term, while Russia, as has been demonstrated by its actions in Georgia and Crimea right up to now, operates in the long term. That is something that we really need to think about.

Like the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), I feel that this is one of the best debates to which I have ever responded in this place. I thank all Members for their contributions, especially the Opposition spokespeople, both of whom made mostly elegant and excellent speeches. The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) may not remember that we served at the same time in the European Parliament at the beginning of his and the end of my career there. It was good to hear him speak so widely about this subject. I will try to respond to as many of the points that have been raised as I can in the time available to me.

As this debate has highlighted, recent actions by the Russian state are of significant concern. Indeed, as the integrated review made clear—and while, as so many Members have said, we have no issue whatsoever with the Russian people—Russia itself currently poses the most acute and direct threat to the UK's national security. As most Members probably know, we set up a cross-Government Russia unit in 2017, bringing together the UK's diplomatic, intelligence and military capabilities to try to achieve the maximum effect, and we are working closely with our partners to address the threats from Russia and hold it to account. The UK has demonstrated international leadership on this, for instance through our G7 presidency. Following the appalling attack in Salisbury in 2018, we expelled 23 Russian intelligence officers, and the international community joined us in solidarity. That resulted in the collective expulsion of more than 150 Russian intelligence officers.

Obviously, the current relationship with Russia is not the one that we want, but unfortunately it cannot be normalised until Russia stops its many and various irresponsible and destabilising activities. We are seeing a very concerning pattern of Russian military build-up on Ukraine's border and in illegally annexed Crimea. We have repeatedly made clear to Russia that any incursion into Ukraine would be a huge strategic mistake, and would carry severe costs. The Prime Minister delivered this message himself when he spoke to President Putin on 13 December, as did the Foreign Secretary when she met Foreign Minister Lavrov on 2 December. The Russian Government need to de-escalate their activities and engage in serious discussions.

As well as speaking directly to Russia, we are working with our allies and partners to address the challenges to our security. The Foreign Secretary led G7 Foreign Ministers and the High Representative to the EU in a joint statement on 12 December:

"We call on Russia to immediately de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and abide by its international commitments on transparency of military activities."

Four days later we joined our NATO allies in a joint statement from the North Atlantic Council emphasising that we are

"ready for meaningful dialogue with Russia".

We are firm in our position that NATO will remain the foundation of collective security in the Euro-Atlantic area, and we will continue to make our position clear at every opportunity in the coming days and weeks.

I assure the House that we remain unwavering in our support for Ukraine's territorial integrity. Both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary are in close contact with their Ukrainian counterparts. Most recently, the Prime Minister spoke to President Zelensky on 17 December to reiterate the UK's support, and the Foreign Secretary spoke to Foreign Minister Kuleba on 4 January.

The Foreign Secretary further demonstrated our support by hosting the first ever UK-Ukraine strategic dialogue on 8 December, and we announced a huge range of commitments, including UK support in the face of Russian aggression and steps to build stronger trade links. This includes increasing the amount of support available through UK Export Finance for projects in Ukraine to £3.5 billion. These announcements complement our existing security, economic and political support to Ukraine, which includes: defensive military training for 20,000 members of Ukraine's armed forces through Operation Orbital; a package of £1.7 billion to enhance Ukrainian naval capabilities; and vital support in fighting corruption and strengthening the judiciary.

Bob Seely: I am delighted to congratulate my hon. Friend on his new role, and I am delighted that we are doing all that, but it is a bit late. The time to make a difference when training and supplying an army is one, two or three years before the army needs to use it. If the Russians are intent on invading sooner rather than later, does he agree that it is all far too late in the day?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hope it is not. I have been in post for only two weeks, so I am doing as much as I can as quickly as I can.

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

Sadly, we know all too well that Russia has a record of flagrantly violating international law. We are at the forefront of efforts to end Russia's illegitimate control of the Crimean peninsula, and Crimea is, of course, Ukraine. We used our G7 presidency last year to maintain a high level of international engagement on that, and the UK also supports the international Crimea Platform in its work to hold Russia to account.

Meanwhile, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) mentioned, Russian interference in the western Balkans threatens to undermine the region's hard-won security. We take this extremely seriously and will continue to work with our partners to strengthen stability, democracy and the rule of law. To demonstrate this commitment, the Foreign Secretary brought together the Foreign Ministers of the six western Balkan countries on 13 December. Our new special envoy to the western Balkans, Sir Stuart Peach, visited Bosnia and Herzegovina on 16 December and will be back in the region soon.

Mr Ellwood: I welcome my hon. Friend to his post. Given the challenges and threats to our national and international security, does he agree it is now time to increase defence spending to 3% of GDP?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will arrange a meeting for my right hon. Friend with the Chancellor so he can press that point.

I am also grateful to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who visited the region and built strong relationships. She was instrumental in demonstrating our commitment in this area.

I am wary of the time, so I will move on to a major concern that most Members articulated. The Government, like most hon. Members, are deeply concerned about the forced closure of human rights groups such as Memorial, which was closed down in the past few days. The work of this particular internationally respected group of historians and human rights experts is vital to defending human rights and preserving the memories of victims of political repression in Russia. The group has worked tirelessly for decades to ensure that the abuses of the Soviet era are never forgotten, and its closure is yet another chilling blow to freedom of expression in Russia. That demonstrates what my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) said about the gradual and ruthless suppression of dissent, human rights and media freedoms in the country.

The UK has been at the forefront of calling out Russia's malicious cyber activity, in solidarity with our international partners. In 2020, in tandem with the European Union, we announced sanctions against the Russian intelligence services for cyber-attacks against the UK and our allies. Last month, we set out our new national cyber strategy, backed by £2.6 billion of funding, to help to protect the United Kingdom and our international partners. We are developing an autonomous UK cyber sanctions regime. Our sanctions are carefully targeted to respond to hostile acts, and to defend freedom and democracy. That includes sanctions on 180 individuals and 48 entities for the destabilisation of Crimea, Sevastopol and eastern Ukraine. We also announced asset freezes and travel

bans against 13 individuals and an entity involved in the attempted murder of Alexei Navalny, the Russian Opposition politician.

We have taken multiple other actions to address the Russian threat in recent years. As we set out in our response to the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report in July 2020, this includes new legislation to stop individuals at the UK border to determine whether they are, or have been, involved in hostile state activity. We have provided the security services and law enforcement with additional tools to tackle evolving state threats.

We take the threat from Russia extremely seriously. We are working closely with our allies and partners to set a strong, united, consistent signal that Russian aggression will have severe consequences. We will continue to engage with the Russian Government on matters of international peace and security, to address global challenges facing the world, including climate change and the coronavirus pandemic. We will also use these channels to raise any wider issues of concern to us.

Dr Julian Lewis: Will my hon. Friend allow me to intervene?

Chris Heaton-Harris: Forgive me, but I must allow my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex some time to conclude.

For us to work together, Russia must de-escalate its activities and engage seriously with the international community. Ultimately, we are all better in co-operation than in opposition, but I must underline what the Foreign Secretary said to this House earlier today. Our commitment to Ukraine is unwavering. Any Russian military incursion into Ukraine would be a massive strategic mistake and come at a severe cost, including co-ordinated sanctions.

4.57 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the Minister for his reply to this debate; was a privilege for me to open it. I have been humbled by the quality of the contributions and struck by the 100% unanimity of the condemnation of President Putin, at least, even though there are other disagreements. Those are disagreements between friends and democrats, however; we all disagree with the actions of the dictator.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that everything the Government are now doing is commendable, but diplomacy, expelling diplomats, diplomatic language and even economic sanctions are not enough. We have to develop military capacity to deter. Unless the penalty of military action, or threatening military action, is sufficiently painful for our adversary, they will take that action. No consequences are serious enough unless they deter, and there is evidence that we are failing to deter.

If there is one objective that we must try to achieve in these Geneva meetings, it is to reunite NATO and make this a step change in the behaviour of the west towards Russia—something that it has not seen for the past decade and a half—so that the Russians begin to understand that the penalty for what they are threatening to do in Ukraine and elsewhere is too high, and they will back off.

Some of my colleagues have said we are in a new cold war—yes, we are. We should welcome the fact that we have the capacity to mount a cold war. Like the last cold war, it will end when Russia ends its aggression, and that has to be the message we take to our allies and to the Russians themselves.

I am sorry, but there are too many other brilliant contributions to mention, except one. Many colleagues have said that we have no quarrel with the Russian people. I should have called this debate “Putin’s grand strategy”, because I do not believe the Russian people are committed to sending their young men into military action to lose their lives in futile—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Antisemitism: Bristol University

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Michael Tomlinson.)

5 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Con): It is profoundly troubling that in 2022 I have to rise and publicly speak about the hatred being directed towards Jewish students on university campuses. What should also be alarming to colleagues in this House and all those in wider society is the amount of parliamentary time that has been dedicated to the issue over the previous two years. I have sat through comments in this Chamber, read parliamentary questions and responses, heard evidence at the Select Committee on Education and led a Westminster Hall debate highlighting the concerns of Jewish students across our country.

Most Jewish students will enjoy an incident-free and happy time on campus, but I have heard testimony from many Jewish students and their families. When embarking on university careers, Jewish students and staff should feel safe, secure and supported. When issues arise, procedures should be in place and complaints investigated and acted on. Tragically, in many instances, that is not the case.

I have chosen to focus this debate on Bristol University because of the fact that it has shown a consistent disregard for the welfare of its Jewish students and, indeed, for Members of this House. Many will know about the abhorrent and racist views of Professor David Miller. However, there have been other instances of troubling behaviour that have not been addressed. Just yesterday, a Jewish academic shared on Twitter a screenshot of the university’s equality, diversity and inclusion training on religion and belief. The scenario explained that the best candidate for the job was Jewish and would therefore need to leave early on Fridays for shabbats, when there was a team meeting. If the participant answered the scenario by saying that there should be a flexible approach to hire the best candidate, they were told:

“Might not be a good idea.”

Essentially, this training is teaching participants not to hire an observant Jew.

The actions of David Miller will be familiar to most. Members will have read the numerous newspaper articles and heard the exasperation of Jewish students who were left exhausted and frustrated when raising these serious issues with the university authorities. To give some context, Professor Miller taught political sociology at the University of Bristol. He abused his position to extol dangerous antisemitic conspiracy theories to his impressionable students.

Miller conducted a module called “Harms of the Powerful”, including a PowerPoint slide with a fanciful diagram featuring a web of Jewish organisations placed under or subservient to the Israeli Government. The topic of the week in his February 2019 lecture was Islamophobia, and the slide was part of Professor Miller’s explanation of his theory that the Zionist movement is part of a global network that promotes and encourages hatred of Muslims and of Islam. The PowerPoint presentation he used included mainstream UK Jewish organisations and leaders in that diagram, implying that they were part of an alleged Islamophobic network.

[*Christian Wakeford*]

One Jewish student present put it like this:

"As a Jewish student I felt uncomfortable and intimidated in his class. I know and understand what he says is false, it is clear however that a number of students in the class believe him, just because he is an academic".

The same student said:

"I fear that if he found out that I was Jewish this would negatively affect my experience throughout this unit".

A different Jewish student in his class stated:

"I don't think it is right that I should have to sit in a lecture or seminar in fear. Fear that he will offend me personally or for fear that he is going to spread hatred and misinformation to other students who, in turn, can pass on these false ideas".

The Community Security Trust, which monitors hate crime on behalf of the Jewish community, submitted a complaint to the university in March 2019. It was informed that

"the University does not have a formal process for responding to complaints from third parties".

The university insisted that to look into matters further, a complaint would have to be submitted by a named individual. The students who had made contact with the CST insisted on their anonymity being preserved. As a result, Bristol University falsely asserted that it had received no complaints. That is clearly not the case.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the case of antisemitic racist Professor Miller, because that is what he is and what many of his supporters are. We should never shy away from calling him out as what he is, which is an antisemitic racist.

It is not just students who have problems, as my hon. Friend will be aware. I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, of which he is a vice-chair. More than 100 parliamentarians from seven parties have written to Bristol University. The APPG has written numerous times, and although we have had responses, they have been lacking in detail and in the information that we have asked for. Most recently, we asked the university to share with us the details of the training that it says it is offering on antisemitism. It is not good enough. The students should never have been put in such a position, but when 100 parliamentarians from seven parties are also ignored, that really tells us that Bristol is not putting the emphasis it should put on this important issue. It is frankly a disgrace.

Christian Wakeford: I find it hard to disagree with a single word that my hon. Friend says. It is an absolute disgrace that for more than two years, such antisemitic racist views were allowed to continue. What is more abhorrent is that even when she came in front of the Select Committee on Education, a representative of the university tried to hide behind the fact of having had a conversation and a dialogue with the Bristol Jewish Society—JSoc—as if that were the solution to all the problems. Again, that is not the case.

It is appalling that students felt that they had to choose whether to complain against an academic teaching racist conspiracy theory because they would inevitably face a backlash. The University of Bristol Jewish Society submitted its own complaint. In responding, the academic charged with reviewing the matter wrote in June 2019

that the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism, which the university later adopted,

"is a somewhat controversial definition, with some believing that it is imprecise and can be used to conflate criticism of the policies of the Israeli government and of Zionism with antisemitism".

Instead, he decided to use

"a simpler and, I hope, less controversial definition of antisemitism as hostility towards Jews as Jews".

He then ruled, regarding Professor Miller's lecture, that

"I cannot find any evidence in the material before me that these views are underlain by hostility to Jews as Jews...I am unable, therefore, to find grounds upon which Professor Miller should be subjected to disciplinary action".

That is completely contrary to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism. It subsequently transpired that the person charged with investigating the matter was a close colleague who was notorious for holding similar political views to Professor Miller's.

In 2019, the then Member for Bassetlaw, now Lord Mann, wrote to the university on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism, asking it to review its disciplinary processes and consult antisemitism experts, but the institution refused. Following Bristol's adoption of the IHRA's definition in December 2019, a further complaint was made by CST, following further appalling, untrue and potentially dangerous allegations about the organisations, but this too was treated with utter disdain. The complaint followed Miller's comments in an online meeting in which he described CST as

"people who must only be faced and defeated".

CST is an organisation that looks after children going to school and people going about their daily worship and their daily Jewish life. To describe it as an organisation that must be defeated is absolutely abhorrent.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this important Adjournment debate. As someone whose constituency contains the Community Security Trust, I am shocked by some of the comments made by Professor Miller. He claims that CST is actually controlled by the Israeli Government, but I can assure the whole House that that is certainly not the case. One thing that CST does, certainly in the London Borough of Barnet, is keep our citizens safe.

Christian Wakeford: I completely agree. I have had the fortunate privilege of working very closely with CST since my election. For those who look after the safety of the community to be treated with utter disdain is absolutely appalling.

When challenged on his comments by *Jewish News*, Professor Miller said that CST

"is an organisation that exists to run point for a hostile foreign government in the UK...This is a straightforward story of influence-peddling by a foreign state."

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I seem to recall that the previous title of CST was the Defence Department of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, so if CST is being accused of being an agent of the Israeli Government, presumably the accuser is saying the same about the Board of Deputies of British Jews. That gets pretty close to antisemitism in my book.

Christian Wakeford: Again, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the PowerPoint document in which not only the Board of Deputies but the Jewish representative councils, the Jewish Leadership Council and so many different community organisations were all highlighted as being part of a Zionist conspiracy, which is a blatant falsehood.

That comment alone from Professor Miller is blatantly antisemitic. Once again, the response from the university was underwhelming, emphasising that CST was an external organisation. It paid no regard to the fact CST was clearly not a third party and was in fact the injured party, given that the comments made were directly addressed to the organisation.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry to labour the point, but it is such an important point because that argument is an antisemitic trope that is used against anybody who dares to call this issue out or question it. It has been used against the APPG. We have been accused of being in the pay of Zionists, and videos have been produced accusing the group's members of being on the take from the Israeli Government or paid for by Zionists. That is a regular occurrence and something that these people use time and time again against anybody who dares to question them: to accuse them of being in the pay of a foreign Government or some other shady characters in the background. It is pure and simple antisemitism. This has to stop, and I hope that the Minister will listen and contact Bristol University himself to demand that it shares with him the training materials that it is providing on this issue.

Christian Wakeford: I completely agree. Not only is it antisemitic, but the conspiracy theories alone are dangerous. They are false and inaccurate and, again, fuel the racist ideology that Professor Miller extols.

Seemingly encouraged by the lack of an official response to the complaints, Professor Miller carried on articulating his problematic views. He claimed that an interfaith cookery class was looking to normalise Zionism among Muslims. He also argued that

“Britain is in the grip of an assault on its public sphere by the state of Israel and its advocates”,

and called BBC's Emma Barnett

“one of the most energetic Zionist campaigners in British public life”.

On the abuse of Jewish students on campus, he claimed:

“There is a real question of abuse here—of Jewish students on British campuses being used as political pawns by a violent, racist foreign regime engaged in ethnic cleansing”.

Again, this is not accurate. It is not true and it is dangerous.

One would have thought any one of those ridiculous theories would be enough for instant dismissal, but the lack of action emboldened Professor Miller. Even a letter signed by 700 academics, which stated that they

“believe that Prof. Miller's depiction of Jewish students as Israeli-directed agents of a campaign of censorship is false, outrageous, and breaks all academic norms regarding the acceptable treatment of students”,

was ignored.

Professor Miller also had the audacity to criticise the Jewish Society and Jewish students for calling out antisemitism. Miller personally attacked the Jewish Society president, which led to a sustained campaign of abuse

being launched online. In February 2021, the Union of Jewish Students once again had to release a number of statements, following further comments by Miller discussing some imagined global Zionist conspiracy involving Jewish students. It took until March 2021 for an investigation to be launched. Even after the outrage and a number of mentions in both Houses of Parliament, Miller was allowed back on campus, to the disgust of the Union of Jewish Students and its members.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) said, the leadership of the APPG continued to demand action from the university, in February and March 2021, when over 100 cross-party Members of both Houses intervened, and again in May and August. Each time our concerns were ignored, and Miller later suggested that the APPG, too, was part of an Israeli conspiracy.

The highest echelons of the university were well aware of Miller's hateful views, and an unproductive meeting was held with the vice-chancellor and Jewish students. This was 165 days since Professor Miller had attacked Jewish students, and no guarantees were given on timescales or when the university would fulfil its basic duty of care to its Jewish students. Only on 1 October was news received that he would no longer be employed by the university. Giving evidence to the Select Committee on Education later that month, Professor Jessop mentioned that several training programmes were being run at the university, including on inclusion, Islamophobia and antisemitism. A letter from the APPG in October asking for details of the training was ignored.

The ordeal seemed to have drawn to a close, although a subsequent petition was signed by 460 people, mainly academics, highlighting this deep-rooted problem. Bristol University and Professor Miller are responsible for bringing antisemitism into a mainstream university campus, and they should be thoroughly ashamed. The fact that Bristol University took so long to act as Miller, a racist, peddled baseless conspiracy theories about his own students will be a permanent stain on its reputation. Initially, it stood by Miller's teaching instead of protecting Jewish students from suspicion and discrimination. The fact that Bristol University did not act to protect Jewish students who were subjected to his disgusting conspiracy theories is a disgrace. This is a case study of how not to deal with legitimate complaints of antisemitism by concerned students who were deliberately targeted by one of its academics.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry to intervene again, but it is important to state that one of the defences used by the university was free speech. We are all cognisant of and protectors of free speech in this place, but free speech does not extend to racist language or the peddling of racist myths. It is shameful that the university used that as a defence. I hope that it will, in listening to this debate, reflect on that. Freedom of speech does not give us the ability and freedom to make racist comments or make Jewish students—or any student of any minority group—feel unsafe on campus. It was shameful that it used that as a defence.

Christian Wakeford: I completely agree. Freedom of speech is something we all treasure and hold dearly. However, freedom of speech should never include incitement to racial hatred, which is what was the case.

[*Christian Wakeford*]

I have two substantive questions for the Minister. First, any improvement at Bristol University will involve training. Will he undertake to write to the university to find out what training is being undertaken, who has provided it and what quality assurance has been applied? Secondly, the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, as the Antisemitism Policy Trust pointed out, risks failing the Miller test by giving academics recourse to the courts when expressing themselves within their area of expertise—and we know how Miller describes that. Will he meet again with me the trust, the CST, the UJS and others on how the Bill can be amended to prevent that from happening?

