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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 13 January 2022

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Physical and Mental Health of Veterans

1. **Mark Jenkinson** (Workington) (Con): What steps he is taking to support the physical and mental health of veterans. [904972]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We are committed to striving to provide a gold standard of care and support for all veterans. This year, we have allocated £17.8 million to the veterans health and wellbeing service—Op Courage at the NHS—and recently committed a £2.7 million boost over the next three years to further expand services supporting those who experience complex mental or physical trauma or alcohol and substance misuse.

Mark Jenkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for our veterans. At Christmas, I delivered hampers of fresh local produce to over 100 veterans across the Workington constituency to thank them for their service. Does he agree with me that as the party that looks after all who have served, it is right that we take every opportunity to repay that service?

Leo Docherty: I thank my hon. Friend and put on the record my gratitude for the fantastically energetic way in which he supports veterans in the community. He briefed me last year on the hamper project and I commend him for the tangible benefit that he provides and energy with which he supports veterans in Workington.

Omicron Variant: Support for Key Services

2. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What support he is providing to businesses and the voluntary sector to support key services affected by the omicron variant. [904973]

12. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): What support he is providing to businesses and the voluntary sector to support key services affected by the omicron variant. [904987]

14. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What support he is providing to businesses and the voluntary sector to support key services affected by the omicron variant. [904989]

15. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What support he is providing to businesses and the voluntary sector to support key services affected by the omicron variant. [904992]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): The most important thing to support businesses in the voluntary sector is to come out of the covid restrictions and reopen our economy. Boosters remain the best way to save lives, reduce the pressure on our NHS and keep our country safe. It is a great tribute to those working in our NHS that almost eight out of 10 eligible adults in England are now boosted.

Geraint Davies: A year ago, Phil Grant of the DVLA tragically died of coronavirus. He was a man in his 60s with a heart condition who had previously been allowed to work from home during the first lockdown and was forced to go to work. A year on, just pre last Christmas, unions and management agreed that, after 700 cases of coronavirus at the DVLA, there should be new arrangements for people to work from home and a rota system to allow safety. The Government intervened and stopped that from being instated on the grounds that omicron was not as dangerous. Since then, we now have a cumulative figure of 1,700 coronavirus cases at the DVLA. Will the Minister intervene to enable the scheme agreed by both unions and management to be implemented for at least a couple of months and meet me urgently so that the safety of workers and their families can be protected?

Mr Speaker: Can we try to make questions shorter?

Steve Barclay: I recognise the seriousness of the case. On behalf of all colleagues in the House, I am sure, I express our sympathy for the family concerned. As the honorable gentleman will know, it is difficult to comment on individual cases. He will also be aware that under plan B, employees are encouraged to work from home where possible. I am happy to flag the case to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, who oversees the body concerned. My right hon. Friend is balancing the need to address those employment issues with the importance of getting testing boosted when it comes to HGVs, cars and others, but he will pick up the case and I will raise it with him.

Liz Twist: During the pandemic, charities have played a hugely important part in supporting people, particularly those in need of help and more vulnerable older people. Does the Minister not agree that it would have been better to have involved those charities in the planning right from the start? Can we learn that lesson for the future?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about the importance of charities, including in the pandemic response more widely. That is why we have had a package of £750 million of support for charities, which indicates their importance and how they have been involved throughout the pandemic.

Mr Virendra Sharma: Ealing food bank in my constituency is doing tremendous work feeding those struggling the most. Those in greatest need already cannot afford to feed themselves and their families even while in work. If the Government move to charging for

testing, will the Minister commit to funding lateral flow tests for the most vulnerable to prevent unwanted covid-19 outbreaks?

Steve Barclay: The reality as we meet today is that we continue to offer universal free testing. Actually, the UK is an outlier both in terms of the sheer quantum of testing that we have delivered—more than any other country in Europe—and the fact that we have not charged to do so. Testing has played a key role in our response, along with the booster campaign, but we need to balance that with value for money and the cost, which is very significant.

Stephen Morgan: MAKE, based in Fratton, is an amazing, award-winning service that is supporting men struggling with their mental health during the pandemic through its Breakfast OK project, which provides a safe space for them to share their experiences with others with similar issues. What specifically is the Minister doing to support Portsmouth social enterprises to flourish and succeed at a time of rising demand and lengthening waiting times for vital mental health services?

Steve Barclay: I will have to pick up on the specific organisation the hon. Member references, but as I said in my answer a moment ago, we have had a package of £750 million of support. We have worked with a number of organisations, including our school sector with holiday clubs and other support that has been offered. I am very happy to look at the specific case he highlights to the House.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): At every twist and turn during this pandemic, the Government have dangerously dithered and delayed instead of being ready and resilient. The reality is that Labour brought in the Civil Contingencies Act in 2004, but the Conservatives have deprioritised and underfunded vital emergencies infrastructure since 2010. While I welcome the temporary funding for local resilience forums announced last year, it is just a meagre £7.5 million. It is a tiny sum in the grand scheme of resilience needs, and it runs out in three months' time. This leaves us unprepared to face the omicron variant, and potential future variants and emergencies, so will the Minister commit to properly and sustainably funding local resilience forums and ensure they are never again left without the resources they need to keep us all safe?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Lady is right on the importance of local resilience forums, but she is not right to say that the Government have not responded. There has been over £400 billion of support from the Government as part of our pandemic response. On specific measures, I refer her to the statement by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on 21 December 2021 announcing further measures. I will not run through the full quantum of them, but just to take one, there are the one-off grants of up to £6,000 per premises to support the hospitality and leisure sector. We have also taken wider measures to support businesses, such as reducing the isolation period, the daily contact testing and addressing issues within specific sectors—whether that is in social care or in the transport sector. There has been a whole range of measures from the Government, including the funding support, and as she mentioned in her question, much of that is continuing until the end of March.

Minister for Hydrogen Role

3. **Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** Whether he has held discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the creation of a dedicated Minister for Hydrogen role. [904974]

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): Developing a thriving low-carbon hydrogen sector in the UK is a key piece of this Government's plan to build back better with a cleaner, greener energy system. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change has ministerial responsibility for this sector, and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy published the UK's first hydrogen strategy last year, building on the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution.

Ian Paisley: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister will know that hydrogen covers all regions of the United Kingdom, and I hope he agrees with me that we need to create a golden thread that brings together all the Departments of Government so that we can maximise and make sure we do not miss out on the hydrogen revolution for the United Kingdom, because it will be a game changer for our economy. Does the Minister agree that such a Minister would help create a contact point for the engineering supply chain across all of the UK, which is worth billions of pound to our economy?

Nigel Adams: I know the hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion for this sector, with the Wrightbus company in his constituency, of which he is rightly proud. He should be aware, and I know he is aware, of the £100 million of new funding for the net zero innovation portfolio, which will support industry to switch to low-carbon fuels. The supply chain of course needs to be an integral part of that, and it will certainly be taken into consideration as we develop this policy. I look forward to the opportunity of possibly visiting the site in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Government Contracts: Underperforming Suppliers and Legislative Proposals

4. **Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** What steps he is taking to ensure that underperforming suppliers do not receive Government contracts. [904975]

5. **Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab):** When the Government plan to bring forward legislative proposals to reform public procurement. [904976]

7. **Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab):** When the Government plan to bring forward legislative proposals to reform public procurement. [904978]

16. **Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** When the Government plan to bring forward legislative proposals to reform public procurement. [904993]

19. **Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab):** When the Government plan to bring forward legislative proposals to reform public procurement. [904996]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): In December 2020, we published the Government's response to the consultation on the Green Paper on "Transforming Public Procurement". We intend to bring forward these detailed and ambitious legislative proposals when parliamentary time allows.¹ The reforms will make it easier for buyers to take account of previous poor performance by suppliers, which is an important factor in deciding whether to award contracts, and there will be clearer and stronger rules about excluding suppliers that pose an unacceptable risk.

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for that answer. What action will he take to get contractors to supply the service for which they are contracted, rather than necessarily cancelling them? However, if they continue to underperform, what action will he take to cancel those contracts and get suppliers in who do the job properly?

Michael Ellis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his excellent question. As he knows, the Prime Minister is bringing forward some of the biggest reforms in decades in this country. One of them will be in procurement, which is worth £300 billion a year to our economy. We have seen underperformance and it is of course current Government policy to ensure that suppliers' past performance in adhering to contracts is taken into account when awarding new contracts. Under the public contract regulations, contracting authorities can use selection criteria, but we will make across-the-board improvements and reforms in the procurement system. I know that my hon. Friend will look forward to that and its benefits.

Daniel Zeichner: The Government maintain buying standards for food and catering services. The relevant Select Committee, campaign groups such as Sustain, and Henry Dimbleby with his food plan have all made the point that those standards should be brought up to date. The shadow Chancellor has pledged that Labour will ensure that public bodies have to report on how much British produce they buy. What are the Government doing on that, or is it just open season for Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and the rest?

Michael Ellis: The Conservative party is a party of free trade and a free economy. I do not know about the Labour party. We are improving procurement and thereby having a major effect on the economy. The hon. Member, like everyone else, will have to wait for the details of how the new rules will be implemented and how they will work, but, through a Green Paper, we have asked everyone to feed in their ideas and suggestions for detailed policies. Based on that, a Bill is currently being prepared for introduction to Parliament and I know that the hon. Member will look forward to that.

Nick Smith: Given that the Government's VIP lane for personal protective equipment contracts has been ruled unlawful, will there be immediate publication of contracts after emergency procurement to restore faith in the system? It would help avoid having the Government hauled so embarrassingly through the courts.

Michael Ellis: I do not accept that characterisation of any technical breaches that may have occurred. If the hon. Member looks at the judgment, he will see that the court ruled yesterday that the Government's industry

call to arms was open, transparent and justified in a time of national emergency. Actually, the court found that it was highly unlikely that the outcome would have been substantially different if a different assessment process had been followed.

Nia Griffith: During the pandemic, UK companies stepped up to the mark and changed production lines to meet our needs and increase our resilience. They were encouraged to think that they would get ongoing business for helping out during the PPE shortages. A local SME in my constituency invested more than £700,000 in automating its hand sanitiser production, but now finds that most of its UK Government Department customers have gone back to their original foreign suppliers. What will the Minister do to recognise the resilience that British firms provided, improve the uptake of British-made products by Government Departments and ensure that build back better is not just a slogan?

Michael Ellis: I would appreciate it if the hon. Member wrote to me with that particular example. I know that companies in her constituency are ably supported by her and I would like to hear more about that example. She is right that companies across the United Kingdom provided support at a time of national emergency, and they should be thanked for that.

Kate Osborne: The shocking news this week that the Government broke the law by handing out contracts worth huge sums to those with political connections shows that cronyism is rife in the Tory party. When will all the emergency procurement procedures end and all the emergency covid contracts finally be published?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept that characterisation. The court found that we did not rely on referral to the high priority lane when awarding contracts in certain cases, but that it was a technical matter, and that we were open, transparent and justified in what we did. "Justified" is a key word. As for emergency procurement, that is perfectly routine. It happens all the time, every year, including outside pandemics for various reasons. That will have to continue, but we are looking, in a new procurement Bill, at different ways of proceeding.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Frustratingly, pre-Brexit, "EU procurement rules" was always trotted out as a reason why local firms, local farms and others never got a look in when it came to local public service contracts. Post Brexit, will the Government take a proactive lead to support local procurement, which benefits local small businesses especially, as well as farmers and local food and drink producers? That would also help to reduce food miles.

Michael Ellis: The short answer is yes. Thanks to the work of my noble friend Lord Agnew, who has been working on this matter for a considerable time, my hon. Friend can look forward to further progress.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): The Government's use of emergency procurement during the pandemic has raised concerns around the transparency of contracts, potential conflicts of interest and the unsuitability of suppliers. Nearly two years on, Government Departments can still use those emergency regulations to bypass open

1. [Official Report, 20 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 6MC.]

competition and scrutiny. That is unacceptable, and it implies that Departments have failed to plan ahead to meet demand. Will the Minister explain why that has been allowed to continue?

Michael Ellis: The availability of an emergency mechanism for procurement existed prior to the pandemic. It has taken place under Governments of all political colours, and it will continue to take place occasionally. The contracts signed by Government with third parties are myriad, and there will frequently be circumstances of supply, or circumstances that relate to particular individual cases where emergency mechanisms have to apply. That is routine and it continues on a regular basis when it has to do so.

Rachel Hopkins: Good procurement that benefits the whole country needs good decisions made by a civil service that reflects the society it serves. However, the civil service fast stream recruitment over the last three years—from 2019 to 2021—resulted in more successful applicants coming from homes in London than the whole of the midlands and north of England put together. Although young people whose parents did not go to university made up more than half of external applicants, they made up only less than a third of those who were offered jobs. What is the Minister doing to rectify that regional and class discrimination in the civil service fast stream recruitment?

Michael Ellis: Procurement or otherwise, I am proud of our civil service, and I hope that the hon. Lady is, too. She criticises the civil service and makes a class warfare-type assertion about it—I do not accept that. This country, under this Government, is levelling up. We are levelling up across the country and making reforms in all our mechanisms of government, including in the national health service, housing, the economy and transport, and we are doing it in the civil service, too.

Cyber-security

6. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What steps he is taking to help strengthen the UK's resilience against cyber-attacks. [904977]

8. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What recent steps the Government have taken to strengthen cyber-security in the UK. [904980]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): Our new national cyber-strategy was launched in December. It builds on the previous five-year strategy, which reinforced the UK's position as a global leader in cyber, second only to the US and China in independent studies. The new strategy sets out how the UK will continue to be a leading, responsible and democratic cyber power, and able to protect and promote our interests. It is supported by £2.6 billion of investment over the next three years.

Sally-Ann Hart: What further steps is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that the UK's use of cyber-space enhances the UK's economic and social prosperity and national security, and ensures a strong, cohesive and resilient society while maintaining our core values of freedom, fairness and the rule of law?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. That is why the strategy sets out a whole of society approach, including a focus on building skills and the highest standards in cyber-security across society. Over the last five years, we have seen the cyber sector grow significantly, with more than 1,400 businesses generating revenues of £8.9 billion last year alone, and supporting 46,700 skilled jobs. That is also why we are targeting key sectors as part of that strategy, such as through the CyberFirst programme, which will ensure that 6,500 pupils from 600 schools can benefit, in particular by attracting girls into that competition so that they are a part of the cyber-strategy.

Margaret Ferrier: A cyber-attack last March on the UK Defence Academy was recently reported to have caused significant damage despite ultimately being unsuccessful. Those behind the attack remain unidentified. What measures are the Government considering to improve identification of malicious hackers and impose consequences on them?

Steve Barclay: That is an extremely important point, and the hon. Lady is right to highlight it to the House. First, that is why we are putting in more funding: £2.6 billion over three years, as opposed to the previous £1.9 billion over five years. On her particular point about deterrence, that funding is outwith the funding provided to the National Cyber Force, which is going into Preston and the north-west as part of our levelling-up agenda. That will have a key role in the deterrence aspects of the risk that she quite rightly identifies.

Ministers' Personal and Lifestyle Costs: Vulnerability to Outside Influence

9. **Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): If he will take steps to reassure the public that Cabinet Ministers' personal and lifestyle costs are not being funded by donors and therefore vulnerable to outside influence. [904983]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): All Ministers are subject to the ministerial code, which requires Ministers to ensure that no conflict arises, or could arise, between their public duties and their private interests, financial or otherwise.

Catherine West: It was so good to hear the Paymaster General praising civil servants, so could he please explain why the Foreign Secretary overruled civil servants' advice and went to a £3,000 lunch in a private members' club owned by a Tory donor—and he calls that abiding by the code? Will the Paymaster General immediately include that in the investigation being undertaken into the other boozy parties in No. 10 Downing Street?

Michael Ellis: It is absolutely ridiculous to characterise the matter in the way that the hon. Lady does. The reality of the matter is that the Labour party engages in trade union entertainment on every possible occasion. There is no conflict of interest in the matter she describes. Indeed, all the matters that are brought to the attention of the relevant authorities are properly dealt with.

Mr Speaker: That is not a very good answer, to be quite honest. I am not impressed with that.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It would seem to be quite a hard life being a Prime Minister at the moment. In WhatsApp messages to Lord Brownlow that surfaced last week, the Prime Minister described his No. 11 flat as a “bit of a tip” that is desperately in need of a lick of paint, some gold wallpaper and the offices of a leading fashion designer. In return for expediting this, the Prime Minister assured Lord Brownlow that he would take a look at his idea for a great exhibition festival. So we have a new term in British politics: wallpaper for access. Can the Minister give a serious explanation as to why this exchange with Lord Brownlow was not passed on to the independent adviser on ministerial interests but was passed on to the Electoral Commission for its investigation? Out of interest, does he have the Prime Minister’s new number?

Michael Ellis: As set out in the letter, Lord Geidt has not changed his assessment that no conflict of interest arose from the support provided by Lord Brownlow. The Prime Minister correctly declared an interest, as required under the ministerial code, and Lord Geidt now considers the matter closed.

Veterans: Employment Opportunities

11. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): What steps the Office for Veterans’ Affairs is taking to help improve employment opportunities for veterans. [904985]

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): We are putting the employability of veterans at the heart of our veterans strategy. We are rolling out a national insurance holiday for employers of veterans and guaranteeing job interviews for veterans applying to join the civil service. We know that veterans make fantastic employees and that military service does indeed give skills for life.

Peter Gibson: I thank the Minister for that answer. Could he outline for the House every step that is being taken to ensure that all veterans get access to and information about every opportunity and every job vacancy?

Leo Docherty: We are determined to ensure a gold standard when it comes to communicating the availability of support and opportunity for veterans. That is why we have invested £500,000 in this financial year alone to help deliver the Veterans’ Gateway service, which is an online portal for all veterans’ welfare needs. The Office for Veterans’ Affairs continues to promote all services and opportunities available to veterans.

Press Conference Rehearsal: Consequences for Staff

13. **Andrew Gwynne** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): What consequences staff have faced who were involved in a video reported in the media in December 2021, which showed members of the Prime Minister’s office rehearsing for a press conference. [904988]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Following the long-standing practice of successive Administrations, Her Majesty’s Government do not comment on individual disciplinary matters. The terms of reference for the Cabinet Office’s investigation have been published and the Government have committed to publishing the findings of that investigation.

Andrew Gwynne: But now we know that there were parties at Downing Street in lockdown and the Prime Minister was present. It is serious. He knowingly breached the rules that he himself set for the country. He broke the law, and over recent weeks he has told the House things that turned out not to be true, breaking the ministerial code. Allegra Stratton paid the price for joking about parties at Downing Street—parties that the Prime Minister attended. Why is it always the little people who get the chop to save this unsaveable Prime Minister?

Michael Ellis: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this matter is under the purview of a senior civil servant—the second permanent secretary at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who is an expert having been director general of propriety and ethics. She is carefully looking into the matter. She is a highly respected civil servant with probity, independence and integrity, and she will report in due course, swiftly. So the hon. Gentleman will no doubt wish to wait before he jumps to any unwarranted and unevidenced conclusions.

Departure from the EU: Regulatory Reforms

17. **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to make regulatory reforms following the UK’s departure from the EU. [904994]

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): The Government are driving a wide range of regulatory reforms, from shaping the approach for new technology such as data, artificial intelligence and autonomous vehicles, to reforming existing regulations to better suit the UK, including on financial services. In addition, a range of smaller reforms will make a material difference to specific industries, and we are digitising regulation and reviewing all EU retained law.

Jonathan Gullis: Despite years of Labour trying to block Brexit and keep us tied to mirroring EU rules and regulations, it is this Prime Minister who got Brexit done, and we are therefore able to reform procurement rules, blocking companies with a poor track record of delivery from winning public contracts. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if Labour had its way, we would be in a scenario whereby companies failing to deliver for the taxpayer with their money could still win public contracts?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He highlights an extremely important Brexit opportunity around our £300 billion procurement spend. As we heard earlier, we now have the ability to use our public procurement in new and innovative ways, particularly to drive social value within communities. That will make a big difference as part of our wider levelling-up agenda.

Covid-19: Public Inquiry

18. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Prime Minister on formally starting the public inquiry into the covid-19 pandemic. [904995]

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): On 15 December, the Prime Minister announced the appointment of the right hon. Baroness Hallett—Heather Hallett—as chair of the public inquiry into covid-19. The inquiry is set to begin its work in the spring of 2022.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank the Minister for that answer, but it would appear that discussions on this have not been a priority. The terms of reference for the inquiry have not even been set yet. Bearing in mind the Prime Minister's distant relationship with the truth, will the Minister outline exactly how the public, and Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, can have any faith in this inquiry at all?

Michael Ellis: We have appointed a very senior figure from the judiciary—a recently retired lady justice of appeal from the Court of Appeal. The Prime Minister has confirmed that the inquiry's detailed terms of reference will be set out in due course, and the bereaved families and other groups will be consulted before they are finalised. The process will be done carefully and properly and with consultation and consideration for all.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Might the Paymaster General consider the approach that was adopted when the infected blood inquiry was set up, whereby those infected and affected have been at the heart of the consultation around the terms of reference? Sir Brian Langstaff made it his first priority to ensure that those people were at the very heart of the infected blood inquiry that he now so ably chairs.

Michael Ellis: May I take this opportunity to thank the right hon. Lady again for the support she has provided and the work she has done on the infected blood inquiry? It is no exaggeration to say that she has been instrumental in achieving what has been achieved so far—there is still a lot to do, of course. In answer to her question, of course it would be the wish of everyone concerned to involve the bereaved as much as possible. Baroness Hallett, a Cross-Bench peer, will have command and control of this matter, if I can put it that way, just as Sir Brian Langstaff does in the infected blood inquiry. I am sure that all concerned will have heard what the right hon. Lady has had to say.

Mr Speaker: We are going to topicals early, so there will be a great opportunity to get more people in. Let us start with David Simmonds.

Topical Questions

T1. [904997] **David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Steve Barclay): I would like to begin by paying tribute to the Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who was a hugely respected figure throughout the House. When I first arrived in Parliament, I worked very constructively with him on the important issue of gangmasters, on which he had long been a champion, particularly in respect of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority. He will be greatly missed on both sides of the House. We send our condolences to colleagues opposite and, in particular, to Harriet, for their great loss.

May I also take this opportunity to place on the record my thanks to Sir Dave Lewis for all his work with the supply chain unit in helping to ensure greater resilience of supplies in the run-up to Christmas and that some of the wilder concerns that were highlighted about shortages at Christmas did not materialise? That is a great tribute to his work and that of the supply chain unit.

Today, the Cabinet Office is launching a Government campaign on an issue that I know unites all of us in this House: tackling the abhorrent crime of child sexual abuse. The Stop Abuse Together campaign empowers parents and carers to help keep children safe from harm by recognising potential signs of abuse, and by building trust by speaking to children regularly and finding further support where they have concerns.

As the lead Minister for cyber-security, I find it shocking and tragic, as I am sure all Members do, that this is the worst year on record for child sexual abuse online. The Internet Watch Foundation reports a threefold increase in imagery showing seven to 10-year-olds who have been targeted and groomed by predators during the pandemic. The charity investigated more than 360,000 reports of suspected criminal material in 2021, which is more than it dealt with in the previous 15 years. An estimated one in 10 children in England and Wales will experience sexual abuse before they are 16 and many will not tell anyone at the time. We all want to play our full part in keeping young people safe, online and in person, and this important campaign launched today can help bring them the protection they need.

David Simmonds: I very much welcome what has just been said.

Colleagues at the London Borough of Hillingdon have told me of the benefits to the procurement process that they see from the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, so what measures does my right hon. Friend have in mind to promote the benefits that that Act can bring to public sector procurement, and especially in how it might support the levelling-up agenda?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend knows from his own time in local government how important that Act is in requiring that people who commission public services think about how they can secure wider social, economic and environmental benefit. That is why we are going to extend the terms of that provision. As the Paymaster General set out a moment ago, the new procurement legislation will further empower local authorities, and others procuring on behalf of the taxpayer, to drive better social value, for example by targeting contracts to businesses that employ a larger proportion of those with disability. I think these measures will be supported across the House, and they build on much good work that has already been done in local authorities across the country.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Earlier, in his response to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the Paymaster General talked about poor performance. The Government's VIP lane for personal protective equipment procurement was not just dodgy, but actually illegal. That was not my opinion, but the judgment of the High Court yesterday. Once again, this Government have been shown that they cannot seem to stay on the right side of the law. Listening

to the Paymaster General, anybody would think that they had won their case in the Court yesterday. Time and again, Cabinet Office Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and told us that detailed diligence and full financial checks were done. Yesterday, the Court found that the Cabinet Office simply did not have the resources necessary to undertake due diligence. Officials simply searched online to confirm that one company existed, and another received a red warning but it was not passed on. Can he tell us how much, from those two contracts alone, was spent on equipment that was not even used by the NHS?

Steve Barclay: With respect, what the right hon. Lady omitted was that the court acknowledged that it is highly unlikely that the outcome would have been “substantially different” if a different assessment process had been followed. What the House would quite rightly challenge the Government on is, first, whether anything different would have occurred had there been a different approach; and secondly, the fundamental point of whether, at a time of national crisis, the Government were straining every sinew to ensure that the clinicians at the sharp end of our NHS had the PPE that they needed, and the answer is that they did do that.

That is why we paid higher procurement costs when I was in my role as Chief Secretary to the Treasury. It is why colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care strained every sinew possible to get that procurement. What the Court said was that it was highly unlikely that the outcome would have been “substantially different”. That is the key finding of the case yesterday, but, of course, we will look closely at that case—it was only yesterday—to see what lessons can be learned.

Angela Rayner: There was no answer to the question about the billions of pounds that were wasted on the dodgy contracts through that VIP fast lane. I encourage people to read that judgment, because the Government at the moment seem to think that it was all good and rosy.

When the Paymaster General was sent to cover for the Prime Minister this week, he told the House that “a fair and impartial investigation takes place before there is a judge, jury and executioner.”—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 430.]

The terms of reference for that investigation are clear. They say:

“Any matters relating to the conduct of Ministers should follow the process set out in the Ministerial Code.”

That process is also clear. The rules say:

“The Prime Minister is the ultimate judge of the...appropriate consequences of a breach”.

So, will the Prime Minister act as the judge and jury even though he is also the man in the dock, or will his Conservative colleagues find their integrity and finally act as executioners to his premiership?

Steve Barclay: The right hon. Lady is conflating two different issues. On the first issue, the reality is that more than 16.5 billion PPE items were delivered, and that was the key challenge, at a time of national crisis, that the Government were set to ensure that those on the frontline were protected, as they needed to be. The Court’s judgment yesterday was very clear. As I said a moment ago, it is highly unlikely that the outcome would have been “substantially different” had a different process been followed.

On the right hon. Lady’s second item, the Prime Minister addressed those points in the House yesterday at Prime Minister’s questions, when he apologised. He recognised the extraordinary sacrifices that have been made by the British public over the past 18 months, and it is right that Sue Gray, a highly respected senior civil servant, as the Paymaster General said, is allowed to complete her inquiry so that the full facts can be established.

T2. [904999] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): As part of the celebrations for Her Majesty’s 2022 platinum jubilee, 39 places are in competition for city status, including the town I represent, Dudley. Does my right hon. Friend agree that city status can deliver more jobs and business opportunities, and play a vital part in the wider regeneration of towns such as Dudley?

Steve Barclay: I do agree with my hon. Friend. These civic honours are a rare acknowledgment, awarded by Her Majesty herself, to celebrate a place’s individual heritage, its sense of community and the fact that residents have worked so hard to create a special environment. That is being recognised. The platinum jubilee will be a historic moment in time that brings people together and helps us to renew our nation as we emerge. I am delighted that Dudley, among a number of places, has put itself forward for Her Majesty’s consideration.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Repeatedly throughout the pandemic, the devolved Administrations have asked their people to do the right but often difficult thing, which, to their enormous credit, they have. Does the Minister think that the Prime Minister’s remarkable admission that he attended an illegal Downing Street party during a period of strict national lockdown will strengthen or undermine the relationship between the Government in London and those in Cardiff, Belfast and Edinburgh?

Steve Barclay: The fact that yesterday I, together with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, was on a call with the First Minister of Scotland, the First Minister of Wales and others underscores the commitment on all sides across the Union to work together on the common challenges we have faced throughout the pandemic. At both official and ministerial level, people have been willing to set party differences aside to respond to a common challenge. Building on the conversation yesterday, that response shows a willingness to work together, and I think that is what the public in Scotland and across the United Kingdom want their elected representatives to do. Certainly in my role I am extremely keen to continue that positive engagement with the First Minister and others in the interests of our electorate.

Brendan O’Hara: I assume, therefore, that the answer is, “No, it will not strengthen that relationship.” Still on the illegal party in Downing Street during a strict national lockdown, when did the Minister first become aware that the party had taken place? Now that the Met is finally taking an interest in this matter, what advice has he sought from the Attorney General, ahead of speaking to the police?

Steve Barclay: To the direct question the hon. Gentleman raises, I first became aware when it was covered in the media—I am sure at a similar time to him. We cannot anticipate the conclusions of the current inquiry, as the Prime Minister said to the House yesterday, and we should allow that inquiry to conclude.

T3. [905000] **David Johnston** (Wantage) (Con): Last week, I met my constituent Mark Isaacs from the UK Veterans Hearing Foundation, who explained that services for veterans with hearing loss got considerable funding from the LIBOR fines, but that since that money has not been available many veterans are struggling to get the support they need. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how veterans can get the services they need for often considerable hearing loss?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I am very pleased that my hon. Friend has raised the matter and that he has met the UK Veterans Hearing Foundation. The issue is very important and I will be very pleased to meet him to discuss it further. I also put on record my gratitude for all the energetic work he does in his constituency to support veterans, including local veteran Councillor Bill Service of Didcot Town Council.