I hope now that at the very least any institution planning to employ Professor Miller cannot say that it was not aware of his racism, and that Jewish students across the country will hear this debate and know that we will always stand with them and by them in the fight against anti-Jewish racism. That is what he is guilty of.

5.17 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) on securing this debate on antisemitism at the University of Bristol. I echo his comment that it is profoundly troubling that we should have to have this debate at all. It feels especially poignant given that Holocaust Memorial Day is just a few weeks away. I should point out that I am responding to the debate on behalf of the Minister for Higher and Further Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), who is isolating pending the outcome of a PCR test. I wish her well with that.

I would like to begin by stating that there is no place for antisemitism in our society. The Government are clear that racism and religious hatred of any kind should not be tolerated. Universities and other higher education providers should be at the forefront of tackling antisemitism, and must make sure that higher education is a genuinely fulfilling and welcoming experience for everyone. Colleagues may be aware that in November, within just a few weeks of his appointment, the Secretary of State for Education visited Auschwitz, which demonstrated his resolve to learn the terrible lessons of the holocaust and to eradicate antisemitism from our education system. During his visit, he warned that if universities failed to consider the views of Jewish students, the risk was “obvious”, adding that antisemitism is not simply a historic debate; it is a present danger and a scourge that exists, sadly, on our campuses. We must do more to stamp out antisemitism and ensure that Jewish students and staff feel welcome on all our campuses.

Eliminating antisemitism from our society, including our world-leading university sector, is one of our key priorities. We have been clear that we expect providers to take a zero-tolerance approach to antisemitism in all its forms. The Government have taken decisive and long-standing action to tackle antisemitism in higher education. The working definition of antisemitism developed by the IHRA is one important tool for identifying and tackling antisemitism. Adopting it sends a strong signal that higher education providers take the issue seriously.

Christian Wakeford: Getting from where we were a couple of years ago to where we are now with regard to the number of institutions that have adopted IHRA is something we should be proud of. However, adopting IHRA is clearly just a badge. What can the Minister and the Department do to make sure that adoption is only part of the journey and that the definition is truly enforced as well?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend pre-empts some of the comments I am about to make. I absolutely recognise that it is only a step on the journey and not the destination itself.

In October 2020, the previous Secretary of State wrote to all higher education providers, urging them to adopt the IHRA definition. He wrote again in May 2021, emphasising the importance of adopting the definition in the light of increased antisemitic incidences following the conflict in the middle east.

To support that, in the previous Secretary of State’s strategic guidance letter to the Office for Students last year, he specifically emphasised the importance of work on the IHRA definition and asked the Office for Students to undertake a package of work aiming to increase adoption levels across the sector. Last month, in response, the OfS published a list of providers that have adopted the definition along with case studies of where it is being used most effectively. I am pleased to see the progress made—my hon. Friend commented on this—with a marked increase in the number of providers adopting the definition from about 30 to more than 200, including the vast majority of universities.

Although that progress has been made, we are acutely aware that adoption of the definition is just a first step towards eradicating antisemitism in higher education. The Community Security Trust recently published statistics indicating that there is still much work to do. Some worrying examples were cited that demonstrate how much more needs to be done.

Dr Offord: I am grateful that the Minister raised the CST and the figures that it published, which I have in front of me. He will be aware that of the about 8,500 Jewish students at UK universities, about one in five suffers antisemitic abuse.

Mr Walker: Which is clearly far too many. I was going to say that while I welcome the fact that the CST found that the vast majority of Jewish students have a strongly positive experience at university, it is deeply troubling to hear that there were about 111 antisemitic incidents in the sector in the 2020-21 academic year. To see a number of high-profile universities, including Bristol, named by the CST as providers with high numbers of incidents shows that there is still much more work to do—even at providers that have embraced the IHRA definition.

Those worrying statistics follow the CST report on campus antisemitism between 2018 and 2020 that named six cities with five or more recorded incidents throughout the period, of which Bristol was one. It is even more concerning that many of the institutions named by the CST had already adopted the IHRA definition. I take this opportunity to echo the comments made in the debate and wholeheartedly express my support and that of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and

Further Education for the work done by the CST. I recognise how it provides invaluable assistance to the UK Jewish community, including in schools, for which I am responsible, and I know that the Minister for Higher and Further Education and the Secretary of State are looking forward to welcoming the CST to the summit that they are leading later this month focused on tackling antisemitism in universities.

We know from the statistics mentioned that while our work to increase adoption of the IHRA definition is important, it is not enough on its own. That is why the Government have provided, via the Office for Students, £4.7 million to support 119 projects with a particular focus on harassment and hate crime, including 11 projects targeted at tackling religion-based hate crime. Those projects concluded in spring 2020, and an independent evaluation showed that they led to increased collaboration between the sector and external partners such as charities or community organisations aiming to tackle religious hatred.

In relation to steps that the OfS is taking on tackling antisemitism, as well as publishing on 10 November the list of providers that have adopted the IHRA definition, it has published supportive guidance for providers. In 2019, Universities UK published a briefing note on tackling antisemitism, with which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education has urged all providers to engage seriously. The OfS is also undertaking an impact evaluation on its statement of expectations on harassment and hate crime, which was published in April 2021. That work will take place from January to August. As part of the OfS's next steps, it will consider options for connecting the statement of expectations to its conditions for registration.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury South raised the important question of how the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill will apply in this context. The Bill will strengthen existing freedom of speech duties and introduce clear consequences for where these duties are breached. Recent incidents such as those at the London School of Economics show the importance of the work in this area. I am absolutely clear that the Bill does not give a green light to antisemitism and holocaust denial. In particular, any attempt to deny the scale or occurrence of the holocaust is morally reprehensible and has no basis in fact. I am categorical that nothing in the Bill in any way encourages higher education providers or student unions to invite antisemites, including holocaust deniers, to speak on campus. The strengthened protections for freedom of speech are likely to support students from minority backgrounds, who, on a number of occasions, have had their speech shut down by others.

The Bill provides for the appointment of a director for freedom of speech and academic freedom to the OfS board, with responsibility for overseeing its free speech functions, including championing freedom of speech and recommending redress via a new complaints scheme where speech is unlawfully restricted. This will place an appropriate focus on these fundamental rights.

The Bill will protect the freedom of speech of Jewish students, staff and visiting speakers, which has at times been under threat, as we saw recently with incidents in our universities. It will stop universities using security costs as a spurious attempt to cancel mainstream speakers, such as has been the case when a society attempted to invite the Israeli ambassador, and it will mean that

universities and student unions have to take genuine action against those who use violence or threats of violence to shut down speech, including that of Jewish students.

In addition to the Bill, there needs to be cultural change, and we welcome initiatives by universities, academics and students to drive this, but as we have seen historically on issues such as gender equality, race discrimination and human rights, cultural change occurs more readily when backed by appropriate legislation.

Christian Wakeford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will give way, but I am happy to commit to the meeting my hon. Friend has asked for, which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education has offered to hold.

Christian Wakeford: I appreciate the offer of a meeting. Obviously, I will raise this in the meeting, but I will also raise it during this debate. Cultural change can only happen with open dialogue, training and transparency, so will the Minister commit to writing to the university to request details of the provider and what is actually being covered, as well as the assurance that this is meaningful training about how to tackle antisemitism?

Mr Walker: I think I can probably make that commitment on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education, but I will certainly make sure that the Department follows up on it.

I did want to address specifically the case of Professor Miller at the University of Bristol. Universities are of course independent and autonomous organisations. Accordingly, the Government have not intervened directly in this case. I also understand that there are ongoing legal proceedings in relation to the case, so for that reason I cannot address all the specifics that my hon. Friend raised. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education has said publicly on a number of occasions that the views of Professor Miller, in particular his accusations against Jewish students, are ill-founded and wholly reprehensible, and the Government wholeheartedly reject them.

My right hon. Friend met representatives of the University of Bristol in May 2021 not to intervene in its investigation, but to seek their reassurance that the university recognises its obligations to protect Jewish students from harassment and hate crime, and to support them if they feel in any way threatened. She also wrote to the university twice to ensure that it was supporting Jewish students and staff who may have felt threatened at the time. We of course welcome the university completing a full investigation into the conduct of Professor Miller, but we expect that future instances there or elsewhere should be dealt with in a much swifter and more decisive manner.

Tackling antisemitism is a priority for me, for my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education and for the Government. We are keen to hear from Jewish groups about what more can be done to make Jewish students and staff feel safe on campus. The Secretary of State and Ministers will continue to work closely with Lord Mann, the independent adviser to the Government on antisemitism, and also meet regularly with Jewish stakeholder groups.

[Mr Robin Walker]

As I mentioned earlier, later this month, my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for Education and the Minister for Higher and Further Education will be leading a summit specifically focused on tackling antisemitism in higher education. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said that he intends to bring together key stakeholders from the sector to examine what more can be done to make Jewish students and staff feel safe on campus. This event will encourage discussion about what more can be done to eradicate the scourge that is antisemitism, and to agree concrete actions that providers can take to keep their Jewish students safe from it.

My hon. Friend asked specifically about antisemitism training at the University of Bristol. As I say, I am happy to make the commitment that the Department will write to the university again. I urge the university and other providers truly to engage with the communities that suffer from these abhorrent behaviours and to work with them to increase awareness of the impact of antisemitism and how it can be tackled most effectively.

My ministerial colleagues have worked closely with the Union of Jewish Students, which provides training on how to recognise and tackle antisemitism. I urge the University of Bristol to consider how it can learn more from those who are directly affected, and I know the UJS would be keen to support such work. My hon. Friend asked whether the UJS can be part of a meeting with him, the CST and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education; as I mentioned earlier, she is happy to commit to that.

Our HE sector has enormous capacity to change lives for the better. I know that universities are serious in their commitment to tackling antisemitism, but there remains work to be done, as this debate has demonstrated. For our part, we will continue to work across Government to ensure that racism and religious hatred of any kind are not tolerated anywhere, including in our world-leading universities.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 January 2022

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Second Homes and Holiday Lets: Rural Communities

1.30 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Happy new year to all. Before we begin, 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. 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. This can be done either at the testing centre in the House or at home. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of second homes and holiday lets in rural communities.

It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. Happy new year to you, too, and to colleagues.

It is a huge privilege to serve our communities in Cumbria—our towns, villages lakes and dales, among the rugged beauty of England's finest landscapes—yet the people who live in our communities are even more precious than the places themselves. We welcome those who see Cumbria as a holiday destination: a place for leisure and relaxation, and a place of peaceful serenity and exhilarating extremes. It is our collective privilege to be the stewards of such a spectacular environment for the country, yet our full-time local communities face an existential threat unlike any other in the UK. I am immensely grateful to have secured this debate, because the housing crisis that has faced our communities in Cumbria and elsewhere in rural Britain for decades has rapidly become a catastrophe during the two years of the pandemic.

For the last few decades, we have seen an erosion in the number of properties in Cumbria that are available and affordable for local people to buy or rent. What little I know of geology tells me that although erosion usually takes place over huge passages of time, sometimes a whole rockface may collapse or a whole piece of a cliff might drop into the sea in a single instant. That is what has happened to our housing stock during the pandemic. In the space of less than two years, a bad situation has become utterly disastrous.

I have been calling for the Government to take action from the very beginning, so I confess to being frustrated and angry that Ministers have yet to do anything meaningful to tackle the problem. As a result, many of us living in rural communities feel ignored, abandoned and taken

for granted by the Government, and we stand together today as rural communities to declare that we will not be taken for granted one moment longer.

In South Lakeland, the average house price is 11 times greater than the average household income. Families on low or middle incomes, and even those on reasonably good incomes, are completely excluded from the possibility of buying a home. Although the local council in South Lakeland has enabled the building of more than 1,000 new social rented properties, there are still more than 3,000 families languishing on the housing waiting list. Even before the pandemic, at least one in seven houses in my constituency was a second home—a bolthole or an investment for people whose main home is somewhere else.

In many towns and villages, such as Coniston, Hawkshead, Dent, Chapel Stile and Grasmere, the majority of properties are now empty for most of the year. Across the Yorkshire Dales, much of which is in Cumbria and in my constituency, more than a quarter of the housing stock in the national park is not lived in. In Elterwater in Langdale, 85% of the properties are second homes. Without a large enough permanent population, villages just die. The school loses numbers and then closes. The bus service loses passengers, so it gets cut. The pub loses its trade, the post office loses customers and the church loses its congregation, so they close too. Those who are left behind are isolated and often impoverished in communities whose life has effectively come to an end.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured this important debate. He has mentioned that his local authority has brought forward some affordable housing—I cannot remember the number he said—but that it was all rented. The Government have created a new scheme, the first homes scheme, to allow discounted properties to be purchased as affordable homes. Is the hon. Gentleman pursuing that with his local authority, to try to make more of those properties available to his local first-time buyers?

Tim Farron: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention. The short answer is yes. The slightly longer answer is that the first homes scheme cannot be instead of other schemes but has to be in addition to them. By the way, in a community like ours where the average household price is 11 times greater than the average income, the first homes scheme will not help people; it will not even nearly help them. Maybe if their income was seven times less than the average house price, it might just help them, so it is a good scheme, but it is barely even the tip of the iceberg. Yes, I have spoken to the previous Secretary of State to ask him to make our area a pilot, but that does not touch the sides, if I am honest. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman has raised a really important point.

During the pandemic, I have spoken to many local estate agents across our county. Around 80% of all house sales during the past two years have been in the second home market. Those who have the money to do so are rethinking their priorities, investing in the rising value of property and seeking a piece of the countryside to call their own, and we can kind of understand that. I do not wish to demonise anybody with a second home,

[Tim Farron]

or to say that there are no circumstances in which it is okay to have one, but let me be blunt: surely, someone's right to have a second home must not trump a struggling family's right to have any home, yet in reality, apparently it does. Every day that the Government fail to act is another day that they are backing those who are lucky enough to have multiple homes against those who cannot find any home in the lakes, the dales or any other rural community in our country.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): My own constituency, Aberconwy in north Wales, has this problem—not to the extent that the hon. Member describes, but certainly smaller villages are particularly vulnerable to high levels of second home ownership. However, I wonder what he has to say about the example given to me of a farmer whose family had lived in one valley, Penmachno, for many years. He himself had to move away to find other work, so he now has a second home—his family home—in Penmachno, but he must live in England. In that circumstance, there is a second home in the village that is not occupied, but there is a tradition and a family heritage in that village. Should that person then have to give up that home, or does the hon. Member have a way of recognising that kind of arrangement?

Tim Farron: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his intervention, which is really helpful and worthwhile. I would say two things. First, we have a desperate lack of affordable private rented accommodation, so we want both social rented houses and houses in the private rented stock. It seems to me that that is clearly the route for the hon. Gentleman's constituent to go down.

Secondly, possibly the only thing in the coalition agreement that had anything to do with me whatsoever was a commitment to what we called “home on the farm”: the ability, which is still the Government's stated policy, for farmers to convert underused or semi-used farm buildings into affordable homes for families, but also as part of the wider housing network. These are all small ounces that will help us to shift the problem, and I wish that the hon. Gentleman's Government in Wales and his Government here would take up these suggestions.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on having secured this important debate. It is clear from some of the questions that have been asked, and from what the hon. Gentleman is saying, that this is a complex issue. I will give an example: on the Isle of Wight, the village of Seaview has 82% second home ownership, so it has been effectively stripped out of permanent life, and Bembridge and Yarmouth have similar problems. Is the hon. Gentleman aware that a group of us have written to the Secretary of State with over two dozen ideas for how to make the upcoming housing and planning Bill—if it does come—much better and stronger, and give it a much wider base of support? We have put forward recommendations, and some options on second home ownership.

Tim Farron: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his helpful contribution, and for his ongoing concern and interest in this issue, which is very laudable indeed. In one sense, this issue is not complex at all. If a person is forced out of their community, it is not slightly complex; it is just bloomin' tragic. Yes, there is a planning

Bill, and I look forward to that. I might feel all sorts of dread about that Bill, but it is an opportunity to do something. However, every single day is an opportunity to do something. The opportunity was two years ago, a year ago, last week and the week before, and the Government do nothing.

The simple reality is that it is not that complex to do things that will shift the dial and save the dales and other rural communities that are being undermined in the way they are. That is what so frustrating to us: there are people from all parties in this Chamber today, and there are other people who would be here on a normal Thursday if it were not this time of year and if there were any votes today. The reality is that we know there is a problem, and we see no action from the Government. Every day that goes by is another day wasted. It is not complex—it is just tragic.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for calling the debate and I congratulate him on his speech. Urban areas that are holiday destinations—such as York, which has more than 8 million visitors a year—are also plagued by the issue, which is about not only Airbnbs and holiday lets but second homes, not least because people have now discovered new ways of working. Is that not another factor to add to the equation when we look at not only who has the ownership, but what is being developed?

Tim Farron: The hon. Lady makes a great point and I am grateful for her intervention. It is not just a rural issue, although it may predominantly be rural. York is clearly a good example of somewhere that suffers in a different way. I will come to the issue of holiday lets and some of the answers in a moment. It will rob communities of their very life if we do not intervene. I am not someone who is anti-market—I am anti-broken market, and this is a broken market. This is our opportunity to do something about it.

Excessive second home ownership is a colossal problem in our communities. The purpose of this debate is to shake the Government out of their demonstrable and inexcusable inaction and to take the action required to save our communities.

The crisis has become a catastrophe, and it is not just about second homes. Holiday lets are an important part of our tourism economy. In the Lake district, we argue and believe that we are the most visited part of Britain outside London. Our tourism economy is worth more than £3 billion a year and employs 60,000 people—comfortably Cumbria's biggest employer. It is a vibrant industry and, by its very nature, a joyful one; I am proud to be a voice for Cumbria tourism in this place. Those 60,000 people working in hospitality and tourism need to live somewhere. Some 80% of the entire working-age population of the Lake district already works in hospitality and tourism. We need to increase the number of working-age people who can afford to live and raise a family in our communities, yet the absolute opposite is happening at a rate of knots.

During the pandemic, in South Lakeland alone—just one district that makes up part of the Lake district—there was a 32% rise in one year in the number of holiday lets. I assure the Minister that those were not new builds; they were not magicked out of thin air. Those new holiday lets emerged in 2021 following the lifting of the

covid eviction ban. That is not to blame the ban; it was a good idea, and it had to come to an end at some point. My point is that that rise was over a tiny period of time: less than 12 months, in reality. The fact is that this time last year those new holiday lets were someone's home.

In Sedbergh, Kirkby Lonsdale, Kendal, Windermere, Staveley, Ambleside, Coniston, Grasmere, Grange and throughout Cumbria, I have met people who have been evicted from their homes under a section 21 eviction order—which, incidentally, this Government promised to ban in their last manifesto.

Among the hundreds evicted, I think of the couple with two small children in Ambleside, who struggled to pay £800 a month for their flat above a shop in town; they were evicted last spring only to find the home they had lived in for years on Airbnb for £1,200 a week. I think of the mum near Grange, whose teenage son had lived in their rented home his whole life; they were evicted only to see their property on Airbnb a few days later for over £1,000 a week. I think of the tradesman from Sedbergh, who had served the community for 15 years; a few days after he was evicted, his former home was also on Airbnb for £1,000 a week. There are hundreds more individuals and families in the same situation right across rural Cumbria.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Back in 2018, I did some work with Gordon Marsden, the then MP for Blackpool South, looking at Airbnb and the issues of the sharing economy for the all-party parliamentary group for hospitality and tourism. We came up with a recommendation for a statutory registrations scheme for all accommodation providers. Is that something the hon. Gentleman has considered?

Tim Farron: I have, and I will come to some suggestions in a moment, including on how we might tackle the issue—to put it neutrally—of Airbnb. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point, and the need for such a scheme is huge. Undoubtedly, the ease with which people can turn a home into a holiday let is part of the problem. The consequences are phenomenal. The people I am speaking about are real human beings; I could pick dozens and dozens more to talk about. What it means for them is that they have to leave the area. This is no less than a Lakeland clearance: whole communities ejected from the places where they were raised, where they had chosen to raise their families, or where they had set down roots to live, work and contribute to our economy.

Will the Minister accept that this is both morally abhorrent and economically stupid? We have businesses in Cumbria that, having survived covid so far, are now reducing their opening hours or closing all together because they cannot find staff anymore. We have people isolated and vulnerable because they cannot find care staff. There are friends of mine in that situation, in part because the local workforce has been effectively cleared out and expelled. In each case I mentioned earlier—in Sedbergh, Ambleside and Grange—the people could not find anywhere else to live in those communities or in the wider community. They have had to uproot and move away all together. How is the economy of Britain's second biggest tourism destination expected to deliver for Britain's wider economy without anybody to staff it?

What about the children who have to move away, and are forced to move school, and leave behind friends and support networks? What about those left behind in our dwindling communities, whose schools are now threatened with closure? I have spoken to MPs, not just those who are here and for whose presence I am massively grateful, but from rural communities right across this House. Most of those, particularly in England and Wales, are from the Conservative party. There is a kind of private agreement that this is a catastrophe. They see it in their own constituencies: the collapse of affordable, available housing for local communities is killing towns and villages in Cornwall, Northumberland, Shropshire, Devon, Somerset, North Yorkshire, the highlands of Scotland and rural Wales, as well as in my home of Cumbria.

Our rural communities want two things from the Minister today: first, a sign that he understands that this catastrophe is happening; and secondly, a commitment not to wait for the planning Bill, but to act radically and to act right now.

Robin Millar: Forgive me for not thanking the hon. Member earlier for securing this debate; this is a crucial debate and very important to residents in Aberconwy. I want to ask him about the point he made about the distribution of this problem in Wales, Scotland and England. Is he suggesting that this is a problem that can be solved by the UK Government, or is it one that he feels must be dealt with by the devolved Administrations?

Tim Farron: I do not care who solves it—it needs solving. The UK Government have got powers that they could use.

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. No disrespect, and I do not want to stop the debate or the interventions. However, those who are speaking later may want to be a little hesitant to intervene.

Tim Farron: I will be guided by you, Mr Sharma. Unless people are desperate, I will not take any more interventions. Members have the opportunity to speak after I finish.

The point that the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) makes is important; the UK Government have powers and I will come on to talk about the things that they could do. There are things that the Welsh Government could do, and there are some things that they are already doing that the UK Government are not doing—we could learn some lessons from them. There are also some powers that local authorities and national parks have, but those are very limited. It is essentially about taxation and planning law, in particular; those things come from both the devolved and central Administrations. However, it is a perfectly sensible and intelligent point that the hon. Member makes.

Now might be the moment, having asked the Minister to acknowledge that the catastrophe is real and to act, for me to give him some ideas about how he might act. What could and should the Government do? I propose seven steps to save rural communities. First, they could make second homes and holiday lets new and separate categories of planning use. This would mean that councils and national parks would have the power to put a limit on the number of such properties in each town and village, protecting the majority of houses for

[Tim Farron]

permanent occupation. Secondly, they could provide targeted, ringfenced finance so that planning departments have the resources to police this new rule effectively.

Thirdly, the Government could follow the lead of the Welsh Government and give councils the power to increase council tax by up to 100% on second homes in the worst-affected communities. That would serve to protect those communities and generate significant revenue that could then be ploughed back into their threatened schools and into new affordable housing for local families. A quick assessment shows that, in Coniston alone, that would raise £750,000 a year, which would make a colossal difference to that community.

Fourthly, the Government could force all holiday let owners to pay council tax, as they can avoid paying anything at all if they are deemed a small business.

Fifthly, the Government could give councils and national parks the power to ensure that, at least in some cases, 100% of new builds are genuinely affordable, and provide funding to pump prime those developments, possibly in part via the proceeds of a second homes council tax supplement. We have a deeply broken housing market. Of course, developers can sell any property that they build in our rural communities for a handsome price, but that is surely not the most important thing. Is it not time to stop building simply to meet demand, and instead build to meet need?

Sixthly, the Government could simply keep their manifesto promise and ban section 21 evictions.

Seventhly, the Government can ensure that platforms such as Airbnb are not allowed to cut corners and undermine the traditional holiday let industry. Their properties should have to meet the same standards as any other rental. Failure to do that is unsafe, unfair and creates a fast track for the Lakeland clearances to continue and escalate.

I want to be constructive, and I hope that I have been. I called for this debate not to throw bricks at the Government, but because I love my communities and I am despairing at what is happening to them. I am determined that Ministers should understand the depth and scale of this catastrophe, and that they should take radical action right now. I support free markets, but unregulated markets that are obviously broken are not free at all. That is when they need the visible hand of Government to referee and intervene.

The Government will have noticed that, in recent months, rural Britain has demonstrated at the ballot box that it will not tolerate being taken for granted. This debate gives Ministers an early opportunity to demonstrate, in return, that they will stop taking us for granted, standing idly by while rural communities are rapidly destroyed.

To those of us who live in Cumbria and other beautiful parts of our country, it is obvious what is happening, and it is heartbreaking. Likewise, it is obvious to us what needs to be done, and it frustrates us, to the point of fury, that the Government have so far failed to even acknowledge the problem, much less to do anything about it. Today is their chance to put that right. Rural Britain is watching.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Virendra Sharma (in the Chair): Order. I will not limit the time for each speech at this stage, but I will be calling the Opposition spokesperson by 2.28 pm, so I leave it to Members to adjust their speeches accordingly.

1.53 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for opening the debate so well, as we see a surge of second homes and holiday lets. We all know that our constituents need local homes for local people. They are being priced out of their communities and the wrong houses are being built, all at a cost to the local economy. This is about cost, tenure, and impact.

York is no different from rural areas; it is not about location but housing tenure and use, not least for a holiday destination. York has residential streets full of holiday lets, fragmenting communities in areas where second homes have a prevalence. We have new developments that are increasingly attractive to investors but unaffordable for local people. That includes the 2,500-unit York Central development, which even Homes England recognises could be dominated by second homes and holiday lets—it is now being dubbed “Airbnb central”. The wrong kind of housing is being developed; the site should be about public land being used for public good.

I do not chastise the Government for their focus on housing numbers, but in York, we need growth for our local people, and that focus is propping up second homes and the lettings market, and causing the housing market to overheat at the expense of local families being pushed further away from our city. The solution is local homes for local people, whether they already live in York or are moving to serve our local economy and public services.

Let me address costs. York receives more than 8 million visitors a year. The holiday let business is booming, not least as covid-safe staycations have been such a feature of the pandemic. York’s pressure-cooker housing market saw an increase of 14%—£36,000—in the average property price in the year up to August. First-time buyers spend 23% more on housing than they did five years ago. York’s affordability ratio is 8.3 and rising sharply. Family homes are being snapped up as holiday lets or second homes, and it is more lucrative to convert student lets to holiday lets, so we now have a problem with student accommodation. York’s superb connectivity and new ways of working mean that the opportunity to own a second home in York has become even more attractive to weekly commuters.

On tenure, developers are building units for investors, not to meet local need. They are perfect for short-term breaks but hopeless for local families, even though family homes constitute 80% of those needed. That is why the numbers game just does not work and the planning system does not deliver. It is a false economy: housing units are getting ticked off but housing need is not being addressed. It is a developer’s dream, as they can name their price, but a local person’s nightmare, as they are pushed away from our city.

On the impact, we cannot recruit those with the vital skills to staff our NHS or social care. We cannot staff our local economy, particularly in retail and hospitality, as people can no longer afford to live in York, and that problem has reached crisis point in some professions.

The gentrification of our post-industrial city is coming at a heavy cost, not least as local families are now being driven away by the net loss of council housing and a housing waiting list that has tripled in my short time in Parliament. The unaffordable rents and market housing costs are forcing people to live and work elsewhere. Too many people are now at the mercy of unscrupulous private landlords or in overcrowded social housing. It is breaking our city. Local homes for local people is imperative.

I will make five suggestions. First, we need proper local data, including a register of housing lets and a register of second homes.

Secondly, we need to fix local taxation. Business rates do not work here, as we all know, so on top of council tax, a council tax levy should be paid by people who have the privilege of owning a second property for holiday lets. After all, people renting still use local services and need their bins collecting.

Thirdly, on planning, we need to build local homes for local people. The planning system does not currently accommodate that, and the obligations and incentives have a perverse impact. A residence test is required, and although I would welcome such a measure, it is about more than that. We need to address the problem not just at the point of sale, but when the land is being developed, and consider the obligations placed on developers. We need to review the local planning process—I appreciate that we have not had a local plan since 1954, which is escalating the problem—and I trust that the Minister will deliver that for us this year. He needs to bang heads together at our local authority to deliver that, because we absolutely need to look at the planning system in today's context.

Fourthly, on financial incentives, scrapping the mortgage tax relief on holiday lets is absolutely essential, as is looking at how stamp duty can be even better used as a disincentive for second home ownership. When disposing of public land, instead of chasing one-off land receipts, investment in the long-term interests of the community and the socioeconomic outcomes should be the prime focus.

Fifthly, we should also limit the time for which holiday homes can be let, as has been done in London and Europe. That will curb the behaviour of some of second home owners and ensure that those homes can go to local communities.

We need the principle of local homes for local people to govern every housing decision so that we can once again have a vibrant community.

1.59 pm

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this important debate.

I feel like a stuck record for raising the issue of second homes in North Devon again. My constituency is not just rural but coastal, and many of the issues described by hon. Members are exacerbated many times over on the coast, where we have only the sea to draw on for extra residents or houses. Therefore, down the south-west peninsula, in both Devon and Cornwall, MPs have been highlighting this issue ever since I was elected. Although the pandemic has seen a perfect storm, resulting in a

rush to purchase second homes in beautiful locations or to convert properties to short-term holiday lets, it is not a new problem. I was contacted during the 2019 general election campaign by the Croyde Area Residents Association, which was concerned even then that second homes accounted for 64% of properties in the stunning surf village of Croyde.

The issues around second homes are well documented with regards to a shortage of affordable properties for local residents. In the past year of the pandemic, we have also seen many evictions of local residents who have rented their homes for many years, so that owners can convert their properties to short-term holiday lets. North Devon has always welcomed second-homers and those visiting our beautiful coast in short-term holiday lets, but what we are now seeing is unsustainable, and we need action to address the problem before we become a complete ghost coast.

Like me, North Devon Council has written numerous times to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and now to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, on this matter. In its most recent letter, North Devon Council detailed the following concerns about the critical situation facing our housing market. Average house prices in North Devon have increased by 22.5% in the past 12 months—the second-highest rise in England. There has been a 67% reduction in listings for permanent rental properties in 12 months—the highest reduction in the south-west, and the fourth highest nationally. There has been a 33% increase in the number of people on the housing register in 12 months, a 21% increase in the number of dwellings registered for business rates for holiday lets over 24 months, and a 7.5% increase in the number of second homes in just 12 months.

The number of properties advertised for permanent rental via Rightmove, compared with those available for Airbnb, really highlights the issue. Many of us had hoped the problem would have passed by the end of the summer, but at the start of November in Barnstaple, the main town in my constituency, there were 126 Airbnbs and two private rentals. In Ilfracombe, there were over 300 Airbnbs and three private rentals. In Lynton, there were 104 Airbnbs. In Woolacombe, there were 196 Airbnbs but not a single private rental on Rightmove.

The council's housing staff are now dealing with a huge increase in the number of people presenting as homeless, and they have also seen a major shift in the type of people asking for assistance. These people are homeless simply because they are forced to present as such, as they have been evicted by landlords who wish to convert their properties from private residential use to short-term holiday use. Given the numbers I have mentioned, it is impossible for them to find alternative accommodation on the open market. I want to take this opportunity to thank the housing team at North Devon Council for their tireless work in trying to help families who find themselves in an incredibly difficult and stressful situation through no fault of their own.

Although tourism is a major part of the North Devon economy, the lack of housing available for permanent residential use is starting to have a major impact on the lives of far too many residents, as well as on local businesses and public services such as health and education, which are struggling to recruit because of the lack of housing and which are also suffering

[Selaine Saxby]

from existing staff leaving the area because of eviction and the lack of affordable housing. Major employers in North Devon have indicated that the lack of available housing is now being considered when deciding whether to invest in the area. Local schools and colleges, and the health service, cannot recruit quality staff because of the lack of housing. Even our much-loved North Devon District Hospital is struggling to find accommodation for just the handful of new students that started there this year.

The recent shift from permanent residential to holiday use, and the substantial increase in house prices, means not only that a permanent home is out of reach for many people living and working in the area. Public attitudes to new house building have also changed. Virtually every housing scheme in North Devon, particularly the larger ones, is meeting substantial opposition from the community, with many objectors citing fears that the properties will become second homes or holiday lets, and that they will invariably be unaffordable for local residents. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that viability challenges raised by developers mean that on average only around 20% of new homes built in North Devon are affordable, by any definition.

A proliferation of short-term holiday lets in an area not only changes the character of a neighbourhood but can also increase antisocial behaviour and noise nuisance, primarily because there is so little regulation of short-term holiday lets. We are already starting to see that, with an increase in the number of complaints received by the council relating to noise, antisocial behaviour, parties, hot tubs and so on.

I recognise that any intervention in the housing market has a huge risk of unintended consequences and potential increases in prices in some sectors, but I very much hope that some steps can be taken to level the playing field between the short-term and the long-term rental markets through the various current tax inequalities, to ensure that the short-term holiday let market is better regulated and that a change of use is required to convert properties from primary residence to holiday lets. It seems bizarre that some of the holiday lets in my constituency have to have a change of use to become a long-term rental, but the situation is not the same the other way round. Restrictions of just 10 months' occupancy are imposed by local councils for good reasons at the time they were imposed, but those restrictions are now not being reversed. Support is needed for small district councils to enable them to confidently take those steps, if they are able.

We also need to take steps to bring back into occupation derelict properties that have been left empty for months or years. Councils have powers, but the processes are slow and expensive, and the proximity of my own home to derelict houses suggests such powers are not being readily acted upon.

Most people dream of owning their own home, and I fully support the Government's ambition to help people to achieve that dream. To do that in places such as North Devon, we need to find a solution for increasing the supply of affordable housing and we need to review the guidance and tests in place to assess the viability of developments, to ensure that the level of affordable housing provided is not affected by issues such as an unreasonably high valuation placed on the land.

Our councils need more control and flexibility in access to funding to build affordable homes and to protect them for occupancy by local residents, so that they are available to future generations. New homes need to be available to those who want to live in these rural and coastal constituencies. There are innovative schemes such as rent to buy from companies such as Rentplus, community land trusts for small rural communities need to be more accessible to small planning authorities, and more needs to be done so that our local plans really do reflect the needs of our local communities.

Like many of my constituents, I would like the lights over Christmas to be on in my neighbours' houses, but far too many closes like mine are deserted through the winter. I very much hope that the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has some plans, blue sky or otherwise. During the pandemic, this Government showed that we can act quickly when we need to. The time is now to address the imbalances in the housing market, before the lights go out for good and the whole of the North Devon coast becomes a winter ghost town.

2.8 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

Like other Members here today, I represent a rural and coastal constituency. North East Fife is very popular with tourists—and why would it not be? The East Neuk is known as a hidden gem, a string of pearls, with its beautiful fishing villages of Crail and Elie, St Monans, Anstruther and Cellardyke; beaches and cliffs and nature to walk on—I tackled the Elie chain walk scramble with my son last year—and the sea for swimming and sailing; it has local food producers and a burgeoning craft alcohol industry; and all that is before moving on to St Andrews with its history and golf.

Tourism is clearly a vital part of North East Fife's local economy, but I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend on the need for a balance. Tourism is only sustainable when it works with and enhances local communities. In many respects, the communities in North East Fife continue to thrive even outside of tourist season. Over Small Business Saturday before Christmas, I had the opportunity to visit the inaugural Largo arts winter weekend, where 30 artists opened their homes and studios to showcase and sell their works. Between covid and the weather, there were arguably not many tourists, but it was a fantastic and vibrant day showing the strengths of those living in our communities.

A persistent issue for those living in North East Fife, as for other constituencies mentioned here today, is the unsustainable proliferation of second homes and holiday lets. Details from Fife Council housing services for March 2021 show that, at a minimum, almost a 10th of all the properties in the East Neuk were second homes. I say "at a minimum" because the data does not include 14 smaller villages where there are fewer than 30 second homes, it does not identify where long-term empty properties are second homes and, crucially, it does not record holiday lets at all. So the real figures are likely to be significantly higher, with some anecdotal estimates placing the number closer to half of all properties.

No community can thrive when half of all private properties are holiday accommodation. A constituent wrote to me recently, noting that during the last 25 years numbers at the local primary school had fallen from just over 100 pupils to 30. That is not good enough for the families in North East Fife or elsewhere. It is not the sign of a thriving community where children will be given opportunities to flourish as they grow up. Others have mentioned the ongoing impact that that has on other services. We all run campaigns as MPs to keep our bus services and to keep our schools and other public places open, but we find ourselves in a vicious cycle because of this problem.

As others have mentioned, these properties drive away families and drive up house prices. Last August it was reported that property prices along the East Neuk rose by more than 26%, which is fantastic if you are on the property ladder, but less so for young people and growing families, who find themselves priced out. As the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) referenced, there is an impact on councils and housing. There has always been a shortage of council housing in North East Fife, with people forced to become homeless.

I have mentioned the success of many local businesses, but no one's income grew by more than a quarter last year, and no local business can work without employees. Like other areas, North East Fife has really struggled with employment in hospitality. There are vacancies in establishments such as the Michelin-starred Peat Inn, which has been forced to cancel lunch services owing to a lack of staff.

I welcome the actions of the Liberal Democrats on Fife Council, who brought a motion to consider the use of control orders. Those are not a silver bullet, but they do attempt to strike the right balance in our communities and, importantly, give local people a say.

I am conscious that many of the proposals mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale fall into policy areas that have been devolved to the Scottish Government. The option taken by the Scottish National party in Holyrood was to propose the licensing of properties to regulate proper usage. The Scottish Government withdrew those proposals prior to the Holyrood elections in May, having committed to respond to stakeholder concerns about the licensing scheme through a working group. However, I am sorry to say that that working group has not gone well. In August, tourism bodies, having highlighted the lack of significant change to the legislation, particularly where it impacted on traditional self-catering and bed and breakfasts, resigned from the group en masse. Since then, the group has given evidence to Holyrood's Local Government and Communities Committee, outlining its view that the current plans would be hugely damaging to the Scottish tourism economy, particularly as we recover from covid.

I understand the frustration of those living in city areas, where noise from partygoers in rentals can be a real issue, but the solution of the legislation being outlined in Scotland will not resolve the issues experienced in rural and coastal communities such as North East Fife. My MSP colleague, Willie Rennie, continues to raise those issues in the Scottish Parliament.

So what can be done for North East Fife in Westminster? Fiscal policy could be used to encourage the sale of properties as primary residences. The Liberal Democrats

have previously called for the holiday let tax loophole to be closed and for mortgage tax relief to be removed from holiday lets. Just as important as tangible policy change is the need for a consistent approach between the devolved Administrations and Westminster, as the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), who is no longer in his place, alluded to.

Hospitality and tourism are vital for communities across the four nations of the UK. As we have seen with differing covid regulations, sometimes people do not think twice about travelling across borders to where the rules are different. I want hospitality, tourism and the communities in North East Fife to thrive, and I want them to thrive in North Devon and in Westmorland and Lonsdale, so I ask the Minister to commit to conversations with his counterparts in the Scottish Government and the other devolved Administrations to ensure that no community ends up losing out in a race to the bottom on these measures.

2.14 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for setting the scene so well. I have absolutely no doubt that his constituency is full of pleasant scenery, being in the very heart of the Lake district. However, I do not believe that anywhere compares with some of the visuals back home in my own constituency—although I might just be a wee tad biased. Nevertheless, if all the Members here in Westminster Hall came to Strangford, they would say, “You're definitely right. It is the best place to be. The visuals are there.” Whether it be the beaches, the golf courses, the antique shops, the coffee shops, the historical destinations, Mount Stewart or Strangford Lough with all its sea sports, Strangford has it. If anyone comes for a holiday, they will come back.

In my constituency, the core economic strategy of the local council, Ards and North Down Borough Council, is tourism, to create the jobs and the wages. There is a need to ensure that tourism can progress, while also ensuring that locals can still live where they were brought up, and I understand the hon. Gentleman's frustrations about the rural parts of his constituency being predominantly used for holiday lets and second homes. Although our rural areas are beautiful, often with unique scenery, it is crucial that people have somewhere to live and are not evicted to make room for another holiday let. As the hon. Gentleman referred to, recent statistics have shown that there has been a 32% increase in holiday lets in the last year in his constituency.