T4. [905002] **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The civil service fast stream graduate programme to recruit more black civil servants has been an abject failure. Out of over 14,000 black applicants, only 98 were successful. That is one in 143, compared to one in 44 for white applicants. That is clearly not levelling up. Does the Minister agree that that is because of deeply entrenched institutional racism? Will he explain what assessment has been undertaken on levels of diversity and what actions will be taken to deal with such significant under-representation?

Steve Barclay: With respect to the hon. Lady, I do not accept the characterisation she places on the civil service.

Kim Johnson: They are facts and figures.

Steve Barclay: I was actually going to come on to what I hope is a constructive point, because the underlying concern the hon. Lady raises is fair. I am very happy to pick up on the issue with the disability and equalities unit that sits within the Cabinet Office. It is important that we have the right processes in place, particularly with fast streamers, because if we are to have better representation at senior civil service level, including at perm sec level, then we need to get the ladder in place for other ranks in order to have the trajectory through. So I do not accept her characterisation, but she raises an important point and it is one that I will pick up with the disability and equalities unit. I will write to her on the point she raises.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): In considering ministerial responsibility for the hydrogen sector, will the Minister bear in mind that 95% of hydrogen is so-called blue hydrogen derived from natural gas and that, if we really are to have a hydrogen revolution that puts Britain on the map, we need more green hydrogen derived from renewable or nuclear power?

The Minister without Portfolio (Nigel Adams): May I first congratulate my right hon. Friend and Lady Goodwill on the fantastic news from Her Majesty's new year honours list? The good people of Scarborough and Whitby will be rightly proud of their Member of Parliament. He is right to ask that question. The strategy that we are implementing supports multiple production technologies including both electrolytic green and carbon capture-enabled blue hydrogen production. We are not limiting ambition for any one technology by arbitrarily splitting our 5 GW ambition between green and blue hydrogen. Following the consultation, we will develop an approach to different production routes, including the less developed ones to which he refers, by early this year.

T5. [905003] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Given the damage that the self-styled Minister for the Union has done to public trust in recent days and the decision of some Cabinet colleagues to diminish the role of the Scottish Conservative leader, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), will the Minister prove that the Government can at least try to do one thing right and commit to supporting my private Member's Bill, which would at least ensure that the boards of public bodies include appropriate representation from the devolved nations?

Steve Barclay: As a former member of the Whips Office, I know that it is always a triumph how different issues can be used in support of a private Member's Bill. I am sure that my colleague the Chief Whip will look at the Bill's terms in detail.

As for the Union, the Prime Minister is the Minister for the Union, and its importance was reinforced by the recent machinery of government change and the leading position taken by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We want to level up across the entire Union of the United Kingdom. I referenced the call that I had yesterday with other Ministers and colleagues in the devolved Administrations as part of the ongoing covid response on which we are working closely together. The Union is fundamental to the Government—it certainly informs much of my work as a Minister—and the Prime Minister and ministerial team are hugely committed to it.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Nationality and Borders Bill is a crucial step forward to preventing illegal immigration and abuse of our asylum system, but the Home Office clearly cannot solve the problem on its own. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on cross-departmental efforts to stop small boats crossing the channel?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point that is a key issue for the illegal migration taskforce, which I chair. I will meet the Home Secretary later today, and I met the Foreign Secretary yesterday. He is right that our response is a whole of Government endeavour and I am sure that the Home Secretary will update the House further on our progress.

T6. [905004] **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Does the Paymaster General, as a former Law Officer, agree that there is a fatal flaw in our system when the person who ultimately makes judgment on the

ministerial code is a Prime Minister who is at the centre of allegations of breaking the law and misleading the House? Does it not go against all the rules of natural justice to be judge and jury in your own case?

The Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): Well, natural justice also requires something on which to impose justice and as yet we do not have any result from the inquiry, so, if I may say so, the right hon. Member is putting the cart before the horse. I would say that the Prime Minister is a man of integrity, as I have said before, and the ministerial code has always been under the purview of the Prime Minister since it was created.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I want to thank my right hon. Friend and the noble Lord Agnew who, with the Cabinet Office and the Home Office, have managed to bring more than 500 brand-new jobs to the city of Stoke-on-Trent as well as further investment in developing a site. Will he update the House on progress for the Stoke-on-Trent relocation and on the wider move that is taking civil servants out across our United Kingdom?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to mention the importance of the Places for Growth agenda not just to Stoke, but across the entire United Kingdom. It is fundamental to greater diversity in our civil service—diversity of place, as well as gender and race—and I am very happy to have further discussions with him about the role of Places for Growth in Stoke. As he knows, it fits within a range of Government programmes that are committed to levelling up Stoke, including those that he and other Stoke MPs highlighted to the House at Prime Minister's questions yesterday.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The Government's VIP lane for personal protective equipment contracts has been ruled by a judge to be unlawful. The judge found that the

"operation of the High Priority Lane was in breach of the obligation of equal treatment...the illegality is marked by this judgment."

The House needs to know what steps Ministers will take to ensure that there are no corrupt processes, particularly involving contracts to Conservative party cronies. In particular, I would like to hear confirmation from Ministers today in relation to some of the serious questions about PPE Medpro. Will the Minister agree to release details of the financial checks done on that company, including its connections to a Conservative party peer?

Steve Barclay: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I think that question perhaps predated the various discussions we have had, including with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), in the course of these departmental questions. As I said, we have delivered more than 16.5 billion PPE items. The court found that it is highly unlikely that the outcome would have been substantially different. We have had questions in the House on, for example, the contracts with PestFix and Ayanda, and the court found that we did not rely on a referral to the high-priority lane when awarding those contracts. It is right that the House considers properly the judgment yesterday, but that judgment shows that the outcome would not have been substantially different.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We will face local elections later this year. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what action will be taken to make sure that personation does not take place and that postal and proxy voting is in accordance with the law?

Steve Barclay: My hon. Friend raises an extremely important point. He will be well aware, following the recent machinery of government change, that that subject no longer falls within the purview of the Cabinet Office, so I do not want to incur the displeasure of Mr Speaker by straying into the territory of ministerial colleagues. However, I will ensure that the relevant colleague is alerted to the very good point that my hon. Friend highlights.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I remind the Minister for Defence People and Veterans of my request to him about the charity Beyond the Battlefield, which does amazing work for veterans who suffer from poor mental health and particularly those who often go under the radar and are not accounted for in the stats process. In Northern Ireland, its work is phenomenal. Will the Minister consider allocating funding to assist with its privately funded veterans centre in Portavogie in my constituency, which is due to open next week? The Minister would be very welcome to come along with me to visit it.

Leo Docherty: I would be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Does the Cabinet Office agree that the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), is a "lightweight"?

Steve Barclay: I think he is a hugely talented colleague. I work extremely closely with him and I look forward to doing so. One of the points that has come out through departmental questions is the commitment from many across the House, although not those on the Scottish National party Benches, to the importance of the Union. That is an absolutely central commitment of the Government and the Prime Minister and the entire Cabinet are committed to defending it.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Can I give a bit of friendly advice to the Paymaster General, who has been valiantly defending the indefensible? When the ship is about to sail, you jump on it because it is leaving without you. The ministerial code matters, standards in public life matter and trust in politics matters. The case against the Prime Minister is clear. Why is the Paymaster General destroying his own integrity to save a man who has none?

Michael Ellis: It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to be concerned about my position and I am very grateful to him. My position is clear: the Prime Minister answers to the people of this country and to this House. He came to the House yesterday, at Prime Minister's questions, and he apologised. He has said—and I agree—that we should wait until the result of the investigation that is in progress. That would be the case with any individual facing any allegation anywhere in this country. One waits until due process is complete. The hon.

Gentleman ought to accept that that would be the case, whether that view comes from his party, my party or anywhere else.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Despite the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's words at the Dispatch Box, the reality is that his Cabinet colleagues yesterday were calling the Scottish Conservative leader a "lightweight" and irrelevant because he was up in Elgin. Is it not the case that there has never been a Union of equals? It is always "Scotland, know your place," and that was demonstrated yesterday.

Steve Barclay: Again, that is a question that pre-empted the discussion that we have had in the House today. I flagged to the hon. Gentleman's colleague a moment

ago the very constructive discussions that I, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and indeed the Paymaster General had with the First Minister of Scotland yesterday. We touched on the role—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman wants to heckle through the answer, that is entirely up to him; I was just running through the various things that we do as part of our commitment to Places for Growth. The Cabinet Office has a commitment to our office in Glasgow: we had a hugely successful COP26 event that showcased the great talents of Glasgow, of Scotland and of the United Kingdom. That is part of our wider commitment to the Union, which is four-square at the heart of our agenda as a Government.

Underpayment of Benefits: Compensation

10.30 am

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the historic underpayment of benefits to 118,000 benefit claimants and the Government's plans for compensation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): I would like to start by extending an apology to Ms U for the experiences that have been highlighted in the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman's report. The Department will, of course, formally apologise and make additional payments now that that the PHSO report has been published.

I should remind the House that the employment support allowance was introduced in 2008, and from March 2011 the Department began reassessing people in incapacity benefits for eligibility for ESA, which saw some claimants underpaid. The Department's priority was that all people get the financial support to which they are entitled. It undertook a special exercise to review all cases that were potentially affected and paid arrears where due. We realised how important it was to get this matter fixed and ensure that people get the benefits that they are owed as quickly as possible. We therefore set up a dedicated team, with up to 1,200 staff at the peak of the workload. This has enabled us to complete this important work at pace.

I remind the House that the exercise to correct past ESA payments and pay arrears, following conversion from the previous incapacity benefits, was completed last year, and the then Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), made a statement to the House in July 2021. All cases have been considered and reviews completed, where the information has been provided, and arrears due were paid. As of 1 June 2021, we have reviewed approximately 600,000 cases and made 118,000 arrears payments to those who are eligible, totalling £613 million. The Department published an update on the exercise last Thursday on gov.uk, which sets out further detail on the progress that it has made on processing the cases.¹

Jonathan Ashworth: May I start by paying tribute to the Greenwich Welfare Rights Service and to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford)? It is a reminder of the value and the vital importance of welfare rights advisers, who do so much for our constituents despite grappling with swingeing cuts under the last 10 years of Conservative Government.

The report came about because a vulnerable person with significant long-term health needs, recovering from a heart bypass, was forced to endure years of hardship, trying to live on less than 50% of what she was entitled to, for a sustained period because of mistakes made by the Department for Work and Pensions when it migrated 100,000 claimants from incapacity benefit to contribution-based employment and support allowance between 2011 and 2014. The ombudsman's report today not only vindicates Greenwich Welfare Rights and hon. Members who pursued the case, but is damning for the Government.

The DWP's incompetence and failure to provide compensation has been judged as maladministration. Does the Minister accept that, as a consequence of the Department's incompetence, more than 100,000 people were unable to access passported benefits and extra support such as free prescriptions, despite being highly vulnerable and often having long-term health needs?

The ombudsman rules that refusal to offer recompense for that was inconsistent with the Department's own principles of remedy. With respect, and although I welcome the apology, it is no good Ministers' putting their fingers in their ears and pretending that there is not a bigger problem here. This stands as—in the words of this report—"an unremedied injustice", impacting on some of the most vulnerable people in society.

Will Ministers remedy that injustice via compensation for those affected, as the ombudsman and the Department's own principles recommend, or will the Minister deny compensation to 118,000 disabled people and people with long-term health conditions who lost out through no fault of their own? Frankly, when disabled people face a cost of living crisis with rising heating bills, when 600,000 disabled people are struggling with a universal credit cut, and when disabled people face their support being cut this April because inflation is heading to 6%, does this sorry saga of maladministration not prove once again that disabled people are worse off under this Government?

David Rutley: I agree absolutely with the right hon. Gentleman's comments about welfare advisers. They play a vital role, whether in Greenwich or in Macclesfield, where we have the Disability Information Bureau, and provide the extra support that people in very vulnerable circumstances often need. He highlighted the situation involving Ms U; as I said in my apology, it was very concerning, and those compensation payments will be paid, as I have reassured him.

On the point about broader compensation, of course we only received the report this morning—it has only just been published—so we will consider it and review its recommendations, as is entirely right. We would also say that if people believe they should have further compensation and want to contact us at DWP, they can contact us through the various helplines that have been set up. There is a team working specifically on this broad issue, and if they prefer, they can go through the complaints process, so those avenues are available to those individuals. In these situations we are typically not compelled to come forward with compensation payments, but we will consider the wider points and the views put forward by the report.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I know from the individual constituent cases I have dealt with how distressing it is when people's benefits are underpaid. One issue here is dealing with compensation payments, but the other is taking the steps to ensure something like this does not happen again. Can my hon. Friend assure me that those steps, if they have not been taken already, are in the process of being taken?

David Rutley: Lessons really have been learned from this situation, and if underpayments are made, that can have a real impact on people's lives. Lessons will be learned from this. While it is not my departmental

1.[Official Report, 18 January 2022, Vol. 707, c. 4MC.]

[David Rutley]

responsibility, I will take this away and work closely with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work and the Secretary of State, who is not able to be here today, to see what further lessons we can learn as a result of this report. As I have said, we must formally reply to the report as well.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Under this Tory Government, we have had the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign scandal, the universal credit cuts, pensioners now losing £500 a year and a cost of living crisis that they are doing nothing about. They really do not care. It is outrageous that it has taken the ombudsman to determine that compensation is due to the 118,000 claimants underpaid for up to seven years. Of course people should be paid compensation for having been forced to live in poverty, so what are the timescales for providing justice to those claimants?

In August 2021, there were still 76,000 cases open for review. What is that number now? What are the Government doing to assess the extra top-ups that were due, such as enhanced disability, severe disability, carer and pension premiums, that have not yet been considered for all the 118,000 underpaid claimants? Scope estimates that at present 42% of families on disability benefits live in poverty. What are the Government's plans to rectify that? Pension credits are consistently underclaimed; when will they make that an automatic entitlement, and when will there ever be a level playing field between the DWP's responsibilities and the way it treats claimants?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman has made a number of points. Arrears have already been paid to the 118,000, but the team are still in place, so when people are deceased and the surviving parties feel, on the basis of the report, that they could be eligible to receive such arrears, they can do so. I have already explained how those who feel they should receive further compensation can find out more about the process of investigating that. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to do more to increase people's awareness of the pension credits that are available. He also mentioned people with vulnerabilities. We want to help those people, which is why we established the household support fund and made additional funds available in Scotland as well.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): During the period of the inquiry the benefits system was incredibly complicated, involving many mutually exclusive benefits. I well remember talking on the helplines to civil servants who did not know which elements were mutually exclusive and which were not. Will my hon. Friend bear in mind the need to ensure that the system is straightforward, that people can understand it, and that people are paid the compensation and the benefits they are due? We are talking about the most vulnerable members of society.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend has made some good points. I know that he has a proven track record in this area, given his campaigning work both locally and nationally. The benefits system is indeed complicated. Universal credit has helped to simplify it by putting benefits into a single bundle, but as the new Minister on the welfare delivery block, I am aware that the system is

still complex even under the universal credit banner. I shall be working hard to ensure that we can communicate clearly with some of those most vulnerable people in explaining what benefits are available; and, as I have said, we will review the report and see what further lessons can be learnt.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just say to Members who were not present at the outset that they should not expect to be called, and ask them please not to try to take advantage? I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, Stephen Timms.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I welcome this important report, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

What is the position relating to the payment of interest in cases such as this? The ombudsman found that these failings had had a severe effect on Ms U's existing mental and physical health problems, and no doubt the same is true for quite a number of the other 118,000 people affected. Will the Department work out, proactively, who should be receiving compensation? One of the ombudsman's recommendations is that the Department should report to the Select Committee on its progress in considering his report and the decisions that it makes on how to remedy its own failings. Will the Department accept the recommendation and report to the Committee, and if so, when can we expect that to happen?

David Rutley: Obviously the primary responsibility is to respond to the report, and we will do that, but I—and, no doubt, the Secretary of State—will note the right hon. Member's point, and will make appropriate responses to his Committee. I have mentioned the 118,000 people who have received the arrears, and, as I said earlier to the Opposition spokesman, the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth)—I am sorry, I should have said the shadow Secretary of State: I do not want to understate his importance—there are mechanisms for those who feel they have grounds for further compensation to get in touch with the Department and explore that further.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): The benefits system is crucially important to my constituents. The Resolution Foundation has praised it, and has praised universal credit for its resilience during the pandemic. Will the Minister commit himself to maintaining that resilience for the benefit of everyone in the country?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend has made a good point. There are people who criticise universal credit, but, as I said earlier, it is a simplifying mechanism. It proved to be very resilient in response to the pandemic, and it helped millions of people at a crucial time. We have learnt lessons in that regard, but, as we have said before and as I have reiterated today, there are wider lessons that we also need to learn, and we will do so.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I wish to pay tribute to Greenwich Borough Council's welfare rights unit for identifying this error and for the tenacity with which it pursued it on behalf of my constituent. This will affect the 118,000 other people who have also been wronged.

My constituent suffers from paranoid schizophrenia, arthritis, hypertension and Graves' disease. This decision left her to survive on far less than she was entitled to between 23 May 2012 and 11 August 2017, amounting to £80 a week. The DWP, having made this error, compounded the problem by refusing to allow her to complain to the independent case examiner and by failing to tell her about her right to go to the ombudsman.

The ombudsman has now recommended that, within one month of the final report, the DWP should write to my constituent to apologise for the impact of maladministration on her life, make a payment of £7,500 to compensate her for the impact and apply the appropriate rate of interest to the benefit arrears payment of £19,832.55. Will the Minister give me an undertaking that the DWP will comply with the ombudsman's recommendations on behalf of my constituent?

David Rutley: As I said right at the beginning, the hon. Gentleman has represented his constituent's case well, as I would expect. We apologise unreservedly for the situation in which his constituent, Ms U, found herself. We will pay the compensation and the interest, as set out in the report. That will happen, and I very much hope we can get the apology over to her well before the month set out by the ombudsman. I will gladly discuss this further with the hon. Gentleman after this urgent question.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman said in its judgment:

"It is human to make mistakes but not acting to right wrongs is a matter of policy choice."

In this case the choice has been made by the very organisation that is responsible for supporting those most in need. Will the Minister please outline how many people in my Vauxhall constituency were impacted by underpayments? This decision has had a devastating impact by causing financial hardship for some of the most vulnerable people. They need that compensation now, so can he confirm that it will happen?

David Rutley: I understand the hon. Lady's point. I genuinely do not know how many were in the Vauxhall constituency, as we do not have that level of data. As I set out, there are mechanisms that her constituents who might have concerns can follow up. We will formally respond to the report, as I set out.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): Such incidents are obviously very regrettable, so having robust IT systems and finding ways to design out the human element that might have caused these mistakes is clearly very important. Can the Minister assure me that every possible effort will be made to ensure such incidents do not happen again?

David Rutley: We all make mistakes, and this was clearly a big one. All I can say is that we will learn the lessons. We made an active response when we found out the scale of the problem. We did the review, and then we put 1,200 staff into this exercise to rectify the situation. We did not take it lightly. We responded actively to the situation once we found the error.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I think all hon. Members here know this is not the first time the ombudsman has found maladministration in relation to the Department for Work and Pensions. Before Christmas I wrote to the Minister about two of my constituents who seem to have been given incorrect advice by benefit advisers in relation to being on remand and being released without charge. They are suffering financial hardship as a result. I listened to what he said about reading the report and taking its recommendations, but what is the DWP doing when these issues are highlighted to it by MPs and rights agencies to ensure we deal with them at an early stage?

David Rutley: I am relatively new in post—I have been here about three or four months—and all I can say is that I take a very active interest in the correspondence from MPs across the House. I hope people are aware of that. I will gladly separately follow up either in writing or in a meeting about the particular points that the hon. Member makes. We need to learn lessons. Our postbags are invaluable sources of information that sometimes are not really seen by officials or civil servants in the same light. It is an invaluable source of information to help me do my job. I will gladly follow up.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The problems highlighted by the ombudsman's report were not only predictable, but in some respects were predicted. Welfare rights workers are brilliant at what they do on behalf of our constituents, but they are often swamped by the demand, but would they be necessary at all if the Department was doing its work properly, efficiently, in a timely fashion and getting its determinations right for our constituents in the first place? Can the Minister outline how many people in my constituency of Gateshead were affected by this ministerial and departmental maladministration? If he cannot do so now, will he do so in writing in short order?

David Rutley: I would like to, but unfortunately we do not have that data at that individual level. *[Interruption.]* As I was about to go on to say, let me see what is available, and I can follow up. What I will say is that an error has been made here—I accept that—but we all know that many, many people who work in the Department for Work and Pensions do a fantastic job and are committed to serving people who are very vulnerable. Through this error, I would not want to cast a view across all DWP civil servants; they do a remarkable job. I accept that we made an error in this situation, and I will follow up on the points the hon. Member makes.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The Government and this Department have a track record of having to be dragged to the ombudsman or dragged to court to make the most basic human decisions. In Scotland, we put dignity and respect at the heart of everything we do with regards to social security. Does the Minister not agree that that would be a much better approach than having to be dragged to court or the ombudsman to make decisions that should have been made in the first place?

David Rutley: I understand the point the hon. Member makes. There are obviously competing challenges here. We are here today worrying about the concerns of some very vulnerable people, but we also need to look at the

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taxpayers' demands, too, and there are challenges, as the Scottish Government will discover as they start to take on more benefits. We work closely with the Scottish Government in their desire to take on more responsibility for welfare provision, and all I would say is that things are not always straightforward; there are very challenging circumstances, as Members on the Opposition Benches who have been in these offices will know. I accept the challenge, but we are working together with the Scottish Government to give support here. We will learn the lessons from this case and move forward.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I just say that it is very disappointing that this had to be an urgent question today, rather than a statement from the Government? It is also very disappointing that the Minister does not have the basic information that most constituency MPs will want to know, which is how many of our constituents have been affected by the maladministration of his Department. Can he reassure me that he will employ the same energy his Department uses to pursue those who receive overpayments to ensure that those people who should get compensation and payments for benefits that they did not receive will do so?

David Rutley: Yes. We are a very large operational Department that takes care of the needs of millions of people. It is disappointing to me when we make errors. I work as hard as I can day in, day out to ensure we do not make errors. Sometimes we do and they are genuine and then we need to rectify them speedily. Sometimes they are fraudulent situations, and when we have a figure of £8.4 billion for fraud, partly because of the increase in welfare payments around coronavirus, we have to go through procedures, because some people, sadly and disappointingly, are trying to rip off the taxpayer and take money away from people who deserve it. There is a difficult balance. I understand the point that the right hon. Lady makes and I can assure her I am working hard on those points.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is not the first time that there has been a finding of maladministration at the DWP; there was a similar judgment on the pensions of 1950s-born women. That does prompt questions about the DWP's competence.

On this specific issue, I was going to ask the Minister how many people in the Denton and Reddish constituency are affected, but he does not have that data, which I find astounding, quite frankly. That is basic data that Members of Parliament need. Why is the onus on individuals to come forward to the DWP? Why is he not being proactive in going out to the individuals who are affected? That seems like common sense to me.

David Rutley: We were very active in engaging in with the 118,000 people to make sure that their arrears were paid. As I said, if people still believe that arrears are owed or that they should receive further compensation, they can get in touch with the available helplines. We will, as I said, consider and review the report, which we received—as it was published—only today.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that the UK was found to be in breach of the human rights of people with disabilities by the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights. He will know that some 7 million people live in food insecurity and food poverty in Britain. In Wales, we earn only 70% of the UK average, so thousands of vulnerable people in Swansea have been hit by this. Will he ensure not just that those people are paid, but that payments are made to charities for disabilities, and that we look again at universal credit uplift and perhaps a universal basic income so that the poorest do not continually fall through the net during the cost-of-living crisis?

David Rutley: I think I have highlighted what we are going to do in response to this particular situation. The hon. Gentleman makes some other points about what we are doing on food security and for those vulnerable people. As he knows, we have created an additional support fund—in England, it is called the household support fund—of £500 million across the UK. A chunk of that money—around £21 million, from memory; it is over £20 million anyway—has gone to Wales, and the Welsh Government are using it to help vulnerable people. We recognise that there are people who need further support.

On universal basic income, people who have tried that out—ask the Finnish Government—said that it is not the way forward; it is untargeted and does not provide a work incentive. I do not think it is the way forward. Of course, we can always improve our welfare approaches, but that is not the approach that would help.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Minister has said that we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people, so does he not think it shameful that 42% of families relying on disability benefits are still living in poverty? Can he tell us what long-term strategy his Government have to address that and lift those families out of poverty? Will he make sure that the DWP will permanently continue virtual and telephone health assessments to help remove some of the barriers for disabled people who need the support? Often, that is the most stressful part of the entire process of claiming support.

David Rutley: More needs to be done to make those processes simpler. Again, this specific area is not part of my portfolio or brief, but we have made significant progress in getting disabled people into work, and we want to move that forward with the disability strategy and a clear action plan. I know that my colleague the Minister for Disabled People will actively drive that forward across the nations, and will work very closely on that with the Scottish Government as well.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his replies. There is no doubt that the inaccuracy of benefit payments will have a detrimental impact on individuals and their families throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Many of those 118,000 people are vulnerable and face the injustice of arrears. Those moneys belong to those people. Will the Minister confirm a timescale in which those affected are likely to receive their compensation?

How many of the people to whom unpaid money is due are from Northern Ireland? What amount of money is due for Northern Ireland? I would appreciate an answer today, but if the Minister does not have the figures, I am very happy to wait for a written response.

David Rutley: The exercise to pay the arrears to the 118,000 people is complete. As of 1 June 2021, we have reviewed 600,000 cases. The 118,000 arrears payments were made to those who were eligible, and a total of £613 million has been paid. I will follow up on the hon. Gentleman's other points.

Business of the House

10.59 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 next week is as follows:

MONDAY 17 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Elections Bill.

TUESDAY 18 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill [*Lords*] followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Charities Bill [*Lords*].

WEDNESDAY 19 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Building Safety Bill.

THURSDAY 20 JANUARY—Debate on a motion on the Uyghur tribunals, followed by general debate on lawfare and the UK court system. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 21 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 January will include:

MONDAY 24—Opposition day (9th allotted day—2nd part). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party, subject to be announced, followed by remaining stages of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Judicial Review and Courts Bill.

Mr Speaker, may I conclude this announcement by paying tribute to Jack Dromey because it is the first opportunity for me to do so and to pass my sympathy to the right hon. and learned Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman)? It is such a tragedy for her. It is a loss to the House, a loss to the Labour party and the Labour movement, but also a loss to politics more generally. We mourn with the Mother of the House and her family.

Thangam Debbonaire: First, I thank the Leader of the House for his tribute to our friend Jack Dromey. I find it hard to talk about, so I will wait until the tributes, but I join him in sending our love, support and sympathy to the Mother of the House. The loss of Jack will be felt so keenly by so many and it is a real tribute to him that so many people have said so and so obviously fulsomely.

I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I was listening intently to him. He will have noticed that I was gazing, waiting for the words to drop from his mouth. Given the publication of the Standards report into the conduct of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), I should not have to ask, but in the light of recent actions on a previous case, will he please confirm when the Standards motion will be laid, and whether the Government will mount the same level of defence as they did for the former constituency neighbour of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham, Owen Paterson?

Last week, the Leader of the House revealed his socialist tendencies in calling for the scrapping of the national insurance rise. Last night, in the media, he

[Thangam Debbonaire]

revealed his Scottish National tendencies. *[Interruption.]* Didn't he just? Indeed, I do not think that Scottish National party Members are as rude as he about his Scottish colleague. Is it now Government policy to attack their own party? Does the right hon. Gentleman think it is appropriate to dismiss the leader of the Scottish Conservatives as a "lightweight"? In the light of all that, could we have a statement on where the Government see the future of the Union?

First, the Prime Minister said no rules were broken. Then he said that he did not know about any parties, then that he needed to wait for the internal investigation, and now he has admitted that he was at one of them, but he did not know it was a party. The Prime Minister was the one setting the rules. Are we really expected to believe that he did not understand them? As my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said—and goodness me, I wish I had thought of it—what a

"shower of shenanigans"—*[Official Report, Wednesday 12 January 2022; Vol. 706, c. 573.]*

Can the Leader of the House direct us to the part of the coronavirus legislation where there is an exemption for the Prime Minister and those in No. 10 to break the rules and hold a boozy gathering just so that they can enjoy the nice weather? Does he really think that the Prime Minister cannot tell the difference between a party and a work meeting? And while I am at it, may I ask the Leader of the House whether he knows the difference? It is completely unsurprising that the public—the public—have concluded that the Prime Minister is lying to them and that he is laughing at them while he does. *[Interruption.]* It was the public—I did refer very carefully to the public and I did not make any accusations myself.

Throughout some of the most difficult months of this pandemic, all my constituents, and I am sure all the Leader of the House's constituents, were following the rules that the Prime Minister set. On that day—when hundreds of people died from covid, it was illegal to meet any more than one person and that was allowed in an outside setting only—a bring-your-own-booze party was held at No. 10. I know that the Leader of the House has previously dismissed this as "brouhaha" and that the Prime Minister only attended the party for 25 minutes—I think that is what he said last night—but to all those who were unable to say goodbye to dying loved ones, unable to comfort family and friends, 25 minutes would have meant the world. But they, unlike the Prime Minister, followed the rules because they believed they were the right thing to do. How does the Leader of the House defend any of this as acceptable behaviour?