Bringing it back home for a moment, I have the pleasure of representing a constituency that has a number of towns—Newtownards, Comber and Ballynahinch—but also many lovely seaside villages, such as Killyleagh, Ballywalter and Portavogie. One thing that I take pride in are the little B&Bs, the glamping pods and the mini-getaways—the staycations that Strangford provides. For example, there is Pebble Pods, for glamping, or luxury camping, in Killinchy, and there are also seaside cottages to rent in Ballyhalbert, all a mere bus ride from the town of Newtownards and a day's shopping or a night at the cinema. I am just watching everybody's mouths water in relation to what Strangford has to offer, and I am sure they will all be queuing up to book the first plane, the first car or whatever it may be to get over to Northern Ireland.

[*Jim Shannon*]

From 2019 to 2020, between 520 and 611 residential planning decisions were approved for my constituency. Compared with other constituencies in Northern Ireland, those figures are not that high—across the Province, the figure is about 950. That shows that there are controls in place in my constituency, and we are pleased to see them.

In addition, 35% of people in Northern Ireland live in rural areas. I am blessed to have always lived in the countryside, starting in the village of Ballywalter, and then in the Ards peninsula for the rest of my life—that is for many reasons, such as health, geography and desire.

A constituent of mine suffers with severe asthma. He found that living in a town with a higher level of industrial fumes was affecting his breathing. Therefore, he moved to Ballywalter, the village I was brought up in, where there is fresh sea air. I understand why there is a desire to go to the countryside—to Westmorland and Lonsdale, to south Devon or wherever it might be. However, it is crucial that there is sustainable housing, both private and social housing, that people can avail themselves of.

Although it is important that there is sufficient housing in rural communities, it is fair to say that, in terms of tourism, they are often overlooked. Tourism in rural areas can be seen as fairly architectural and does not represent luxury for all age types; we have to understand that as well.

I agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale about many of his points, but I must acknowledge and praise those who have gone above and beyond to improve amenities in their areas for the purpose of development and to make those areas more popular places to go to. There is a purpose in that if people want to go to those places, but there is also a need to do the very core thing that the hon. Gentleman referred to, which is to ensure that local people can stay and live where they are. It is also about getting people out of congested cities and into the countryside.

Back home in my constituency and across Northern Ireland, we have some rules—the planning rules are clear. In every housing development some of the land must be set aside for social housing and rental opportunities—I do not know whether that is one of the seven options the hon. Gentleman referred to. Barn conversions should be the only thing when it comes to tourism—re-lets for the future. The seven points the hon. Gentleman referred to are key, and he put them forward in the way he always does—in a constructive fashion. I am not deriding the Minister or his Department; this is about how we can do better and make things better.

Better scrutiny must take place with regard to planning, and local residents should be given a platform to air their concerns. I want to make it clear that everyone should have a home. I remember the Conservative party and Margaret Thatcher many years ago, and her theme was that every person should have access to housing. I understand from a paper that I read that in the last few months 400,000 people were first-time buyers of their houses. So it is clear that there are other things we need to look towards.

When planners discuss new plans for holiday lets or second homes, they should take into consideration who they are putting at risk of homelessness. I urge the Minister and the Government to take new steps and to engage with local councils to protect residents in rural areas who are at risk of losing their homes to holiday lets, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale referred to. We must ensure that councils have the power to say when enough is enough, and to differentiate between residential and leisure planning, which is one of the seven points that the hon. Gentleman made.

I will conclude with this comment: a person who has lived all their life in the country needs to know that affordable housing is available for them to raise their families in. Currently, that is not the case and, as everybody has referred to, we must find a balance between protecting the countryside, encouraging tourism and ensuring that there is an environment of affordable housing. That is a difficult balance, to be sure, but it is not an impossible one, and I remain hopeful that this House, in tandem with planning and tourism, can do differently and do better.

2.20 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, and I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for having secured this important debate. It was good to hear him speak in favour of free markets: that is not something we always hear from his party, so it was very welcome. However, I agree with him that we are in a broken market. I must draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I have been involved in the housing market for many years.

There is a scarcity of land across the country, and in the rural areas we are talking about today—many of which are covered by national parks, including much of my area—those scarcities are even more profound. The reality is that we are already intervening in the market by creating that scarcity through the planning process, so I do not think it is wrong for us to talk about interventions, because free markets cannot be the only solution to the problems we have in the housing market.

Certainly, second homes are having a very big effect, creating even greater pressures and affordability constraints in some of these rural areas, and not just rural areas—as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) said, many urban areas face the same kinds of issues. Ryedale council covers much of my patch, where the average house price is around £300,000, with an average earnings to house price ratio of about 8.7. In Hambleton, the ratio is 7.2, and in other places, such as Filey—attractive coastal resorts—prices are going up, and the increasing number of holiday lets is putting further pressure on local people's ability to find properties to rent and purchase. We cannot just rely on a supply and demand equation to solve all those problems: we must look at different interventions.

What the Government have done through the first homes scheme is part of the solution to this problem. It is an excellent policy, and I do not quite agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that it is not a solution for his constituency. He mentioned that average house prices in his patch were 11 times greater

than average incomes—well, first homes could be up to half-price. Transfer values in my area from developers to housing associations are below half-price, and there is no reason why some of those houses cannot be made available to purchase in perpetuity through discounts of half-price or even below half-price.

I urge the Government to rename the whole first homes policy “half-price homes”, because we could deliver many properties around the country to local first-time buyers at half-price. That would make a significant difference to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and to mine. It would mean that young first-time buyers could buy properties in my constituency that would cost four or five times their average earnings, which would bring those homes in scope for lots of those people. I fully concede that this is not all about affordable homes for purchase—we also need affordable homes to rent, shared ownership and lots of other things—but first homes is a very important policy that we should be driving further forward.

Taxation is bound to come into this conversation. Clearly, the Government believe that already: there is already a 3% stamp duty surcharge for second homes, so the Government believe we need to do something about second homes to try to level the playing field between investors, second home owners, first-time buyers and other buyers in our constituencies. This is not uncharted territory for this Government, so we should have a conversation about whether we should have a council tax surcharge as well. There is a perfectly sensible conversation to be had here, while recognising that the Conservative party believes in freedom of choice, so if somebody wants to use their money to buy a second home in a different part of the country as an investment or a place to live, we should not be totally against that. It is about trying to strike a balance between those two things to make it a fair and level playing field.

Another area that could make a big difference and that could fund lots of different activities would be the way we tax non-resident overseas owners. This could be in rural areas or urban areas. I do not think there is any argument for not taxing those people pretty heavily if they own property in the UK and are non-resident. We already have a 2% surcharge, on top of the 3% surcharge, for overseas owners. These people are having a profound effect on some house prices in urban areas as well as rural areas. I think 28% of properties sold above £2 million are bought by overseas owners. Around 20% of all properties in London—and probably a decent quantity in York and other cities—are owned by overseas residents. I do not see a reason why we would not seek to tax those people even more heavily than with a 100% increase in council tax.

Roughly, if we applied a 1% wealth tax on UK properties—this is only for overseas owners, not UK residents—it would raise £4 billion to £5 billion a year. There would still be an incentive for those people to invest their money in the UK, which I am not against, but the reality is that this would make it a fair and level playing field. They would still benefit from the very high house price growth. As we have heard today, house prices have been rising by around 10%, so it still makes sense for people to invest, but such a tax would mean that we could take a little bit out of the money they are making every year from house price inflation and put it elsewhere.

I would recommend that we put that £4 billion or £5 billion a year into the first homes programme, increasing the number of properties available to local, first-time buyers who are keen to get into the housing market. That would ensure that those local people have a stake in our communities and are available for employers to do the very important work of making our communities sustainable.

2.27 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in the debate, and I extend my thanks to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for bringing it forward.

An over-supply of second homes and holiday lets has a detrimental effect on our rural and island economies and ultimately leads to depopulation, as we have heard. Too many of those living in rural and island communities find that their working-age sons and daughters simply cannot afford to stay in the communities in which they grew up and raise children, because house prices have been driven up by second home owners and holiday let operators, pricing them out of their own communities.

The reality is that too many properties in our rural and island communities lie empty for considerable periods throughout the year. That is why the SNP Scottish Government are devolving powers to local councils to allow them to regulate second homes and holiday lets where people buy second homes in popular rural or island communities where housing availability is necessarily low. Different local authorities will tailor this regulation to suit their particular circumstances, and that is how it should be.

In 2016 the people of Cornwall had a referendum supporting a ban on second homes being purchased, because it priced people out of the market. In St Ives, the local council can take action if owners of new homes do not live in them as their principal residence. I understand that the previous Communities Secretary in the UK was looking at giving councils in England the power to ban the purchase of second homes if they are deemed to be damaging to the local community. Perhaps the Minister will update us on those plans.

In Scotland we are taking action. It is expected that new housing projects in parts of Scotland will receive planning permission only if they are reserved for full-time residents. We have an estimated 25,000 second homes, which leaves many local people struggling to get a foot on the housing ladder in areas where there is particular pressure—in popular locations such as the isle of Skye, the Western Isles, the isle of Bute and, of course, in my own constituency, on the isle of Arran. Twenty-five of Scotland’s 32 local authorities have already removed the 10% council tax discount on second homes. In addition, second home buyers have to pay a dwelling supplement of 4% on top of the land and buildings transaction tax on the purchase price of the property.

More power is also being delivered to local councils to manage the number of second homes in their area, and the Scottish Government will work with Community Land Scotland to ensure the right land is available to deliver more housing in our rural areas. We understand the need for more island and rural housing to ensure the long-term sustainability of those communities. Some 110,000 affordable homes will be delivered in Scotland

[Patricia Gibson]

by 2032, of which at least 70% will be available for social rent, and 10% will be in our remote, rural and island communities.

A remote, rural and islands housing action plan will be developed to meet the housing needs of those areas and to help retain and attract people to those communities, backed by a remote and rural island housing fund of at least £45 million, as part of the Scottish Government's overall housing supply programme funding in the current parliamentary session. The goal is to try to ease some of the housing pressure that has built up over time and which needs to be addressed.

The challenge of depopulation is serious and that is why the Scottish Government will establish an islands bond. We will offer 100 bonds of up to £50,000 to young people and families to stay in or move to islands currently threatened by depopulation, supporting people to buy houses, start businesses and make their lives in these communities. We can celebrate the fact that on the isle of Arran in my constituency, for example, 34 new houses are being built on Brathwic Terrace in Brodick, with Scottish Government funding of £70,000 per house—a total investment of £2.38 million. Almost all those homes will be allocated to Arran residents, and a number of other developments are in the pipeline.

Of some concern is the fact that of the current 3,099 homes on Arran, 726 are second and empty homes, which constitute 23.7% of the island's entire housing stock. The impact is that although the average house price in North Ayrshire is £136,000, the average house price on Arran is more than double the average of the rest of the local authority area, at £272,000.

As we have heard, that matters because we need a workforce on our islands and in our rural areas. We need teachers and cleaners for our schools; we need people to work in the hospitality sector; we need people to work in the shops, and to deliver care to our older people. Those workers need to be able to access affordable housing. That is so important for the sustainability of our communities, but at the moment, it is challenging.

As well as second homes, we have seen an explosion of the Airbnb market. In some parts of the UK, those properties have become so prevalent that there is now one listed for every four properties. The impact on the supply of much-needed homes in some of our rural and island communities is significant, but the challenges posed by Airbnb properties are not restricted to those communities. In fact, *The Guardian* identified Airbnb hotspots where the ratio of active listings to homes was more than 20 times higher than the average across England, Scotland and Wales. Indeed, the highest incidence of Airbnbs was found in Edinburgh Old Town, where there were 29 active listings for every 100 properties, followed closely by the north-west of Skye, which had the second highest concentration of 25 active listings per 100 properties. The impact of that type of let is that they drive up rental costs for everyone, making housing less affordable and having a serious impact on available housing stock.

The Liberal Democrat and Labour council in the Highlands has concluded that changing a dwelling to a short-term let should require planning permission, so that locals have a right to comment. That would help to weed out poor operators to the benefit of everyone.

Constructive changes that we all want to see are going through the Scottish Parliament, including tackling overprovision, simplifying publicity notifications, stronger guidance on fees, and a focused use of inspections. The licensing orders going through the Scottish Parliament will help improve those matters.

No one is saying that there is no place for short-term holiday lets in our communities, whether rural, island or urban. They absolutely have a place in our island communities and in other urban and rural areas where people want to spend their holidays. When people do so, they are made most welcome. However, there has to be a balance in the market; as we can see, that balance is currently not there in some cases. That is why devolving powers to local councils to allow them to regulate local provision is an important and proportionate step.

I am very pleased that we have had this debate on this important matter today. Given that some of the challenges are replicated across the UK, I hope we can all share good practice to tackle the issue. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on what has already been done in Scotland and Wales and on whether he has any further ideas on what can be done. I hope he can also update us on the previous Secretary of State's comments about tackling the issue.

2.35 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing this debate. He has a huge amount of knowledge about the subject. As he has done on numerous occasions in the past, he spoke with authority about the negative impact of second homes and holiday lets on his constituents, as well as outlining a number of suggestions that certainly warrant further consideration.

All speakers in today's debate have acknowledged that, in order to thrive, rural communities need investment, employment opportunities and, in many cases, thriving tourism industries, but they also need affordable homes for local people. While second homes and short-term lets can undoubtedly bring benefits to local economies, those benefits must be continually weighed against their impact on local people.

It is clear from the strength of feeling expressed in this debate, and from other recent debates that have touched on these issues for coastal, urban and rural constituencies, that there is a clear view among a sizeable number of hon. Members on both sides of the House that, as things stand, the Government have not got the balance right. It is that balance, as so many have mentioned, that is important.

Informed by their respective constituency experiences, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and other hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon have detailed the negative impact that excessive numbers of second homes and holiday lets are having on the communities they represent. As we have heard, excessive rates of second home ownership in rural areas have a direct impact on the affordability and therefore the availability of local homes, particularly for local first-time buyers. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, high rates of second home ownership entail the loss of a significant proportion of the permanent population, and have a detrimental impact on local services and amenities,

whether that be local schools, transport links or local small businesses, and therefore the sustainability and cohesion of those communities.

The staggering growth in short-term and holiday lets in many rural constituencies—as well as, as hon. Members have said, in urban areas, including in my own city—is having a direct impact on the affordability and availability of homes for local people to buy. In many parts of the country the growth in this market is also having an impact on those who cannot buy or to secure social housing, in terms of access to private rentals. That point was highlighted powerfully by the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby). That growth is also having an impact in terms of security for those renters, including key workers, who find that their landlord wishes to begin using their property exclusively as a short-term or holiday let, a situation unlikely to be ameliorated any time soon, given the fact we are still waiting for the Government's promised renters' reform Bill.

The emerging evidence suggests that the pandemic and the resulting attraction of staycations for domestic holidaymakers has accelerated markedly the growth in both second home ownership and holiday lets. Fuelled in part by the stamp duty holiday, the number of transactions liable for the second home stamp duty surcharge stood at just under 85,000 in the second quarter of this year—the single largest quarterly figure since the higher rate for the additional dwellings surcharge was introduced back in 2016.

As the *Financial Times* reported back in July, figures produced by estate agent Hamptons International using Companies House data show that the rate at which holiday let companies are being set up has more than doubled over the coronavirus crisis, with the vast majority of those incorporating being individuals owning only one mortgaged property, rather than large corporations holding multiple holiday homes.

It is worth reflecting briefly at this point on the issue of data—the point was well made by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) in her contribution—because the fact is that we do not know the numbers of second homes and holiday lets in any detail, other than that they continue to rise. We do not have an accurate grasp of the figures across the country. Council tax records are likely to significantly undercount second homes, both because there is no financial incentive to register a property in areas where a council tax discount is no longer offered and because second home owners can still avoid council tax altogether by claiming that their properties have moved from domestic to non-domestic use. When it comes to second home ownership, the estimates produced by the English housing survey are more reliable, but even they are based on a relatively small survey sample and rely on respondents understanding what is meant by a “second home” and accurately reporting their situation. Similar limitations apply to short-term lettings. There is no single definite source of data on rates for what is after all an incredibly diverse sector, with providers offering accommodation across multiple platforms.

It therefore seems logical that as well as considering what more might be done to mitigate the negative impact of excessive rates of second home ownership and short-term and holiday lets, the Government should give some thought to how we might obtain better data

on overall rates, not least to provide a more accurate baseline as we emerge from the pandemic and also a better sense of precisely which parts of the country face the most acute challenges. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether the Department has given data collection in this regard any thought and, if not, whether he will commit to taking the point away for further consideration.

In relation to how we might meet the housing needs of local people in rural areas and other parts of the country where there is high demand, the wider context is obviously crucial. The point was touched on in the debate, but if we had had more time, we could have had a much wider debate about affordability criteria and what needs to be done, not least in the light of the evident failings—here I have to disagree with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—of the First Homes scheme, to give local first-time buyers better access to new homes.

On the specific issue of what more might be done to mitigate the negative impact of excessive numbers of second homes and holiday lets, it is useful to break things down, as the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale did, into potential planning and non-planning—primarily taxation—measures. On the non-planning side, the Government have taken action over recent years by reforming stamp duty, allowing local authorities to increase council tax to 100% for second homes and proposing that properties be required to have been let for 70 days in a given financial year in order to be liable for business rates rather than council tax, although I believe that we are still waiting for a formal decision to confirm that change in policy.

However, there is a strong case for exploring whether the Government should provide local authorities with powers to, for example, introduce licensing regimes for second homes and short-term lets, and for considering giving them even greater discretion over their council tax regimes—perhaps allowing local authorities, as Labour has done in Wales, to levy a premium or surcharge on second homes and long-term empty properties if they believe that that is required in their locality. There is also a strong case—this point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell)—for reviewing whether the current 3% rate of stamp duty surcharge on second homes as well as the 5% rate levied on non-UK buyers remain at the appropriate level in the light of the boom that we have witnessed over the course of the pandemic. Is the Department even exploring those or any similar options?

When it comes to planning, the system now enables local residents to put in place neighbourhood plans that can go some way to managing second home ownership rates, but it is clear that further measures are required. May I therefore press the Minister to clarify whether the Government accept in principle that in order to bear down on excessive numbers of second homes and holiday lets in particular parts of the country, there may be a need for further changes in relation specifically to planning restrictions and enforcement—designed, obviously, so as not to exacerbate the problems of affordability and availability that have been touched on in the debate today?

This has undoubtedly been a worthwhile debate on an issue that is only going to grow in significance. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about what further

[Matthew Pennycook]

steps the Government propose in order to ensure that when it comes to the benefits and liabilities of second home ownership and short-term and holiday lets, we begin to redress the current imbalance affecting rural and other communities across the country.

2.44 pm

The Minister for Housing (Christopher Pincher): It is a great pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I wish you and all Members here in the Chamber a happy new year, particularly the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who secured this important debate. I congratulate him on doing so and I congratulate all hon. Members on their intelligent, thoughtful and detailed contributions.

In the time available to me, I shall certainly do my utmost to address the points that have been raised by Members and on occasion I will also refer to the very excellent speech that my officials have provided for me. However, I will begin by making a general point, and if I misquote Jane Austen, forgive me, because it is a “truth universally acknowledged” that if we are to have the affordable homes that people want and need in the places that they are needed, we must build more homes in those places. It is not just me saying that; organisations and groups as different as KPMG and Shelter also say that in order to meet the housing needs of our country, we need to build north of 250,000 new homes each year.

I am pleased to say that in the year before covid struck, we were well on our way to achieving that objective: 244,000 homes were built in that year. Indeed, even in the year of covid, 216,000 new homes were built. I am also pleased to say that in that time 408,379 first-time buyers achieved their dream of home ownership, which was a 20-year high and a 35% uplift on the previous year.

It is because we need to build more homes that we have introduced and built upon our affordable homes programme, which injects a further £11.3 billion of public money into building more affordable homes. We reckon that 180,000 affordable homes will be built in the next five years, 32,000 of which will be for social rent. That is why we have abolished the cap on the housing revenue account and provided very attractive Public Works Loan Board interest rates for local authorities to build their own homes, if they wish to do so. It is also why we have the Help to Buy scheme, which has now helped 339,000 people on to the housing ladder, why we have introduced a fixed mortgage guarantee scheme of 95% of loan-to-value, to help people to get those mortgages and get on to the housing ladder, and why we have introduced the First Homes scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) quite properly recommended. The First Homes scheme will ensure that local people can benefit from discounts to local homes of up to 50% and in some specific cases from discounts greater than 50%.