As if that is not enough, the Tories have been busy wasting even more taxpayers' money this week. While our hard-working NHS staff were going without personal protective equipment, the Government were busy lining their mates' pockets with PPE contracts. They are still covering up key documents and critical messages. Minutes have gone missing. A judge has ruled that the Government's so-called VIP lane for handing out crony contracts was unlawful. So will the Leader of the House commit to a fully independent investigation to get to the bottom of how £3.5 billion of taxpayers' hard-earned money was handed out in crony contracts and ensure that the Government cannot do this again?

When they are not wasting taxpayers' money, the Government are voting against helping people with their bills. Working families feeling the pinch with rising prices deserve security, prosperity and respect, but this Government are not delivering that. I know the Leader of the House will say that there is a global gas price crisis, but I am sorry—it is 10 years of Conservative failed energy policy that has left us and our constituents uniquely exposed. The Conservatives' dither, delay and incompetence have created an energy price crisis felt by everyone.

On Tuesday, the Government could have fixed this by backing Labour's plan. Will the Leader of the House please explain why the Government refused to back the windfall tax that would have helped to support families and keep bills low, because if it was not clear then, it certainly is now—this is a Government who have lost their grip and working people are paying the price?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As regards the Standards report into my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), I had a discussion this morning with the Chairman of the Standards Committee, and the Government, as is normal, look forward to bringing forward the motion as soon as possible. The business statement for next week was prepared before we had received a copy of the inquiry, but that will be brought forward swiftly.

The hon. Lady went on to the Opposition day that was held earlier this week. The problem with that Opposition day was not the main subject that it tried to get to, but the process it was using, where the Opposition decided that they would take over the Government and suspend Standing Order No. 14. There is one very important thing that you have to do to control the Order Paper in this House, and that is to win a general election. The Labour party, in December 2019, failed to win a general election. It was won by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister with a majority of 80, and that is why, under Standing Order No. 14, the control of time in this House belongs to the Government. I would suggest to the hon. Lady that if she wishes to take control of the Order Paper, she wins an election—something that the socialists have found extraordinarily difficult in recent years and I expect they will continue to do so.

Then we come on to the issue of PPE, which has been raised before, and it is worth giving exactly the same answer: we needed PPE urgently. The normal procedure for procurement takes three to six months. We needed it immediately—there was not the ability to hang around. Interestingly, the judgment that came forth yesterday said that the contracts would have been awarded in the same way anyway and they were awarded not by Ministers, but by civil servants. Exactly what happened with the vaccine success was what was done with PPE. It was essential to ensure that the national health service had what it needed.

The hon. Lady challenged me about my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross). My hon. Friend has an office within the Conservative party and it seems to me that people who hold office ought to support the leader of the party. That is the honourable and proper thing to do. But the United Kingdom is something that we can celebrate and debate in this Chamber daily. It is the foundation—the cornerstone—of the success of the nation as a whole. We are very fortunate to have the

United Kingdom that we have and we are particularly fortunate to have the Scotland Secretary that we have, who is such a formidable figure in Scottish politics and offers the strongest, firmest and clearest leadership.

Let us come to the most important issue that the hon. Lady raised, which relates to events in Downing Street on 20 May 2020. First, I remind her that the Prime Minister came here yesterday and apologised. He said that with hindsight it was not what should have happened or what he would have wanted to happen. It is being investigated by Sue Gray, a civil servant of the highest integrity and of the greatest reputation. I think that everybody understands, on all sides of the House, that people were obeying the rules and that these rules were very hard for people to obey. I received a message last night from a friend of mine who was unable to go to the funeral of his two-year-old granddaughter. One cannot hear these stories without grieving for people who suffered. Decisions were taken at the beginning of the pandemic that affected people up and down the country and they were very hard. We must consider, as this goes to an inquiry and we look into what happened with covid, whether all those regulations were proportionate, or whether it was too hard on people. As we hear of these stories, we inevitably grieve for those who suffered, those who could not visit people they loved—their family—and could not attend funerals. But I think the key is that this is being looked into, Sue Gray will report, the Prime Minister has made his apology clear and, as he said yesterday, he understands—as do I—the “rage”, his own word, felt by people who they were making these terrible sacrifices. There is no doubt about that and the Prime Minister’s position was absolutely clear.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I was going to ask the Leader of the House about my private Member’s Bill tomorrow on abolishing the licence fee and the support I seemed to get from the Prime Minister for it. Unfortunately, however, this morning, my office was yet again vandalised. It is not fair on my staff in Wellingborough and it is not fair for other Members who have suffered similarly. So my question to the Leader of the House now is: may we have a debate next week on the security of Members in this House and the importance of that to our democratic process?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I am very concerned, as I know you will be, Mr Speaker, about the issue that he raised on the security of his office and the risk taken by his staff. I can reassure him that the review of MPs’ security with the Home Office and the Metropolitan police is going ahead well, that an updated letter went to you, Mr Speaker, and the Home Secretary at the end of December, and that you have both approved work to continue. It is so important for the sake of democracy that Members are safe in their offices and I am sure that the police will take this attack extremely seriously. It is difficult for me to promise a debate because we do not debate security matters publicly, for very obvious reasons in relation to security itself.

Mr Speaker: May I just reaffirm that all Members’ security and safety is taken very seriously? I have quickly made a note of what the Member has just said, but I would not expect a debate on Members’ security on the Floor of the House because, as the Leader of the House said, it is something that we do not discuss.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I suppose the only statement we want in the next few days is one confirming that the Prime Minister has written to Her Majesty the Queen to offer his resignation. The absurd and laughable defence that he did not know he was at a party has insulted and offended a nation, who now just want him gone. For the Leader of the House to stand there and say that somehow the rules were wrong just compounds this.

There are three options available to the Prime Minister: first, he somehow manages to find some self-respect and dignity, and goes of his own volition; secondly, Conservative Members somehow find a collective backbone and compel him to go; or, thirdly, we all wait until an election, and a good proportion of them will go down with him. That is what they are left with.

Now, of course, the Scottish Tories know exactly how the rest of Scotland feels after the Leader of the House poured his scorn and contempt upon them last night. According to him, the democratically elected Scottish Tory leader is an insignificant figure—a “lightweight”, a nobody—presumably just like every single Tory MSP who agrees with their Scottish leader. The Scottish Tories are supposed to be the praetorian guard of their precious Union, and the Leader of the House has just undermined them and thrown them under the proverbial bus. If this is how the Government treat even the Scottish Tories, why should the Scottish people even entertain being any part of their useless Union?

Does the Leader of the House want to take this opportunity now to apologise to the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) for his remarks last night, or is he prepared to make them once again in this House just to confirm what we in Scotland all know, which is that this is a Government who could not care less about Scotland and Scottish democracy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The problem with the hon. Gentleman’s approach to business questions is that he is so angry every week that one never knows whether it is real or synthetic. He could have called for the Prime Minister to resign at every business questions at which we have exchanged pleasantries since I became Leader of the House, other than during his brief sabbatical away from the role, so I think his call for the Prime Minister to resign is not one of which any notice will be taken.

The Prime Minister won an election, and that is the basis on which our democracy in this country works. He won a majority of 80, and he has done so much to the benefit of this country in the last two years. If we look at the whole panoply of decisions made with regard to covid, the Prime Minister has consistently got them right. He got the vaccine right, he got ending the lockdown in the summer right, he got the refusal to impose new restrictions before Christmas right, and he got furlough and the £400 billion to support the economy right.

Again and again, the Prime Minister got the decisions right that mean this country is coming out of the pandemic in a better position than other countries across the world. It is something we should recognise, and that required good, solid, decisive leadership. That is not beginning to say that every decision made was perfect—that would not be within human nature—but the result of what has happened following the decisions

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that the Prime Minister has made has been to allow this country to do better than others as we come out of this pandemic.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Could we have a debate or a statement about developers that build on greenfield sites and do not tell the people who buy their houses that Japanese knotweed is present when they know it is present? They should do a survey, and they should alert people to it. I have constituents who now cannot sell their houses because developers such as Persimmon are not dealing with the problem seriously and getting rid of it so that they can sell their houses on. Could we have a debate on that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend has raised the point so very effectively. Japanese knotweed is the most common of four invasive knotweed plant species in the UK, and landowners have an obligation to stop knotweed on their land spreading from their property. Soil or plant material contaminated with non-native and invasive plants such as Japanese knotweed can cause ecological damage and may be classified as controlled waste. This is a matter to be raised with the Environment Agency, and I will do that on behalf of my hon. Friend. People do not have to remove knotweed from their land unless it is causing a nuisance, but they can be prosecuted for causing it to spread into the wild.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week, particularly the two debates on Thursday under the aegis of the Backbench Business Committee on the Uyghur tribunals and on lawfare and the UK court system.

Due to the very heavily subscribed application for the Holocaust Memorial Day debate on 27 January, we are at the moment considering converting a whole afternoon to that debate, which I hope does not cause any problems with clashes with other events. We have now received the application for the Welsh Affairs debate to coincide with the week of St David's Day on 1 March.

On Tuesday, I chaired a meeting with Network Rail and London North Eastern Railway about the proposed timetable changes on the east coast main line. At over 500 miles long, it is a line that LNER shares with nine other operating companies, and it is quite clear that the complexity of the timetabling problems is caused in the main by lack of line capacity north of York. Can we have a statement on what the Department for Transport is going to do as a matter of urgency to increase capacity on the east coast main line north of York?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for giving me advance notice of his debates and that the Holocaust Memorial Day debate may be a full day's debate. I will take that as lobbying me to try to deter statements on that day; Mr Speaker may well take it as an attempt to lobby him to deter urgent questions on that day. We have our separate responsibilities.

The integrated rail plan investment expenditure is going to be £96 billion: a great deal is being done to ensure that the rail system has the funding it needs. The

£26.2 billion Department for Transport budget for 2024-25 is a real-terms increase of 1.9%, but there is £35 billion-worth of rail investment over the spending review period. Enormous sums are going in, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of where they should specifically go; an Adjournment debate may be the most suitable option.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Next week, the last piece of roof metalwork is due to be installed as part of the restoration of the 26 individual cast iron roofs of the Palace of Westminster. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Mary Gallagher and the team involved in this historic project, which has been done on time and within budget, and in wishing the restoration and renewal programme every success in following the roof projects team's impressive example?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I thank Mary Gallagher for the work she has done. "On time and under budget" is not a phrase that one often hears in relation to projects in the public sector, let alone within the House of Commons, so this is absolutely terrific news. As we come to debate in due course the rumours that we hear of a potential 20-year decant, and enormous sums of money for restoration and renewal, we will have to think about how well the roofs programme was done. It is an indication of the historic nature of this building that the roof has a very unusual form, and it has been very carefully repaired—within budget, as my hon. Friend says. Keeping careful control of taxpayers' money should be our watchword.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to say that the unsuccessful attempt by the board of Liverpool Victoria to demutualise and sell up to the controversial American private equity giant Bain Capital just before Christmas was unsuccessful, but it revealed a series of legislative and regulatory weaknesses in the rules governing mutuals. Almost 90% of the owners of Liverpool Victoria rejected the board's dismal deal, but will the Leader of the House nevertheless find time for a debate about how to strengthen the mutual sector and its rules?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. Historically, mutuals have been a good way of providing financial services and pooling risk—and, indeed, pooling profits for investors. Sometimes mutuals have been demutualised with very significant profits for the mutual owners, which has been quite welcome to them, but of course it is always important that people should be treated fairly and that boards observe their fiduciary duty. The hon. Gentleman is sitting next to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee; I suggest that he has a quiet word to seek a debate.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): There are many unsung heroes in Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, but I want to commend one in particular: Isaac Rotherham, a pupil at St Mary's Church of England Primary School in Tunstall who turned nine on 27 December. Rather than asking for a list of presents for himself, he asked for a list of items needed by the homeless. Isaac handed the 200 to 300 items over to legendary Stoke City manager Lou Macari, who now runs the Macari Centre, which provides support and

shelter for homeless people. During the covid pandemic, the centre provided covid-secure accommodation for roughly 40 people in glamping-style pods. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Isaac a belated happy birthday and applauding him and Lou for all they have done for the local community across Stoke-on-Trent, Kidsgrove and Talke?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is an honour to join my hon. Friend in wishing Isaac a belated happy birthday. I am sure that the whole House will applaud Isaac and Lou for what they have achieved and for the incredible support that they have provided for the homeless. I am glad to say that the number of households that are homeless or threatened with homelessness is now below pre-pandemic levels. Good progress has been made on our manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping: our most recent rough sleeping snapshot shows that levels have fallen by 43% since 2017. The Government's ambition to end rough sleeping within this Parliament still stands; we are working on the sector to build on the recent progress. Isaac and Lou are an inspiration to us all, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing another success of Stoke to the attention of the House.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I have met many constituents who have post covid-19 syndrome, also known as long covid. Many of them are workers—teachers, healthcare professionals, police officers—who caught covid working as part of this country's frontline response to the covid-19 pandemic. With that in mind, will the Government provide time for a debate to allow MPs to bring the experiences of their constituents with long covid to this Chamber, giving the Government the opportunity to explain how they intend to deliver on their obligation to those workers and support them in the long term?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises a point of considerable importance that will be of concern to hon. Members across the House in representing their constituents. I can tell her that NHS England and NHS Improvement is spending £224 million to expand NHS long covid treatment and rehabilitation services and establish 90 long covid assessment services, including paediatric hubs for children and young people. I am sure that we still have a great deal to learn about the condition, but I can reassure her that NHS England is taking steps.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the familiar names on high streets up and down the country is Wilko. It is crucial to the vitality of St Peter's Avenue in Cleethorpes, but unfortunately the company has announced the store's possible closure, which is of obvious concern, particularly to the staff. The Government have done a great deal to support our high streets, but this is clearly another example of the difficulties that companies are facing. Could I urge the Leader of the House to consider a debate to further explore what can be done to ensure that companies such as Wilko retain their outlet in Cleethorpes?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As always, my hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency. I can tell him what the Government have been doing. The £4.8 billion levelling-up fund includes help to regenerate town centres and high streets. Considerable measures have been taken to spur

innovation and investment across the country and help business to build back better from the pandemic. We are increasing the British Business Bank's regional financing programme to £1.6 billion, providing capital to businesses across the country; extending the temporary £1 million annual investment allowance cap to March 2023, providing more up-front support to help businesses to invest and grow; and reducing the burden of business rates by more than £7 billion over five years. All those things should help high streets, but the support that my hon. Friend gives by encouraging people to use their high street and go to the shops will also be important in maintaining a competitive high street.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I have a British constituent who is still trapped in Afghanistan. She is an eight-year-old child—just eight—and is being kept from her mum and little sister because of successive Passport Office failures dating back to 2014. We have made frantic efforts to get her out, before and since the flights stopped. On one day, she was in a Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office minibus, so close to the airport, for 24 hours—an enormous risk—but was turned away because she had been given nothing to show and no support to get through the checkpoints and the gates. I have written to the Foreign Secretary and others many, many times, but there has been no constructive answer and no action. This little girl is in grave danger, and she believes her mum does not love her. We have to bring her home. Will the Leader of the House intervene with his friends in the Home Office and the FCDO to get an answer and some action as soon as possible from someone?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very sorry to hear about that eight-year-old girl. The hon. Lady puts her case very forcefully. I have said before at this Dispatch Box that whenever right hon. and hon. Members have individual constituency cases I will do whatever I can to take them up with the relevant Departments, to try to get answers. I cannot promise the answer, because that is not within my purview, but if she writes to me with all the details, I will certainly take it up with both the Home Office and the Foreign Office as necessary.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): As we know, the Welsh NHS is managed by the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff, and the biggest challenge facing my constituents is access to healthcare. Twelve hours in A&E is now normal, as are two weeks to get a repeat prescription and patients having to travel over the border to access minor injury units. I understand that that is not this Government's jurisdiction, but can my right hon. Friend suggest ways that I can hold the Welsh Labour Government to account for my constituents?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this concerning matter, and I also thank her for her personal contribution to the health service, not just before becoming a Member but throughout the pandemic; I understand she returned to frontline nursing in 2020 to support the fight against covid-19. The poor performance of the NHS in Wales is, as she rightly says, a devolved matter and the precise policy is a matter for Cardiff Bay rather than Westminster, but those problems in the end affect the whole United Kingdom, with people coming across into England for minor injuries because of failures in the Welsh health service.

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

I am glad to say that on 18 January the Welsh Grand Committee will meet in Parliament to debate strengthening the Union in Wales—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hurrah!”] I am glad it is so widely supported across the House; at last we have achieved bipartisan support. It will be a good opportunity to contribute to the debate, and I expect that many right hon. and hon. Members will be able to use their parliamentary standing to hold the socialist Welsh Government to account.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): When the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill left this House it was woefully under-scrutinised, since which time the Government have ladled amendments into it hand over fist in the other place. Those amendments include many draconian restrictions on our prized freedoms, especially the right to protest. Can the Leader of the House give me some assurance that, if the Government are successful in getting those amendments through the other place, when the Bill comes back to this House we will be given proper time—at least half a day or a day—to debate those amendments and not just the usual one hour?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. This House and the other place are both here to protect the freedoms of this nation and of the individuals within it, but also to protect their right to go about their lives in an orderly way. Therefore, there must be a balance between the right to protest and the right of people to go about their business. Amendments from the House of Lords go through a normal process. The precise timing for any consideration of Lords amendments is a matter for discussion; his representations have been made and I have heard them, but it will depend on the other business going through the House at the time.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today, trade talks kicked off in New Delhi between the United Kingdom and India. As my right hon. Friend will know, the EU has been trying to do a trade deal with India since 1997, without any success. The opportunities for the United Kingdom and India of a mutually agreed trade deal are clearly enormous, so could my right hon. Friend arrange for a statement to be made next week on the objectives the UK has in achieving this trade deal, so that Members across the House can contribute their ideas on how we can get the best deal possible for both the United Kingdom and our friends in India?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend raises an important point. India is one of our closest and most important allies, and I think will become closer and more important over the decades ahead. I can tell him that there will be questions to the Department for International Trade next Thursday, which would be an initial opportunity to raise those important matters. However, the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee is still in his place, and—without trying to lobby him, because I have no standing to do so—I think this would be a worthy subject for debate and many Members would be interested in how our friendly relationship with India can become even better.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I am sure that many Members present have experienced the never-ending struggle of trying to get a timely response from the Home Office. In Luton North, we have hundreds of cases that have exceeded the 20 working day response time. It is simply not good enough, especially for those waiting on immigration and asylum cases who want to get on with their lives—they want to get jobs, feel safe and contribute to our society. I would ask for a debate, but what I really want is some answers for constituents.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I take this issue extremely seriously. I think it is part of my role as Leader of the House to chase up Departments when answers are not forthcoming punctually. I have done that for quite a number of right hon. and hon. Members, and I am happy to continue to do so. Earlier this week, I wrote to all other members of the Cabinet reminding them of the importance of giving timely and good answers to written questions. I will happily take up the hon. Lady's individual case if she contacts my office.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): In 2006, Gunner Lee Thornton from Blackpool sadly lost his life during his second tour of Iraq. Lee loved his country and serving in the Army. Lee's mum Karen has been campaigning for a suitable memorial for him, but, despite contacting Blackpool Council on multiple occasions, she has yet to receive a response. A petition requesting that Blackpool Council honours Lee's service by, for example, looking to name a local road after him, has attracted a great deal of local support. Does my right hon. Friend agree that surely it is right that those who make the ultimate sacrifice serving the country receive a fitting tribute? Will he find time for a debate on how we can suitably recognise those who make the ultimate sacrifice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We should be so grateful to people like Gunner Lee Thornton who are willing to lay down their lives for the country. It is, as my hon. Friend says, the ultimate service, and it is right that they should be memorialised locally. That is a proper way of remembering them, and that is surely our duty. We always say that we will remember them, and it is right to do it locally where their families and friends will be able to see the permanent memorial. I encourage my hon. Friend to continue his campaign. I think that the specific issue would benefit from an Adjournment debate to discuss the individual facts. I think that there would be so much agreement about the proper memorialisation in a wider debate that it would be rather more a series of statements in support of my hon. Friend.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): It is telling, is it not, that the only Scottish Conservative willing to defend the Prime Minister is the Scottish Conservative on the Prime Minister's payroll? The Leader of the House's withering dispatch yesterday of the Scottish Conservative leader evidences the disdain with which Scotland is viewed by the Westminster elite and demonstrates that Scotland is a possession and not a partner of this Union. Can we have a debate about how we smoothly and transactionally move Scotland out of this Union and into a brighter independent future?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I fundamentally disagree with the hon. Gentleman. Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland are equal fundamental parts of the United Kingdom, without which there is no United Kingdom. Our great history, our great tradition and our success as a nation has been built on this Union. How did we, a small country, a small island off the coast of the European continent, become one of the great empires in the world? It was thanks often to the work of people from Scotland. Why was it that, when I used to live in Hong Kong, there was Aberdeen in Hong Kong? It was because of the contribution of the Scottish people to making the whole of the United Kingdom a great nation. That is celebrated on the Conservative side of the House and is something that we glory in as our great, shared, joined history. It is our history of ties of kinship, of ties of blood and of ties of involvement in each other's lives. In response to the hon. Gentleman's absolute question and fundamental point, people who hold office in the Conservative party are honour-bound to support the Prime Minister.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): There are currently no statutory requirements for a planning authority to consult immediate neighbours in another planning authority; nor are there any requirements to consult anybody at all in relation to the issuing of certificates of lawful use. The current framework therefore provides for greater opportunities for green-belt development by the back door, and that is happening right now between my constituency and neighbouring South Staffordshire. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on planning policy in relation to the requirements for public consultation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Certificates of lawful use are exactly what they say and if the use is lawful then people are allowed to do it. If, on the other hand, enforcement action is taken, or people get it wrong and they should have applied for planning permission, then they have to apply for retrospective planning permission and can be forced to take buildings down. Local planning authorities are meant to co-operate with each other, but do not necessarily have to consult on individual applications. They all, however, have an overriding obligation to co-operate, because development can have knock-on effects from one community to another. I reassure my hon. Friend that protecting the green belt is a firm manifesto commitment. We are looking to improve the planning system to make it work more effectively, but also to ensure that restrictions are carried out properly. We need to build more houses. We need to ensure that people have homes they can live in and to make the dream of home ownership available, but it must be done in a proper and considered way.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Can we find time for an urgent debate on pensions injustices, so that I and many other Members across the House can raise the case of members of the Pensions Action Group, including members of the financial assistance scheme and many former Allied Steel and Wire workers in my constituency? I pay tribute to our late friend Jack Dromey for all the support he gave, typically, to those seeking justice on pensions during his time as shadow Minister. Many are suffering because of the failure to link their pensions to inflation, which is

now going up massively. Some are now receiving 40% less than they were entitled to. With them, we met the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) in summer last year and provided detailed submissions afterwards, but received a reply only in November, with little comfort or support for those pensioners. The Leader of the House might think they are going to go away, but I assure him that they are not. It is important that we have a debate, so we can all put our cases to the Minister.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point that private pension schemes are much more effectively regulated than they once were to try to ensure protections for pensioners, but many of them are still dependent on the underlying business and the ability of the business to afford the pensions. The Pensions Regulator has a responsibility to do that. It also has a fund to support pension funds that become insolvent or businesses that become unable to afford their pension obligations. None the less, he is right to stand up for his constituents who are expecting pensions they do not get. For a debate, however, in the first instance I point him to the Backbench Business Committee.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Mayor of London is failing to maintain and upgrade tube stations in my constituency. South Kensington, the gateway to our world-class museums, unbelievably has no step-free access to the District and Circle line, and the Piccadilly line does not even stop at South Kensington at the moment. Ladbroke Grove in north Kensington, which is vital to access north Kensington, again has no step-free access. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Mayor of London needs to get his act together and provide suitable transport links for my constituents, and will he contemplate a debate on the matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am contemplating having a set question every week to which the answer is, "The Mayor of London is failing," because there is a continued theme of questions about what he is not managing to do. My hon. Friend raises a very important question about mismanagement. We should bear in mind that £4 billion of emergency funding has come from the taxpayer to Transport for London, and that when London transport was run by the Prime Minister when he was Mayor of London, in that halcyon age of 2008 to 2016, services were much better. Disabled access is of fundamental importance and this failure of the Mayor is further evidence of his mismanagement.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The judge in the High Court ruling that deemed unlawful the Government's red carpet-to-riches VIP lane for personal protective equipment suppliers, stated:

"There is evidence that opportunities were treated as high priority even where there were no objectively justifiable grounds for expediting the offer."

Some 32 billion items of PPE, valued at £14 billion, were bought through directly awarded and negotiated contracts. Rather than giving us history lessons in his reply, as he so often does during business questions, what action will the Leader of the House going to take to ensure that VIP lane procurement is investigated, and will he set time in Parliament for debates accordingly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I suggest the hon. Lady reads the judgment, because it was absolutely clear that the contracts would have been awarded to the same people, and that they were done by civil servants, not by Ministers. I reiterate what I said to the shadow Leader of the House—that it was a matter of emergency, of urgency, and of need. There is dither and delay with the socialists. They never want to get on with anything. They always put process ahead of achieving things. They would still have us in lockdown and not able to move about. They love regulation, because that is what they believe in. What Her Majesty's Government did was get the PPE that was needed and the vaccine that was needed. To do that, yes, of course, they had to short-circuit some elements of procurement, which normally takes three to six months.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con): The first part of the inquiry into the Manchester arena bombing has just been published. As the House will know, on 22 May 2017, Islamist suicide bomber Salman Abedi murdered 22 people and injured hundreds more at the Manchester arena. Despite the fact that Salman Abedi was known to security services as an Islamist extremist with multiple terrorist connections, he was not questioned when he returned from Libya just a few days before the attack. Given that and given similar failures to stop attacks in Liverpool and Southend, can we have an urgent debate on the Prevent strategy and the Government's wider counter-terrorism strategy? We must not bury our head in the sand.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I welcome the Home Secretary's publication of the consultation findings on the Protect duty. As he rightly highlights, the Manchester arena attack was a tragic event, and it is so important that we bring forward legislation to support public safety while not placing excessive burdens on smaller businesses. The Government's overriding priority must be, is and always will be keeping the people of the United Kingdom safe. Prevent is having an effect in stopping people being drawn into terrorism. Prevent is about working in areas where there are risks of radicalisation, and it offers support predominantly through local community partnerships.

The independent review of Prevent is looking at the effectiveness of the Government's strategy to protect vulnerable people from being drawn into terrorism. The Government will carefully consider the findings and the recommendations of the review and assess the implications for the future of Prevent. I obviously note my hon. Friend's points about the better monitoring of those who come into this country, which I am sure has been a great concern to many British people following these attacks. We have Home Office questions on Monday, so I urge him to raise this directly with the Home Secretary then.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is reported—I am sure the Leader of the House will know this with his new interest in Scottish politics—that the Prime Minister is not welcome to speak at the Scottish Conservative conference in March. This will be the first time that the party leader has been unwelcome. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on that and tell us whether the Secretary of State for Scotland would be welcome at such a conference? Does this demonstrate not only that the Prime Minister has

run out of road with his own party and with the public, but that this Union has well and truly run out of road, and that we need a debate on Scottish independence now?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady does me an injustice. I was the Conservative and Unionist candidate in Central Fife in 1997, so I have long had an interest in the United Kingdom. I made the case in 1997, which I have made consistently since, for the benefit of the United Kingdom, and it has always been important for Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister is one of our party's great assets, and I note that our best results in Scottish parliamentary elections were when one B. Johnson was Prime Minister.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give me his assessment of a problem that I am having with the Department of Health and Social Care? I wrote to the then Minister, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), in May of last year and received a reply on 6 January from the Minister for Care and Mental Health, the hon. Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan)—my inquiry seems to have survived the reshuffle. What assessment does he make of this, and does he believe that there needs to be some cleaning up and some strong encouragement to provide timely replies to Members of Parliament and stop this sloppy practice? Or is this about people just thinking any which way, because it is from the top that a fish tends to rot?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad that the hon. Lady asked that question while I am sitting next to the Minister for Health, because I have said in this House on a number of occasions that Members have a right to expect timely replies. I have taken this up with various Departments. Earlier in the pandemic, I was very sympathetic to the Department of Health and Social Care because of the burdens that it faced, and it was not unreasonable that there was a delay. By the time we got to May last year, responses ought to have become more timely. I can only apologise that the delay in the response has been so long, until 6 January. We have a right, on behalf of our constituents, to seek redress of grievance—not on our behalf, but for those we represent—and, as Leader of the House, I will always do my best to ensure that that right is upheld.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Following the right hon. Gentleman's disparaging remarks about the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), can we have a statement from him about exactly what he meant by that? For example, does he think that the leader of the Welsh Conservatives is a lightweight figure, and can he name him?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales is called Simon Hart.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): My constituents Amanda, who works for the ambulance service, and her husband James have been forced for the past month to provide incredibly complex care to Amanda's father, John. John is entitled to receive NHS continuing healthcare between 7 am and 8 pm every day, but because County Durham clinical commissioning group simply cannot

find a care provider with the staff to fulfil his care package, James and Amanda are having to stop work to provide this care, which they can provide only due to her profession. They are exhausted, and it is because the care system is broken. I know at first hand the stress of caring for a loved one while holding down a job, so can we have a debate on the current staffing crisis in care, and will the right hon. Gentleman facilitate a meeting with the Minister for Care and Mental Health to discuss this issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this very difficult case. I recognise that there are problems in social care that the Government are trying to tackle. There is a £5.4 billion package for social care over the next three years and we will have the end of the lottery that leads to catastrophic costs with the £86,000 cap. The White Paper put forward plans to spend more than £1 billion over the next three years on system reform. The hon. Lady raises an important and troubling case. It is recognised that there are difficulties, but urgent steps are being taken, with very significant amounts of taxpayers' money, to put these problems right.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We had a statement this week from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about the problems that those in high-rise flats and flats under the height of 18 metres are having with fire safety. A statement is fine, and what he had to say was welcome, but it does not give us the opportunity as Back Benchers, all of whom have cases in our constituencies, to raise the detail of those cases. Can we have a debate in Government time in which we can put the detail before the Secretary of State so that he understands our constituents' problems?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think I granted that before the question was asked, because on Wednesday 19 January, there will be the remaining stages of the Building Safety Bill, which will be an opportunity to debate this matter.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Stronger safeguards are needed to stop online consumers choosing "buy now, pay later" options to pay for products without knowing the risks. As new research by Which? reveals, many people do not think that they are taking on debt when using that payment method, the use of which has soared in recent years. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the need to regulate this unregulated area of the credit market, including the need for much greater transparency on the risks that consumers face when using "buy now, pay later" options?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady is right to raise this. People ought to know what they are doing when they buy things online and ought to have consumer protections. There is a debate coming up later today on the draft Online Safety Bill, and that debate is entitled to cover these sorts of areas, so I encourage her to participate in it.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a Government statement on improving internet access in the south-west? It appears that a notspot in Devon is the reason why the Chancellor was unable to contact the Prime Minister yesterday to offer his support.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I wonder whether I may give an advert for Truespeed, which has come to Somerset and is doing terrific work in ensuring that my constituents are connected? Connecting Devon and Somerset has also been working very hard to improve the quality of broadband. However, it has to be said that when it comes to mobile telephony, there are still some parts of the south-west where the signal goes down and it does not seem to come back particularly quickly.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I read the Government's record on covid slightly differently from the Leader of the House. Yes, the Government did really well on vaccines and take-up, but we had the biggest economic collapse of any advanced economy in the world, and I think we probably still have the highest death rate per 100,000.