I am very pleased that the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale is keen on the First Homes scheme. I am bound to tell him that we are yet to hear from Lakeland about an opportunity to pilot the scheme there. [Interruption.] I am very pleased that he has made the offer again and I will certainly ensure that my officials are aware of it and make contact with Lakeland, because we believe that First Homes is a way of ensuring that

local people, or people with particular skills that are necessary in a local area, are able to get on to the property ladder and stay there.

However, we recognise that rural communities face some very specific challenges. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton and others pointed out that we have changed the tax system. Since 2013, local authorities have been able to levy 100% of council tax on second homes, where the people who own them do not necessarily use the local services that they might, but through the council tax have to contribute to them; 96% of local authorities make use of that opportunity. Where homes are empty for a period of time, they can levy even more significant council tax surcharges.

That is also why we have committed to close the loophole in the business rate system that the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), the Opposition spokesman, referred to, in order to ensure that letters have to reach a letting threshold before they can benefit from business rate relief, and we will introduce our proposals to close that loophole as soon as we can. Colleagues across the Chamber have mentioned the changes we have made to stamp duty to help first-time buyers, charging second home purchasers more to alleviate some of the advantages that they have over first-time buyers. That is why we have also introduced a further surcharge for foreign purchasers of property.

I hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton says about taxation policy. Taxation policy is, of course, a matter for the Treasury. As I have said before, although not all good ideas start in the Treasury, they can all end there if the Treasury does not like them—although I am bound to say that the Treasury usually likes ideas that raise its income. We will, with the Treasury, keep these issues under close review.

This issue is also why we have reformed the planning system, which, at 74 years old, is even older than the plan for the City of York. It is opaque, slow, and is not predictable. That does not help small and medium-sized enterprises—often the builders who build different types of homes for different tenures in the places that the big builders do not want. We need a system that will help those SMEs and is far more engaging. Presently, 1% of local people get involved in the development of their local authority’s local plan—that is far too few—and 2% to 3% of local communities get involved in individual planning applications; again, that is far too few. If we can build a system that is digitised and far more straightforward, it will engage more people in plan making, and that will buy in communities to the plans for those communities and their needs.

We also want, as a reform to be introduced soon, a new infrastructure levy to replace section 106, which tends to favour the bigger developers that can afford the bigger batteries of lawyers. We want a system that, again, is speedier and more transparent, that front-loads the funding for local authorities to use earlier in the development process, and that captures greater land value. Our infrastructure levy proposal, which colleagues will hear more about in the near future, will, we believe, achieve that.

I recognise that more must be done, but we must ensure that we get the right balance on the economic benefits of second homes, the social challenges that they can sometimes provide, the rights of homeowners

to use their properties as they choose, and the needs of homeseekers wishing to live in or near the area where their friends, families or workplaces are located.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale offered seven solutions. We recognise that a large number of second homes and holiday lets can have adverse effects in some areas, so I will look closely at his proposals and at the points raised by other colleagues. However, I am bound to say to him that while changing planning law so as to make second homes and holiday lets a separate category in planning use has some attractions, it also has some significant drawbacks. Use classes apply nationally in all cases, irrespective of whether one lives in a high tourism area. Therefore, a new use class would affect second homes and therefore potentially restrict the freedoms of homeowners, wherever they live, regardless of whether it is a high-use tourist area.

We also do not have the information needed to understand how, and for how long, a property is being used. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, the shadow spokesman—the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich—and others, made the point that we need data. It was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), and by my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double)—as a Whip, he is silent in public, but I can assure the House that he is very vocal in private with me about these matters.

I can confirm that we propose to consult on the introduction of a tourist accommodation registration scheme in England so that we can build an understanding of the evidence and the issues that second homes present, particularly when driven by the rise of online platforms such as Airbnb. We will launch that consultation later this year and will begin the process of a call for evidence in the coming weeks. We want to look at not just the issue of short-term holiday letting, but the effect that it has on supply. We will also look at compliance, health and safety regulations and the effect of antisocial behaviour and so on. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), the Minister with responsibility for sport, tourism and heritage, has already been in touch with the local council of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, and I dare say that he will be in touch with other councils in due course.

We are acutely aware of the challenges that second homes present, as well as the opportunities that they provide. I can assure the Chamber that as we develop proposals on planning reform, we will keep those considerations and concerns in mind. I will also keep in mind the proposal of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton to rebadge or rebrand houses under the first homes scheme as half-price homes—at least that has the benefit of alliteration, if nothing else. We certainly want to make sure that the value and importance of the first homes strategy is fully understood and appreciated by local authorities up and down the country.

I am conscious that the sponsor of the debate, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, should have an opportunity to be heard. Let me conclude,

therefore, by saying that as we emerge from the pandemic we want to build new and better homes and communities while recognising that building in and of itself does not solve some of the challenges that communities face. That will be at the forefront of our minds as we bring forward our White Paper on levelling up as well as our planning proposals, which I hope I will be able to present to the House in the not too distant future.

2.57 pm

Tim Farron: Mr Sharma, I am very grateful to you for giving me a moment or two at the end. Thank you for giving us all the opportunity to make our points today. I pay tribute to the following for their contributions: the hon. Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and for North Devon (Selaine Saxby), my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), and the Minister himself. I hope I have not missed anybody out. There were also some useful interventions, mostly from Members who are no longer in their place, although the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) is still present.

Lots of things were said. We were reminded that this issue affects not just rural areas, but coastal areas and cities. It has an impact on the hospitality and tourism economy and the workforce. I speak to lots of people in hospitality and tourism, and they are very keen that action is taken. This is not about tourism versus action; this is about the determination of the tourism industry that action should be taken. Of course, other industries and forms of employment—for example, in health and education—are also hugely affected by the lack of a local permanent population.

I welcome the review that the Minister talked about. That is all good—but it is all we got. I was not overwhelmed by a tidal wave of urgency—in fact, quite the opposite. In the seconds that I have left, I want to say to the Minister that inaction is action. It is action on behalf of those who own multiple homes against our communities. I want to see an awful lot more than we have seen today. By the time a part of what we proposed is looked at in a review, which will take years because they always do, there will be another 32% and then another 32%, and the communities at risk of dying that I talked about earlier will be actually dead. We need urgency right now, so I ask for further meetings immediately. The Minister talks about the planning rules, but how about letting national parks pilot the differential in planning use categories? That, at least, would be a start, to demonstrate that it could be possible. I am disappointed by the lack of urgency, but I am grateful for the opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of second homes and holiday lets in rural communities.

Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

3.1 pm

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind hon. Members that they are expected to wear masks when they are not speaking in the debate, in line with Government guidance. I also remind Members to take daily tests when coming on to the estate, which can be done either on the estate or at home. Please give each other enough space—I can see you are already doing that. Hansard colleagues would be very grateful if you could pass on your speaking notes afterwards.

3.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

My thanks to you, Ms Ali, and to the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to raise this essential issue. I know that it has been addressed today in a statement in the Chamber, but unfortunately I could not be there because I was in another debate. I apologised in advance to the Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary. I have also provided my notes so the Minister probably knows where I am coming from.

It is only right that I start by putting on the record my thanks to my Minister and my Government for what they have done on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, and for how our Government have conveyed the compassion that is needed for the Afghan refugees we watched on TV, even though we might not have met them personally. I certainly hope I will meet some of them in my constituency of Strangford. I want to express my thanks for the generosity of this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am keen to express some concerns. I know that other Members, such as the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), will also want to make a plea on behalf of those I refer to as a persecuted people—the religious and ethnic minorities; those living in Afghanistan even now—as to how our Minister and Government can respond. I also wish to say that while I welcome the four-year plan, I am concerned that four years might mean that some will, I fear to say, not be here, and that they will not get their opportunity to come to this country. Therefore we need urgency.

The Taliban's swift takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, in the wake of UK, US and NATO forces withdrawing from the country, has left many Afghans concerned and terrified for their future. Initial statements from the Taliban claiming that they had reformed certain elements of their ideology, positioning themselves as a less nefarious force, were, unsurprisingly, blatant lies—we cannot believe a word that comes out of their mouths. Sadly, we know all too well that Afghans who do not adhere to the Taliban's harsh and strict interpretation of Sunni Islam, especially those who adhere to other faiths or beliefs, face a grave threat. Since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, members of ethnic and religious minority communities, supporters of the former Government, and other minorities have lived in fear of violence, torture, and even execution.

None of us in this Chamber could fail to be moved by the scenes of chaos that we saw at Kabul airport, of people fleeing for their lives. I hope—indeed, I believe—we can all agree that there is a pressing need to protect these vulnerable groups, and a moral obligation to defend their most fundamental human rights. I very much welcomed the announcement on 18 August that Her Majesty's Government would launch the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, a bespoke initiative to enable vulnerable Afghan citizens to be settled in the UK. That scheme is designed to provide protection for Afghans identified as most at risk: their gender, sexuality and religion could all be indicators of vulnerability, as well as having advocated for democracy and human rights. I am very grateful to the Government for working to support those groups, but much more must be done, which is why we are having this debate today.

We need to be more anxious, more keen and more determined to deliver what we intended to deliver through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme in August last year. Given the subsequent months of fear that vulnerable Afghans have faced, it is necessary to obtain clarity on how that scheme will work. Again, I apologise that although I was present in the main Chamber for part of the Minister's statement, I was not there for all of the answers that she gave. After four long months of silence and seeming shrinking of responsibility, I welcomed the Minister's announcement on 23 December that the scheme would open this month. I stress the urgency of that scheme for vulnerable persons in Afghanistan, and the need for the swift opening of applications. I believe with all my heart that there is an urgency to this matter and a need to expedite the process as soon as possible. I look forward to more details being made available to Parliament at the Minister's earliest convenience, as we all eagerly await details of how the UK will mobilise to assist these vulnerable people.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I have spoken to many colleagues who are deeply concerned about the current situation in Afghanistan. When it comes to freedom of religion or belief, conditions in the country have deteriorated drastically since the Taliban seized control last year. Religious or belief minorities are facing a particular threat, and it is heartbreaking to hear some of their stories. I will focus on religious and ethnic groups, not on individuals, because if we focus on individuals, it is very hard to move away from that. I would have very much liked to have seen earlier prioritisation and understanding of this issue. Greater clarity as to the eligibility criteria would have conveyed the Government's dedication to the issue.

One such group in Afghanistan that I would like to draw attention to today is the Hazara community, labelled as heretical by the Taliban, along with other non-Sunni Muslims. The Hazara community has long faced discrimination and violence, and has suffered social and economic marginalisation and waves of physical attacks. When the Taliban were last in power, the Hazaras faced targeted violence, and many fled as refugees to neighbouring Iran and Pakistan in search of safety, such was their fear of what might happen if they and their families remained in Afghanistan. Since its emergence, ISIS in the Khorasan province—ISIS-K, as it is referred to—has also attacked this community, and has stated its goal to exterminate the Shi'a Muslims, including the Hazara Muslims.

There has been a resurgence of attacks on the Hazara community since the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. Hazara schools and religious sites have been bombed, medical clinics have been targeted, and Hazara civilians have been murdered by the Taliban and ISIS-K. A recent report by Amnesty International in December 2021, “Afghanistan: No escape: War crimes and civilian harm during the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban”, emphasised that the Hazara Muslims are at considerable risk of targeting by Taliban forces. That report highlights the targeted killings of Hazara Muslims in Daykundi and Mundarakht provinces in July 2021. After taking control of Afghanistan’s Ghazni province, Taliban fighters massacred nine Hazara men in the village of Mundarakht. Eyewitnesses have since given harrowing accounts of those killings. Six of the nine men were shot. Three were tortured. Similarly devastating, on 30 August, Taliban forces killed 13 Hazaras, including a 17-year-old girl, in Kahor village in Afghanistan’s Daykundi province, after members of the security forces of the former Government surrendered. Those are the very people they were surely trying to save.

Depressingly, such brutal killings likely represent a tiny fraction of the total death toll inflicted by the Taliban to date. The group have cut mobile phone services in many of the areas they have recently captured, controlling which media from those regions are shared. Such attacks must not go unnoticed, which is why we are holding this debate and are looking for action right now.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate at this important time, and for highlighting the plight of the Hazara community. Relatives among my constituents have been in touch with me. Does he share my concern that there is no way to apply for the scheme? Relatives in the Hazara community have no way of knowing whether their family members are in the system and should be contacted within the next six months or a year. It is very unclear whether those people are going to be safe, despite the fact that they are in hiding and in fear of their lives.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady very much for all the work she did in her previous job—I have said it before, but I say it in Westminster Hall for the first time. I am aware that she has a heart for this subject matter. I agree with her point exactly. That is one of the things we are looking for—how do these people get into the system to ensure that they get the opportunity of the Afghan resettlement scheme and we get the opportunity to have them in this country?

Hazaras are not the only community at risk. Far too many other minority communities also face a bleak and precarious future. Amnesty International’s report lists a litany of attacks against many religious minorities. Owing to the Taliban’s interpretation of sharia law, they consider conversion from Islam to another religion apostasy, and do not hesitate to punish such a decision by death. Afghan Christians, Ahmadi Muslims, Baha’is and those of no religious belief are all unable to express their faiths or beliefs openly due to fear of the dire consequences from the Taliban.

Ahmadi Muslims, for instance, are not recognised by either the Sunni or Shi’a Muslim faiths and have suffered a long history of persecution in Afghanistan, including public stoning in the early 19th and 20th centuries.

Heaven forbid such hostility should prevail once again. Today, Afghan Ahmadiis practise their faith in secret due to continued societal persecution and discrimination.

Christians, of which I am one, are another group at grave risk. We know people who are still in Afghanistan. As the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) said in her intervention, the issue is how we get those people on the list. We need to know. I look to the Minister to give some response, focus, direction and pointers on how we do that, for all the people that we are going to speak about.

Many Afghan Christians are converts from Islam and are therefore considered apostates according to Afghan law. They have already faced ostracisation and the threat of honour killings by family members, but such retaliatory measures are now at heightened risk with the Taliban in power. Those people are in fear of their lives.

According to reports from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Christian converts receive threats in a variety of forms. A Dari-speaking network in the United States of America that supports Afghan house churches has reported that a leader of a house church network with more than 500 members received a letter signed by the Taliban, threatening him and his family. It read, “We know where you are and what you are doing.” That brings back to me chilling memories from Northern Ireland and what the IRA used to do—“We know who you are and where you live.” We can all guess the implications and imagine the fear incited. On 15 August, Taliban members visited the leader’s home, but he and his family had already gone into hiding—a point that the hon. Member for Putney referred to.

In essence, the Taliban has successfully stifled freedom of religion or belief. These people need help. How do we get help to them? How do we let them know that they have a route to the end of it?

Some Christians have had to abandon the use of their phones and have moved to undisclosed locations for unknown lengths of time just in hopes of being left alone. Other church members have received threats and visits from the Taliban. During one visit, Taliban members took a 14-year-old daughter from one of the families. Months later, that family still have no idea what has happened to their daughter. We can imagine the heartache and pain in their hearts.

Humanist and atheist beliefs are also considered apostasy and punishable by death. Arash Kargar, a humanist in Afghanistan, describes his life as,

“facing constant problems with family, friends, and even in dealing with people at the university campus and the community at large. Having any beliefs outside of Islam or that...are not compatible with Islam and its teachings is considered an unforgivable crime. Such a view is prevalent throughout society, family, friends and even at the university...There are two ways available to me and others like me: Either stay quiet for your entire life which in turn is an imposed punishment for a social being like humans, or voice your concern for equality, freedom of thought and expression publicly. But to what cost?”

The ultimatum that Arash faces is faced by thousands of others in Afghanistan, even more so since the Taliban took over.

I hope that my summary of the different groups in Afghanistan that we know of—and others here know of directly through their constituents—shows the enormity of what we are trying to achieve, and what Government

[*Jim Shannon*]

need to grasp through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. It also demonstrates the extent to which freedom of religion or belief is violated in Afghanistan, and how vital it is that these groups are offered safe resettlement. Whether they are Hazaras, Christians, Humanists, Uyghur Muslims, Baha'is or other minority groups, extreme levels of persecution haunt their waking moments. The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme seeks to provide for 5,000 spaces a year over four years for vulnerable Afghan citizens to be resettled in the UK. By the end of this scheme the UK will have aided in resettling 20,000 Afghan citizens. I said it at the beginning of the debate and I will say it again: I understand and welcome what the Government are doing, but we want to feed into the process in a way that can help those people that we know of. Some of those people we may never meet in this world, but we know them through our constituents and through others.

While the creation of this pathway fills me with much hope, it is vital that this scheme is treated with the urgency that is needed. Four years is too long to wait for vulnerable communities who are facing arrests, torture, extrajudicial killings, war crimes or even genocide. I ask that this Government—my Government; my Minister—reconsider the staggered approach to the resettlement scheme and clarify how a four-year-long wait is justifiable when it is a matter of life or death. That is the issue and the core of where I am coming from.

I thank the Government for their commitment to starting the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme. I have set myself a time limit of 20 minutes, which will give plenty of time for everybody else to participate—I will not go beyond that. I thank the Minister and the Department for the commitment, and the letter that I got last week. Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct, two companies in my constituency, in September 2021 offered jobs to any Afghan people who wanted to resettle in this country. Not only did they offer them jobs, but they offered them accommodation as well. I have sent the details of the Minister's letter on to those two companies; those two companies will respond very quickly about what they are able to offer. I hope that my constituents in Strangford will offer what the hon. Member for Putney and everyone else here wants—the opportunity to reach out and help, and to give people hope for the future. These people did not want to leave Afghanistan; they did so because they had no other option. We in this country, with the compassion that we have and the ability that we have to help, need to do so.

As I draw to the end of my remarks, I would like to end on a note of hope. Much work has been done in the past few months by individuals and organisations to assist those on the ground in Afghanistan. They have not squandered time in the face of this very real human rights crisis, and I believe that Government could learn from their example. I want to praise the work of people like Baroness Kennedy, who has seen more than 100 female Afghan judges and their families rescued from Afghanistan. I think the Minister mentioned that in her statement on the Floor of the House of Commons today.

I also offer my thanks to the many colleagues who have repeatedly asked for answers and assurances on the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme. We want to see all of those people who have come here for a new life,

new opportunities and a new beginning have that opportunity across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The Afghan citizens resettlement scheme is such a scheme. However, I want to stress again that urgent action is needed to prevent the tragedy that will happen in Afghanistan if we do not get those people over here and into this system.

When it comes to leadership and the resettlement scheme, I thank the Minister on behalf of my constituents in Strangford, who want to help. The two companies that I have mentioned also want to help. With that in mind, I look forward to the Minister's response and thank hon. Members for coming to make a contribution to the debate.

3.20 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Ms Ali. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate, which seems to have prompted the Government to make today's announcement about the opening of the Afghan citizen resettlement scheme. I welcome that, but I believe it should have happened months ago. The announcement of the opening of the scheme still leaves many questions unanswered, and I hope that the Minister can answer some of them when she responds.

There are three Chevening alumni scholars who have a connection to my constituency and who were eligible for the emergency evacuation by the Foreign Office back in August, but given the chaos that ensued at Kabul airport and the lack of response from the Foreign Office, they were unable to board the flights to the UK. The three Chevening alumni scholars remain in Afghanistan and have been lying low to avoid the Taliban, and I am pleased that the Minister has stated that there will be a third route to the scheme that will prioritise Chevening alumni and others, but I would welcome the Minister's explaining to me how the scheme will work in practice to locate the alumni, and whether it will also allow those who are eligible to bring their families with them. During the statement, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) stressed the need for family reunion to be part and parcel of the resettlement scheme, because the one thing that we do not want to happen is to see family members embarking on dangerous crossings to the UK in order to be with their families who have secured places on the resettlement scheme.