My big anxiety this year is the financial situation facing families in my constituency. Gas and electricity bills are likely to go up by 50% in April. The cost of petrol and diesel has already gone up by 25% this year, compared with last year. We have the national insurance increase and a 7.1% increase in basic inflation. The average family in my constituency—I have done the figures—will be £1,535 worse off every year, and for those on universal credit the figure is £2,575. Many families are just on the cusp of collapsing financially. They would need an 18% pay rise this year to meet that figure, and that simply is not going to happen. So what are the Government going to do? When will they come here and acknowledge that we really do have a crisis facing thousands of families?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman is not right to say that we have the worst death rate of any major western country, because other European countries have worse rates.

In relation to the economic figures, we use a more up-to-date way of calculating GDP, so if people are still paid to work in a school but that school is not open, we do not count that towards our GDP, whereas most countries do. It is very important, when making these statements, to ensure that the comparators are correct.

Let me come to the hon. Gentleman's question, because I think the whole House recognises the difficulties that our constituents may be facing during the course of the year. On his underlying point, most of our constituents live to their income level, and therefore big swings in costs have a powerful effect on people pretty much regardless of their income level. Those problems are recognised, so what are the Government doing? Well, there is £4.2 billion of taxpayer support to help with the cost of living. The national living wage will go up to £9.50 from April. Some 2 million families will get an extra £1,000 through our cut to the universal credit taper and increased work allowances. There will be seasonal cold weather payments of an extra £25 a week for up to 4 million people during colder periods. Fuel duty has been frozen for the 12th year running, saving car drivers £15 every time they fill up compared with pre-2010 plans. Local housing allowance has been increased in cash terms this year, worth an extra £600 on average to 1.5 million households. The energy cap remains in place. We have provided the £500 million household support fund so that local authorities can offer their

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

residents help with food and utility bills, and there are winter fuel payments to over 11.4 million pensioners, worth up to £300. So there is very considerable support, but I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying, because it is a worrying time for many people.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This morning the all-party parliamentary group for “left behind” neighbourhoods released a report on health inequalities showing that people from one of the 225 most disadvantaged parts of the country are 46% more likely to die from covid than people living in other parts of England. The report also shows these people work longer hours and have fewer years of healthy life, at a cost of about £30 billion to our economy. Will the Government make a statement on how health inequalities will fit into their levelling-up agenda? Without that, levelling up will not mean what we all want it to mean for these particular communities.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The right hon. Lady is right to raise that point, and I am aware of the report and the very troubling figure of a 46% higher possibility of dying from covid depending on where people live in the country and the level of prosperity. I do not want to go through all the figures I have just given to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), but they are part of this question and part of levelling up. It is about helping people with their bills, it is about increasing the national living wage to make sure that being in work pays and it is about reducing the withdrawal rate of universal credit, but it is also about ensuring healthcare is available to everybody. The support—the billions—going into the national health service will ensure there is good healthcare across the country. There may be challenges, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Sarah Atherton) mentioned, in relation to what happens in Wales and the devolved authorities, which will be in a different category.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): This Monday is Brew Monday, a Samaritans event to mark what is often a low point for many people. Following the pandemic, we know that many people are feeling tested. May I invite the Leader of the House and hon. Members to join me online for Brew Monday to share a cup of tea to mark the event? May I also take the opportunity to praise my colleagues in the Samaritans of Tyneside who will be joining us to talk about their work?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join the hon. Lady in thanking the Samaritans of Tyneside, and Samaritans across the country, for their work in saving people’s lives and helping people at the most desperate point in their life. I wonder whether she would like to join me in my office on Monday, when I would be delighted to give her a nice cup of tea. I will have coffee, even if she decides to have tea. I so enjoyed going online for Brew Monday last year, at her invitation. If this year we are able to do it together, I think that would be even better.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): People up and down the country, including in my Bath constituency, are gathering this weekend to protest against the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. That illiberal Bill is

an attack on our liberal democracy, and it includes a crackdown on the right to protest peacefully. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) mentioned, the Government have now shoehorned a large number of amendments into the Bill in the other place. It will shortly return to this House and we will possibly have only one hour, maybe three, to debate that controversial Bill. Further to the answer the Leader of the House gave to my right hon. Friend, what conversations has he had with his colleagues and the business managers about the time allowed for the Bill to ensure that my constituents and people across the country are properly represented when it comes back for debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I note that the hon. Lady mentions her constituency. I thought on this occasion she might be talking about the seemingly illiberal behaviour of Lib Dem councillors on Bath and North East Somerset Council and the serious accusation of their bullying another councillor who has left the Lib Dems because of the way he was treated. He has made serious accusations of racist bullying, and I thought the hon. Lady might want to apologise for the level of illiberalism going on in her own patch.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): In 2015 the Government lost a Supreme Court case on clean air brought by ClientEarth. The Leader of the House will know that, as a result, a ministerial direction was placed on the 10 Greater Manchester authorities to bring air quality within safe levels for human health and instructing a category C clean air zone, which is about to go live in May. The Government gave Greater Manchester just £120 million to fund the retrofit, which is woefully inadequate for the task and, as a result, the direction is now harmful to many small businesses that are unable to comply. Will the Leader of the House use his good offices to urge the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to look again at his direction?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I say to the hon. Gentleman that £120 million is a very significant amount of money, and that Greater Manchester has a devolved settlement and a socialist Mayor who must live up to his responsibilities. That is what happens when these mayoralities are created.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My 30-year-old constituent Calum Campbell has dyspraxia, and all his life his mum has had to fight the Department for Work and Pensions for support. Even so, he has now lost his personal independence payment award. Our office assisted Calum’s wife with a mandatory reconsideration, but the DWP ignored the key information put to it, chose not to speak to Calum for updated information, and upheld its original decision simply by looking again at the original information—that is really a joke of a decision. Will the Leader of the House request that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions intervene to make sure that Calum gets the support he deserves?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I once again thank the hon. Gentleman, who often raises important constituency cases. I reiterate my commitment as Leader of the House to help Members, whenever possible, with constituency cases. If he would

be kind enough to write to me with the details in relation to his constituent Calum, I will certainly take it up with the DWP as soon as possible.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The Scottish Tourism Alliance found this week that one in three businesses in Scotland are likely to fail this year. Retaining the reduced rate of VAT is essential to supporting the hospitality sector and preventing businesses from passing mounting costs to consumers who are already struggling with the cost of living. Will the Leader of the House schedule a debate, in Government time, on the retention of the 12.5% VAT rate for hospitality businesses?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady makes a very important plea for her constituents. It is really important to keep businesses and to tackle the cost of living issues that we all face. However, I fear that she knows what I am going to say next: matters of taxation are for the Chancellor.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): May I commend to my right hon. Friend today's publication by the Environmental Audit Committee of its report on water quality in rivers? I take this opportunity to thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), who is in his place, for the opportunity that he has provided us to make a statement on the report in Westminster Hall this afternoon. In our report, we have made recommendations about the strategic policy statement that the Government will shortly be issuing to Ofwat. When that happens, will my right hon. Friend encourage the Environment Minister to make a statement to the House on that policy statement?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted that the Environmental Audit Committee has come forward with that report. I believe it has an absolutely brilliant Chairman who

ensures that its reports are always well worth reading, and I am glad that he has a debate about this one in Westminster Hall later. The Osmotherly rules set out how responses will be made to Select Committee reports, and those will of course be borne in mind for the response coming from the Department and the Minister, but I will pass on my right hon. Friend's request for a statement.

The issue with statements, as my right hon. Friend knows only too well, is the pressure on parliamentary business and the other matters that we have to decide. We have had a demand to receive information and for more time for House of Lords amendments, and we have pressures on Back-Bench business, but I hear his request, and a request from him is always taken seriously.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Leader of the House for making his business statement and for responding to questions for over an hour.

Wera Hobhouse: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Leader of the House has just accused my Liberal Democrat colleagues in Bath and North East Somerset Council of racism. Independent processes against those allegations, including from BANES Council, have already been held, and all allegations have been dismissed. Will the Leader of the House please withdraw his allegations?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Leader of the House.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The councillor concerned is still making those allegations and does not believe the processes have been satisfactorily carried out, so I would point to what he has said.

Covid-19 Update

12.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Let me start by paying tribute to Professor Sir Jonathan Van-Tam, who, after four years as deputy chief medical officer, will be returning to his role at the University of Nottingham at the end of March. There are not many clinical advisers who can be recognised solely by three letters, but JVT's unique and straightforward approach to communication has seen him rapidly become a national hero. I will use some words that I think he might particularly like. We are grateful for having had him on loan for so many years. He has been a top signing, and he has blown the whistle on time. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in wishing Jonathan Van-Tam—Professor Sir Jonathan Van-Tam—all the very best.

With permission, Mr Speaker. I will now make a statement on the covid-19 pandemic. We have started this year as the freest country in Europe, thanks to the decision we made to open up in the summer and the defences that we have built, but we must not lose sight of the fact that the virus is still with us, and that there are still likely to be difficult weeks ahead. According to data published yesterday by the Office for National Statistics, there are encouraging signs that infections are falling in London and the east of England, but they are still rising in other parts of the country, and the data does not yet reflect the impact of people returning to work and school; so we must proceed with caution.

Omicron's far greater transmissibility still has the potential to lead to a significant number of hospitalisations. There are already nearly 17,000 covid-19 patients in hospital in England, and, owing to the lag between infections and hospitalisations, the NHS will remain under significant pressure over the next few weeks. It is encouraging, however, that during this wave we have seen no increase in the number of covid-19 intensive care patients, and there are early signs that the rate of hospitalisation is starting to slow.

We know that omicron is less severe, but no one should be under any illusions: it is severe for those who end up in hospital, and that is far more likely if they have not had the jab. In many major cities in the United States where the levels of booster vaccination are comparatively lower than the UK, pressures on intensive care are approaching the levels of last winter, and in Chicago they have already exceeded the peak from last January. So we must stay vigilant, and keep fortifying the pharmaceutical defences that we have built—some of the strongest in the world.

Let me now update the House on how we are making those pharmaceutical defences even stronger, and how we are giving the NHS and the country what they need to withstand this omicron wave. Our primary defence is, of course, the vaccination programme. Some 79% of eligible adults in England have now had a booster, including more than 91% of over-50s, who we know are more vulnerable to the virus. Per capita, we are the most boosted large country in the world. Data published on Friday by the UK Health Security Agency shows that about three months after those aged 65 and over received their booster, their protection against hospitalisation remains at about 90%. These vaccines do not just protect ourselves and our loved ones; they protect the country's

progress too. The reason we have been able to start the year with much greater freedom than last year, with children back at school, shops opening their doors and this Chamber bustling with activity, is that so many people have made the positive choice to be vaccinated.

There are, of course, a small minority of people who could get the jab if they wanted to, but have chosen not to. Let us be clear: those people have been able to enjoy the freedoms that they enjoy today because they are standing on the shoulders of the nine out of 10 people across the UK who have stepped forward to get the jab. If we are to maintain the collective protection that we have built, we need everyone to choose responsibly and take the simple step that will help to secure greater freedom for us all.

People working in health and care look after some of the most vulnerable in our society, so they carry a unique responsibility. Last month, this House approved our plans that anyone working in health or wider social care activities regulated by the Care Quality Commission will need to be vaccinated against covid-19 if their role involves direct contact with patients, unless of course they are medically exempt. That includes NHS hospitals, the independent sector, and GP and dental practices regardless of whether they are working in the public or private sector. Uptake over the past few months has been very promising: since the Government consulted on the policy in September, the proportion of NHS trust healthcare workers vaccinated with at least a first dose has increased from 92% to 94%, and we remain committed to putting these measures into force on 1 April.

Our next line of defence is testing. We are doing more tests than any other country in Europe. We raised the distribution of free lateral flow tests from 120 million in November to 300 million in December to meet the demands of the omicron wave, and we expect to make approximately 400 million tests available over the course of this month—four times the pre-omicron plan.

Our third line of defence is antivirals and treatments, for which we have built the most advanced programme in Europe. We have now secured almost 5 million courses of oral antivirals and are leading the whole continent in the number that we have procured per person. We are already making these cutting-edge antivirals and treatments available directly to patients. Last month, we contacted 1.3 million of those at the highest risk from covid-19, such as people who might sadly be suffering with cancer or people with Down's syndrome, and sent them a PCR test kit that they can keep at home. If they test positive, they can access either a monoclonal antibody or an antiviral; either it can be sent to those patients at home or they can access it through a clinician at one of the 96 covid medicine delivery units that now exist across England.

We are also making oral antiviral treatments available more widely through a national study. If any of our constituents who are over 50, or are between 18 and 49 with an underlying health condition, get covid-19 symptoms and test positive, they are eligible. They can sign up for the trial, if they are interested, by visiting panoramictrial.org. The more people who sign up, the more widely we can deploy these treatments.

With those three defences—the most boosted, the most tested and the most antivirals—it is no wonder that we are the freest country in Europe. This country is leading the world in learning to live with covid.

Just as we have strengthened these defences to keep people out of hospital, we are taking measures to ensure that the health service has what it needs. As part of that work, we have looked at every available route to secure the maximum capacity possible across the NHS. We have been working with the latest technology to create virtual wards where patients can be monitored by clinicians remotely in their own home. We are bringing on stream extra beds in hotels and hospices, where people can be safely discharged once they are ready to leave hospital. We are putting in place new Nightingale surge hubs within hospital grounds to provide extra resilience should we need it. We are also making use of the independent sector: this week, we announced a new three-month agreement that will allow NHS trusts to send a wider range of patients, for example those in need of cancer care, to the independent sector for treatment.

These measures, taken together, are our insurance policy, helping us to plan for the worst while we hope for the best. As with any insurance policy, we hope that we will not need to use it, but it is the role of any responsible Government to prepare for all reasonable outcomes so that we can keep this country safe and protect the progress that we have made.

Finally, I have always said to the House that any curbs on our freedoms must be an absolute last resort and we should not keep them in place for a day longer than absolutely necessary. With that in mind, we have been reviewing the isolation period for positive cases to make sure that the measures we have in place maximise activity in the economy and education, and minimise the risk of infectious people leaving isolation. UKHSA data shows that about two thirds of positive cases are no longer infectious by the end of day five, and we want to use the testing capacity we have built up to help these people leave isolation safely. After reviewing all the evidence, we have made the decision to reduce the minimum self-isolation period to five full days in England. From Monday, people can test twice before they go, leaving isolation at the start of day six. Those two tests are critical to these balanced and proportionate plans, and I urge everyone to take advantage of the capacity we have built up in tests so that we can restore the freedoms to this country, while we are keeping everyone safe.

We have now entered the third year of this country's fight against covid-19. Thanks to an incredible national endeavour, we are now better protected than ever before. But this virus is not going away; there will be more variants, and no one can be sure what threat they might pose. But we can be sure that our pharmaceutical defences—vaccines, testing and antivirals—are the best way to protect our health and our freedoms as we learn to live with covid. I commend this statement to the House.

12.21 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I also pay tribute to Professor Sir Jonathan Van-Tam, who has provided outstanding public service throughout the pandemic. It was not the Government resignation we were looking for, but the timing brought to mind the now infamous and deleted tweet from the UK Civil Service:

"Can you imagine having to work with these truth twisters?"

JVT already has a knighthood, but working with the Prime Minister he must have the patience of a saint. On behalf of the whole Labour party, we thank him for his service and wish him well for the future. He is truly a national treasure.

We welcome the announcement the Secretary of State has made on the reduction of the covid isolation period to five days, on condition that two negative tests are produced. So let us hope that he sorts out testing. Before Christmas, he told us that there were no issues with supply, but over Christmas NHS staff and other key workers were unable to access tests because the Government had not noticed that the deliverers had shut up shop for Christmas. Workforce shortages are one of the biggest challenges facing the NHS and the wider economy during the current wave of the omicron variant. This measure will help people get back to work faster and safely, which is great news for the Prime Minister, who, through a terribly unfortunate coincidence of timing, is isolating today, unable to face the cameras or the public. How good of the Secretary of State to help the Prime Minister back to work in time to face the music again at Prime Minister's questions next week—the Leader of the Opposition looks forward to seeing him.

But what took the Secretary of State so long? Is it really because the Government had misread the policy of the Biden Administration? How many days does the Secretary of State think the NHS has lost and the economy has lost because they could not read the policy being used in the US? The Secretary of State has been briefing that it is UKHSA's fault—how brave of him to blame officials. But the CDC—Centres for Disease Control and Prevention—advice to the Biden Administration is open access and available on its website. Did he not read it? Doesn't anyone in this Government take responsibility any more—or is "blame the staff" now the essence of the ministerial code?

We are not out of the woods with covid-19 yet. We hope that the omicron variant has passed its peak in London, but we know it is yet to peak across vast swathes of England and that NHS services are under enormous pressure. Today, we learned that NHS waiting lists were at an historic 6 million before the omicron wave arrived. Twenty-four hours in A&E is not just a television programme; it is the grim experience of patients in too many cases. Week after week, we see more evidence of unacceptable delays for patients.

Now we know that the Government are lowering standards and normalising longer waits in the NHS: 12 hours to be seen in A&E, two years for referral to treatment and an hour just to be transferred from an ambulance into hospital—assuming someone can get an ambulance and has not been told to phone a friend or call a cab if they are suffering from a stroke or suspected heart attack, as has happened in at least one trust in the north-east of England. Does the Secretary of State really believe those waits are acceptable, or is it just the case with this Government that when they break the rules, they change the rules?

The Secretary of State will want to blame pandemic pressures alone, but we went into the pandemic with NHS waiting lists already at a record high of 4.5 million, staff shortages at 100,000 and social care vacancies at 112,000. Patients are paying a heavy price with delays, and the country has paid a greater price with lockdowns, because a decade of Tory policies left the NHS without

[Wes Streeting]

the capacity and resilience to withstand the annual pressures of winter, let alone the unique pressures of a global pandemic. Where is the workforce strategy for the recovery? Where is the elective care recovery plan? Where is the sign that this Government have any understanding of the responsibility they bear for the crisis, let alone a plan to fix it for the future?

Finally, can I ask what on earth the Secretary of State thought he was doing yesterday when he leapt to the Prime Minister's defence? His first duty is to public health. He also has a duty to the health and social care workforce. If doctors and nurses had brought their own booze to work, they would have been fired. The Prime Minister has undermined trust and confidence at a critical moment in the pandemic. Who is he to ask others to do the right thing when he does not practise what he preaches?

In conclusion, the Secretary of State has a duty to inculcate the Government's pandemic response from a toxic, radioactive Prime Minister. The public have concluded that the Prime Minister is unfit for office. The Secretary of State needs to be careful in his defence that they do not draw the same conclusion about him.

Sajid Javid: First, I notice that the hon. Gentleman did not mention the huge increase in booster vaccinations in this country since he last stood at the Dispatch Box facing me. He just heard me say it, so he knows we are the most boosted country in Europe and the most boosted of any large country. He knows how much that has helped, yet there was not one word of thanks from him to the NHS, the volunteers, the military and everyone who helped to do that. There was not one word of thanks from the hon. Gentleman. It will be noted by the British public. I did notice, though—[*Interruption.*] Would the hon. Gentleman like to return to the Dispatch Box? I will sit down.

Wes Streeting: I am not sure that is in order, but what I said from a sedentary position is that the Prime Minister is not fit to lick the boots of NHS staff in this country.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. We will not have that again, please. No interventions like that, please.

Sajid Javid: Again, the hon. Gentleman had another fresh opportunity to thank the NHS staff for the enormous work they have been doing not just throughout the pandemic but in December, and especially for everything they have done to boost so many people, but there was not one word of thanks from him.

I was pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman welcome the new self-isolation policy. He asked whether enough tests are available. He might have heard me say earlier that we have quadrupled the number of lateral flow tests available this month to approximately 400 million, which is more than four times the original pre-omicron plan. I was confused by his response to that, because he seemed to be suggesting that we should be subcontracting our covid policy to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention. If I heard him correctly, he was suggesting that just because another country—in this case, the US—has changed its policy, we should automatically follow suit and do what it does.

We have just taken back control from the EU. We have just left the European Medicines Agency, and here the hon. Gentleman is, just months later, suggesting we subcontract our policy to another state. That tells us all we need to know about the Labour party's approach. He suggests we take the same approach as the US, and he of all people should know that while the US might have an isolation period of five days, they have no testing. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman heard me earlier, but let me remind him: the UK Health Security Agency data shows that approximately 30% of people are still infectious at the end of day 5. That is why we require two tests.

The hon. Gentleman was suggesting that we should have the same policy as the US, which requires no testing, and for everyone to leave isolation at day 5, regardless of whether they have tested or not, and wear a face mask for the last five days. The hon. Gentleman has to decide whether he wants these decisions to be made here in the UK, based on expert UK advice from some of the best advisers anywhere across the world, or to subcontract them to another state.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman talked about the NHS and capacity. He will know that as a result of the omicron emergency, it has sadly been necessary for the NHS to make changes. Of course that has had an impact on electives. The most urgent electives such as cancer care will be protected, and he heard me talk earlier about the deal that has been done at least for the next three months with the independent sector. I hope he supports that and the measures that the NHS is taking to protect capacity.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): I welcome today's announcement. We have one of the best vaccine programmes in the world and as a result we can look forward to a time of living with covid with justified confidence. This is a very important step forward.

As the Secretary of State knows, last week the Health and Social Care Committee published a report on what is going to happen now that the NHS is starting to think about tackling the covid backlog. We said that we were worried that that would be derailed by a workforce crisis, with shortages in nearly every speciality throughout the NHS. When is the covid backlog plan going to be published? Will it have details about what is going to happen in areas such as emergency care and general practice social care, all of which have a direct impact on the ability of the elective care programme to deliver? Will it deal with what the Health Foundation says is a shortage of 4,000 doctors and nearly 19,000 nurses who will be necessary for that elective recovery programme? Finally, when is he going to publish the workforce strategy? Will that have independently verified assurance that we are training enough doctors and nurses for the future?

Sajid Javid: First, I thank my right hon. Friend for his support for the changes that the Government have announced today. He is right to raise the importance of the workforce, especially when it comes to dealing with the backlog. He may know that since September 2020, 20,000 more clinicians have been working throughout the NHS, but we do need to plan properly for the NHS workforce in the long term. The Government are working on a workforce strategy and I look forward to discussing that with him and the members of the Committee that he so expertly chairs in due course.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In response to the news that all Tory MSPs and the leader of the Tories in Scotland have called for the Prime Minister's resignation following his covid-rule-breaking party, the Tory Leader of the House resorted to personal attacks. Does the Secretary of State for Health think that attacks from members of his Government on those who criticise covid lockdown regulation violations is conducive to encouraging public compliance with covid restrictions—with all the implications that that has for the NHS and staff, who are already under enormous pressure?

If the Prime Minister cannot or will not follow his own rules, why does the Health Secretary think he can possibly continue to argue that the public should follow them? Is not the Prime Minister's credibility on regulating and issuing public health instructions, as we continue to face covid restrictions, in tatters? The longer the Secretary of State supports the Prime Minister's breach of these regulations, the longer his own credibility will suffer. Does he truly and sincerely think that the Prime Minister is the best person within his party's ranks to lead the UK Government's ongoing battle with covid?

Sajid Javid: The Prime Minister stood at the Dispatch Box yesterday and apologised; he set that out very clearly from this Dispatch Box. As he said, and as I think most people have accepted, it is right to wait for the completion of the investigation by Sue Gray.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in his tribute to Professor Jonathan Van-Tam for his remarkable public service, and I welcome the announcements that he has made today. Restrictions have an impact beyond covid, and we should be as responsive in lifting them as we are in imposing them. Given the news he has given us today that over 91% of over-50s have been boosted, can he confirm that we are on track to lift the plan B restrictions when they expire on 26 January, and will he include in that the advice on face masks in classrooms, for which a particularly weak evidence base was published?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support for these new measures. He speaks with considerable experience. He is absolutely right to talk about the impact of restrictions beyond health. He has heard me, and other members of the Government, say before that no restrictions—none at all—should be in place for a moment longer than is absolutely necessary. He will know that the plan B restrictions, unless this House were to decide otherwise, will sunset on 26 January. On what happens next in terms of the Government's own view, we will set that out as soon as we can.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State talks about the importance of having insurance policies, and in managing risk as he is, that is of course the proper thing to do. However, on Friday, he issued a ministerial direction to the NHS England chief executive, Amanda Pritchard, to authorise the use, as he touched on his statement, of private sector providers, and this is at a very high cost. It requires a minimum income guarantee for those private hospitals of between £75 million and £90 million a month, and if the surge requirement is used, that could rise to £175 million a month, as the chief executive

sets out in her letter requesting the direction. Where is that money going to come from, and why, at this stage of the pandemic, are we still being held over a barrel, as the taxpayer, by the private sector? Could not the Secretary of State at least have negotiated a better deal?

Sajid Javid: The deal that the hon. Lady refers to was negotiated by the NHS, and I think it has done an excellent job in its negotiations. It is also absolutely right for the chief executive of the NHS to write to the Government—to write to me—to request such a direction, because the NHS's job is obviously running the NHS, but the Government's job is to think beyond the NHS and the impact of covid beyond just health. The hon. Lady should know by now that the more capacity we have in the NHS, the less need there is for restrictions. What I can say for sure is that had we not taken out this insurance policy with the independent sector and got this extra capacity, she would be one of the first to stand up in this House asking us why we did not work with the independent sector.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement about reducing the self-isolation period. I have a number of constituents who have not seen their relatives in care homes for a considerable time. A member of my own family can have one visitor but has been confined to her small room for coming up to five weeks now because every time there is a case anywhere, everybody is kept in their rooms and cannot go in the garden or the communal areas. Will my right hon. Friend look at these guidelines again, because of course we want to protect care home residents, but the way they are being implemented is having a considerable impact on those people's physical and mental health?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this most important of issues. In the way he phrased his question, he reflects just how difficult it is to strike the right balance in care homes between protecting the residents and making sure that they can get the visits that are so important for them. The approach that we have taken in England is different from that in other parts of the country. We do allow more visitors. We are supplying a record number of tests to care homes, not only for the residents but for the staff. For the reasons that he has so clearly laid out, we keep this under review and will remove restrictions as soon as it is safe to do so.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly his reference to cancer patients and his commitment to apply the latest technology. May I respectfully draw his attention to yesterday's excellent debate in Westminster Hall about access to radiotherapy services? In particular, I draw his attention to the fact that modern radiotherapy is extremely precise, cost-effective and non-invasive, and it does not affect the immune system. Can I urge the Secretary of State to provide the required additional resources needed to modernise radiotherapy services throughout the UK and to catch up with cancer?

Sajid Javid: I very much agree with what the hon. Gentleman has shared with the House. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend that debate, but the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the

[Sajid Javid]

Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) did, and she will also be meeting the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy and listening more. I know the hon. Gentleman agrees with me that it has been absolutely right during this very difficult time for the NHS to direct more resources especially to looking after more covid patients and to the booster programme, but it has also been right to protect cancer care.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): As the world improves with the vaccine programme that we have had and continue to have, which has been brilliant in this country, could I ask the Secretary of State to urge doctors who are not on the covid frontline to actually see their patients face to face again, because doctors in hospitals and GPs are still not doing this fully and people's problems are being missed?

There is also a problem as the world opens up that if someone who has had covid needs to travel, they cannot take a PCR test because that shows they are positive even though they may have long since had it—they are not positive for covid any more, but it still shows positive on a PCR test—and they cannot prove to the country they are going to that they do not have covid. Many people are wanting to travel more now. People can be stuck for 90 days during which they cannot go to any country that requires a negative PCR test because they cannot get one.

Sajid Javid: First, I agree with my hon. Friend about the points she has made on these issues. On her final point about travelling, as she has seen just in the last few days, the UK Government keep our travel rules under constant review. The moment we have been able to safely remove any of those rules based on the evidence, we have done so, and I know my hon. Friend has respected that. When it comes to the rules of other countries for British citizens wishing to travel for holiday, business or otherwise, those are of course their rules. However, we are working at many levels—in my Department, the Department for Transport, the Foreign Office and others—with those countries to see how we can best co-ordinate on such rules.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I am delighted that JVT is returning to the University of Nottingham, but I am worried about what he will hear from local clinicians. This week, I received an email from a doctor working in our local NHS. She says:

“I am crying as I write this. For years now the talk has been that the NHS is ‘at breaking point’. Well that point has passed. We are broken. We are on our knees.”

Of course, covid has taken a huge toll on staff, but we went into the pandemic with huge waiting lists and chronic staff shortages as a direct result of under-investment and mismanagement over the previous decade. Has not the right hon. Gentleman's party failed my constituent and her NHS colleagues?

Sajid Javid: As I have mentioned, JVT's move is the country's loss, but Nottingham's gain, and I am glad that the hon. Lady is delighted. On investment in the NHS, she will know that, even before covid-19, the Government had already set out, in the long-term plan for investment in the NHS, the extra £30 billion going into the NHS by the end of that period, with huge

investment in areas such as cancer care, mental health care and electives. Then during the crisis, which has of course been very challenging for our health and care services, as it has been across the world, we have set out over £40 billion of extra investment, including this year, to help us get through this crisis.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I welcome the change in the self-isolation rules that the Secretary of State set out. It is a good indication that the Government can be flexible on policy, so let me have another go on the subject I raised yesterday. My right hon. Friend heard the exchange I had with the Vaccines Minister. She agreed with me from the Dispatch Box that persuasion was the best and right way to get health and social care workers to be vaccinated. However, telling a health and social care worker that they will be sacked if they do not get vaccinated is not persuasion, but coercion. Will my right hon. Friend reflect on whether it is sensible on 1 April to continue to try to implement a policy that, according to the Government's estimates, will mean 73,000 NHS staff and 38,000 domiciliary care workers losing their jobs? When a policy is not working, it is right to ditch it, isn't it?

Sajid Javid: First, I commend my right hon. Friend for the scrutiny that he has constantly provided of the Government's covid policy. He did that long before I was Secretary of State and I am pleased that he has continued to provide that scrutiny, which is very valuable. It is most valuable to me when he supports the policy, as he did on self-isolation today, but it is still valuable when he challenges the Government to think again about policy. That is very important. I addressed a bit in my statement the policy he raised of the vaccine as a condition of deployment in the health and social care sector. He will have heard that we are committed to it, but that is because it is right that, in those settings where there are people who are more vulnerable than others, they are put first. We know that vaccines limit transmission and that as a result it is safer for patients if the individuals who provide that care—the health and care workers—are vaccinated. The policy is about putting patients first, was voted for by the House with an overwhelming majority, and the Government intend to implement it.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State put a lot of emphasis on testing in his statement. Inspired Outsourcing in my constituency would agree with him. It provides contact centre services, and some of its workers are key workers so cannot work from home. It has been using twice-weekly testing to keep its workers safe, but has run out of tests. It cannot get hold of any tests apart from by paying what would effectively be £2,000 a month to a private provider recommended on the Government's website. Does the Secretary of State believe that small businesses such as Inspired Outsourcing should have access to free lateral flow tests? How can it get hold of those tests today in Newcastle, because that is what it needs to keep its workers safe and provide protection to us all?

Sajid Javid: That is an important point. When the country first discovered omicron, the tests that were in stock were not designed for another huge wave. However, the people who run testing at UKHSA responded very quickly by ordering almost any lateral flow tests that

meet our standards that they could find. As I said in my statement, in December, we had 300 million as opposed to the 100 million that was originally planned and, in January, there will be four times the pre-plan amount. In answer to the hon. Lady's specific question, whether for a workplace, for visiting a care home or other reasons, people will be able to get access to the lateral flow tests now that millions more have arrived in the country. They have been distributed and people can get them online or from pharmacies.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am very grateful to the excellent Secretary of State for coming to the Dispatch Box yet again to update the House and particularly for making an announcement first in the House rather than to the media.

I wonder whether my right hon. Friend agrees with Lord Frost, who said:

"I would like to see the Government ruling out lockdowns for the future, repealing the legislation, ending them... We can't afford it, it doesn't work, stop doing Covid theatre—vaccine passports, masks, stuff that doesn't work".

Sajid Javid: I have huge respect for Lord Frost and for my hon. Friend, who has just shared some important points. No one wants to see this country go back into anything resembling a lockdown. As he will have heard earlier, while we have had to put some restrictions—the so-called plan B—in place over the past few weeks, I hope he will agree that, when we reflect on those restrictions and compare them with other countries in Europe, large or small, we are the freest country in Europe. The reason for that is the pharmaceutical defences that I talked about earlier: we are the most boosted large country in Europe, with the most antivirals per head and the most testing. That is what we should focus on for the future as we learn to live with covid.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I want to press the Secretary of State on the morale of our NHS and social care workforce. He will know that, between March 2020 and May 2021, 1,561 NHS and social care staff died from covid while working on the frontline. That is part of the reason I am campaigning for an NHS and social care covenant, just as we have for the armed forces and the police. What does he have to say to those key workers who saw colleagues die while the Prime Minister was at the law-breaking works party on 20 May?

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of morale in the NHS. As I and every Member of this House knows full well, this country owes a huge debt to everyone who has worked in the NHS and the care sector, especially over the past two years. She has talked about campaigning for an NHS covenant; I am not sure how much longer she needs to campaign, because I have already announced we are going to have one. I will be happy to work with her on how we could do that, but she can desist from her campaign and put her efforts into working with me to help to introduce one. She will know that as Home Secretary I decided the police should have a covenant, so it is right that we recognise the NHS in that way too. As for the points she made about the Prime Minister, I refer her to the answer I gave a moment ago.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, despite my enormous respect for him, I voted against the introduction of covid passports before Christmas. I maintain my view that they are not effective. Will he please commit to dropping domestic certification at the earliest possible opportunity? Will he also make clear today from the Dispatch Box to NHS trusts up and down this country that he will not stand for the pandemic of arbitrary discrimination we are seeing against pregnant women and their partners, and parents who want to be with their children on paediatric wards but are being prevented by trusts in an illogical and unscientific manner from being with them to look after and advocate for them?

Sajid Javid: First, I agree with every word my hon. Friend says about pregnant women. That is a message that has been reinforced to every NHS trust. I thank her for how she has campaigned on this issue and brought it to light, because that is making a difference. On the issue she raised about domestic certification, I share her instinctive discomfort, and I assure her and the House that as far as I am concerned we will not be keeping domestic certification in place a moment longer than absolutely necessary.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I, from the Liberal Democrat Benches, also pay tribute to the services of Professor Sir Jonathan Van-Tam? The Government are still ignoring people who are clinically extremely vulnerable, and their concerns at the lack of guidance and support. I raised this with the Secretary of State before Christmas and I still have many of my Bath constituents writing in about it. Two thirds of housebound people have not received the booster. What are the Government doing to ensure that the vaccines are accessible to everybody, including the housebound?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady talks about ensuring everyone gets access to the booster. The people at the top of the list should be those who are clinically extremely vulnerable, as long as the vaccine is something that can work for them. That is why, during the month of December, especially when we accelerated the booster programme, working mainly with GPs but also with others, those who are housebound or are in care homes were a priority and we saw the booster rate rise substantially.

I also point the hon. Lady to what I said in my statement about the 1.3 million clinically extremely vulnerable. The NHS has contacted them directly to ensure that they have access to the new antivirals that we have procured. I am sure that she would welcome that.

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, which brings such positive news that will give confidence to individuals and businesses as they return to a more normal life as we learn to live with covid. My constituency has many, perhaps a higher proportion of, small self-employed businesses and they were absolutely terrified in the run-up to Christmas that we were looking at lockdowns and severe restrictions. I therefore thank him and the Prime Minister for the balanced, proportionate approach that the Government have taken in looking at how we move forward and for the steps they took during the Christmas period. May I seek assurances that that will continue to be the way?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and support for the changes that I have announced today. He is right to point to a key difference in our approach during the omicron wave compared with any other country in Europe—and, I think, any other large country. It is not by accident that we have been the most open and freest country in Europe; it is by design. It is because we have rightly focused on the booster programme, with 79% of eligible adults boosted—the most boosted country in Europe. We have more antivirals per head than any other country in Europe. We are testing more than any other country in Europe. It is those pharmaceutical defences that will allow us to live with covid, to keep businesses open, to protect the life chances of our young people and to keep our country open and free, just as he wants to see.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that the Secretary of State will want to join me in paying tribute to the staff at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board for their work on the booster programme. He will know that statistics show that Wales is joint first in Europe—we are actually ahead of the UK average—on delivery of boosters, which can only be a good thing for our population. Will he say a little about what the JCVI is discussing and what his view is on further boosters for people who are older and more vulnerable and the immunosuppressed, and the use of polyvalent vaccines going forward? As we open up further, people will be deeply worried about that, particularly with waning boosters. Will he talk a little about the plans for further jabs for the most vulnerable?

Sajid Javid: I join the hon. Gentleman in commending Wales for the roll-out of its booster programme. In fact, in Scotland, Northern Ireland and every part of the UK we have seen a very good, positive approach that is protecting more and more people. In terms of the JCVI, I point him to two recent announcements that he may be aware of. First, just before the Christmas break, the JCVI recommended to the Government that at-risk five to 11-year-olds be offered the paediatric vaccine. I have accepted that and that will start this month; I believe that that will start across the UK, including Wales. Secondly, we received another recommendation, I think at the end of last week. After looking carefully at the very latest evidence—some of the evidence from the UKHSA that I referenced in my statement—the JCVI decided that we should not offer a fourth dose to over-85s, or others at risk at this point. It was comfortable that the protection that is provided—it looked at waning protection—was still incredibly strong for older people.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I add to the chorus of approval for the decision to reduce self-isolation to five days. But can my right hon. Friend ensure that the NHS covid-19 app and the Government website are updated as soon as possible to avoid the confusion that seemed to exist around the reduction to seven-day isolation, so that people fully understand their obligations, when their isolation starts and when it can finish?

Sajid Javid: I thank my hon. Friend for his support. I will ensure that the website is updated in the way he suggests as soon as possible.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Recent data suggest that just 4% of teachers say that readings on classroom carbon dioxide monitors are above the safe threshold set by the Department for Education. The Secretary of State will be aware that ventilation is becoming a massive challenge in schools, and in primary schools in particular. What conversations is he having with his colleagues at the Department for Education to ensure that children can continue to learn in classrooms, but can do so as safely as possible, protecting them and the wider community?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important issue: ensuring we do all we can as a Government to work with schools to protect schoolchildren so they can stay in school. No one wants to see what happened before with the lockdowns and children not being able to attend school in the usual way. That is why I hope she welcomes the recent announcement by my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary on a huge new investment in ventilation. My right hon. Friend takes this issue incredibly seriously, working with schools up and down the country, and seeing what more can be done.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Implicit in my right hon. Friend's statement was the concept that we will all be held back by the decisions of the unvaccinated. If I may say so, he used some quite heavy language to bring pressure to bear on the unvaccinated, talking about standing on people's shoulders and so on. Would it not be better, rather than creating what seem to me to be the conditions for coercion and division, to say to the unvaccinated, "You've made your choice to take a greater risk and we are not going to be held back as a society by your choices. You will have to bear the consequences"? Would that not be a more consistent and humane way to deal with them, and to deal with us all, without creating division?

Sajid Javid: First, may I take this opportunity to thank my hon. Friend for the scrutiny he provides? As always, he makes important points that are worth discussing. He is right about the language I used earlier, because it is factually correct to say that. The reason this country is as free as it is now is the decision that nine out of 10 people have made to get vaccinated. Those people who decided not to be vaccinated when they could have been, because they are not medically exempt, for example, made a choice and that has consequences. It does not just have consequences for them; it has consequences for all of us.

My hon. Friend might be interested to know that when I visited the ICU ward looking after covid patients in King's College Hospital in London last week, I was told by the consultant in charge that they estimate that 70% of patients in the ICU ward are unvaccinated. If those people had got vaccinated, they would not only have been safer, but space in hospitals, and not just in ICU wards, could have been used for others. There are 17,000 covid-positive patients in our hospitals. That could have been prevented if those who were unvaccinated or who decided not to take their booster shot had actually bothered to have their vaccination. Yes, getting vaccinated needs to be a positive choice: we need to encourage people and, with the exception of the health and social care high-risk settings, it should not be done by compulsion. I do not believe in that. I do not think it would work and I think it is unethical, but the

people who have chosen not to get vaccinated should understand the consequences of their decision for the rest of society.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Following on from that, I pay tribute to all NHS and care staff. We are 17 days away from the first deadline, when NHS and care staff will need to get their first vaccine if they are to be fully vaccinated by the deadline of 1 April. What we did not hear in the Secretary of State's statement is anything about a long-term strategy for staffing in our NHS to deal with the current vacancies and, unfortunately, those that will come about as a result of the 1 April deadline. Where is the long-term plan that NHS managers are crying out for, and where are we going to get qualified staff from in future?

Sajid Javid: I hope that the hon. Gentleman heard my earlier comments about the importance of making sure that patients are as safe as possible in health and care settings; I hope that he agrees and therefore understands the new vaccination rules to whose importance he refers.

The hon. Gentleman is right to ask about the planning necessary to cope with the changes. I can reassure him that even before Parliament voted on them, the NHS had started planning in anticipation of its decision. It is working with each and every trust, but is rightly putting in most effort into convincing the 6% of people in NHS trusts who have not yet had a first dose of the covid-19 vaccine to do so. It is working to convince them in a positive way to make that positive choice, with all the information that they need about the vaccines being safe and effective. It is offering them meetings with clinicians, including one-on-one meetings. I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports that approach.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I very much welcome the reduction of the self-isolation time to five days, which will be appreciated by the hospitality industry, particularly in Bournemouth. I am proud to say that I am a vaccinator in Bournemouth and that tomorrow I will be doing my duty along with thousands of others across the country. It is a critical job if we are to tackle covid-19 and a rewarding one.

The Secretary of State will be aware from his visits that the atmosphere in the temporary hubs is extremely professional but can also be quite quiet and sombre. Will he look at whether the licensing conditions for radio can be lifted? Maybe he could speak to the BBC, Classic FM or Virgin Radio—Chris Evans might even be listening to our debate today. I hope the Secretary of State agrees that radio would help to lift spirits as we go about this important national effort.

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for his support for today's measures and for being a volunteer vaccinator. People like him up and down the country

have come forward in their thousands, especially in the past few weeks as we have made the call for the booster programme. Those volunteers are working alongside the NHS, helped by the soldiers and the military, with whom my right hon. Friend also has direct experience.

I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend's suggestion, which I think is a very good one. It is not something that I had given any thought to, but I think it is absolutely right that we contact those organisations and see whether they would like to be helpful to our army of vaccinators across the country. It is a very good suggestion; I thank him for it, and we shall try our best to act on it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the incredibly patient Matt Western.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I add my voice to the congratulations to Jonathan Van-Tam and all those across our universities and science sectors who have contributed so much. I hope that others will be similarly rewarded.

The Secretary of State is aware of the shortage of testing kits. He mentioned in his statement that the 120 million have now increased to 300 million. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) said, the Opposition are desperately keen for businesses to stay open and for young people to remain in education. I am aware that there are separate supply lines to universities for testing, but there is concern about supply in future weeks. Can the Secretary of State confirm—guarantee, perhaps—that in the coming weeks there will be no issue with the supply of testing kits to our higher education sector?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to thank not just JVT for his service, but those across our academic sector who have supported the Government, people and the NHS throughout the pandemic. I am privileged to work not just with JVT, but with so many of them, and I see every day the value they add and how they are helping us all to get through the pandemic.

The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of testing. The figure is not 300 million; the 300 million lateral flow tests were in December, but for the month of January we have planned at least 400 million, which is four times as many as in the original pre-omicron plan. That makes us confident that we have the lateral flow tests we need. The university sector and the education sector more broadly, including schools and colleges, rightly have a separate supply line. It is still run through my Department, but we work very closely with the Department for Education to make sure that the sector has the supply that it needs.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for responding to questions for an hour.

Points of Order

1.9 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. An email from Mr Speaker has just arrived in our offices. I understand the key issue is that he has been contacted by MI5, and is now warning Members of Parliament that an agent of the Chinese Government has been active here in Parliament—working with a Member of Parliament—obviously to subvert the processes here. As a Member of Parliament who was sanctioned by the Chinese Government, as others were, this is a matter of grave concern to me. I therefore rise to make three important points.

First, will this now lead to a serious overhaul of the accreditation procedures here in the House of Commons? They are clearly too slack if these people get in, either through all-party parliamentary groups or with individuals.

Is it possible that we will have a statement from Mr Speaker, from the Chair, about the risks? I am one of those who has done a lot to try to help Hong Kong Chinese who are fleeing the Communist regime. We have the names and numbers of people here in the UK, which leaves me worrying that some of them have been accessed by such an individual. That would put their lives and families at risk, and I am deeply concerned, because my activities may well have been traced, as well as those of my colleagues and friends.

I understand the latest news is that this individual is not to be deported and no further action is to be taken. How can a foreign, despotic and despicable power, which is hellbent on reducing many people to penury, put somebody into this mother of Parliaments and that individual have nothing done to them other than not being allowed into Parliament? That is surely not good enough. Could there be a statement from the Government on what they plan to do and, with respect, a statement from Mr Speaker from the Chair?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for giving me forward notice of it. As he knows, it is not the policy of the Chair to comment in detail on any security matters, and I will certainly not be doing so today. As for any statement either from the Chair or, indeed, from a Minister, I have been given no notification whatsoever. Should that change, I am certain that Members will be notified in the usual way.

On the third point, we do not discuss the detail of security issues on the Floor of the House. However, I assure the right hon. Gentleman that the House authorities

are in regular contact with the appropriate Government agencies on this matter, and we will update our advice and activities as necessary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his point of order.

There is such danger and concern for us in the House. Mr Deputy Speaker, have you had the opportunity to find out whether knowledge of the integration of a Chinese spy in this House has been conveyed to other Administrations in the United Kingdom, including the Northern Ireland Assembly? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that we are accepting people from Hong Kong, and Northern Ireland will be doing so, too. I want to make sure that people are safe. With that in mind, have you or the House been made aware that the Northern Ireland Assembly, for instance, has been made aware of this matter?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I have not been made aware of how this information has been disseminated, other than the email that Sir Iain Duncan Smith has just spoken about. I am absolutely certain that all parts of the United Kingdom will be made aware in the dialogue that takes place between the devolved Administrations and the Government.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is the sort of grey-zone interference we now anticipate and expect from China but, given the fact that it has happened to this Parliament, there must be a sense of urgency from the Government. Having heard your comments today, I am grateful that you are taking this matter very seriously indeed, but could I encourage and endorse the request for a statement on this before the close of play today, so that we can understand its ramifications and impact and what the Government and, indeed, Parliament intend to do about it?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The Treasury Bench will have heard what he has had to say. As I said earlier, should a statement be made, the House will be informed in the usual manner. I know that all right hon. and hon. Members will be very concerned about the content of the email, and I am sure the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) will pass on to the relevant Ministers the comments she has heard today from the Treasury Bench.

Smart Motorways

TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

[Relevant Documents: Third Report of the Transport Committee, Rollout and safety of smart motorways, HC 26, and the Government Response, HC 1020.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I will remind Members of the procedure for Select Committee statements, because it is still fairly new. The Chair of the Transport Committee, Huw Merriman, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Mr Merriman to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in the questioning.

1.15 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am very pleased to be able to make this statement, and not just to commend a set of recommendations from the Transport Committee to the House, but to welcome the acceptance of every one of them by the Government. In so doing, I would like to thank my predecessors as Chair of the Committee. Back in 2016, when I was a member of the Committee, the then Chair, Dame Louise Ellman, made a series of recommendations that were not accepted by the Government. Those calls were correct back in 2016, and if they had been accepted, I contend, we would have been in a better place. In 2019 my predecessor as Chair, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), continued to shine a light on some of the failings of smart motorways. These recommendations are therefore the result of the endeavours of three successive Transport Committees. I would like to thank not only the Chairs, but the members and staff of the Committee, for their tireless work and commitment over the past six years—I see that my Committee Clerk is at the Table, keeping a watchful eye.

By way of explanation, all smart motorways have design and technology that helps to control the flow and behaviour of traffic, but there are three types that differ in how they treat the hard shoulder. First, all-lane running motorways do not have a hard shoulder at all but rely on a series of emergency refuge areas for stranded motorists. In 2019 there were 141 miles of all-lane running motorway, with a fatality rate, measured from 2015 to 2019 per 100 million vehicle miles, of 0.12%. Secondly, controlled motorways have a permanent hard-shoulder. In 2019 they accounted for 141 miles, with a fatality rate of 0.07%. Thirdly, there are dynamic hard shoulder motorways, where the hard shoulder is switched to a lane at busy times of day. In 2019 there were 63 miles of this design, with a fatality rate of 0.09%. The remaining 1,500 miles or so of conventional motorway has a hard shoulder but no smart design. It has a fatality rate of 0.16%.

The data between 2015 and 2019 therefore suggests that smart motorways have lower fatality rates than conventional motorways. However, taking 2019 on its own, when more smart motorways had been rolled out, the reverse is true. Of the three smart motorway designs, all-lane running had the highest fatality rate.

The Committee launched its inquiry in February last year and reported in November. The Government shared their response with the Committee this week. In the response, the Government agreed to the following key recommendations: first, to pause the roll-out of all-lane running motorways yet to commence construction until five years of data is available for those built before 2020; and secondly, to pause the conversion of dynamic hard shoulder motorways to all-lane running motorways and revisit the case for controlled motorways.

Thirdly, the Government agreed to retrofit emergency refuge areas to existing all-lane running motorways to make them no further than 1 mile apart—the Government have announced £390 million of funding for this. Fourthly, they agreed to grant powers to the Office of Rail and Road, the roads regulator, to evaluate the Government smart motorways project plan. Starting this year, the regulator will report on progress annually and carry out an evaluation of stopped vehicle detection technology and other safety measures.

Fifthly, the Government agreed to introduce an emergency corridor manoeuvre into the highway code to help emergency services and traffic patrol officers to assess incidents, subject to consultation; and sixthly, to investigate the granting of new road safety powers to the roads regulator before changes to design or operational standards are implemented on our motorways and key roads; and finally, to revisit the entire business case and rationale for smart motorway conversion.

The headline is, of course, the pausing of new smart motorways, but during this time, the Government and National Highways will not just be evaluating whether smart motorways are safe enough to meet our high standards. For the 141 miles that are all lane running, they will be retrofitting emergency refuge areas, stopped vehicle detection technology, and CCTV technology to make these smart motorways safer than they are at present.

It is on this retrofitting exercise that I wish to reflect, and I suggest that the lesson must be learned. In the six years that I have been following this project, I have been struck by the focus on creating capacity in the motorway network. That is understandable. Traffic on the strategic road network is projected to increase by up to two thirds over the next 30 years. Ministers and National Highways have argued that a failure to deliver extra capacity, such as can be done via removing the hard shoulder, would cause congestion that could ultimately cause drivers to switch from motorways on to less safe local roads.

However, there is another set of targets and statistics that needs more focus. National Highways has a target of zero harm, by which it aims to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on the strategic road network to a level approaching zero by 2040. As part of that commitment, there is a target to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on the road network by 50% in 2025, compared with the baseline figure of 2005 to 2009. I see conflicts in this target, just as I saw flaws in the roll-out of smart motorways. Let me give a couple of examples.

First, back in 2016, the Committee was assured that stopped vehicle detection technology would be fitted going forward. By 2019, only 18% of all-lanes running motorways had this incorporated. Secondly, we recommended that smart motorways should adopt the

[*Huw Merriman*]

specification used in the M42 pilot, with emergency refuge areas every 500 metres. However, these are now typically spaced every 2.5 km on all-lane running motorways. It therefore comes as no surprise that 40% of all breakdowns on those motorways occur on a live lane, because at 2.5 km intervals, it takes 75 seconds to reach an emergency refuge area driving at 60 miles an hour, versus the 30 seconds it would have taken had our spacing recommendation been followed. It also follows that, on average, it takes 17 minutes to reach a motorist stranded on a live lane. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that 79% of drivers interviewed by the RAC are concerned that they would not reach such a refuge area.

The upshot is that, instead of drivers using less congested smart motorways and coming off more dangerous local roads, we are faced with the opposite—drivers not feeling safe using smart motorways and moving on to those less safe local roads. This could have been avoided had equal emphasis been placed on safety technology. Instead, the roads were reopened before such measures had been completed. When the Committee put this to the chief executive of the agency in 2019, he maintained that drivers wanted to try the road once the tarmac had been delivered. This culture of capacity first and safety mitigation later needs to be eradicated. I believe that it will be, and I welcome the response of the current chief executive of the agency to our report. He could have been very defensive. Instead, he assured the Committee in his response that he would take on board the recommendations.

I recognise that, for some, this report and its recommendations do not go far enough. Some would like to see the hard shoulder brought back immediately. To those I have this to say. First, hard shoulders also kill. This is why it can be argued that all-lane running motorways have a lower fatality rate than conventional motorways with a hard shoulder. Secondly, the new lane of a smart motorway cannot be just turned back to the hard shoulder without substantial engineering works. This would take years. Thirdly, closing the motorway could cause chaos on local roads where the fatality rate is that much greater. However, with the commitment to revisit the business case and the safety performance over the coming years, this may be an action that is required in the years to come.

I can assure the House that the Transport Committee will continue to monitor the delivery of these recommendations. One of the less reported measures is the granting of powers to the Office of Rail and Road to give more independence. Currently, the regulator does not have the powers over road safety in the same way that it does over rail. Indeed, of the regulator's 350 employees, only 19 focus on roads; the rest focus on rail. This balance will need to change, but I agree with the Government that we need to get the inclusion of regulation right. With every new road, there will be a danger. We cannot use this as a reason to halt road building.

I am delighted that the Government have accepted the Transport Committee's recommendations. It demonstrates that Select Committees can not only scrutinise, but see reason and reasonable recommendations turned into policy. I thank the Secretary of State for Transport, the Roads Minister Baroness Vere, and the Minister who is

here today—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison)—for doing so. Thank you for allowing me to make this statement, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am happy to take questions from Members.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Labour party has long warned about the serious flaws with smart motorways, but it is thanks to the dedication of bereaved families and the hon. Gentleman, the Chair of the Transport Committee, and his Committee that the roll-out has been paused at all. Does he share my assessment that alongside the botched roll-out, the failure to install critical technology, which can, for instance, identify stopped vehicles on smart motorways, is absolutely scandalous? Does he believe that lives have been lost as a result?

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his points and for being very kind about the work of the Committee. It has been a frustration for the Committee that, on matters such as stopped vehicle detection technology, assurances were given to the Committee in 2016 that those would be delivered but that did not occur. In my view, that is one of the greater failures. It also points to a defensive attitude and a culture of building first and implementing safety second. As he will know, it is very hard to implement that technology once a road is open.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I congratulate the Committee on its work and thank the Government for having listened to the recommendations so positively. Will my hon. Friend put a little more flesh on the statistics? Can he give us some actual figures—if not now, then subsequently—on what point-nought-nought-something per cent. means in actual lives lost? Do those statistics show any significant differences between hours during daylight and after dark?

Huw Merriman: I thank my right hon. Friend for his words. Like him, I think that the Government deserve a huge amount of credit for accepting all the recommendations. He will know from chairing a Select Committee that it can sometimes be disappointing to receive the responses, but this one was fantastic. He makes the correct point that this is all about the statistics. There is a perception that smart motorways are not safe, and we have to get that right, otherwise people will not use them. If we use the data from 2019, we see that there is indeed a better fatality rate, at least. The serious collision rate is perhaps a little more patchy. If we then take 2019, we see that the reverse is true. For that reason, we called for a pause until we can get to the bottom of that.

My right hon. Friend asked about the statistical measure—for example, I referred to the 0.12% figure on all-lane running motorways. It is measured per 100 million vehicle miles. It is important to recognise that this is on a proportionate basis. It does not compare a small amount of the network with a much larger one in terms of fatalities. I do not have the data on day and night, but I will write to him with that.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I commend the Chair, members and staff of the Transport Committee and, unusually from my lips, I also welcome the Government's response in accepting its recommendations.

My question is about the promises that were made to install stopped vehicle detection technology on the existing stretches of smart motorways. I ask because, in 2019, only 18% of all-lane running motorways had had stopped vehicle detection technology advanced cameras installed. The Transport Committee has now been told that this roll-out will not be complete until September 2022—that is six years behind schedule. What confidence can the Committee, the House and the general public have in the ability of National Highways—which many of us know as Highways England, as it was previously—to realistically deliver on this and other road safety improvements in future?

Huw Merriman: The hon. Gentleman—my friend—is right to praise the role of members of the Committee. He is a great one of us, and I thank him for everything he has done in this regard. He is also right to point out the target delivery date. That was one frustration that the Committee experienced. There had been a commitment to roll out the stopped vehicle detection technology for the whole of the existing network by 2023, but the date was then brought forward by a year, to 2022. That was regarded as a positive—which it is—but, as the hon. Gentleman will know, we had received a commitment that from 2016 onwards all new smart motorways would have that technology, so we regarded the date as not one year early, but six years late.

The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on that issue, because we understand—we will look into this further, as will the Office of Rail and Road—that once the road has been built, installing the technology when the lanes are running will be much more difficult, time-consuming and expensive than it would have been had it been done in the first place. I am also intrigued by the question of whether there is enough technology in place to be delivered, from a supply perspective. I think that the hon. Gentleman and I will work in the Committee to investigate that further.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his Committee on a superb report, and on persuading the Government to change their mind. The Committee is an exemplar of how a really effective Select Committee can persuade a Government to change their policy.