In August and September, some people felt that their lives were threatened by the Taliban due to their roles as activists for women's rights or in law enforcement, or because they were from religious minorities or were part of the LGBTQ community. They managed to escape to third countries. They, too, will need to access the ACRS, but from a third country. Could the Minister let me know whether they will be able to access the scheme from third countries? I note that in her statement earlier today, she spoke about the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees playing a role in referring refugees in need of resettlement who fled Afghanistan, but I am interested to know how that would work, because some of them may have fled to places such as Tajikistan, Iran and other countries, where it may be a bit more difficult for UNHCR to assist them.

If the scheme is to be a success, the Government also need to consider what they need to do to ensure that there is integration when people have been settled in the UK. I note that Barnardo's has advised that there is a need to help children to be resettled in the UK. It has advised that children should be given a particular focus when considering integration, because the needs of refugee children, and the impact that they have on the entire family, must be considered in order to ensure that integration is successful. Families need to be supported in the environment in which they are most comfortable—for instance, key workers can best build relationships with refugee families in informal settings, such as their home environment. Things like that also need to be considered.

Barnardo's also argues that integration is a two-way process, so local communities must be encouraged and supported to better understand the nature and trauma of those seeking asylum and resettlement in another country. I ask the Minister to take into account the expertise of organisations such as Barnardo's in dealing with resettlement, particularly of children. I note the references that the Minister made in her statement earlier today about integration, but I would welcome her thoughts on the issue of integrating children into the system.

Local councils will also be at the centre of supporting communities and people who have been resettled under the scheme. They cannot be left alone to deal with the challenges of the scheme without proper support—both financial and strategic—from central Government. I would very much welcome information from the Minister about how local government will be supported in hosting communities and vulnerable individuals through the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme.

In August and September, many of us received emails, telephone calls or visits from constituents in relation to their concerns about family members in Afghanistan. Although we were able to give responses with the information we had had from the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence, those updates stopped in September. I have already had a couple of inquiries from constituents who are concerned about their family members. I invite the Minister to advise us on what support will be received from the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the MOD, so that we can respond to those inquiries from constituents whose family members may be eligible for the scheme. That needs to be addressed.

I have made only a short speech because I thought the debate would be oversubscribed, but clearly the earlier statement has dealt with a number of concerns that people have about the resettlement scheme. I will end by saying that the chaotic scenes during the UK's withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 must be one of the lowest points of the Government's foreign policy. We now have a moral duty to support those who have helped the UK and who have a strong connection with our nation. Although I welcome the opening of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, it has to be implemented properly so that it does what it was intended to do. I am very keen for the scheme to be a success because we must not let the Afghan people down again.

3.27 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am absolutely delighted to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Ms Ali—it is the first time, I think, so congratulations to you. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the

absolutely exemplary work that she is doing in this area—we are very grateful that she is in her position. I want to make two points. The first is on the position in Wycombe, and the second is to ask a few questions about what we should do, but what I will say will not surprise my hon. Friend because it was the essence of my question to her following her statement on the Floor of the House earlier.

According to the 2010 census, about one in six of my Wycombe constituents are British Asians. As I know my constituents, I know that those people will overwhelmingly be Kashmiri. That means, of course, that they are very much embedded in the wider region, so it is no surprise to me that a significant number of my constituents—a larger number than I might have expected, in fact—have family and friends in Afghanistan, or cousins who are married to people in Afghanistan. This issue is very present in Wycombe, as things often are in the region.

Having grown up as a white British person in a homogeneous community in Cornwall, I confess that for many people across our country, these are distant events with which they will not feel closely associated. Indeed, I do not doubt that I will see that on my social media after this speech. I have to say to people, however, that we must remember that the UK is now a diverse country and I am very proud of that—I am proud to represent Wycombe—and people in the UK with friends and family who are connected to Afghanistan deserve our diligent representation and support.

The Minister for Afghan Resettlement (Victoria Atkins)
indicated assent.

Mr Baker: My hon. Friend is nodding, and I know that she knows this, but I will put it on the record for others: we have to look after everyone who is British, and I am glad that we are doing so.

The particular issue that comes up in Wycombe is that constituents very often believe that family—and possibly friends—in Afghanistan had visa entitlements to come and join them in the UK prior to our departure from that country. Of course, they are most concerned that those people should—on top of any other scheme—continue to have those entitlements to visas and to come and be here, notwithstanding the change of circumstances. Although there are other questions about why people who worked for the Government have not already been extracted, I am putting that particular question to the Minister because it is such a present issue in my constituency. I am sure our goal is the humane treatment of everybody, but I sympathise with Ministers as we go through this. We are not taking a very large number of people. Carrying through people's prior entitlement to visas would be a good way to show good faith with the British people who have friends and family—a good way to go beyond the 5,000 would be to bring those people over as well, as they were expecting to be able to do.

I come on to some specific asks. What should people do? In the Chamber earlier, the Minister talked about safe and legal routes in answer to the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin). Pakistan has some very legitimate interests of its own. We would not thank a country that created a crisis on our own borders—indeed, that perhaps comes up with France at the moment—so it is perfectly reasonable

[Mr Steve Baker]

that Pakistan should ask us not to act in such a way as to drive illegal immigration into their own country. This is a very important and sensitive humanitarian situation across multiple dimensions.

We should of course respect Pakistan's legitimate requirement for legal migration in its own country. I am being asked by people whether friends and family should go to Pakistan and whether they will be processed there. It is a legitimate question, and I need to ask my hon. Friend the Minister for an answer to it, even though I recognise that she may well have to discourage people from doing so in order to respect the interests of Pakistan. I am sorry to give her that difficult problem to answer, but we need to say something to our constituents.

That is the final point I need to raise. My constituency caseworkers are now very highly connected to the surprising number of people with direct contacts and connections in Afghanistan. We all know the sensitivity and the danger of the situation. People are in hiding in Afghanistan, fearful for their lives, fearful of being physically tortured and dismembered for what they have done, obviously quite wrongly. Tensions and emotions are running extremely high and people are desperate for information. There is a great need to give all our constituency caseworkers what information we can, respecting that none of us can second-guess the security situation of particular individuals in the country. We need to give guidance and support to caseworkers. They are under immense stress themselves. We can help alleviate that stress by giving them good information to pass on, in so far as we can.

I finish where I began, in thanking my hon. Friend the Minister. I absolutely sincerely welcome the job she is doing, which I know is very difficult. She is doing it with great skill and diplomacy. I absolutely wish her well in carrying forward her task and I can certainly promise to give her any support she might like.

3.32 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a particular pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate and for all his diligent work in this area, particularly on religious freedom and on freedom of speech: a subject very dear to my own heart. I echo what the hon. Gentleman said—more needs to be done and more needs to be done more urgently. I am looking forward to hearing the Minister's responses to his questions.

Many of us were glad to hear of some progress in today's statement in the Chamber—I thank the Minister for that. I want to make one point to her quite gently. When the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), pointed out that there are some criticisms to be made of the way the Government have handled the matter, the Minister seemed to suggest that, in doing so, the shadow Home Secretary was criticising our forces, which she absolutely was not doing. We would all praise the efforts of British forces on the ground, and the civil servants and non-governmental organisations, who worked so hard back in August to get as many people out as possible. What I gently say to the Minister is that their efforts should not be a shield for our political masters to hide behind.

Many MPs continue to receive desperate pleas on behalf of those left behind in Afghanistan. The United Kingdom Government machine needs to up its game, for this reason: the UK Government pursued a foreign and defence policy that encouraged people in Afghanistan to participate in creating a democratic state, where human rights were protected. Due to the failure of that policy, many of those people are now at risk, so we in the United Kingdom—having been at the heart of pursuing that policy, albeit with some allies—have a particular moral responsibility to take proper steps to help those at risk in Afghanistan.

Like many other Members of Parliament, I have been trying to help constituents with inquiries about friends and family, as well as people who have contacted me as a British MP seeking my help. However, I have been particularly engaged with the plight of female judges and female prosecutors in Afghanistan. We all know that women face particular oppression under the Taliban; when I spoke in a debate about LGBT rights in Afghanistan, I made the point that lesbians and bisexual women experience discrimination twice over in Afghanistan, both for their sex and for their same-sex attraction. This is most definitely an area in which sex matters, and women are particularly at risk.

The brave women who became judges, prosecutors, policewomen, human rights defenders and women's rights activists under western rule now find that their lives are in mortal danger. That is also true for many of the men they worked alongside, but those women's lack of freedom to move and to access the means to leave the country themselves, because of their oppression as women and the severe discrimination against them, makes the position of women all the worse. These women who worked as judges, prosecutors and so on are at risk twice over, both because of their civic contribution and because of their sex.

As the Minister knows, I have been working with a former Afghan judge and feminist activist to try to highlight the plight of lower-level female judges and prosecutors in provincial villages, whose lives are particularly at risk because they live in small communities and are therefore more readily identifiable. Marzia Babakarkhail came to the UK in 2008 after two attempts on her life by the Taliban, having served as a judge in Afghanistan. She is now a British citizen who lives in Oldham, and her story is featured in the People's History Museum in Manchester, which is very worth a visit for anyone who has not been there. It houses the black Samsonite bag that Marzia was given by her mother as a gift to congratulate her on her success as a lawyer, which is one of the few possessions she was able to bring with her to her new life in the United Kingdom. Marzia is anxious that the UK Government should provide a new life in the United Kingdom for other female judges and prosecutors, and she is in touch with many of those who are trapped and left behind. They are in imminent danger of persecution from the Taliban, and from other dangerous criminals and members of terrorist groups who the Taliban have released from prison.

The Taliban's opposition to the formal justice system of Afghanistan is well known. They are strongly against state-building and against the justice reconstruction efforts by what they call westernising forces, and favour sharia law as the source of justice, underpinned by a strict interpretation of Islam. In the past, they have targeted and brutally killed many judges, and since last

August, there have been other, similar targetings. Many of the men who the Taliban have released from prison are heavily armed and are now free to trace and target their enemies without fear, and many of those female judges and prosecutors were involved in the indictment and punishment of those criminals and terrorists, so they are prime targets for revenge attacks.

As we speak and over the past few months, the Taliban have been conducting house-to-house searches, and many of these women are now in hiding, where they receive threatening phone calls asking them about their whereabouts. These women are contacting Marzia in fear and desperation, and she in turn is contacting me and other Members of Parliament.

As the Minister knows, in 2003 the convention on the elimination of violence against women was ratified by Afghanistan under western influence; based on that law, specialist courts were established in 34 provinces under the control of female judges. The Taliban and other conservative groups in Afghanistan considered that law to be un-Islamic, and the judges who enforced it to be infidels and foreign collaborators, so any of the female judges who sat on those courts, trying to protect women, are now at risk. As the hon. Member for Strangford said earlier, Baroness Helena Kennedy, who is—among her many good works—the head of the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, has worked with a large team of pro bono lawyers in the UK and across the world to try to save some of those women. She has succeeded in doing so, and I commend her and her colleagues on their efforts.

However, Marzia is worried that junior female judges and prosecutors in the provinces will be overlooked, so I am working to raise their profile with the UK Government. At the end of last year, I brought Marzia into Parliament to meet Baroness Kennedy, the Justice Committee and the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland), who has recently been knighted. The then Justice Secretary was very keen to assist, but unfortunately he lost his position in the Cabinet reshuffle and with all due respect to his replacement—the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab)—I have to say that he has not so far covered himself in glory over the issue of Afghanistan. However, doing something to help these female judges and prosecutors would be a way for him to make amends.

Regarding the Minister who is here today, she agreed this morning in the Chamber to meet Marzia and I; I look forward to doing so very soon. All I really want to ask her now is that, in addition to answering the questions of the hon. Member for Strangford and other hon. Members, she answers this question: can she reassure me that the meeting she will have with Marzia and I will recognise the United Kingdom's particular responsibility towards these women? Will it bring tangible results for women who have been left behind in Afghanistan and are now desperate?

3.41 pm

Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): It is a pleasure, Ms Ali, to serve under your chairship for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate, and I wish all Members a happy new year.

We are now five months on from the fall of Kabul to the Taliban, which came at the end of 20 years of British involvement in Afghanistan. The chaotic and painful events of last summer brought home just how many links have been forged between our two countries over that time. That was also evident in the huge numbers of Afghans living in the UK who desperately sought to help their loved ones to leave the country as the Taliban took power; I was contacted by 65 constituents, who passed on the details of 400 people in total. Of those 400 people, as far as my office have established, seven have fled Afghanistan and reached a third country, but the rest remain in Afghanistan. Shockingly, in only 20 cases have I received an individual response from the relevant Department, rather than the stock numbered response from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I mention these statistics to highlight just how many people remain in desperate need in Afghanistan and wish to join their relatives in this country.

I will make a few specific points about the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and related issues, as they relate to cases I am dealing with, and I hope that the Minister can respond to them. First, there are Afghan citizens in the UK who had already submitted an asylum claim before the Taliban takeover but have not had a decision from the Home Office. The Home Office confirmed in an email to me that it is not making decisions on Afghan asylum claims until updated safety guidance on Afghanistan is published. Surely, however, the need to claim asylum from Afghanistan should be accepted if the Government accept the need for an Afghan citizens resettlement scheme.

It is also unclear how the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme will apply to families where some members are UK nationals and some are not. Do the non-UK national family members have to apply for the ACRS, or is there another pathway for the families to travel to the UK together?

Finally, after the statement earlier today about the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme in the main Chamber, I said that I have constituents with leave to remain in the UK who are trapped in Afghanistan as they are not UK nationals and so have not been able to access consular support. In her response to me earlier this afternoon, the Minister said that the Government are working with countries in the region to find safe routes for eligible Afghans to be evacuated from Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. I appreciate that these efforts are ongoing, but I would be grateful to the Minister if she could provide a bit more information as to when we are likely to receive an update and a bit more information about which countries in the region she has had conversations with. That would enable me to update my constituents, who are asking me for guidance about their cases. I hope that the Minister can respond to those important points. I take the opportunity to thank her for her response this afternoon regarding my follow-up-meeting request.

3.44 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her statement today and also for her dedicated hard work on this really challenging but very important issue. I also commend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate.

[Fiona Bruce]

I very much support what he said, particularly regarding targeted religious minorities, which I want to focus on in my speech, particularly because I am concerned about those in my role as the Prime Minister's envoy for freedom of religion or belief.

In the penultimate Prime Minister's questions before Christmas, I asked my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister whether the promised gift of resettlement for Afghans who are members of religious minorities would be available by the end of Christmas. If I am right, last night was Twelfth Night, so, being generous, may I give the Minister the benefit of the extra day and say thank you for getting the ACRS up and running now? I note, however, that it is only from the spring that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees will refer refugees to the scheme, based on assessments of protection need. That sounds more like a Coptic Christmas timeline to me, but, more seriously, the delay in providing refuge and support for vulnerable religious minorities concerns me, and I know that it concerns many of my colleagues in the organisation of which I, as the Prime Minister's envoy, am a member. That is the 33-country alliance of envoys, which is called the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance.

The alliance issued a statement in support of vulnerable individuals being targeted in Afghanistan because of their faith or belief. I commend that statement to the Minister, not least because it demonstrates that there are international partners who most seriously do share our concerns about the vulnerable situation of those being targeted for their beliefs in Afghanistan. I will just read out a little from it:

"We hold grave concerns for...members of religious minority groups who are at risk, including Shi'a and Ismaili Muslims, Hazaras, Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, non-believers, and others. We call upon all parties and international agencies to recognize the vulnerabilities of these individuals being targeted because of their faith or belief."

The statement goes on to call for, among other things, "a renewed humanitarian effort by the international community."

I was interested to note today in the Minister's statement her reference to the scale of the challenge and the need to co-ordinate closely with international partners, as indeed the alliance has done. It was very encouraging that, during the preparation of its statement, two alliance countries, the US and Brazil, got together; one supplied a plane and the other supplied the visas, and they were able to fly out 193 members of religious minorities from Afghanistan. It is that kind of international co-operation that I am sure the Minister is speaking of, but could I ask her, please, for more information as to how the UK is doing this and how we can fulfil the IRFBA statement's intent?

I have of course spoken directly to members of several religious communities, as I know many colleagues have, so I will not go into detail as to the concerns that I share about the risks to these communities, but I am pleased that the Government have, rightly, included religious minorities in the criteria for eligibility for the ACRS, and I was pleased today in the House to hear the Minister's assurance that the scheme is open now to vulnerable religious minorities and that that could be combined with community sponsorship. I will say a little more about that shortly.

First, with regard to the UNHCR refugee referral scheme starting in the spring, could the Minister clarify that it is based on the Government's announced eligibility criteria, which specifically include minority groups, and that it is not wholly delegated to the UNHCR's assessments of protection need? In terms of protection services, the principle of non-discrimination prevents the UNHCR from specifically targeting minority groups, so it means that arguably members of the LGBT community, who were rightly evacuated under the ARAP—Afghan relocations and assistance policy—scheme, might well not have been eligible under the UNHCR scheme. A further concern about the scheme is that religious belief is not a specific UNHCR eligibility criterion or an automatic indicator of need in its own right. In the past, that led to criticism of the operation of the Syrian resettlement scheme when it came to resettling religious minorities—specifically Christians—in the UK.

I hope that Members will bear with me as I cite some figures that bear that out. In 2017, the Barnabas Fund obtained data that revealed that in 2015, of the 2,637 individuals recommended to the UK by the UNHCR for resettlement, only 43 were Christians, even though Christians are widely accepted as constituting 10% of Syria's pre-war population; only one was Shi'a, who were estimated to be 1.5% of the population; and only 13 were Yazidis. The following year, 2016, of the 7,499 individuals recommended to the UK by the UNHCR for resettlement, only 27 were Christians, 13 were Shi'a and five were Yazidis. Interestingly, it is estimated that Syria's pre-war population was 74% Sunni Muslim, 13% Shi'a and Alawite, 10% Christian and 3% Druze, and that there were 70,000 Yazidis.

In the ACRS, the Government have made membership of a minority group a specific eligibility criterion, consistent with the new plan for immigration. Let me quote the wording of that plan for the record, because it is good and clear. It states:

"We will also ensure our resettlement offer encompasses persecuted refugees from a broader range of minority groups (including, for example, Christians in some parts of the world). We know that across the globe there are minority groups that are systematically persecuted for their gender, religion or belief and we want to ensure our resettlement offer properly reflects these groups. We will strengthen our engagement with global charities and international partners to ensure that minority groups facing persecution are able to be referred so their case can be considered for resettlement in the UK more easily."

Although the Minister's response to my question earlier today gave me hope, I would like more information about how the new plan is to be implemented, particularly because, to date, I am not aware of the evacuation to the UK of any individuals who have been targeted specifically because of their religion.

Despite good intentions, there is real concern that religious minorities will still not be included in the ACRS in the spring, or indeed in the first year of the scheme's operation, if it is based solely on the UNHCR protection criteria. The Home Office does not have to rely solely on the UNHCR for resettlement assessment; it could conduct such assessments itself. It is clear that, in the case of Afghans in Afghanistan, the UNHCR does not have a mandate to deal with their situation; it can do so only if they arrive in Pakistan, for example, which is risky and causes many other challenges. The assessment could be done by the Home Office in house, as it is currently for some asylum applications, and it could be assisted by trusted partner organisations.

As I said I would, I come to the community sponsorship scheme. I suggest that one way to harness the Government's commitment to the scheme, which is welcomed by the UNHCR and would provide a bespoke legal route of resettlement for religious communities, is to look at the Canadian scheme of community sponsorship for resettlement. Very substantial numbers of refugees have been resettled as a result of that scheme, which involved close to 2 million adult Canadians supporting local community sponsorship of Syrian refugees, many of whom were survivors of violence or torture whose life, liberty, safety or other fundamental rights were at risk. Many were vulnerable women or girls. Two thirds of the resettled refugees coming to Canada were privately sponsored by Canadian citizens under that scheme. Recent research suggests that comparative data emanating from that programme over the past 40 years demonstrates that sponsored refugees have better and quicker integration outcomes than refugees settled through more traditional Government schemes.

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Order. Does the hon. Lady mind wrapping up? We have one more speaker whom I want to fit in.

Fiona Bruce: I will do so, Ms Ali.

I suggest to the Minister that we consider the main elements of the Canadian community sponsorship model and see how we could adopt them in the UK. May we meet to discuss this issue? Finally, I place on the record my commendation of the volunteers in my constituency, the Welcome Churches in Sandbach and the LOL Foundation in Congleton, which have done so much to support the Afghan refugees in Sandbach.