It seems to me that retrofitting emergency refuge areas is the most important way of addressing the safety of all lane running motorways. I welcome the Government's commitment to spending £390 million on an extra 150 emergency areas—at just over £2.5 million a go—by 2025, but they have made no commitment to retrofitting the remainder, and are saying that that must be considered as part of road investment strategy 3. Is my hon. Friend as worried as I am that the Government might try to wriggle out of retrofitting the remainder after 2025?

Huw Merriman: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I agree with his first point, but I have learnt lessons from this as well. I have learnt, for instance, that the way to engage with Government is not only to scrutinise—which the Government would expect of those of us on the Back Benches—but to make the case with reason, and to work alongside them. I commend the Government in that regard, because previous Governments

have perhaps been less willing to engage, and I believe there are Ministers in the Department for Transport who might have shared the concerns that my hon. Friend and I have had.

As for the point about emergency refuge areas, I share that concern, too. I believe that the spacing should be identical on every single stretch. If the £390 million does not cover that, more funding will be needed. What is key with smart motorways is a uniform set of rules that people understand so that they know they will be able to reach an emergency bay. We will be keeping a careful eye on this to ensure that it is delivered, as it would have been already if the pilot had been followed. That is the frustrating aspect of the project: it has just slipped. Corners have been cut, and things have not been delivered. We will focus on that, and ensure that we hold the Government and, indeed, National Highways to account.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Committee for the report. I, too, want to focus on refuges. It is great that the Government have adopted certain changes, but the proposal to reduce the spacing to 500 metres—which I believe was the original concept behind smart motorways—has apparently not been accepted. I assume that the Committee heard evidence from the RAC and the AA; I should like to know whether they recommended 500 metres, a mile or some other measure, and what the cost would be if the spacing were set at 500 metres throughout the network.

Huw Merriman: I thank the hon. Member. He has completely roasted me. My memory is that we did indeed take evidence to find out what the different bodies felt the best spacing would be, which is how we arrived at the “three quarters of a mile to a mile” recommendation. The Government have said that the three quarters of a mile should be introduced where it is possible, but 1 mile is probably their standard approach. As for the cost of returning to the original M4 pilot spacing, we will look into that and write to the hon. Member. This is something that we will have to do pursuant to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) about the costing of the Government's £390 million commitment, but I will do the same calculation for the hon. Gentleman's 500 metres.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I had a very sad constituency case in which a hard shoulder had been opened up because of congestion and a car broke down on it. Some of the people were able to leave the vehicle and go over the barrier, but there was a disabled person in the car. By the time someone in the control room had put the red x on, a heavy vehicle had ploughed into the car, killing that person. Does my hon. Friend know whether that situation has changed? Are there still motorways that rely on someone in a control room switching a button to put the x on, or do we have automatic detection on all motorways now?

Huw Merriman: My heart goes out not just to the family to whom my hon. Friend referred, but to all who lose their lives on the roads. In any event, where there is a hard shoulder, it is where one in 12 motorway deaths occur. To those who point out that we need a hard shoulder, I say that they are also dangerous.

[Huw Merriman]

My hon. Friend asked whether the technology is in place for automatic detection. No. That is what we need to see delivered by the end of this year, if that is to be. We also have to make sure that the CCTV operates. The *Daily Mail* highlighted that. It had somebody go under cover and work in the CCTV control rooms, and it was clear from the evidence that it was not being monitored.

By putting all that together in one package—the emergency refuge areas to ensure that people can get in faster; the stopped vehicle detection technology, which means that the lane is closed within a minute; and the CCTV operation and proper staffing—we will make motorways even safer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Further to the comment from the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), I have also had the opportunity to listen to a very distressing emergency call from a father panicking about where to pull over the car safely after breaking down on the motorway. I could hear the impact of another car hitting the car he was in with his children. I thank the Chair and the Select Committee for all that they have done, but I have grave concerns about the safety implications. Does the Committee believe that the emergency refuge area will address such dangers? As the roll-out has been paused for five years, has the Committee looked at what can be done in the interim period—in that five-year pause—to improve safety?

Huw Merriman: Again, I add my condolences to those whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned. The emergency refuge area, as I said, is absolutely crucial. Statistically, if a car is travelling at 60 mph when it breaks down and the driver needs to get off, it will take 75 seconds under the 2.5 km spacing. If we were to bring that down to the 1 km mentioned, we would see it reduced to about 30 seconds. That could save lives, so I really believe that the emergency refuge area is absolutely crucial and integral.

The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on the pause and what it could mean for delivering the technology. Rather than just resting on our hands and looking at data, which is absolutely required, and then making a decision on whether to start building again, I hope that

all the effort that was going to be put into building new smart motorways will now be put into retrofitting these safety measures. I assure him that, as a Committee, we will continue to monitor that.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I congratulate the Chairman of the Select Committee on how he has answered questions. He has made the point that even motorways with hard shoulders are dangerous. In my time, a third of the deaths on motorways were secondary deaths. If a running motorway stops running, the traffic jam goes backwards at 30 mph. People need to be aware of that, and they also need to be aware that if traffic is kept off motorways and put on other roads, the dangers are significantly greater than the difference between the different styles of motorways, with or without recessed emergency refuge areas. Will my hon. Friend emphasise to the Government that, as well as the pause, making sure that motorways attract as much traffic as possible should be a key Government priority?

Huw Merriman: I thank the Father of the House. He is right to focus on that. It is sometimes a very difficult discussion to have because we are talking about the economic case, but as he rightly says, motorways are the safest part of our road network, and getting more traffic on to the motorways saves lives. There is an economic case. It has been estimated that for every pound spent, £3 is delivered by having additional space on motorways. It is also true to say that might be just for the first year, as when people know there is a better route to travel, more people travel on it, but my hon. Friend is right that the more people who can get on to motorways, the better. That, ultimately and fundamentally, is why the Government's response is spot on. They recognise that there are concerns with smart motorways and that people may not use them and go on to more dangerous roads. We need to send the message out that smart motorways are safe. They can be safer, but people should continue to use our motorway network, because it is the safest network of all of our roads system.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his assiduous and thorough answers, which the House has appreciated.

Backbench Business

Bahraini Political Prisoners

1.40 pm

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

That this House has considered the ongoing detention of Bahraini political prisoners.

First, I put on record my appreciation of the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this important debate on the ongoing detention of Bahraini political prisoners. In particular I thank all Members who will contribute this afternoon, given the speed at which today's debate was arranged. Although arranged in haste, the debate is very timely, coinciding as it does with the 190th day that one of Bahrain's most prominent political prisoners, Dr Abduljalil al-Singace, has refused food in protest at his treatment in the notorious Jau prison, where he has spent more than a decade for his part in supporting the pro-democracy Arab spring uprising in 2011. Dr al-Singace is one of an estimated 1,400 political prisoners being held in Jau prison, 500 of whom have been sentenced to 20 years or more. I will speak more about Dr al-Singace and other political prisoners later.

Let me declare an interest at the outset: I am the Scottish National party spokesperson on international human rights, as well as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have very close contacts with Bahrain, and it would dispute those figures on the number of people utterly and completely. Bahrain does not have political prisoners; they are all prisoners because they have committed a crime.

Brendan O'Hara: I absolutely understand the right hon. Gentleman's very close connection to Bahrain. Indeed, he has just returned from a trip to Bahrain, as was declared in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I look forward to his contribution, and he is at liberty to explain to the House exactly why the rest of the world is wrong and there are no political prisoners following the uprising in 2011.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I have listened with interest to the exchange. What has not been explained to me is why, when there is a general release of prisoners, certain categories are never released. That might be a definition of political prisoner.

Brendan O'Hara: I think the Father of the House hits the nail squarely on the head, and I look forward to his contribution.

I applied for the debate not just so that Members across the House could mark the events of February 2011, but to ensure that those pro-democracy campaigners who demand freedom and political reform are not forgotten. It is of equal importance that the debate gives us the opportunity to question the Government and ask once again why they continue to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in Bahrain while sending millions of pounds of taxpayers' cash to the Gulf state via the highly secretive Gulf strategy fund.

On 14 February 2011, having been inspired by events in Tunisia and Egypt, tens of thousands of Bahraini citizens took to the streets to demand political reform. Rather than engaging with their citizens, the Bahraini Government responded with a brutal crackdown, even going so far as to call in a Saudi-led intervention force from neighbouring states to help crush what had been hitherto an overwhelmingly peaceful uprising. In that crackdown, at least 19 protesters were killed, some tortured to death while in state custody, while thousands more were rounded up and detained by the authorities, with the leaders sentenced to life in jail. By any standard, the response of the state was brutal, uncompromising and wholly disproportionate. More than a decade on, Bahrain had one of the most repressed civil societies in the world, with no political opposition and without a free press. Recently, Reporters Without Borders ranked Bahrain 168th of the 180 countries in the world press freedom index. It was no surprise to find that *The Economist* placed Bahrain 150th of 167 countries in its 2020 global democracy index.

Despite the brutal repression of the pro-democracy movement and the continued suppression of basic human rights in Bahrain, the UK remains one of its staunchest allies, making a mockery of any claim we may have had to be pursuing an ethical foreign policy, because states that pursue such a policy do not bankroll regimes that stand accused of widespread human rights abuses, including the use of torture and the execution of political dissidents. I suspect that the Minister knows that already. I am afraid that the old excuse of, "We are leading by example", or, "Things would be so much worse if we weren't there", will simply no longer wash, because after a decade of Britain love-bombing Bahrain, there has been no improvement in its behaviour.

I will give the UK Government this, though: they are nothing if not loyal to their friends. Even when they were slashing humanitarian aid to help eradicate hunger and disease in some of the poorest countries on the planet, they actually increased the amount of money they gave to their allies in the Gulf, including Bahrain. A freedom of information request by the Scottish National party revealed that the Gulf strategy fund was increased by 145% last year. That came in the same year that Amnesty International said:

"The Bahraini state has crushed the hopes and expectations raised by the mass protests of 10 years ago, reacting with a brutal crackdown over the subsequent decade that has been facilitated by the shameful silence of Bahrain's Western allies, especially the UK and the US."

While the UK sends more and more taxpayers' cash to Bahrain, the old repression and detention of political prisoners in Bahrain continues. Arguably, the most urgent of these cases is that of Dr al-Singace, the 59-year-old academic and human rights activist who was initially detained in 2010, having returned from speaking at a conference in the House of Lords. He was subsequently released but was re-arrested in 2011, in the aftermath of the popular uprising. Following his detention, Dr al-Singace, a professor of engineering who is disabled and requires either crutches or a wheelchair, was subjected to physical and mental torture, as well as sexual abuse, at the hands of the Bahraini authorities. He was charged with plotting to overthrow the Government and given a life sentence.

[Brendan O'Hara]

The verdict was immediately condemned by human rights activists and non-governmental organisations, with the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists condemning the Bahraini Government for

“a stunning disregard for due process and basic human rights.”

The French NGO Reporters Without Borders declared that his only crime was

“freely expressing opinions contrary to those of the government”.

He has languished in jail for more than a decade, and in July, exactly 190 days ago, he went on hunger strike in protest at the Bahraini authorities' confiscation of an academic book he had been working on for the past four years of incarceration. In October last year, 46 parliamentarians signed an open letter to the Foreign Secretary asking her to intervene on behalf of Dr al-Singace and his family, but I am sorry to say that nothing has been done and the Government have remained largely silent.

Of course, there are many, many more political prisoners being held in Bahrain's jails simply for voicing or organising their opposition to the regime. Another case worthy of highlighting is that of 74-year-old Hassan Mushaima, the former leader of Bahrain's opposition, who is also serving a life sentence, having been jailed in the aftermath of the pro-democracy uprising in 2011. He, too, has been subject to torture and now suffers from medical complications resulting from it. Just before Christmas I met his son Ali, who is working tirelessly to secure his father's unconditional release. In December, Ali held his own hunger strike outside the Bahraini embassy here in London for 23 days, demanding the release of all political prisoners, including his father.

I know how grateful Ali was for the support shown by Members of this House, particularly those who visited him in the freezing cold days in December. It was meeting Ali on the steps of the Bahraini embassy that was in many ways the catalyst for today's debate, because I promised him that I would seek to raise his father's case on the Floor of the House if he agreed to give up his hunger strike before he caused irreparable damage to himself. I am hugely grateful to those who have helped me to keep that promise to Ali and his family, and I wish him well as he recovers from his ordeal.

While I highlight the situation facing Hassan Mushaima and Dr al-Singace, there are others whose predicament is even worse—the prisoners on death row who have exhausted all legal remedies available to them and are now at imminent risk of execution. The executions are only pending ratification by the king, and painful experience tells us that they could be carried out any day with little or no warning given to the families. Of the 26 people awaiting execution in Bahrain, no fewer than 12 have been convicted of political charges. A recent report by the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy and Reprieve found that executions in Bahrain have increased by a factor of 10 since the UK began its financial assistance through the integrated activity fund in 2017.

Just this morning, Human Rights Watch published its annual report. One look at the section on Bahrain shows that things are not getting any better and that the UK's attempts at gentle persuasion have failed miserably. However, can we expect the Government to change tack? Of course we all understand that much of this is wrapped up in the UK still wanting to appear an

important player on the world stage, coupled with a desperate attempt to secure a trade deal with the countries that make up the Gulf Co-operation Council—something, anything, that will offset the damage done to the UK economy by Brexit. But surely we cannot allow a desire for a trade deal to trample over the moral obligation we have to call out human rights abusers, no matter how deep their pockets or how lucrative the terms on offer. If we choose to go down this road of being a champion for democracy and human rights, but only when it does not upset our rich and powerful allies, then in reality we are not champions of human rights at all.

Will the Minister raise directly with the Bahraini authorities the cases of Dr al-Singace and Hassan Mushaima, and the other political prisoners, and demand justice for those jailed for their part in exercising the basic human right of freedom of speech? Will the Government finally abandon their obviously failed policy of trying to love-bomb Bahrain into improving its awful human rights record by putting some real pressure on the regime to change its ways? That could start by suspending the Gulf strategy fund and establishing a public inquiry into whether that fund has supported regimes with poor human rights records.

The UK could stop funding Bahrain's Ministry of Interior and the ombudsman—bodies that are involved in torture and the whitewashing of abuses against political prisoners. The UK could end all joint training programmes with the Bahraini military until such time as Bahrain allows access to independent human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and UN human rights organisations such as the working group on arbitrary detention. The UK could call for a UN-led commission to investigate torture within Bahrain—one that permits the UN special rapporteur on torture access to its prisons.

In short, there is so much the United Kingdom could do, but is not doing, to call out human rights abuses by its friends. I believe that that refusal to act is doing the United Kingdom enormous reputational damage.

1.53 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I ought to say that the reason I stood late in the exchanges on the Transport Committee statement was that I did not want to come in early. In the role of Father of the House, one often catches the Speaker's or Deputy Speaker's eye, but there are occasions when I think it is more appropriate not to come in early, and that was one of them.

When I was first elected to the House of Commons, I became a foot soldier for the Women's Campaign for Soviet Jewry, and I was allocated a young man who could not leave the USSR. Several years later, he could. I am not saying that my efforts were dominant in that decision, but it is only when people start making individual initiatives, or protests sometimes, that people pay attention. To those who are listening in Bahrain, there are a number of things one can say about Bahrain that are in their favour. It is probably the only Arab country where a senior Minister was sacked because of a human rights abuse—although that was some time ago. It is also true that in 2006 the human rights organisations said that Bahrain was making significant progress. No human rights organisation has said the same since then, and in the past five years things have got significantly worse.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) will be able to talk about his views on whether there are political prisoners or not. On Bahrain National Day, there is usually an amnesty, and the human rights organisations asked that some of the political prisoners be included. None were. If one wants to make a distinction between what is and is not political, that is a useful way of looking at it.

One of the things we said against Bahrain is on the use of torture. If a number of people are convicted only on their own confessions, and then make substantiated allegations of ill-treatment while in custody, one has to say that Bahrain has much further progress to make. Its legal and justice systems will work better when torture is ended. I will not go into a lot of detail, in part because the suddenness of this debate—I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for making it possible—means that I have two other meetings between 2 pm and 3.30 pm on fire safety in residential leaseholds, so I have a responsibility to try to fulfil those commitments. I will leave it to others to make the detailed points on individuals.

I was asked some time back, when Guantanamo Bay was opened up as a prison, whether a human rights organisation, Reprieve, should start taking up some of the cases—not whether people were innocent or not, but whether people should have proper legal representation. I said that it should. To begin with, people would not understand, because obviously everyone who has been taken to Guantanamo must be guilty of some terrible crime, but in time people would realise that a lot of people had been swept up who should not have been there, and even those who should be there ought still to have the chance of legal representation. I am glad that Reprieve reports that one person in Guantanamo Bay has now been allocated for release. I hope that some country will take that person; if the Americans do not want to go on holding them, they ought to have a chance at living at peace elsewhere.

I am not a middle east specialist, but I do understand the consequences of history, and in Bahrain there is a majority community with little access to power or responsibility. That may be one of the underlying reasons why the rulers of Bahrain are resisting doing things that would make life in Bahrain safer, more secure and better for all. I commend to people the Wikipedia article on human rights in Bahrain; it would be useful to those who want to take an interest in the subject. As I conclude, I say to the Bahrainis: “You are not the worst country in the world, but it wouldn’t take many steps for you to become one of the best countries in the world. Please do.”

1.58 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) for securing today’s debate, for visiting the hunger strike outside the Bahraini embassy and for his support for Hassan Mushaima and his plight in prison in Bahrain.

I also went along to support that strike, and as a result I received a letter—a quite substantial letter—from the Bahraini embassy on 24 December. I quote one line from it:

“No person is, or can be, prosecuted for such activities,”—

that is, freedom of expression and other issues—

“and no person is arrested or in custody in Bahrain in connection with peaceful political activity.”

Since the Bahraini Government have clearly made that statement, they must live up to it, and that means they must be prepared to answer the questions that various United Nations and other human rights bodies wish to put to them. They cannot simply make such a bold statement and then not be able to substantiate it.

Indeed, the speeches already made indicate that human rights in Bahrain are in an appalling situation, and this is not new. The first time I ever met human rights activists from Bahrain was in 1986 at a United Nations conference I was attending in Copenhagen, and they talked to me about the situation they were facing. I hope that today our British Government will be able to say that we do put first human rights, democracy and the right of freedom of speech—all the things enshrined in the universal declaration—before we start military exercises or military training and providing financial support to this particular regime.

The United Nations Human Rights Council registered its very deep concern that, between 17 April and 5 May only last year, there were reports of 64 cases of torture in prison in Bahrain. There has been a denial of access for human rights monitors and human rights organisations to Bahrain, which has been the very consistent pattern for a very long time. There are also significant concerns, which have not been mentioned so far, about the rights and living standards of the very large number of migrant workers who live and work in Bahrain and keep the economy going.

International visitors have often drawn attention to the living standards and conditions of migrant workers, as they have in other Gulf states, and I think we should be on the side of those migrant workers, who after all do keep the economy going. It is to the credit of Lewis Hamilton and others that they used their substantial media presence to highlight human rights abuses in Bahrain when they were there for the Formula 1 race. The best response of Formula 1 would be to say that it will refuse to go countries where there are significant human rights abuses, rather than expecting drivers individually to make such statements.

There is also the concept of mass trials that go on in Bahrain: 167 people were sentenced in one day in 2019, and 26 are on death row. As the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), pointed out in his speech, many of the people put on trial have confessed under torture, duress or pressure to crimes they did not commit, or in some cases could not have committed. That would be illegal in this country and illegal anywhere in Europe through the European convention on human rights. There has to be universal acceptance that, whatever crime somebody is accused of, they have a right to legal representation and a legal presence during the investigation. It is not a very big ask.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who has had to leave to go to another debate in Westminster Hall, particularly asked me to raise the case of Ali al-Hajee, who is serving a 10-year sentence in Jau prison for organising pro-democracy protests. He was subject to severe torture following his arrest in 2013, leaving him with life-changing injuries, and there

[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

was a 75-day hunger strike in prison to support him and others. If the Bahrain Government and embassy are listening to and watching this debate, as I am sure they are, I hope they will bear in mind what I said in quoting from their letter at the start of my remarks. I want an answer on his case, as we do on all the other cases.

I know that time is quite limited and many others wish to speak in this debate, so I will conclude with these thoughts. Bahrain is a member of the United Nations and it is a prosperous place. Bahrain has significant human rights difficulties and problems not unassociated with the relationship of the royal family and the Government of Bahrain with Saudi Arabia and the oppression of democracy protests that has gone on for a long time in Bahrain. Surely to goodness, on this basis alone we should pause all military aid and assistance to Bahrain and pause any support that is given to quasi-Government organisations in Bahrain until it puts its human rights record to rights, because if we support the Bahrain military and police force in their behaviour towards protesters, who are we to complain about abuses that take place?

I am pleased that we are having this debate, and I am pleased by the remarks of the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute and of the Father of the House. When we speak out and take up individual cases, as no doubt other colleagues will, it has an effect and it begins to help. The Bahraini embassy has said that it wants to meet those of us who are concerned about human rights in Bahrain. That is absolutely fine. I am very happy to go along and meet its staff with a list of political prisoners and of people who I believe should not be in prison. They should be subject to the normal rules that the rest of us expect, with an accountable police force, a transparent legal system and prison conditions that do not allow torture or force 12 people into a very small cell, which itself is a torture.

We are here to speak up for justice and human rights around the world, and today our focus is on Bahrain. I hope it is listening.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We now have to have a formal time limit of five minutes.

2.5 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): For nearly 53 years, I have been a good friend and supporter of Bahrain as I have watched it develop quickly to become the vibrant country that it is today. When I was elected to Parliament, I immediately joined the Bahrain all-party parliamentary group, and I have been its chairman for three years. I have visited the island several times, especially for the Manama dialogues, and I have given two lectures on principles and decision making to its diplomatic corps—for the record, no money changed hands.

Bahrain has freedom of religion. On my last visit in November, I visited a synagogue—the only one in the Arabian Gulf, by the way, which I think is enlightened for the region in which Bahrain sits. According to the Bahraini constitution, freedom of opinion and expression are expressly protected, and no person can be prosecuted for such activities. I am certain that nobody is in prison simply for disagreeing with the regime. Many have been

convicted with evidence—which others may suggest has been tampered with—of being involved in terrorism in one way or another. That is exactly the way we act in this country.

It is a standard terrorist tactic for people accused of terrorism to claim that they are being unfairly treated and that the charges against them are politically motivated, as I know from my own experience in Northern Ireland. However, I am very pleased to say that in November 2019, the public prosecutor's office in Bahrain announced the release of 75 prisoners, most of whom claimed that they were in prison for political reasons, so it is not true that so-called political prisoners have not been released. I gather that several prisoners face the death penalty, but their executions are in abeyance, at least for the moment—and, by the way, they all killed security personnel and innocent civilians.

I must point out to the House that Bahrain faces considerable terrorist activity—I have seen the concrete evidence for that. Every state has the right to defend itself against such activities, and Bahrain is no different from us. During my last visit in November, I saw a whole range of weapons that had been confiscated in anti-terrorist operations. They included booby traps, anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles, mines, rifles and heavy machine guns. From my own experience, I can tell colleagues that some of the ordnance that I saw was very heavy stuff indeed. I also saw a large noticeboard in the police headquarters that seemed to have well over 100 photographs of young policemen and quite a few policewomen who had been murdered by terrorists.

I had been aware before my last visit that Bahrain faced considerable threats from terrorism, but not on the scale of which I saw the evidence last November. The main terrorism that Bahrain faces is inspired from Iran, which is doing all it can to encourage rebellion in the state; it is also where a lot of the weaponry I saw originated from.

Last May, ambassadors from China, France, Italy, Germany and Oman and our British ambassador, as well as the American chargé d'affaires, went to Jau, the main prison in Bahrain. Following that, our own highly experienced ambassador, Roddy Drummond, tweeted:

"I was pleased to visit Jau prison on 3 May with other Ambassadors. We were shown a well-run facility, with good medical provision and measures against Covid, with vaccinations offered to all prisoners. I welcome this initiative by the authorities to be more transparent."

Bahrain is unfairly portrayed by many who often fail to mention the considerable terrorist threat and the many security personnel who have been murdered. True, there have been mistakes, and Bahrain is not totally there, but, if it has a human rights problem, may I point out that several in the neighbourhood have far worse such records and yet are not pilloried in the same way? The island lives in a volatile neighbourhood, and it is trying its very best with decency to look after its people—all of them.

2.10 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing time for the debate and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing it. I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: namely, that I am a director

of the board of the Council for Arab-British Understanding and an officer of a number of the all-party parliamentary groups relative to the Gulf, including the one chaired by the hon. Member.

I thank the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his contribution to the debate, which illustrated rather well the challenge that we all have—I include the Government—in this area: maintaining the appropriate balance. My consideration of the situation in Bahrain leads me to be most concerned about human rights abuses. We see the comments of Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and other human rights organisations that have taken an interest in Bahrain, and those people have no axe to grind other than because they have a concern for human rights.

I say to the Minister that, in striking the balance—as we must do—the Government have some way to go in getting it right. I understand the strategic importance of Gulf countries to the United Kingdom and of engagement with them. I also understand that sometimes we have to engage with a long-handled spoon, as it were, but I suggest that engagement is worthwhile only if we can see progress and a benefit from it, especially in the maintenance in human rights, and that the money we spend on countries such as Bahrain must show a rather better return than we have seen so far.

It concerns me that, last year, the Home Secretary met Bahrain's Minister of the Interior, Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa, in the wake of an appallingly violent attack against political prisoners in Jau prison in which inmates were subjected to mass torture and enforced disappearance at the hands of the authority. The meeting also took place following the arrest and abuse of 13 children who were subjected to threats of rape and electric shock. The United Kingdom ambassador to Bahrain, Roddy Drummond, also met Sheikh Rashid just a few weeks ago.

Members of the House have heard me speak on numerous occasions about the case for Magnitsky sanctions in relation to several officers of the Chinese Communist party. I give every credit to the Government for their progress on that, especially in relation to those who are active in the Xinjiang region. However, I must say to the Minister that we undermine our good work on China and other regimes if we do not approach Governments in places such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain with equal vigour. That is what I mean in talking about balance.

In replying to the debate, will the Minister address the reasons for the Government refusing to act against Minister Rashid al-Khalifa for his role in overseeing appalling human rights violations and a culture of impunity? That is a man who was responsible for the bloodiest days of the crackdown in 2011. Protestors have been detained and tortured at the hands of his officials.

2.14 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The all-party parliamentary group on human rights, which I co-chair, has been concerned about serious and systematic human rights violations in Bahrain for decades. Then and now, the following have been at the heart of the problems in Bahrain. The Executive retain far too much control, their powers remain largely unchecked and the majority Shi'a Muslim population feel discriminated against by the Sunni, who govern.

There is no genuine political opposition, no press freedom and few independent NGOs are able to operate freely in the country.

The Bahraini Government undertook cosmetic reforms to convince the outside world that things have improved, including the establishment of oversight mechanisms, the extension of the alternative sentencing law to all prisoners, and the development of a national action plan for human rights. But the reality is, sadly, all too apparent to those who scratch the surface. The continued arbitrary detention and inhumane treatment of prisoners of conscience—that is, those in prison solely for peacefully exercising their right to freedom of expression, assembly and/or association—serve to illustrate the true situation in Bahrain.

Bob Stewart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Margaret Ferrier: No.

Like many colleagues, I visited Ali Mushaima during his hunger strike in front of the Bahraini embassy to highlight the plight of prisoners of conscience such as his father Hassan and Abduljalil al-Singace. I, too, got the same letter from the embassy.

The all-party group on human rights has been trying for some years to promote a genuine and substantive political dialogue between the Bahraini authorities and peaceful human rights defenders and opposition activists. Indeed, in 2012, marking the first anniversary of the publication of the Bahrain independent commission of inquiry report—a positive move by the Bahraini King that still needs to be properly followed through—the right hon. Ann Clwyd, the then all-party group chair and former Member for Cynon Valley, brought together such a group on the parliamentary estate to talk and listen to one another. Sadly, however, that did not result in ongoing engagement.

We all want to see a stable and prosperous Bahrain where every citizen can exercise their fundamental rights without fear of persecution, prosecution or detention. That will not happen until the Bahraini authorities engage in good faith with peaceful human rights and opposition activists. The clearest way to indicate their good faith would be by recognising all remaining prisoners of conscience and releasing them unconditionally, followed by initiating national dialogue with a view to establishing a more representative Government structure—one underpinned by the rule of law and respect for human rights.

If the UK Government are a true friend of Bahrain and the Bahraini people, they could help by persuading the Bahraini Government to take stock and embark on such a course of action. The UK Government should immediately stop parroting the line that abuses should be raised with domestic Bahraini oversight bodies. It has become increasingly clear that those bodies are limited in reach and in the interests they are able to serve. Additionally, the UK should stop funding the Bahraini Government's reform agenda given that there has been so little to show for it so far. UK Government officials, including Ministers, need to meet a much wider range of Bahraini interlocutors to hear different perspectives and help to get everyone around the table. The alternative—unsuccessfully attempting to paper over the cracks—will lead only to a situation that none of us wants: growing discontent and instability, potential violence and even greater repression.

[Margaret Ferrier]

Let us take action now while we still can. I hope to meet Bahraini authorities and FCDO officials in the coming months and encourage colleagues to sign early-day motion 835 on human rights in Bahrain to express our collective concern about the situation and support a true path to reform.