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): I call Alison Thewliss. I would be very grateful if you could keep your speech to about three to four minutes.

3.55 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Ms Ali. I am glad to be able to participate in the debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing it. I will start by reflecting on his comments about the urgency of the situation.

The Minister said in her statement earlier that people on the ground have the best understanding of the security situation in Afghanistan, and that is certainly true according to my constituents' accounts of their families who are stuck there. There has been a lot of reference to safe and legal routes, but the reality is that the Government cannot expect people to sit tight and wait for the Taliban to chap their door. People on the ground know the Taliban and have experienced living under them, so it is no surprise to any of us that those who can run do so and keep running until they get somewhere where they feel safe. For many of those people, that is the UK, because they have family here. We have an Afghan diaspora in Glasgow—people who fled before and have come to make their home in Glasgow.

The Government should not be going about their business, as they are with the Nationality and Borders Bill, by penalising those who got out, who sought safety and who managed to leave Afghanistan. They would not have wanted to leave the country and they had seen

change in recent years, but with the Taliban coming in as swiftly as they did, people had no alternative, and many of them ran. Many constituents who have been in contact with me had family there—perhaps the husband was living in my constituency and the wife and children were living in Afghanistan. This is also a symptom of the hostile environment, because those families could not afford to bring their wives and children over, as they did not meet the minimum income threshold. Those families could have been safe, had it not been for the policies that the UK has been pursuing.

One of my constituents, who was visiting his wife and five children, is very worried about getting back. He feels defeated. He emailed me just as the debate was starting, saying:

"We are still waiting and still here. Everyone knows that the British government forgot their nationals in Afghanistan. I have sent too many emails but now I stopped sending them emails, because no response and no benefits and not worth sending emails to them, nearly five months now. There's no way going out and we are waiting for them. Me and my family are fed up staying here. Everyone is in tension, depression and bad economic and hard situations... I just answer your email because you sent me, otherwise I stopped sending emails to anyone. The big issue is my wife's biometric card is expiring soon on this 22 February. If that expired then all of my family will be troubled going back to Glasgow because I can't leave her alone here as well. She has been in Glasgow for almost 10 years".

He did not want to give me any more information than that. There is a lot more that he would say if he could, but that is the kind of situation that I have been hearing about. Like many of us, I have had scores of constituents get in touch and I know of only a handful who actually made it out. Those constituents have been on the phone to me and others, crying and desperate for their families. It has been incredibly hard to listen to, and I can only imagine the pain they feel as they wait without information. I will be glad if the Minister makes some progress towards that today, but there are still a lot of unanswered questions.

As my former friend on the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), asked very reasonably, what happens to the people who had applications in process? That includes many of my constituents who have applications in process and now do not know what is happening. I have a constituent who is in Afghanistan with his wife. They keep getting given appointments by the UK Government for the visa centre in Islamabad, but Pakistan will not issue them an entry visa for them to attend those appointments. What conversations has the Minister had with other consulates and embassies around the world? Those people could get out if Pakistan granted them the visa that would allow them to go and collect what they are entitled to.

There has been a lot of talk about vulnerable women and girls, but boys and men are vulnerable too, which is why they are also running. They are at risk of being recruited to the Taliban; they are at risk of losing their lives due to their service. We should not forget that many people are made vulnerable by this situation, and we must recognise that vulnerability. Many people worked as suppliers to the British Army. They were not recruited or directly involved, and they were not fighting on the frontline, but in the eyes of the Taliban they are part of the problem.

Finally, I will briefly mention those who have made it here and the support being offered. I thank the Afghan diaspora in Glasgow and the Refugee Council in Scotland

[*Alison Thewliss*]

for their work, but those who come here need financial, legal, medical and educational support, and there is a cost involved in that. The Government must recognise that and provide local authorities with funds to ensure that people get the support they need to help them settle. It is all fine and well for the Minister to say that we want people to integrate and work and not to be dependent on the state, but they need support in the early days to get that right.

Refugee, a Glasgow-based organisation, has already had requests from people who have been dispersed around Scotland but not had the support that they require to settle, and it has been falling on charities to pick that up. Charities do not have the spare capacity to do that and should not really be asked to; the Government should be providing that support. I ask the Minister to answer my questions and for support for my constituents and their families who are so desperately in need.

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Order. May I appeal to the Opposition spokesmen to shave a minute or two off their speeches so that the Minister has her full 10 minutes? I would very much appreciate it.

4.1 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I will speak quickly. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this and, from a quick look at the Order Paper, many other debates in front of us—I cannot keep up with him.

On 18 August last year, just three days after the Taliban took control, the Conservative right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), a former Foreign Secretary, said this:

“There is something we can do right now: cut through bureaucracy and ensure that we look after every single Afghani who took risks for themselves and their families because they believed in a better future and trusted us to deliver it.”—[*Official Report*, 18 August 2021; Vol. 699, c. 1307.]

That was the rhetoric, the show of empathy, and the promises made by those on the Government Benches to help desperate Afghans in fear of their lives in the early days of Operation Warm Welcome. The right hon. Gentleman was not alone. Other Members proclaimed that

“Britain must fulfil its moral duty”—[*Official Report*, 18 August 2021; Vol. 699, c. 1335.]—

and that the

“Government are continuing the big-hearted tradition of the British people in offering safe haven to those fleeing persecution.”—[*Official Report*, 18 August 2021; Vol. 699, c. 1370.]

We have heard much of that again today.

In those early days of the withdrawal from Kabul, my office, like everybody else’s, received hundreds of emails and calls either from people who were in Afghanistan fearing for their lives, or from friends and relatives of people stuck in the most fearful of circumstances. With little to go on, the one lifeline and glimmer of hope that we could pass on to people was that, alongside the ARAP scheme, the Government would implement a resettlement scheme, with early figures suggesting that 20,000 refugees would be brought to safety. That figure, although arguably too low, at least gave some comfort that a plan was in place. Of course, we now know from

whistleblowers within the Foreign Office that widespread failures within their Department meant that many cases were not even looked at, let alone dealt with.

It is now nearly five months since that pledge to resettle Afghan refugees was made, and only today have we had any clarity. Five months is a long time for people trapped in a country with a rising humanitarian crisis. Five months is harrowing for our caseworkers, who have been left to answer constituents’ pleas for help at home and abroad. Five months is insufferable for desperate relatives left with no other choice than to refresh a Government webpage that promises an announcement “soon”.

I will give an example of just how excruciating the situation can be for relatives. My office was contacted by an Afghan constituent who is currently undergoing treatment for cancer. She has seven siblings with nieces and nephew all currently stuck in Afghanistan, and she believes they are in danger because of who she is. Such is the stress and worry that her health has been impacted, and she believes that her recovery has been put in jeopardy by the torturous wait for a resettlement scheme to open. The scheme has now opened, but because my constituent’s family are in Afghanistan it is not likely to help them in the near future. What do I tell her?

The Minister told us today that the Government would be working closely with countries in the region to find safe routes for eligible Afghans to be evacuated, and that they were exploring a range of options, but she could not go into any detail. The situation is not new. They have had months to make these arrangements. It is far too late to start exploring options. As for the secrecy, I do not need to know and was not asking for the exact routes, but I need to know what progress has been made and what that is likely to mean for evacuating those in danger. I need something tangible to give people hope. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) made the good point that those who were previously entitled to visas are now unable to access them. How frustrating is that?

For the people we did manage to bring here, it is great that they have been invited here—great, but not charitable; it is just responsible. What about those still trapped in hotel accommodation in the UK? Last week, Prince William told Afghan refugees in hotels that he wished we could have brought more people here and asked, “Why is it taking so long to get people into permanent homes?” It is a good question. I understand that there are logistical challenges, but according to Home Office sources interviewed by *The Times* last week, it is more to do with the Chancellor forcing the Government to scale down their commitments in order to save money.

The Home Secretary and her team should be standing up to the Treasury, not simply moving people who are already in the UK into the ACRS, so that before we know it, bingo! We have managed to make up our numbers! As I said earlier, up to 20,000 could mean anything less than 20,000. It could mean 6,000 people, or 25. A limit of “up to” anything is utterly meaningless. The Government must understand that the failure to implement a resettlement scheme in time, and the fudging of figures has only and will only serve to drive those people into the hands of smuggling gangs or will force them to find alternative dangerous and illegal methods of entry.

Having sat on the Nationality and Borders Bill Committee with the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), I assure the House that despite the Government's calls for anyone looking to find sanctuary in the UK to only use safe and legal routes, they are failing to provide them. The Minister on the Committee repeatedly said, "That is what the legislation is all about," but guess how many mentions said routes got in that very weighty Bill? None at all. The scheme, in response to an emergency five months ago, is supposed to be a great example of a safe and legal route. Family reunion is another safe and legal route, but we have some of the most restrictive family reunion rights in Europe, which have only become more restrictive post Brexit. The ARAP scheme—the only active scheme to resettle Afghan refugees so far—has recently narrowed its criteria to make it even harder for applicants to qualify. I want to double check something that the Minister said in the Chamber earlier. She said nobody would be moved from the ARAP scheme to the ACRS scheme. I would be grateful for confirmation of that.

I also want to raise the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities issue again. As I said, all 32 Scottish local authorities are ready to support the Afghan resettlement scheme. The Minister said earlier that people on both schemes would get indefinite leave to remain, but that is not the same as refugee status. Refugee status confirms rights and entitlements to things like family reunion and education. That is of great interest to our local authorities, and they are keen to know the answer. Will these people have fewer rights than refugees? If so, why? After all, they are refugees, are they not? One thing the Minister failed to tell us today was how the already under-resourced Departments involved would deal with the resettlement effectively and transparently.

The UK Afghanistan Diplomatic and Development Alliance is a network of former civil servants, diplomats and development officials who served the UK Government in Afghanistan. It says that many more staff are needed here and in third countries to speed up the processing of refugees and the enormous backlog of applications. It is also calling for an effective appeals process. As the Minister said earlier, we cannot help everyone but we must ensure that those who fall through the net are given the right to appeal their case.

I will end by speaking about another Afghan man who I have been trying to help. He fits the description the Conservatives are so fond of: he is a youngish man fleeing alone. He must be an economic migrant and go straight to jail—except he is not. He has been waiting five months for the help he was promised and on Christmas Eve—

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Order. May I ask the hon. Lady to wind up her remarks?

Anne McLaughlin: I have two sentences left, Ms Ali. He decided to make a dangerous, illegal and treacherous journey to Iran. He fell and broke his leg. He did it because his wife was getting so desperate. She is now in hiding alone in Afghanistan, and he is now lying with a broken leg on a mountainside in Iran and he cannot afford hospital treatment. That is how desperate we make people when we do not speed up. I really do wish this well. I want it to work. I hope the Minister listens to us and makes some of the changes that we have asked for, but that is what we do to people when we promise them help and we do not give them it.

4.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate you, Ms Ali, on your chairmanship and I look forward to serving under you. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this crucial debate. I would like to echo the shadow Home Secretary's thanks to our UK service personnel and all those who served in Afghanistan and assisted with the evacuation efforts from Kabul and Operation Pitting. No one can doubt their bravery and courage in the most challenging of circumstances. Their actions saved thousands of desperate people from untold suffering and, for many, death. It is nearly five months since the fall of Kabul and the harrowing scenes at Kabul airport as thousands of Afghans attempted to flee the Taliban. Those tragic scenes marked a failure of Government foreign policy in Afghanistan, and that is why the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme and today's debate is so important.

It is about standing by those who desperately need our support at a time when, dare I say, our failure has helped to put them in an intolerable position. It is also about basic decency to those who believe in our most fundamental values of a free and democratic Afghanistan, no longer a base for terrorism. We simply cannot let down those who trusted in our country and who now deserve nothing less than our full support in their time of dire need.

I welcome some of the steps that have been announced today, including in respect of the resettlement scheme. Having said that, it is shameful that it has taken five months from the fall of Kabul—144 days and thousands of hours—for our constituents with loved ones stuck in Afghanistan to finally be given details of the resettlement scheme, how it will operate and who exactly will be eligible. How can it have taken so long?

Instead, what we saw as Members of Parliament was constituents with loved ones in Afghanistan who were desperate to talk to them, get them out and support them. A constituent of mine, Abdul Latifi, went through purgatory before eventually he was able to get out of Kabul with his six children, one of whom is disabled. While these constituents would hang on every word from the Home Office, because they wanted to bring their loved ones to safety, Departments seem to be engaged in briefing wars against one another. It is alleged that the promised 20,000 target for the scheme will be bodged, and there needs to be clarity on this going forward.

The Government promised that under the resettlement scheme they would bring to safety 20,000 of those who could not make it out of Afghanistan in time and who now fear for their lives under the Taliban. Allegedly, the Government want to now roll back on their pledge so that those already evacuated to safety under the ARAP scheme or by other methods will be transferred into the resettlement scheme to meet the 20,000 target.

The Minister said earlier in the House that British nationals evacuated from Afghanistan should and would receive a level of support for the trauma they experienced during the evacuation. I agree, but that support should be given outside of the resettlement scheme. The Minister went on to say that the Government have

"now granted the first people indefinite leave to remain under the ACRS"

[Jack Dromey]

and that that included British nationals evacuated from Afghanistan. Is the Minister really saying that British nationals, who have a special status, are being included in the resettlement scheme to the detriment of Afghans who are not British citizens? What is the point of the resettlement scheme if it is not wholeheartedly meant for them? This would be a serious breach of trust, and we will not support any watering down and bodged counting that undermines our moral commitment to the Afghan people.

When the Minister responds, I hope she can clear up the confusion emanating from the Home Office. I hope she can give a clear commitment that the resettlement scheme will be meant for those in the here and now still suffering under the Taliban. Can she please confirm that the Treasury will fully fund the resettlement scheme to ensure that those 20,000 places are filled with Afghans who are not already protected by ARAP or other schemes? Can she also confirm that there will be family reunion provisions that work for those families separated from each other during the chaotic scenes at Kabul airport, so that they do not ultimately have to end up in dangerous dinghies crossing the freezing English channel to be reunited with their families? This matters not just to those desperately seeking safety, but also to our country's international reputation.

Our country has a proud history of providing a safe haven to those fleeing persecution. Any watering down of the resettlement scheme would be contrary to our most fundamental values of decency, honesty and fairness. That is why the Labour party believes that we should and can do better. The resettlement scheme, which is right in principle, must not be watered down or delayed any further.

It is also critical that the Government listen to the concerns that colleagues have raised here in the House about the operation of the scheme. Concerns were raised by the hon. Members for Strangford, for Wycombe (Mr Baker), for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and by other SNP colleagues. Concerns were also raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare). Members have real concerns and have been desperately trying to support those in dire circumstances in Afghanistan who are separated from their families and friends here in this country.

In conclusion, the bravery of our service personnel and Government officials who stayed on the ground in Kabul, at great personal risk during Operation Pitting, represented the very best of Britain. The Government must match their clear moral sense of purpose, do the right thing by the Afghan people, and without delay ensure a resettlement scheme of integrity—not watered down, not further delayed—that will genuinely help those left behind. If today has seen some welcome steps in the right direction, there are still some fundamental questions that the Minister needs to answer.

4.16 pm

The Minister for Afghan Resettlement (Victoria Atkins): May I say what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship on your first outing, Ms Ali? Well chaired,

if I may make that observation. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this important debate. I am terribly sorry that Government timing gave us a first outing this morning, but I hope he will forgive me. We very much wanted to make the announcement about the launch of this important scheme as quickly as possible so that the House was aware of it. He set out with great lucidity and understated emotion the awful experiences that many people continue to suffer in Afghanistan. “Worry” does not do justice to the terror that their family members and others feel about the experiences of people who are in the country. We understand the concerns, and the Government are trying everything we can to work with countries outside of Afghanistan to try to find safe routes. I will come on to that in a moment.

In today's statement I referred to the three pathways that would operate under the ACRS. The first includes those who are already evacuated and in the UK, including women's rights activists, journalists and prosecutors, as well as the Afghan families of British nationals. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), whom I also welcome to his place, asked me to clarify that. In fairness, we have said this throughout. Paragraph 25 of the statement of 13 September stated that

“some of those who arrived in the UK under the evacuation programme, which included individuals who were considered to be at particular risk...will be resettled under the ACRS.”

I know how it was presented in the press over Christmas, but we have always wanted to support those who have already been evacuated here. They faced risks and were therefore evacuated over.

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington also asked about the funding of British nationals and British national families. British nationals sit outside ARAP and the ACRS. We are none the less supporting them, given the circumstances of their eligibility. However, we are not permitted under an Act from 2002—I think it is an Act from 2002—to include them in the ACRS, and we would not attempt to do so. Their families, however, who are not British, who are Afghan or other nationalities, we will support under the ACRS. We recognise that if they were evacuated in Kabul in those very difficult circumstances, as I said in the statement, we want to support them and recognise the needs that they have.

There is detail on the definition of British nationals. I do not have time to go into that now, but documents will be produced in due course so that colleagues understand the definition of a British national under the support. It is such a huge scheme that we will, I am afraid at some point, have to draw a line in the sand as to the treatment and support. I flag that because I know colleagues are concerned about it.

We also announced the two other referral pathways, including the UNHCR route. I listened carefully to the points of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) about historical concerns over certain elements of UNHCR programmes. I will task officials to look specifically at that. She will of course know that, through our third pathway—civil society—we hope to include people who have perhaps not been caught under previous schemes. I am happy to meet her to discuss that. The third pathway covers those who are at risk and who supported the UK and international community efforts in Afghanistan, including those who are particularly vulnerable.

Colleagues from across the House have asked many questions over preceding months about British Council contractors, Chevening alumni and so on. We have outlined our plans to honour those commitments to those who are at risk in those three groups, including staff from GardaWorld. Because this is an unprecedented scheme, we want to continue working over the next year with international organisations and NGOs in order to develop it in year two, drawing learning not only from our own experiences but from other countries that are attempting to look after Afghans as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) was absolutely right, and I applaud him for his comments on the wonderful diversity of our great nation in the 21st century. He also made the point about relationships with other countries in the region. He is absolutely right that we have to manage our relationships and treat those countries in the region, which face their own pressures, with enormous respect, and that we should work together to ensure that we are able, as an international community, to look after the most vulnerable. As I said in my statement to the House, we are working closely with countries in the region to find safe routes. I also said that the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey), recently visited the region to see what more can be done. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) asked for more details. As I said in the main Chamber, I am afraid I cannot share those details with the House—I am told that they are classified—but we are working with a wide range of allies and partners and genuinely exploring every avenue. I hope that gives a little more context to the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare), as I appreciate her point about wanting to help constituents with their queries.

I am so grateful to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who set out some really important details about not only some of the most senior judges, as she correctly identified in both her contributions today, but those on a more regional basis. I regret having to acknowledge that we do not have an unlimited ability to settle people, but I very much welcome her indication of looking for ways to encourage other countries to help us all in this cause of looking after such judges. I very much look forward to meeting her, as I promised earlier, to discuss that.

The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead asked specifically about British nationals. Again, it is very detailed, but eligible British nationals are those in need of housing and integration support who were evacuated from Afghanistan by the UK military, other NATO countries or a regional state during Operation Pitting, or who were assisted by Her Majesty's Government to leave Afghanistan after Pitting, with that assistance commencing before today and their having entered bridging accommodation or presented as homeless to a council. I hope I have dealt with the point in relation to their families. We very much want to continue caring for them and working with them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton raised the community sponsorship scheme. The example of Canada is really encouraging. I love the idea of local communities working together to welcome families into their midst. We have looked very carefully at the Canadian scheme as we have been looking to review and expand our own version of the scheme. I hope there will be

announcements in due course on how we plan to expand the scheme, not just in the context of Afghan evacuees, but also the wider resettlement programme as set out under the new plan for immigration. I hope those will meet with her approval.

I have been asked questions about stories in the press. We all value an independent and robust press—of course we do—but I have been struck by how united the Government are in working together to look after people under Operation Warm Welcome, and also to try to assist those who are still left in country and in region. As I said at the start of my statement today, this work is genuinely across 10 Departments, and anyone who has ever served in Government knows that getting even a couple of Departments together to work can sometimes cause logistical issues, to put it politely.

I have a brilliant team of Ministers who are leading in their own Departments on all the different avenues of work. For example, the Minister for Employment is developing the jobs employment programme for our new Afghan citizens. My counterpart in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities responsible for homelessness is working with local councils to ensure that we are keeping up to date with them and working with them.

Abena Oppong-Asare: The Minister mentioned local authorities. One of the councils in my constituency, Greenwich, is still waiting for the promised £100,000 from the Government. It still has not received that money for the work it did to support Afghans who have come into the country—

Victoria Atkins: I am rising quickly because I have a minute. I appreciate that concern and the hon. Lady is right to raise it. The funding instructions are in place. If there are particular issues, I will ask my officials to pursue matters with the chief executive to ensure that the relevant forms have been filled in and so on.

It is absolutely right that the House scrutinises our efforts, but this genuinely is a scheme that I think we will look back on with great pride in years to come. We will want to welcome every single person who has come to our country, not just since Pitting, but in the future, and really include them all in our constituencies and in being great members of our country.

4.27 pm

Jim Shannon: First, I thank each and every one of the hon. Members for their poignant and helpful contributions. The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) put her case forward on behalf of her constituents. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) said that children need to be comfortable in the system—I think we are all trying to ensure that. The hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) spoke of the need for visa help. He is absolutely right. The hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) also talked about the visa system—if someone is in Pakistan, how do they get into the system? There are clearly things that need to be done.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) put forward some very good ideas. I look forward to whenever she meets with the Minister and we get the feedback. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) referred to the UNHCR criteria, which the Minister gave an undertaking to look at. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin)

[Jim Shannon]

referred to the need for a tangible scheme for going forward. That is what we are all after—a system where we can see that.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), referred to the strategy for the Afghans. We cannot let them down. For 20 years, we have given them the flavour of democracy. With that in mind, when we left, we left them without any of that. That is where I feel our obligation is.

I thank the Minister. I know the Minister is committed—I have never doubted it for a second. There have been some teething issues to draw out. The hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Abena Oppong-Asare) made comments on behalf of 65 constituents, who have 400 friends and relatives. She is right: we need to be able to tell people what to do, and we welcome whatever the Minister can do to help us as we move forward.

We look forward to welcoming Afghan citizens to our constituencies, to jobs and housing and participation in our communities. We have done it before with Syrian refugees. We will do the same again with the Afghans when they come through.

I thank each and every Member for their contribution. It is at times like this that it feels good to be here working on behalf of people to make a change. That is what I believe we have done today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 6 January 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Departmental Contingent Liability Notification: Energy Supply Company Special Administration Regime

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): Today I will lay before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability arising from the issuance of a letter of credit for the energy administrators acting in the special administration regime for Bulb Energy Ltd (Bulb).

It is normal practice when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability of £300,000 and above, for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Department concerned to present Parliament with a minute giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances.

I regret that, due to recess, I have not been able to follow the usual notification timelines to allow consideration of these issues in advance of issuing the letter of credit.

Bulb entered the energy supply company special administration regime on 24 November 2021. Energy administrators were appointed by court to achieve the statutory objective of continuing energy supplies at the lowest reasonable practicable cost until such time as it becomes unnecessary for the special administration to remain in force for that purpose.

My Department has agreed to provide a facility to the energy administrators, with a letter of credit issued, with my approval, to guarantee such contract, code, licence, or other document obligations of the company consistent with the special administration's statutory objective. I will update the House if any letters of credit are drawn against.

The legal basis for a letter of credit is section 165 of the Energy Act 2004, as applied and modified by section 96 of the Energy Act 2011.

HM Treasury has approved the arrangements in principle. [HCWS524]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Annual Fisheries Negotiations

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): The UK and EU have now reached an agreement on fishing opportunities for the 2022 fishing year. This is the second time the UK has entered into bilateral negotiations with the EU as an independent coastal state, following the signing of the trade and co-operation agreement (TCA) between the UK and EU in 2020.

In its second year negotiating as a coastal state, the UK has also successfully concluded the UK-EU-Norway trilateral negotiations and UK-Norway bilateral negotiations. Both agreements mark the start of new fisheries arrangements in the North sea and a strong willingness from all parties to collaborate closely in the future.

The UK Government have worked closely with Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive, and the outcomes secured by the UK will enable us to improve the sustainable management of our fish stocks in support of the whole of the UK fishing industry in the short and long term.

Collectively from the EU-UK bilateral, EU-UK-Norway trilateral, and coastal states negotiations, the UK has secured agreement on the total allowable catches—TACs—for 86 stocks.

UK-EU Agreement

The agreement we have reached with the EU covers 69 UK-EU TACs, resulting in a total value of fishing opportunities for the UK in 2022 of approximately 140,000 tonnes, worth around £313 million, based on historic landing prices.

Guided by best available scientific advice as part of sustainable fisheries management, the UK and EU agreed reductions across a number of TACs, meaning that overall the UK will have around 12,000 tonnes less quota compared with 2021 from these negotiations. However, even with this reduction, the UK has around 28,000 tonnes more quota from these negotiations than it would have received with its previous shares as an EU member state. This is estimated to be worth around £45 million based on historic landing prices.

As in previous years, the UK negotiated this year's TACs taking account of sustainability principles. A full assessment of the number of individual TACs set consistent with International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advice on catch opportunities will be published shortly and after the conclusion of all the UK's annual fisheries negotiations and the setting of consultative TACs.

On exchanges of quota with the EU, the UK and EU agreed to the continuation of the interim exchange mechanism which has operated successfully since July 2021, enabling voluntary exchanges between the UK and member states. This will continue until the Specialised Committee on Fisheries (SCF) can agree a permanent mechanism, as required by the TCA. The UK and EU agreed to hold a final round of exchanges on 21 January 2022 to allow for the wrapping up of this year's exchanges.

On non-quota stocks (NQS) the UK and EU resolved the outstanding provisional historic baseline tonnage figures, this includes the removal of catches from Crown dependency waters.

The revised baseline figures are 12,365 tonnes for UK vessels in EU waters, and 33,023 tonnes for EU vessels in UK waters. It was also agreed to hold further technical discussions from January 2022 to ensure that future data exchanges on NQS uptake are robust and accurate.

Exceptionally, the UK and EU agreed not to apply the NQS tonnage limits provided for in the TCA for 2022. We will closely monitor uptake data and in the event either party reaches 80% of their total a discussion will be held in the SCF to consider next steps.

The UK and EU also committed to work at pace to develop multi-year strategies for shared NQS as set out under the TCA, with the aim of developing the first of these by 31 July 2022. Both parties confirmed our shared priority to ensure the sustainable management of NQS stocks from 2023 onwards.

The UK and EU agreed to roll forward the previously agreed measures for seabass. In addition, it was agreed that further adjustments would be introduced in 2022. These include an increase in the annual limits for landings of bass from hook and lines and fixed gillnets, as well as an amendment to the commercial trawl/seine flexibility.

Finally, the UK and EU agreed to prioritise and handle NQS, seabass (including the ICES assessment tool), stock without ICES advice, inter-annual quota flexibility and other topics through the Specialised Committee on Fisheries.

UK-EU-Norway Trilateral Negotiations

The UK reached an agreement with Norway and the European Union on catch limits for 2022 for six jointly managed stocks in the North sea. The catch limits agreed for 2022 are worth over £184 million to the UK fishing industry.

The agreement demonstrates the parties' continued commitment to the sustainable management and long-term viability of cod, haddock, plaice, whiting, herring, and saithe stocks in the North sea. Alongside the total allowable catches—TACs—for 2022, the agreement puts in place a process to review the distribution and management of shared stocks which are important for the whole UK catch sector.

UK-Norway Bilateral Negotiations

The agreement reached with Norway includes reciprocal access to each other's waters. The UK will gain access to 30,000 tonnes of whitefish stocks such as cod, haddock and hake. There will also be access to fish pelagic stock: the UK industry will be able to fish its full quota of Atlanto-Scandian herring in Norwegian waters, and up to 17,000 tonnes should it swap in additional quota from the EU in 2022. In return, Norway will be able to fish up to 17,000 tonnes of North sea herring in UK waters. This is less than a third of the level of access for North sea herring enjoyed by Norway while the UK was a member of the European Union. We also agreed some quota exchange, estimated to be worth just over £5 million. This includes bringing in stocks such as North sea whiting, hake and anglerfish, and Arctic cod.

The agreement puts in place a process which ensures that the fishing arrangements do not have detrimental consequences for fish stocks and the wider marine environment. The mutual access will also allow respective fleets more flexibility to target the stocks in the best condition throughout the fishing year, supporting a more sustainable and economically viable fishing industry.

In parallel to the conclusion of these negotiations, Norway has allocated to the UK 6,550 tonnes of cod around Svalbard. This means the UK can fish over 7,000 tonnes of cod in the Arctic in 2022, estimated to be worth around £16 million, and 1,500 tonnes more than in 2021.

UK-Faroe Island Negotiations

Bilateral fisheries negotiations between the UK and Faroes are ongoing. Both parties are pursuing a pragmatic and well-balanced agreement. The UK's overriding priority is to ensure that the deal is in the best interests of the UK industry and protects the marine environment, promoting sustainable stock management.

Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs)

The UK is a contracting party to five RFMOs and played a central role in negotiations in 2021 in securing a number of important new RFMO measures for 2022

and beyond. These include a new rebuilding plan for North Atlantic shortfin mako shark in the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), a new management measure for yellowfin tuna in the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), an interim measure for the Greenland salmon fishery in the North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organisation (NASCO), new "area closures" to protect vulnerable marine ecosystems in the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organisation (NAFO), and a measure to protect juvenile haddock at the North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission (NEAFC). The UK also confirmed its 2022 shares in the four ICCAT stocks negotiated with the EU under the TCA.

The UK will build on these successes in 2022 and beyond, working to achieve rapid progress on our priority objectives for RFMOs both in terms of fishing opportunities where appropriate, and furthering our marine conservation priorities.

Multilateral "Coastal State" Negotiations

On mackerel, blue whiting and Atlanto-Scandian herring, the UK and other coastal states (the parties responsible for a stock's management due to it being distributed in their waters) agreed to set the global TACs for 2022 in line with the advice provided by ICES.

We have also agreed to discuss sharing arrangements for each stock in 2022. The UK will chair discussions on mackerel and Atlanto-Scandian herring.

[HCWS521]

JUSTICE

Outdoor Marriages and Civil Partnerships

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove): On 20 December, the Government launched a public consultation on outdoor weddings and civil partnerships. This consultation sets out, and seeks views on, the Government's proposals to continue to permit outdoor civil marriages and civil partnerships on approved premises, and to permit outdoor religious marriages in the grounds of places of worship.

Since 1 July 2021, couples have been able to have their civil marriage and civil partnership proceedings in the open air, in the grounds of buildings such as stately homes and hotels which are approved or become approved for these civil ceremonies. Previously, these proceedings could only take place indoors or otherwise within permanently immovable structures. These outdoor ceremonies were made possible because the Government laid a statutory instrument (SI) putting in place these flexibilities, in order to give couples more choice of setting, and to support the wedding and civil partnership sector. However, that SI has effect only until the end of 5 April 2022.

We are now proposing to lay a further SI so that these outdoor civil marriage and civil partnership proceedings can continue beyond 5 April 2022 indefinitely, and to extend the policy of permitting outdoor ceremonies to religious marriages using a separate legislative reform order. Together, these proposals would ensure that the provision for outdoor marriages and civil partnerships on approved premises continues indefinitely and would extend similar arrangements to religious weddings in the grounds of places of worship. The proposals would

enable couples to have a greater choice in relation to the location of their ceremonies, and for approved premises and religious bodies to have more flexibility in the locations for ceremonies, should they choose to offer it. No religious group would be obliged to provide outdoor ceremonies, and existing protections to safeguard religious freedoms would remain in place.

The consultation can be found here:
<https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/outdoor-marriages-civil-partnerships>

A copy of the consultation paper will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS522]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Protecting the Integrity of our Elections

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): I am pleased to update Parliament today on amendments the Government will shortly be bringing forward to the Elections Bill which will help to ensure we fully deliver on our commitment to protecting our democracy.

The changes brought forward by the Bill are vital to ensure our democracy remains secure, fair, modern and transparent and I am therefore pleased to also update Parliament today with further information on their implementation. It is our expectation that all the measures will be in place within the lifetime of this Parliament and implementation will be staged over a sensible and pragmatic timetable; it is imperative that this is done properly and with sufficient time for the elections sector and voters to prepare for the new requirements.

Voter identification and the Voter Card

I am today publishing a policy statement, “Protecting the integrity of our elections: voter identification at polling stations and the new Voter Card”, which sets out more detail on the Government’s proposals for the voter identification policy.

The statement includes details of the rationale for the list of accepted photographic identifications in the Elections Bill and further information around our plans for the application process for voter cards.

A voter card will be available free of charge to ensure that all electors have access to an accepted form of identification. The Government are clear that the process for applying for this card must be accessible for all those who need it. There will therefore be a range of application routes, voter cards will be valid across all of Great Britain—not just in the issuing area—and the Government will shortly be tabling amendments to adjust some of the current drafting of the Bill to increase the accessibility and security of the voter card and ensure the voter card system works for all eligible voters.

Voters in Northern Ireland have been required to show identification when voting at polling stations since 1985, and the photographic voter identification system has been in place there for almost 20 years since it was brought in by the last Labour Government in 2003. Since its introduction, this requirement has successfully

helped to tackle electoral fraud and has been operating with ease. In their 2021 public opinion tracker, the Electoral Commission recorded not a single Northern Ireland respondent reporting “I don’t have any identification/I would not be able to vote”.

It is our expectation that voter identification will be in place in Great Britain in time for polls taking place in spring 2023, with the voter card system in operation in good time ahead of this.

Absent Vote Applications

The Government will be introducing a further amendment to the Bill to require identity verification for absent vote applications, as is already the case for Northern Ireland. This will ensure that applications are legitimate, protecting the system from fraud.

A further amendment will provide for an online absent vote application service, making this process more efficient for both citizens and electoral administrators and placing both integrity and elector participation at the heart of our democracy. The new online application service, as well as existing paper applications, will require electors to have their identity verified as part of the process, ensuring that the system is as streamlined as possible for users. As we legislate to update our electoral system we are therefore also ensuring public confidence that our elections will remain secure well into the future.

In order to ensure efficiency of electoral administrative processes, it is our ambition to align the new online application process with other changes to absent vote arrangements and the delivery of overseas electors’ voting rights. Rollout of the online service will be conditional on the identity verification processes being in place and the timing of rollout in Northern Ireland will be dependent on meeting the particular safeguards required in Northern Ireland. This is in order to reduce any opportunity for individuals to exploit the processes and steal votes.

Technical amendments to the Elections Bill

The Bill will be amended to reflect that responsibility for elections has moved from the Cabinet Office to the new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. In addition, an amendment will be made to provisions in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 regarding membership of the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, to allow for the most relevant Minister to be appointed by the Prime Minister to be able to deputise for the Secretary of State on the Committee as and when needed. These changes will not increase the Government’s allocated representation on the Committee.

Several amendments will also be made to the clauses in the Bill relating to the new digital imprints regime. These amendments include clarifying the enforcement responsibilities of the Electoral Commission and the police, and improving consistency between the clauses that relate to “paid material” and those that relate to “other electronic material” (or unpaid material). They will also clarify that the imprint rules will apply only to unpaid electronic material wholly or mainly related to referendums, when published during the referendum period. Further, these amendments will ensure that the regime covers all relevant elections, including all City of London elections. These amendments will help ensure transparency and empower voters to make informed decisions about the material they see online.

The associated document has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and amendments to the Elections Bill will be tabled in due course.

[HCWS525]

PRIME MINISTER

Investigatory Powers Commissioner: Annual Report

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I have today laid before both Houses a copy of the annual report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the right hon. Sir Brian Leveson.

Overall, this report demonstrates that the security and intelligence agencies, law enforcement agencies and other relevant public authorities' use of investigatory powers shows extremely high levels of operational competence combined with respect for the law. The report also sets out the breadth and complexity of the powers covered by the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 and other legislation and offers constructive criticism on the practical framework and individual instances of how these are used. Where the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO) has identified problems, Departments and agencies have worked hard to address these.

This year the commissioner has decided not to include a confidential annex to the report, as allowed under section 234 of the 2016 Act, as all relevant issues have been covered in this report. This has been subject to consultation with relevant Government Departments and agencies, and I am content it is not prejudicial to national security.

I would like to add that this report demonstrates the high quality of the oversight of our intelligence and security agencies' use of the most intrusive powers. I am satisfied that our arrangements are among the strongest and most effective in the world. Despite the unique challenges which covid-19 created, the commissioner notes their oversight has been no less rigorous than in previous years and his report details the changes they made to their inspection practice to ensure this.

I would like to place on record my thanks to the current and previous commissioners and their staff for their work, as well as echoing the commissioner's thanks to the agencies and Departments and civil society organisations which have helped with the establishment of the IPCO over the past few years. I join him in extending my particular thanks to all those who took on the responsibility of serving as temporary judicial commissioners under section 22 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 during the lockdown period, who ensured the work of the IPCO was able to continue uninterrupted.

I commend this report to the House.

[HCWS523]

TRANSPORT

Civil Aviation Authority 2021: Progress Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): During the passage of the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Act 2021 through Parliament, Ministers confirmed that the Civil Aviation Authority's annual progress report on the airspace modernisation strategy would be published, and a copy placed in the Libraries of both Houses accompanied by a written ministerial statement.

The airspace modernisation strategy sets out, through 15 initiatives, ways and means of modernising airspace, initially focusing on the period until the end of 2024. The initiatives include airspace design, operational concepts and new technology.

Six of the 15 initiatives are assessed as on track, and five initiatives require further work. The delayed timescales of delivery against the original plans set out in the airspace modernisation strategy have predominantly shifted because of ongoing recovery of the aviation industry from the covid-19 pandemic.

Four initiatives will need further legislation on performance-based navigation and air traffic management—core elements of the airspace modernisation strategy. The Department for Transport will be taking legislation forward this year to ensure continued progress to the overall airspace modernisation strategy programme.

Key areas of progress have been noted within free route airspace (initiative 2), remobilisation of the future airspace strategy implementation south and north airspace change programmes made possible by Government funding (initiatives 4 and 5) and initiatives 9, 10 and 11 on aligning air traffic provision with international standards, review of airspace classification and electronic conspicuity respectively.

There has also been progress with the Airspace Change Organising Group submitting iteration 2 of their masterplan—which will set out where airspace changes need to be co-ordinated and developed—for assessment by the CAA.

Chapter 2 provides an update from the co-sponsors on policy and regulatory process, with a particular emphasis on stakeholder engagement activity undertaken as part of the airspace modernisation strategy refresh and the reintroduction of the airspace modernisation strategy support fund. Strategic risks have also been flagged within this chapter, predominantly concerning future delivery model, financing, and resourcing of the modernisation programme.

Chapter 3 provides updates related specifically to activities under the airspace modernisation strategy, undertaken within areas of particular interest from the general aviation and communities stakeholder groups.

I will place a copy of the "Airspace Modernisation - 2021 Progress Report" in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-01-06/HCWS520/>

[HCWS520]

Petition

Thursday 6 January 2022

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Aston Fence School speed limit extension

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rother Valley,

Declares that road safety measures must be strengthened and improved around Aston Fence School; and further that the existing 20mph speed limit, which is currently applicable during peak drop-off and pick-up hours in morning and afternoon, be in force at all times to protect pedestrians and drivers alike.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons call on the Government to urge Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council to extend the existing 20mph speeding restrictions around the school so that they are in force at all times, rather than just during peak school hours.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alexander Stafford, *Official Report*, 14 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 1028.]

[P002704]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Baroness Vere of Norbiton

The setting of local speed limits is a matter for the local traffic authority, which has powers to make enforceable speed limit orders which may set either variable speed limits that apply only at certain times, or permanent speed limits that operate all the time. The traffic authority has the responsibility of making decisions about the roads under its care, based on its knowledge of the area and taking into account local needs and considerations.

The Department issues guidance to local traffic authorities designed to make sure that speed limits are appropriately and consistently set while allowing for flexibility to deal with local circumstances. The guidance can be found online at www.gov.uk/government/publications/setting-local-speed-limits. This guidance is not mandatory, and the final decision is for the authority, working with the police which would carry out any enforcement.

Local authorities are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care provided they take account of the relevant legislation. It would be inappropriate for the Government to seek to intervene in the process of local democratic accountability.

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**not later than
Thursday 13 January 2022**

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