2.19 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I very much acknowledge what the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said about terrorism. None of us supports terrorism, but we have to express our concern about the human rights abuses.

I also thank the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for setting the scene so well on this crucial topic. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I am seriously concerned that religious discrimination remains a serious problem for Bahraini civil society and Bahrain's many political prisoners.

Bob Stewart: I understand there are more Shi'a mosques than Sunni mosques in Bahrain. People can worship what they like in Bahrain—they can worship a tree if they like—and, as I have said, there is a synagogue there. I think freedom of religion is extremely well established in Bahrain.

Jim Shannon: I am pleased the right hon. Gentleman is able to say that. Although I acknowledge there have been gigantic steps in the right direction, I will illustrate where the problems are.

We had a Zoom meeting with the hunger strikers, who illustrated the human rights abuses. I was pleased to listen to their concerns, and hopefully in this debate I will be able to express some of my concerns on their behalf. During Bahrain's popular pro-democracy uprising 11 years ago, the regime demolished 38 Shi'a Muslim mosques. Despite promising they would rebuild the mosques, that has yet to occur after more than a decade.

In addition, during Muharram last year—a most important time in the Shi'a Muslim calendar—the Bahraini Government used covid-19 as an excuse to crack down on civil society's freedom of religion and practise of religious rites. I am sorry to say there is an evidence base on the abuse of human rights. I always try to be respectful in what I say in seeking change and that is what I am trying to do today.

During Ashura, the Muslim holiday, slogans were hung on buildings in Shi'a-majority villages across Bahrain. The Government damaged and removed those slogans, and imposed targeted discriminatory policies on Shi'a places of worship—a sheer act of coercion. It is appalling that leading figures in Bahrain, including prominent Shi'a clerics such as Sheikh Ali Salman and Sheikh Muhammad Habib, continue to be held unjustly behind bars in Bahrain. Most religious leaders are serving life sentences in prison for their peaceful role in calling for democracy during the 2011 Arab spring, and they have now been wrongfully deprived of their liberty for over 10 years, which is utterly appalling. I have to put that on record in this House. I call for their release.

Some families have had their Bahraini passports removed, meaning they have no citizenship, due to family members' involvement in peaceful protests. Again, these things are happening. We are saying it very gently, but we have to put it on record and we have to seek change.

A particularly disturbing incident is the Bahraini authorities' violent attack against political prisoners who were staging a sit-in at Jau prison on 17 April 2021, mentioned by the right hon. Members for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute. Following that attack, 64 political prisoners were forcibly disappeared for 19 days and held incommunicado for between 30 and 36 days, during which time they were unable to contact their families or their lawyers, in a flagrant violation of both national and international law.

The evidence base for these facts cannot be ignored. Inmates sometimes remained handcuffed and shackled for over a week and were forced to pray in chains and torn, bloodied clothes. They were also forced to eat, sleep and use the toilet in these conditions. If that is not an abuse of human rights, I want to know what is. This act of control and coercion is utterly shocking, and it must be noted that the entire incident took place during Ramadan, while inmates were fasting. None was given their iftar meal.

I know the Minister is a good man, and I know he will respond to the issues of concern raised in this debate. Given these manifest violations of the fundamental human right to freedom of religion or belief in Bahrain, the Minister and the UK Government must do more to call for the release of imprisoned religious leaders and acknowledge the violations they continue to face. They are an abuse of human rights and an abuse of religious views, and we cannot let that go unnoticed; we must call it out. The UK stated in 2020 that

“Bahrain maintained a positive record on freedom of religion or belief.”

My belief is that that statement must be reconsidered, as the evidential base tells us something very different.

Will the Minister—I conclude with this, Madam Deputy Speaker—acknowledge that Bahrain has contravened the human right to freedom of religion of many political prisoners? I think the evidential base is there. Will he commit to urging his counterparts in that country—we ask them gently and we ask them forcefully—to ensure that those prisoners' immediate and unconditional release from prison is what happens as a result of this debate? That is what we require.

2.25 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on bringing this important matter to the Floor of the House.

Life for citizens living under the Bahraini regime must give all of us who believe in democratic values deep cause for concern. Those who criticise the regime in Bahrain are, as we have heard today, subjected to the most cruel and random treatment, which is an affront to all that is decent: unfair trials of protesters and critics of the regime; ill treatment of detainees which is tantamount to torture; the fabrication of evidence against those in custody; minority groups targeted; the use of the death

penalty; the suppression of freedom of expression; and even reports of rape and electric shock treatments for detainees, some of whom are juveniles. That is the ugly story of life under the current regime in Bahrain.

We are all aware of the Isa Town prison, the only female detention facility in Bahrain, where female prisoners suffer politically motivated human rights violations, such as being denied medical care, physical and psychological abuse, threats of sexual violence and religious discrimination, as well as arbitrary detention and collective punishment. No one should be an apologist for that regime, certainly not from the comfort of the Westminster Benches.

We can also consider the case of Mr al-Singace. We have heard much about Mr al-Singace this afternoon, a 59-year-old academic languishing in prison following his peaceful opposition to Bahrain's dictatorship during the 2011 Arab spring. Having already endured degrading treatment and torture, suffered medical negligence, and endured the indignity of being denied sanitation facilities, he is currently on hunger strike facing a slow death in prison.

What do we hear from the UK Government? We know that they have hosted meetings with Bahraini officials, but they appear to have exercised no influence over the regime and remain a staunch ally. Given that the Government are an ally of that regime, what does that say about the so-called old-fashioned British values we hear about? Whatever action the UK Government are prepared to take against the Bahraini regime and whatever influence they are prepared to bring to bear, that is a choice. To refuse to take any action against the regime, or to refuse to use their influence is also a choice. I fully support early-day motion 578 calling for the UK Government to impose Magnitsky sanctions on those responsible for the unlawful imprisonment of Dr al-Singace. I am sure that many Members have also supported the motion.

I remember the fanfare, on 6 July 2020, around the launch of the UK Government's global human rights sanctions regime, which meant the Foreign Secretary would have the power to sanction persons implicated in human rights abuses anywhere across the globe. Yet Bahraini leaders such as General Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa have been hosted by senior members of this Government. People like him are deeply implicated in the torture of some of their own citizens in Bahrain. It is even more curious that, while the UK Government were cutting humanitarian aid by billions last year, including for clean water and nutrition, their support for the Gulf strategy fund, the former integrated activity fund, increased by 154%. The integrated activity fund has been completely discredited due to its lack of transparency and links to regimes with dubious human rights records, such as Bahrain.

I hope that the Minister, when he gets to his feet, can explain how the flagrant human rights abuses perpetrated by the Bahraini regime's leaders are impacting on its relationship with the UK. Are they impacting at all? Bahrain's leaders are still feted by UK Government officials and money is increasingly finding its way into Bahrain from the UK. Where does that leave the UK's relationship with this barbaric regime? It looks for all the world as though the UK Government, for all their pretensions to be a global supporter of human rights, are content to turn a blind eye to these appalling human

rights abuses when it suits. By maintaining unconditional political and economic support for the Bahraini regime, the UK Government are enabling and facilitating brutality and repression in that country.

We need the UK Government to be much more transparent about which projects the UK funds in Bahrain, with human rights assessments for each. Failure to do so can only heighten concerns. A public inquiry into whether the integrated activity fund—now the Gulf strategy fund—has propped up regimes with poor human rights records is critical. However, while the pressure for such an inquiry grows, the fund continues to operate, despite billions of pounds of cuts to international aid spending by this Government. It is disgraceful that the UK's Ministry of Defence has carried out training programmes with Bahraini military forces, notwithstanding the fact that Bahrain is on the Foreign Office's human rights watch list.

The UK Government need to send a clear and robust signal that the human rights abuses in Bahrain are unacceptable. They must look to their funding mechanisms and their inaction, and stop conferring legitimacy on this appallingly cruel and barbaric regime. We too often hear the UK Government trumpeting their role as a force for good in the world, but words are not enough. All funding for Bahraini programmes that are not focused on poverty alleviation must be suspended until we have much greater transparency around these programmes.

We need the UK Government to introduce a resolution addressing human rights violations in Bahrain at the UN Human Rights Council. We need a UN-led commission to investigate torture within Bahrain that allows access to prisons. As long as Bahrain denies access to independent human rights monitors, including Amnesty International, we can be sure that the regime continues to torture and otherwise mistreat its citizens. The argument that I have heard today, that there are worse regimes than Bahrain, will offer no comfort, and should offer no comfort, to those who have suffered barbaric treatment under that regime.

It is time for the UK to do the right thing and put its money where its mouth is. If it wants to be a force for good in the world, as it often says it does, it cannot choose to pass by on the other side while those in Bahrain standing up for freedom are brutalised. I hope that the UK Government will use every diplomatic tool at their disposal to effect greater respect for human rights in Bahrain. Our own respect for human rights demands nothing less.

2.33 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) on securing this important debate. We on the Opposition side of the House have serious concerns about the human rights situation in Bahrain, particularly with regard to the detention of political prisoners. We have even more concerns about the UK Government's lack of action with regard to these prisoners. We believe that the role of a friend is to criticise when necessary. A true friend does not stay silent and turn a blind eye when the wrong course of action is being taken. It is simply wrong that on the eve of a free trade agreement between us and Bahrain, UK Ministers remain deafeningly silent on the issue of human rights and the ongoing detention of political prisoners.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

Labour has regularly called on UK Ministers to use our country's close relationship with Bahrain to press publicly for human rights reform. We have also called on the UK Government to do all they can to press for the immediate release of political prisoners in Bahrain who are still detained for standing up for democracy. Members have mentioned a number of such prisoners during the course of this debate, including Dr Abduljalil al-Singace and Hasan Mushaima.

We have heard in this debate many examples of how torture and due process violations are endemic in Bahrain. Prison conditions and treatment of political prisoners are notorious and regularly contravene international human rights law. Bahrain has the highest number of political prisoners per capita in the middle east. There are currently about 1,500 political prisoners in the small kingdom, according to the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy. It is also well known that there has been a crackdown in Bahrain, targeting members of the majority Shi'a community, since authorities crushed the popular uprising during the 2011 Arab spring.

Bahrain has even shunned visit requests—from the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights defenders in 2012 and 2015, and even more recently from special rapporteurs on torture, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly. Yet, despite cross-party calls for the UK to secure the release of Bahrainis political prisoners, little has been done by UK Ministers. In fact, the issue has been swept under the carpet.

It has now been 10 years since Britain began funding training and other enterprises in Bahrain and yet torture survivors continue to face execution and political leaders languish behind bars. Even worse than that, it has been argued that the UK Government can be seen as complicit in some of the abuse that has occurred, because of their wilful lack of scrutiny over how UK funds are spent in the region. It is worth looking more closely at the UK Government's role in these matters.

The integrated activity fund was established by the UK Government in 2015 to support the delivery of flexible, cross-cutting and sustained investment to Bahrain and other countries in the Gulf region. Labour has regularly expressed concern that, in allocating UK taxpayer money to the integrated activity fund, the UK Government have not followed their own human rights due diligence policies. The integrated activity fund was replaced at the end of last year by the Gulf strategy fund.

A cross-party report by the all-party group on democracy and human rights in the Gulf, which was published in July 2021, found that programmes supported by the IAF had been run

"with absolute minimal levels of accountability, transparency and due diligence in spite of being repeatedly implicated in human rights violations."

The report of the all-party group stated that institutions backed by the IAF had

"whitewashed human rights abuses, placing the UK government at risk of complicity in abuses themselves".

According to the Government, the GSF in Bahrain had backed reforms to deliver long-term security and stability, but the all-party report found that both the IAF and the GSF fund programmes to bodies in Bahrain that continue

to be implicated in serious human rights and international law violations. The report was unequivocal and it was damning. It recommended:

"Government funding to GCC states through the GSF should be immediately suspended pending an independent inquiry into its implication in human rights and international law violations."

It is important to make it clear that this report received cross-party endorsement, including that of veteran Conservatives such as the Father of the House, the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), and the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

This is clearly not a partisan party political matter. Indeed, it is clear that standing up for human rights and political prisoners in Bahrain and beyond transcends party politics. It is not a matter of left or right, but a matter of right or wrong. If we as Members of Parliament are not prepared to stand up for what is right on the eve of the free trade deal with Bahrain, when will we be?

It is clear that many Members from across the House believe in the sanctity of human rights and are concerned about political prisoners in Bahrain. They believe, like me, that dialogue with Bahrain and others must remain open, but must not ever shy away from difficult subjects. It is therefore deeply disappointing that the Government apparently do not share this conviction of a sense of right and wrong. That is why we are calling on Ministers to take action now on this issue. We believe that the UK Government should publicly condemn the detention and mistreatment of all Bahraini political prisoners—

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene. I have looked at this matter and visited the country several times, and there is not, to the best of my knowledge, a prisoner in a Bahrain prison who has not carried out an offence that is much more than speaking out against the regime—like being a member of a terrorist organisation or propagating terrorism.

Bambos Charalambous: I beg to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. Many organisations dispute that position and the many people who have spoken out against it would also beg to differ.

Jeremy Corbyn: Is not one of the main concerns that people are convicted in Bahrain with no access to independent legal representation or legal accompaniment and claim to have been subjected to torture before confessing to crimes and were therefore imprisoned after that? As I pointed out in my speech, that would be totally illegal within the concepts of international law anywhere else in the world.

Bambos Charalambous: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I too have heard those allegations of the lack of advice prior to conviction.

The UK Government must publicly condemn the death sentences given to torture victims in Bahrain and urgently use all available leverage to push for Bahrain to quash them. The UK Government should also enable an independent inquiry into the implications of their programmes, such as the GSF, and human rights violations, particularly in Bahrain. They should also call for a political reform process in Bahrain that promotes democracy and includes the release of imprisoned civil society leaders.

Bahrain remains important to the UK politically, diplomatically and militarily and we hope that we have a mutual relationship. As with all mutual relationships, we expect the UK Government to call out human rights abuses and stand up for what is right. We have heard much from the Government in the past about engagement on those issues, but where is the evidence of it? The Government need to walk the walk on this. The time for just talking the talk is over.

2.41 pm

The Minister for the Middle East, North Africa and North America (James Cleverly): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for securing the debate. It gives me the opportunity to put on record an alternative—and, I suspect, more balanced—viewpoint to the one that he put forward. Nevertheless, the debate gives us all an opportunity to discuss an important issue. I also put on record my gratitude to other Members who have spoken. I will try to address some of their points, but time prevents me from dealing with them all.

As has been said by Members on both sides of the House, the UK and Bahrain are indeed allies and partners. We work closely together on defence, security, trade and regional issues. Our naval support facilities are a symbol of that enduring co-operation and the UK's commitment to peace, security and stability in the region. The country provided the first permanent UK naval presence east of Suez since 1971, and continues to support our counter-terrorism, counter-piracy and maritime security operations, providing security not just for British trade and British nationals, but for all those who are active in the maritime region around the waters of Bahrain.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute was passionate in his criticism of not just Bahrain, but Her Majesty's Government. He claimed—*Hansard* will correct me if I am wrong—that the UK is bankrolling Bahrain. He went on to say that we were trying to get money from Bahrain. It is not credible to hold simultaneously the positions—

Brendan O'Hara: At no point did I say that the UK was getting money from Bahrain. The Government are trying to secure a trade deal with Bahrain and that is why they are turning a blind eye to the most flagrant human rights abuses. It is not about getting money from Bahrain, but about turning a blind eye to human rights to secure a trade deal.

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman seems to think that he has clarified his position, but he has made it more chaotic and incoherent. If he does not think that trade deals are about securing an inward flow of money to a country, I dread to think what the trade policy of a separatist Scotland under an SNP Government would look like. However, time is tight and we need to get on.

I also thought it was quite telling that the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) listed and dismissed the oversight bodies—I will come to some of the oversight bodies that the UK has helped to bring into existence later—rather than calling for them to be made more effective. She seemed to want to rip away the organisations that seek, with

our support, to improve the legal and criminal justice system in Bahrain, and I think that is perhaps rather telling in respect of her motivations in the debate.

I have genuine respect for my shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), but he accused Her Majesty's Government of being silent on the issues of concern in Bahrain. He is relatively new in post, so I will forgive him for this, but I suggest that if he thinks we have been silent, that is more of an indication that he has perhaps not been listening. I will highlight where the UK Government have brought these things to international attention.

Defending human rights and promoting democracy around the world is a priority for Her Majesty's Government. We want to work to support countries such as Bahrain that have demonstrated, and continue to demonstrate, a desire to adopt a more progressive and inclusive domestic set of measures, not just in their attitudes and words, but in their actions.

I have heard from a number of Members that we should disengage from working with Bahrain, including on human rights issues, and I cannot possibly disagree more strongly. They should ask themselves about the options before them: do they want Her Majesty's Government to drive improvements in countries such as Bahrain or would they prefer Her Majesty's Government just to stand on the sidelines and shout abuse, as they have done? If it is the former, the question we should ask ourselves is how best we influence change. We are better able to influence change through engagement, dialogue and co-operation. It is patently in the UK's national interest to help countries such as Bahrain to benefit from our experience and expertise as they move on their journey towards essential reform.

Mr Carmichael: The Government presumably have key performance indicators on the money that is spent in relation to Bahrain. What are they and what progress have we seen in recent years?

James Cleverly: A number of right hon. and hon. Members have raised the issue of progress and I will come to that, particularly with regard to the Gulf strategy fund. I want to clarify a point that was repeated by a number of Opposition Members about the increase in funding. I remind the House that the Gulf strategy fund does not come from our ODA allocation. The predecessor of the Gulf strategy fund, which sought to accomplish, largely, the same set of priorities, had a budget of—let me double-check. Sorry, the budget for 2021 had halved. The Gulf strategy fund's predecessor's previous budget was twice as much, so when people talk about an increase, actually, the budget has halved. It is important to put that on record.

Jeremy Corbyn: The point is about engagement. Will the Minister assure us that he will pressurise the Bahrain Government to engage with the United Nations human rights organisations and allow them to have independent visits and monitoring, as well as allowing unfettered access for human rights groups such as Amnesty International?

James Cleverly: My understanding is that the United Nations is already engaging with Bahrain on a number of the issues that the right hon. Gentleman has put

[James Cleverly]

forward. I have a number of other points that I wish to address, and I have been generous, so if the House will forgive me, I do not intend to take any more interventions so that the next debate can take place in good time.

A number of Members have highlighted performance indicators and demonstrations or approvals of our involvement. Our close relationship with the Bahraini Government and civil society, including non-governmental organisations, gives the UK a privileged position to positively influence developments on human rights. We draw on 100 years of probation experience, for example, and we are using it to encourage and support Bahraini-led judicial reform. We welcome the steps taken by the Government of Bahrain in reforming their judicial process, including the introduction of alternative sentencing legislation. I know that a number of people in incarceration have been offered alternatives to it. To date, more than 3,600 individuals have had potential prison time replaced by alternative sentences, and further cases remain under consideration by the judiciary.

Our work has supported the effective establishment of independent oversight bodies—the ones that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) would seek to destroy—including the National Institute For Human Rights, the Ministry of Interior Ombudsman, the Special Investigations Unit, and the Prisoners and Detainees Rights Commission.

Members have highlighted examples of completely inappropriate behaviour by Bahraini officials. I remind the House that more than 90 security personnel have been prosecuted or face disciplinary action because of investigations carried out by human rights oversight bodies that the UK Government support. We believe that Bahrain is undertaking important and effective steps to address allegations of torture and mistreatment in detention.

We strongly welcome the initiative that Bahrain has taken to develop an inaugural human rights plan. It is taking an inclusive approach, welcoming contributions from us and from the United Nations, which the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was so passionate about earlier. We look forward to the publication and implementation of the plan, which we expect will deliver further reforms in Bahrain.

We of course recognise that there is more work to be done. To reinforce the point that I made to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute, Lord Ahmed and I have made and will continue to make these points directly to our ministerial counterparts in Bahrain, and because we enjoy a strong working relationship with them, I know that they will listen to us.

I am not able to go into details case by case, but Ministers and senior officials closely monitor cases of interest of those in detention in Bahrain, and indeed in many other countries. That is a core part of the support Her Majesty's Government give to human rights and democracy. Where appropriate, we bring those cases to the attention of those at ministerial or senior official level in partner countries. It is important to highlight that those currently under detention have been tried

and convicted of crimes and sentenced under Bahraini law, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said. The right to fair trial is enshrined in the constitution of Bahrain, and we will continue to encourage the Government of Bahrain to follow due process in all cases and meet their international and domestic human rights commitments.

Bahrain remains an important partner and friend of the United Kingdom. We commend the progress that it has made on human rights and the ambition for the further development of political, social, economic and governmental institutions. The Father of the House, my right hon. Friend—

Sir Peter Bottomley indicated dissent.

James Cleverly: Outrageous. The Father of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), said something typically wise: it would not take much for Bahrain to become one of the best. I think he is right to say that. We will continue to hold frank and sometimes difficult but constructive discussions with our counterparts in Bahrain, and we will continue to support them through the Gulf strategy fund and other diplomatic means, to help them to become the very best that they can be.

2.54 pm

Brendan O'Hara: I put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), the right hon. Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the hon. Members for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for their contributions.

It is deeply disappointing that in a debate about the detention of Bahraini political prisoners, the Minister did not once in his speech mention the names of Dr al-Singace, Hassan Mushaima or any of the other prisoners who have been mentioned. The message came loud and clear from the Minister that everything the Government have done for the past 10 years may have failed, but it is business as usual because human rights abuses are a price worth paying to secure a trade deal with just about anybody.

As the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate said, this is not a matter of party politics; it is a matter of right and wrong. The Minister and his Government have clearly picked which side they are on. Hon. Friends and Members on both sides of the Chamber will continue to ask the awkward questions, continue to expose the multiple failings of this Government and continue to shine a light where certain people in this House do not want it shone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the ongoing detention of Bahraini political prisoners.

Draft Online Safety Bill Report

[Relevant documents: e-petition 575833, “Make verified ID a requirement for opening a social media account”, and e-petition 332315, “Ban anonymous accounts on social media”; oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee on 21 May and 2 July 2020, and 2, 16 and 23 November, and 1 December 2021, on Tackling Online Abuse, HC 364 [Session 2019-21] and HC 479.]

2.55 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Report of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill, HC 609.

I would like to start by thanking the members and Clerks of our Joint Committee, who put in a tremendous effort to deliver its report. In 11 sitting weeks, we received more than 200 submissions of written evidence, took oral evidence from 50 witnesses and held four further roundtable meetings with outside experts, as well as Members of both Houses. I am delighted to see my Joint Committee colleagues Lord Gilbert and Baroness Kidron in the Gallery. I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), and the Secretary of State for the open and collaborative way in which they worked with the Committee throughout the process and our deliberations. I also thank Ofcom, which provided a lot of constructive guidance and advice to the Committee as we prepared the report.

This feels like a moment that has been a long time coming. There has been huge interest on both sides of the House in the Online Safety Bill ever since the publication of the first White Paper in April 2019, and then there were two Government responses, the publication of the draft Bill and a process of pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Committee. I feel that the process has been worth while: in producing a unanimous report, I think the Committee has reflected the wide range of opinions that we received and put forward some strong ideas that will improve the Bill, which I hope will get a Second Reading later in the Session. I believe that it has been a process worth undertaking, and many other Lords and Commons Committees have been looking at the same time at the important issues around online safety and the central role that online services play in our lives.

The big tech companies have had plenty of notice that this is coming. During that period, have we seen a marked improvement? Have we seen the introduction of effective self-regulation? Have the companies set a challenge to Parliament, saying “You don’t really need to pass this legislation, because we are doing all we can already”? No. If anything, the problems have got worse. Last year, we saw an armed insurrection in Washington DC in which a mob stormed the Capitol building, fuelled by messages of hate and confrontation that circulated substantially online. Last summer, members of the England football team were subject to vile racist abuse at the end of the final—the football authorities had warned the companies that that could happen, but they did not prepare for it or act adequately at the time.

As Rio Ferdinand said in evidence to the Joint Committee, people should not have to put up with this. People cannot just put their device down—it is a tool that they use for work and to stay in communication

with their family and friends—so they cannot walk away from the abuse. If someone is abused in a room, they can leave the room, but they cannot walk away from a device that may be the first thing that they see in the morning and one of the last things that they see at night.

We have seen an increase in the incidence of child abuse online. The Internet Watch Foundation has produced a report today that shows that yet again there are record levels of abusive material related to children, posing a real child safety risk. It said the same in its report last year, and the issues are getting worse. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen the rise of anti-vaccine conspiracies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. We have a colleague in Northern Ireland, Diane Dodds MLA, who has had unbelievably vile abuse towards her and her family. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a huge loophole and gap in this Bill—namely, that the anonymity clause remains that allows comments such as those to my colleague and friend Diane Dodds, which were despicable in the extreme? There will be no redress and no one held accountable through this Bill. The veil of anonymity must be lifted and people made to face the consequences of what they are brave enough to type but not to say.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman is not trying to make a speech, is he? No, he is not.

Damian Collins: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The Committee agreed in the report that there must be an expedited process of transparency, so that when people are using anonymity to abuse other people—saying things for which in public they might be sued or have action taken against them—it must be much easier to swiftly identify who those people are. People must know that if they post hate online directed at other people and commit an offence in doing so, their anonymity will not be a shield that will protect them: they will be identified readily and action taken against them. Of course there are cases where anonymity may be required, when people are speaking out against an oppressive regime or victims of abuse are telling their story, but it should not be used as a shield to abuse others. We set that out in the report and the hon. Gentleman is right that the Bill needs to move on it.

We are not just asking the companies to moderate content; we are asking them to moderate their systems as well. Their systems play an active role in directing people towards hate and abuse. A study commissioned by Facebook showed that over 60% of people who joined groups that showed extremist content did so at the active recommendation of the platform itself. In her evidence to the Committee, Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen made clear the active role of systems in promoting and driving content through to people, making them the target of abuse, and making vulnerable people more likely to be confronted with and directed towards content that will exacerbate their vulnerabilities.

Facebook and companies like it may not have invented hate but they are driving hate and making it worse. They must be responsible for these systems. It is right that the Bill will allow the regulator to hold those

[Damian Collins]

companies to account not just for what they do or do not take down, but for the way they use the systems that they have created and designed to make money for themselves by keeping people on them longer, such that they are responsible for them. The key thing at the heart of the Bill and at the heart of the report published by the Joint Committee is that the companies must be held liable for the systems they have created. The Committee recommended a structural change to the Bill to make it absolutely clear that what is illegal offline should be regulated online. Existing offences in law should be written into the Bill and it should be demonstrated how the regulator will set the thresholds for enforcement of those measures online.

This approach has been made possible because of the work of the Law Commission in producing its recommendations, particularly in introducing new offences around actively promoting self-harm and promoting content and information that is known to be false. A new measure will give us the mechanism to deal with malicious deepfake films being targeted at people. There are also necessary measures to make sure that there are guiding principles that the regulator has to work to, and the companies have to work to, to ensure regard to public health in dealing with dangerous disinformation relating to the pandemic or other public health issues.

We also have to ensure an obligation for the regulator to uphold principles of freedom of expression. It is important that effective action should be taken against hate speech, extremism, illegal content and all harmful content that is within the scope of the Bill, but if companies are removing content that has every right to be there—where the positive expression of people's opinions has every right to be online—then the regulator should have the power to intervene in that direction as well.

At the heart of the regime has to be a system where Ofcom, as the independent regulator, can set mandatory codes and standards that we expect the companies to meet, and then use its powers to investigate and audit them to make sure that they are complying. We cannot have a system that is based on self-declared transparency reports by the companies where even they themselves struggle to explain what the results mean and there is no mechanism for understanding whether they are giving us the full picture or only a highly partial one. The regulator must have that power. Crucially, the codes of practice should set the mandatory minimum standards. We should not have Silicon Valley deciding what the online safety of citizens in this country should be. That should be determined through legislation passed through this Parliament empowering the regulator to set the minimum standards and take enforcement action when they have not been met.

We also believe that the Bill would be improved by removing a controversial area, the principles in clause 11. The priority areas of harm are determined by the Secretary of State and advisory to the companies. If we base the regulatory regime and the codes of practice on established offences that this Parliament has already created, which are known and understood and therefore enforced, we can say they are mandatory and clear and that there has been a parliamentary approval process in creating the offences in the first place.

Where new areas of harm are added to the schedules and the codes of practice, there should be an affirmative procedure in both Houses of Parliament to approve those changes to the code, so that Members have the chance to vote on changes to the codes of practice and the introduction of new offences as a consequence of those offences being created.

The Committee took a lot of evidence on the question of online fraud and scams. We received evidence from the Work and Pensions Committee and the Treasury Committee advising us that this should be done: if a known scam or attempt to rip off and defraud people is present on a website or social media platform, be it through advertising or any kind of posting, it should be within the scope and it should be for the regulator to require its removal. There should not be a general blanket exemption for advertising, which would create a perverse incentive to promote such content more actively.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this important issue. Does he agree, as referred to in the report, that platforms must be required to proactively seek out that content and ensure it is changed, and if not, remove it, rather than all removals being prompted by users?

Damian Collins: It is vital that companies are made to act proactively. That is one of the problems with the current regime, where action against illegal content is only required once it is reported to the companies and they are not proactively identifying it. My hon. Friend is right about that, particularly with frauds and scams where the perpetrators are known. The role of the regulator is to ensure that companies do not run those ads. The advertising authorities can still take action against individual advertisers, as can the police, but there should be a proactive responsibility on the platforms themselves.

If you will allow me to say one or two more things, Madam Deputy Speaker, we believe it is important that there should be user redress through the system. That is why the Committee recommended creating an ombudsman if complaints have been exhausted without successful resolution, but also permitting civil redress through the courts.

If an individual or their family has been greatly harmed as a consequence of what they have seen on social media, they may take some solace in the fact that the regulator has intervened against the company for its failures and levied fines or taken action against individual directors. However, as an individual can take a case to the courts for a company's failure to meet its obligations under data protection law, that should also apply to online safety legislation. An individual should have the right, on their own or with others, to sue a company for failing to meet its obligations under an online safety Act.

I commend the report to the House and thank everyone involved in its production for their hard work. This is a Bill we desperately need, and I look forward to seeing it pass through the House in this Session.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): As the House can see, a great many people want to speak this afternoon, so we will have to have a time limit of five minutes with immediate effect.

3.7 pm

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and the members of his Committee on bringing forward an incredibly thorough and very good report. I know Ministers have been consulting well with all Back Benchers, and I hope they do not pay lip service to the report's conclusions, but really take on its important recommendations. What is interesting about this whole debate is that there is a broad consensus on the Back Benches. None of us are bound by ideology on these issues; our approach is based on our experience, the data and the wide body of research.

I will also say at the beginning that the business model of the platforms means that they will never tackle this themselves. They make their money by encouraging traffic on their platforms, and they encourage traffic by allowing abusive content to exist there. Their algorithms are there almost to control and encourage more abusive content. The idea that there can be any self-regulation in the legislation to be proposed by the Government is false.

I will draw attention to three sets of issues in the short time available to me. The first, the recommendations on paid-for scams and frauds, has already been discussed. It is ridiculous that user-generated content can be subject to regulation but that paid-for scams and frauds cannot be. Everybody who gave evidence to the Committee, including the Financial Conduct Authority, pleaded for its inclusion. The figure I have is from Action Fraud: 85% of the £1.7 billion lost in fraudulent scams in the past year resulted from cyber-enabled frauds. During the pandemic, this figure of course exploded. Again, there is no incentive for the platforms to do anything about this. They get paid for by the advertisements so they wish to encourage them. Indeed, there is a double benefit in this particular space for them, because the FCA also pays for them to prioritise the legitimate websites over the scam adds, so again self-regulation will not work. I know that Ministers support the proposal, and I hope that they are not swayed by advice that it is not legally possible, as I just do not accept that. I hope that they do not miss this opportunity by way of promises of legislation down the line.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I very much agree with the point my right hon. Friend is making and with the recommendation in the report. I wonder whether she noticed that the Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee in July that

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

Does she agree that it cannot possibly do that if it misses out scam adverts?

Dame Margaret Hodge: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend on that, and I hope that the Minister will confirm that he will include this in the legislation.

The second issue I wish to raise relates to anonymity. No one wants to undermine anonymity—we all recognise that it is crucial for whistleblowers, for victims of domestic violence or child abuse, and for others—but we do want to tackle anonymous abuse. Sadly, most of the vile abuse that appears online is anonymous, as we have seen in the spreading of disinformation, particularly in

relation to the pandemic. I have seen it in my experience, and it really undermines my right to participate in democratic debate. If people paint someone online as a terrible person, as a hypocrite or as a hateful, wicked woman, which is what they do with me, that person is then not trusted on anything and therefore their voice is shut down in the democratic debate.

What we are all after is not tackling anonymity but ensuring third party verification of the identity of people so that they can be traced if and when they put abusive content online. The proposals that came from the Law Commission, and which one of the four ex-Culture Secretaries who has worked on this issue has diligently pursued, to introduce a new offence to tackle serious online harms more effectively is very important. It is about shifting from content to the effects of the online harm.

My third point relates to director liability. All my experience in working in the field of tackling illicit finance and economic crime demonstrates to me that if we do not introduce director liability for when wrongdoing occurs in the actions of individuals associated with a company, we do not change the behaviour of those companies. Even fines of £50 million are not significant against Facebook's gross revenue of more than £29 billion. I do not understand why we have to wait for two years to implement director liability, as it could be done immediately. I would be grateful to the Minister if he said that he will implement that.

The last thing I should say, in my final seconds, is on anonymity. I would like the Minister simply to confirm this afternoon whether he will tackle anonymous abuse and put in place the Law Commission's proposals. When is the timeframe for that? I very much welcome the report and commend all those who worked so hard to put it together, and I hope we can make progress swiftly on a problem that is growing in British society and that is undermining, not supporting, democracy.

3.13 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this debate, which is clearly sparking enormous interest. I welcome the majority of the Joint Committee's recommendations. Indeed, they very much build on the work already carried out by the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport over recent years. When the big tech giants were in their infancy, the Select Committee, which I am proud to chair today, was already leading on some of this work. The Select Committee has been scrutinising the online harms White Paper over the past year and is continuing to do so, and it will be coming up with its own recommendations shortly. The Joint Committee's report even acknowledges the ongoing work of the Select Committee by stating

“the DCMS Committee has maintained its interest on the issue through the work of its Sub-committee”

—its standing Sub-Committee—

“on Online Harms and Disinformation”.

Let me add to my hon. Friend's speech by identifying some points with which I agree, but which go above and beyond what he actually said. First, I support the Joint Committee's work on journalistic content, and its recommendation that existing protections relating to

[Julian Knight]

journalistic content and content of democratic importance should be replaced by a single statutory requirement for proportionate systems and processes to protect

“content where there are reasonable grounds to believe it will be in the public interest”.

I also welcome some of the work that the Joint Committee has done in exploring age assurances, building on the work already done by the Select Committee. In particular, it rightly makes several recommendations for Ofcom to establish minimum standards for age assurance technology and governance linked to risk profiles to ensure that third-party and provider-designed assurance technologies are privacy-enhancing and rights-protecting, and that in commissioning such services, providers are restricted in respect of the data for which they can ask.

It is right that the Joint Committee acknowledges the serious threats that misinformation poses to society. In recent months we have witnessed the rise in fake news from the anti-vaccine campaigns as it has hit our social media feeds. I therefore support the recommendation that there should be

“content-neutral safety by design requirements, set out as minimum standards in mandatory codes of practice.”

However, the recommendation that a permanent Joint Committee be established as

“a solution to the lack of transparency and...oversight”

concerns me, and my Committee, for a range of reasons. First, it would go against a long-standing parliamentary convention. Never before has a Joint Committee been established merely to provide post-legislative scrutiny. I know some Members have suggested that a Joint Committee on online harms would have terms of reference mirroring those of the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Intelligence and Security Committee, but the Joint Committee on Human Rights was certainly never enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998, and the responsibility of the Intelligence and Security Committee is to provide oversight for policies, expenditure, and operations adopted by MI5, MI6 and GCHQ.

We fear that the creation of such a standing Joint Committee would not only go against parliamentary convention, but would set a bad precedent for many decades to come. If some particularly complex legislation comes to the House in the future, will we just keep on setting up Joint Committees to provide post-legislative scrutiny? Of course we will not—we would be very foolish to do so—but this recommendation sets a precedent for it to happen. When I asked about the cost of establishing the Joint Committee, I was told that it would be £500,000 a year. Moreover, the work is already being done by an elected Committee of the House and a Committee in the other place.

What is the point of establishing another Committee merely to replicate the work that the Select Committee is already doing? If our Committee does need to conduct post-legislative scrutiny of legislation that is particularly complex and groundbreaking, we have a Sub-Committee for the purpose. We recognise the importance of this legislation and this area, and we will continue to scrutinise it through our Sub-Committee and through Standing Order No.152.

I raised this matter with the Leader of the House in my capacity as the Select Committee Chair, and I am grateful to him for his response, in which he said:

“Business Managers and I are of the view that this scrutiny can be arranged through current Standing Orders and that it should not require legislation, nor extraordinary powers, to achieve.”

I know from my conversations with Opposition Front Benchers that they strongly support retaining such scrutiny within current parliamentary procedures, rather than innovating in a way that could be damaging in the long term.

I welcome many aspects of this report, which builds on the Select Committee's own report, but fine tuning is needed before the Bill comes to the House. My Committee stands ready to issue those fine-tuning exercises, and will do so in the coming days.

3.18 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I congratulate the Joint Committee on an excellent report, consisting of 191 pages of well-researched, balanced, temperate and intelligent analysis and recommendations. It is rare to find such qualities when it comes to subjects as important as online harms and, indeed, technology in the society of today. I will not go through the report's recommendations in detail because I do not have the time; also I support and welcome just about all of them. I will mention, for example, the design for safety recommendation, which I think is excellent, but it is one among many excellent recommendations. Instead, I will focus my remarks on why this report needs to be implemented as quickly as possible and what else needs to happen.

I want to start by speaking in praise of technology. I count myself as a tech evangelist. We have to think how many lives have been saved by remote medicine, how many marriages have been saved by not having to argue about the best way to get directions to an event, how much joy has been shared through cat memes or whatever, and how many businesses have been started on such platforms. Technology can and should be a force for good. That is why I went into engineering—to make the world work better for everyone—and my final year project at Imperial College was on a remote alarm to support people who need care in their own homes.

Engineering should be a force for good, but as the report sets out, that is no longer how it is seen. Many of my constituents, for example, feel they are being tracked, monitored, surveilled and analysed, and they feel undermined because they do not want to have to go online to do what they want to do without feeling safe and secure. Self-regulation is broken, as the report says, and it did not need to be this way. Some of us may remember concerns, back when the web started out, that if it was used for commercial purposes, people would be flamed with emails and condemned for trying to advertise or do direct marketing on the web. Somehow, however, the web was captured by those on whom I can only describe as the libertarian right, who sought to maintain the lie that technology and the internet were nothing to do with Government, while building monopolistic platforms with more money and more power than most Governments. Their attitude to regulation and Government, as I remember from my days at Ofcom, was often that if they ignored them, regulation and Government would go away.

Now, of course, the tech giants use their immense riches to wield immense power over Governments—whether in opposing workers' rights in Silicon valley or in delaying

and minimising regulation here. In that, they have been all too successful, and I have to say that it was with the support of a series of Conservative Governments who wanted to leave this to the market and believed that the state was too slow or too stupid to regulate to keep people safe, while actively cutting the part of the state designed to do so. That is why, in my view, this Online Safety Bill is a decade too late. These measures cannot be in place for another year—and that is if the Government act in double quick time, which they seem unable to do—which means that it will be 2023 before we have online safety regulation.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I too want to say how important this work is; this Bill is desperately needed. Refuge has found that one in three women have at some time in their life experienced abuse online. I would say that Muslim women in particular experience a triple whammy of race, faith and gender, and Tell MAMA has told us of the 40% increase in abuse against Muslim women during the lockdown. I hope my hon. Friend agrees that the social media companies must be held to account for their repeated failures.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention because he is absolutely right: women in particular have been subjected to harm online, and that is one of the reasons why more women and more people from ethnic minorities need to take part in designing and developing the web and platforms in the future.

I think it is really important to recognise that the last Labour Government put in place forward-looking regulation in the Communications Act 2003, which set out the landscape for regulating growing tech companies for the next decade. Given that a series of Conservative Governments have put in place no regulation, that the Bill cannot be in place for another year is a real indictment of them and shows a level of negligence that it is difficult to recover from.

In my last minute, let me just say what we need to be looking towards for the future. The Bill and the report do not reflect the development around web 3.0. We are looking to more decentralisation of the web, which is being reflected in the use of blockchain as part of the future architecture of the web. For some, blockchain is a way of avoiding government. If someone has blockchain, they do not need government. It is that kind of libertarian, right-wing approach to digital, and any Government need to be constantly looking forward to see what regulation will be required. We also need to have more emphasis on people's rights, on access to algorithms and on their regulation. I look forward to this Bill being in place as soon as possible.

3.25 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I echo the words of thanks to the Joint Committee and its Clerks, under the excellent chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for this thorough and weighty report. It includes some of the big beasts in the world of online safety, and that is important, because this is one of the single most important pieces of legislation of our time. It is absolutely groundbreaking. It is vast; it is almost five Bills in one, and no country has attempted to regulate the internet so comprehensively.

The pressure is on, not least because we have got into this bad habit of describing this Bill as the calvary coming over the hill for the online world and all the ills it contains. Someone compared it with the motor car, and it has taken decades of legislation to address the safety issues of that evolving technology, so we will never do this in a oner, but this Bill needs to be the very best possible starting point—the foundations to face the current threats, but also the challenges of the future.

I lived with this Bill for 20 months; I can talk about it forever, but I will not. Let us start at the beginning with the algorithms. We have all seen them. We start watching cute videos—in my case, it is usually of babies falling asleep in their own food, but that is probably just me—and immediately we are swept into this rabbit hole of suggested content, and it is designed to keep us engaged as long as possible, because that is where the money is: to capture our attention and sell it to the highest bidder. Do not forget, if we are not paying for the product, it is most likely we are the product.

It gets more sinister than that, though, because that same algorithm that is sending me those cute babies is recommending self-harm to a vulnerable teenager or spreading wildly dangerous disinformation about the dangers of covid. Algorithms are echo chambers. They take our fears and paranoia and surround us with unhealthy voices that reinforce them, however dangerous and hateful.

According to the 2020 Netflix documentary “The Social Dilemma”, former employees of the largest social media companies who were integral to the early development of those algorithms say that addiction is built into the design. Many of them say that the platforms are so unhealthy, they would not let their own kids anywhere near them. As the report says, tackling these design risks at source is more effective than just trying to take down individual pieces of content. We saw that with the outbreak of covid, when 5G masts were burned to the ground because of some wild conspiracy theory that suggested they were the root cause of covid. 3G and 4G masts were also destroyed, because it turns out these people are not wildly bright and cannot tell the difference. We cannot censor this stuff, because that just fuels the sense of a conspiracy theory of state conspiring. We need to stop it before it is force-fed into people and ensure that there is balance. Platforms must tackle the design features that exacerbate the risk of harm, and the legislation should include a specific responsibility for them to do it and for the regulator to enforce it.

I want to talk quickly about a couple of the specifics. There cannot be a Member of the House who has not supported a constituent devastated by online fraud. It is growing exponentially, and there is almost universal agreement that the legislation should address it. That is why we changed things from the White Paper to the draft Bill, but I agree with the Committee that the measure should be strengthened, and it should also be extended to cover paid-for advertising.

Child protection has always been a cornerstone of the Bill. I have no doubt that social media platforms are where the volume is, in terms of both content and people, and in practice it is where very young children are most likely to stumble over really unpleasant content. However, it is not enough to include only user-generated content. The Bill's credibility will be undermined overnight if the largest commercial pornography providers can

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

keep hosting extreme content and putting children at risk. I would therefore like to see the Bill extended, in line with the age appropriate design code. That would be a really good way of dealing with that, as the report suggests.

On categorisation, no doubt big platforms and search engines are where the volume is, but the digital world changes at lightning pace and trends go viral overnight. Risk should not be judged on size—it must be judged on risk. Emerging platforms can be hotbeds of extremism and really unpleasant content, and they must be appropriately regulated.

A final quick note of caution about the report's all-or-nothing tone. It makes great suggestions that would strengthen the Bill, but that has been years in the making. I did a tiny bit of it. It has involved many Ministers and a team of fantastic officials, many of whom have worked on it from the beginning. The Bill is like a huge, complicated tapestry: you pull one thread and others can unravel further down the line. The online world is so fast moving—it is evolving at a rate of knots. We have to think carefully about how we change the Bill. Otherwise, it will be obsolete before the ink is dry.

3.31 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention and intend to deal with those issues. Suicide remains a major public health problem, with the highest suicide rates among men aged 45 to 49. It is the biggest killer of young people aged 16 to 24 and the suicide rate for young women is now at its highest on record.

While suicide and self-harm are complex and rarely caused by one thing, in many cases, the internet is involved. A 2017 inquiry into suicides of young people found suicide-related internet use in nearly 26% of deaths in under-20s and 13% of deaths in 20 to 24-year olds. I therefore welcome the Committee's report, in particular its recommendation that encouraging or assisting suicide be included in the primary legislation as a priority illegal harm.

Self-harm, which is a major risk for suicide, is also becoming much more prevalent, having tripled among young people in the last 15 years. One in 15 adults in England report that they have self-harmed. I also welcome the Committee's recommendation, in line with the Law Commission's, that encouraging or assisting a person to seriously self-harm should be made illegal.

While some harmful suicide content is illegal—and some self-harm content could be in future—there will be suicide and self-harm content that can be distressing, triggering and instructive, that can act in part to maintain or exacerbate self-harm and suicidal behaviours, and that is legal but harmful. Will the Minister confirm that suicide and self-harm will also be included as a priority legal but harmful content in the final Bill?

Samaritans has a longstanding concern that the draft Bill lets smaller platforms such as online community groups, forums and message boards, where some of the most harmful suicide and self-harm content can be found, completely off the hook, particularly when it comes to protecting adults. The Committee received

written evidence from people who contacted Samaritans to share their lived experience of suicide. One respondent wrote:

“The people using the bigger sites will just flood the smaller sites if their content starts getting removed. The standard needs to be the same across all sites.”

Another wrote:

“If suicidal people can't find what they are looking for at large sites they will just go on to the smaller sites so it doesn't solve the problem.”

The age of 18 is not a cut-off point for experiencing suicidal ideation, which can fluctuate over the course of a single day. Those who experience that are more likely to be more vulnerable and at greater risk of harm from legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content.

Another respondent with lived experience told the Committee:

“Harmful and accessible suicide and self-harm online content can be harmful at any age. I am in my fifties and would be tempted to act on this information if I felt suicidal again.”

Furthermore, it has been unclear whether Wikipedia, where some of the most harmful content can be found, would be in scope of the legislation. I therefore welcome the Committee's recommendation that the categorisation of services in the draft Bill be overhauled and that all platforms consider the risk that their service poses in relation to children and adults.

There is a clear imperative to tackle suicide and self-harm content online. Taking a partial approach to such content will undermine the UK Government's efforts to prevent suicide and to achieve the aims of the cross-Government national suicide prevention strategy in England. A key aspect of suicide prevention is the reduction of access to means, and reducing the availability of harmful and instructional information is one way of achieving that.

No caveats around tackling harmful suicide and self-harm content—size of platform, age of user—should be established that will diminish the legislation's ability to tackle harmful content in this space. Can the Minister confirm in relation to suicide and self-harm content that all platforms and people of all ages will be in scope in the final Bill presented to this House?

3.35 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Back in 2013, when I was Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—I am one of at least two former Culture Secretaries in this debate—I visited a number of social media companies in Silicon Valley. I spent time looking at their ethos, priorities and vision, and I rapidly came to the conclusion that statutory regulation would be absolutely essential for the sector in the UK; I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) for taking that forward.

I welcome the Joint Committee's work on this issue. The report is absolutely right to start by saying that self-regulation of online services has failed. It has failed to ensure the design of products that are safe to use, that products are age-appropriate and that content is properly monitored and moderated—hygiene factors in almost any other sector in this country.

When she gave evidence to the Joint Committee, the Secretary of State was completely right in saying that the first priority has to be to end online abuse. Regulation

will only ever be part of that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) said: there are many other elements to the issue. I would like to touch on a couple of those and underline some of the points in the report.

Better law that properly recognises new types of crime in the online world has to be a priority of the Government now—they have gone a great deal of the way towards recognising that following the Law Commission's reports, but there is much more to do, particularly given the violence against women and girls strategy and its acknowledgement that online abuse disproportionately affects women. The Joint Committee's report touches on this issue, but I would go further.

The Government have already recognised the need to criminalise cyber-flashing and deep fake, but the development of such things as nudification software shows how sickeningly ingenious the sector is in inventing new and different ways to perpetrate harm. When it comes to online harm, we need to make sure that the law is better and future-proofed. As well as putting current laws into the Bill, will the Minister produce a schedule of other areas against which the Government intend to legislate—particularly in the area of intimate image abuse—to make sure that all the law is up to date? The regulator needs a strong criminal law in place if it is to be effective.

I underline the issue of individual redress. I wholeheartedly support the Joint Committee recommendation on reporting mechanisms and the idea of an online safety ombudsman; that will be really important to make sure that the Bill does not appear to our constituents, the people who suffer online abuse, as something remote and not practically helpful in their day-to-day life online. I would go one step further and make sure that victim support groups are also well funded because many more victims will be coming forward.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members have touched on the issue of anonymity. We know that the Bill is silent on that issue at the moment, and the Joint Committee is right to recommend changes. I do not fully agree with its recommendations; in my view, the evidence shows that anonymity creates an atmosphere of impunity for those who are abusive. Polling by Compassion in Politics shows that more than 80% of social media users would provide evidence to get verified accounts, and making verified accounts the default option—not the only option—would help to stop some of the abuse. It would not stop all of the abuse, of course, but it would help to change the ethos.

The Joint Committee's report underlines the importance of having evidence, as the lack of transparency and reporting makes scrutiny of the impact of social media very difficult. I wholeheartedly support the idea of ensuring better, clearer and more transparent reporting.

A self-regulated online world has failed. Statutory regulation is the only way forward, but we need to encourage others around the world to follow suit. I applaud the Government for their approach, and I would add to the report's recommendations by saying that the Government should use their work in developing strong relations around the world and in establishing new trade agreements to discuss the stake we all have in a safe and healthy online world.

3.40 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I support the Joint Committee's work, and I am grateful to the Chair, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), and the members of the Committee for their efforts in this important area.

I would like to raise the case of a young boy from Reading, Olly Stephens, who was killed in a most brutal attack, a knifing, in a park where he was lured through social media. I hope to set out some of the concerns of his family and our local community about this dreadful crime.

I pay tribute to Olly. He was just 13 when he died, and he had his whole life ahead of him. He was a livewire at school and a likable boy. It is simply impossible to imagine what his parents and his family are going through. It is now a year since he passed away, and they had a memorial service at the beginning of January that was incredibly moving and very difficult. My heart and the hearts of people in the local community go out to the Stephens family at this incredibly difficult time.

I thank Stuart and Amanda Stephens and, indeed, the community as a whole for their campaigning work to try to raise awareness of knife crime—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Thank you. And to raise awareness of the connection between knife crime and social media.

The background to the attack and the way in which it involved social media is very clear and quite shocking. First, Olly met the two boys who killed him online—that was the connection between them. Secondly, and most crucially of all, he was lured to the park where he was stabbed. A girl sent him a message online asking him to come to the park. She had separately messaged other young people asking someone to stab Olly. This was on a social media platform, and you can imagine how awful it is.

The third point that is important for us to consider today is that the boys who killed Olly—they were very young teenagers—were using 11 different social media platforms, and they were sharing images of knives. Imagine teenagers flicking and playing with knives in their bedroom, videoing it and putting that shocking content up on social media. None of those 11 platforms took down that content. That is the level we are talking about, which is why I urge the Minister particularly to address the connection between knife crime and social media. I am sure he will respond on that point.

Once again, and I hope the Minister will be able to reply in detail, I call for action from the Government on behalf of Olly's parents and on behalf of the local community in Reading and Woodley. I know some of these points are in the report, but I would particularly like the Minister to address the importance of age restrictions, the importance of ending anonymity online and the importance of forcing companies to take down harmful content. How can it be right that powerful and very wealthy companies are allowed to put clearly dangerous content online, such as content featuring knives, and not take it down immediately?

Finally and crucially, because this was apparently also a factor in the case, we must ensure that companies co-operate with the police. I want to look into this further, but I understand it is possible that the social

[Matt Rodda]

media company where the message was shared inciting this criminal act did not fully co-operate with the police. I want to hear more about it, but I understand that is a possibility. I therefore ask the Minister also to ensure that companies operating in the UK are regulated in the UK, so that we can protect our young people from this dreadful form of crime.

In conclusion, I am grateful to the Chair of the Joint Committee and his team for their work on this important matter, and I also thank the Minister and my colleague the shadow Minister for their work. I hope that we can now move forward together to tackle this awful abuse and other forms of crime.

3.45 pm

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda), who I think illustrated clearly why this Bill matters. I want to join the chorus of warm congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and his entire Committee on their remarkable work in producing such an impressive report on what is a very complex Bill. They have done the House a huge favour by suggesting ways in which the Bill could be made more straightforward and more focused on its overall objectives.

The Bill covers unlawful content as well as legal but harmful content, and it is in the latter category that the definitional challenges apply. Of course, we see in that challenge a conflict between specificity and flexibility. The legislation and the regulation that we create need to be specific enough that those subject to it know what they have to do, but flexible enough to keep up with what is a changing online world. The overarching duty of care set out in the initial White Paper was designed to give that adaptability and to encourage proactivity on the part of platforms in identifying and responding to emerging harms, and there is no doubt that that needs refinement.

I think that the Committee's recommendation that there should be a requirement to have in place proportionate systems and processes for identifying and mitigating reasonably foreseeable risks of harm arising from regulated activity defined under the Bill is largely an elegant way to square that circle and keep some sense of control in this place of what harms we are content for the regulator to act against. However, I do not think that the Committee would claim that this is the last word on the subject, and nor should it be, because there are inherent risks of inflexibility—legislating to change harms is cumbersome and time-consuming.

There is also a risk of inconsistency, even with the Committee's approach elsewhere. I am thinking of the Committee's approach to defining content that is harmful to children, which it defines as content or activity that is either specified on the face of the Bill or in regulation, or—this is the crucial bit—where there is a “reasonably foreseeable risk” that it would be likely to cause harm. In other words, there needs to be some flexibility to oblige platforms to deal with harms that are not defined in regulations or in the Bill as they emerge in a fast-changing landscape, and I think that needs to be reflected more broadly too.

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point about flexibility. I wonder whether he is familiar with the work of the Epilepsy Society, which has found that people with photo-sensitive epilepsy are being sent flashing images in the hope that that might induce a seizure. Does he feel that that type of harm ought to be incorporated in the definitions in the Bill as well?

Jeremy Wright: Sadly, I am familiar with the activity that my hon. Friend describes. Of course, it is quite possible that such activity is unlawful, in which case it may well be covered in that part of the Bill. If it is not, we must ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to cover it elsewhere.

The conflict between flexibility and specificity appears elsewhere too. The Committee is right to say, as was my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), that the categorisation approach to differentiating platforms that present greater harm from those that present lesser harm is too blunt an instrument. We need a more sophisticated approach based on risk profile, as the Committee says—one that recognises that risks can emerge from unexpected places and with which we can see small platforms becoming influential very quickly.

I also think that the Committee is entirely right to seek to change the emphasis of the Bill away from solely content and towards activity and systems too, because ultimately it is the ordering, promoting and manipulation of content that is the root of the problem, and that is what the Bill should seek to address. Transparency will of course be crucial in enabling the regulator to do so.

It is also right to highlight, as the report does, what needs adding to or bolstering in the Bill, whether it be anonymity, the management of end-to-end encryption, misinformation and disinformation, or age assurance and verification, which others have spoken about. There are, as the Committee says, other changes needed to the Bill. The structure at the moment is heavily dependent on risk assessments that platforms themselves conduct. There is no provision at the moment for the regulator to do something about those risk assessments being profoundly inadequate, whether by accident or design, and there clearly needs to be.

We all agree that Ofcom needs adequate sanctions to be taken seriously. I welcome, as the Committee does, the Government's indication that they will bring forward more quickly individual director liability for information offences—in other words, failures to give Ofcom information about what is going on. We need to recognise that out of that arises the potentially fairly ludicrous situation in which an individual director might be engaging in the most appalling conduct, but so long as they are honest with the regulator about it, they are okay. That cannot be right and that is why I think the Committee is right to identify the need for an additional offence to deal with egregious conduct by directors.

The balance between parliamentary oversight and the operation of ministerial discretion in the Bill is, frankly, in the wrong place. There is too little of the former and too much of the latter. Power for Ministers to amend codes of practice in order to reflect Government policy is a particularly chilling potential infringement on the independence of the regulator. That needs to be repaired.

The final point I want to make is this: when we approach a Bill not just of this complexity but with the groundbreaking nature that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport described, we need to do so with humility. We may not get everything right first time and there is no monopoly of wisdom. There is no example for us to look to internationally and the rest of the world is looking at us to do this first. I take the point made earlier about delay, but we are still doing it first. We need to get it right and I hope the Government will approach it with an open mind.

3.51 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I, too, want to thank the Joint Committee for its very thorough report and for the recommendations it has made to the upcoming online safety legislation. As has already been mentioned, bringing our legislation on harmful online content into the 21st century is long overdue.

Today, I want to speak about a very particular but sadly prevalent harm: violence against women and girls. The year 2021 was a watershed moment for violence against women and girls, at least in terms of discussion around the extent of the problem. I thank each and every one of my constituents in Bath who wrote to me about these issues. We need those conversations about online violence against women and girls. The experiences of women and men online are often very different. Gendered harms are endemic. The Government have a responsibility to recognise and take meaningful steps in the Online Safety Bill to reduce those harms. I share the Joint Committee's concern that any Bill aimed at improving online safety that does not require companies to act on misogynistic abuse would not be credible.

I welcome the Committee's recommendation that cyber-flashing should be made illegal. The right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has already touched on that issue. Cyber-flashing is a particularly prevalent form of online violence against women and it disproportionately affects young women and girls. Some 76% of girls aged 12 to 18, and 41% of all women, have reported being sent unsolicited penis images. According to the dating app Bumble, 48% of millennial women said they had been sent an unsolicited sexual image in the last year alone. Like real life flashing, cyber-flashing can frighten. It can humiliate. It can violate boundaries. It is a form of sexual harassment from which even the physical boundaries of a home offer no respite. In the words of one woman who shared her experiences, cyber-flashing is "relentless". It can cause many women to police their online activity to avoid receiving those types of images.

All too often the trauma that women experience is trivialised. Unlike in Scotland, there is no effective route to prosecution for cyber-flashing for those who experience it in England and Wales. I urge Ministers to use the Bill to close this loophole in the law. This issue, at its heart, is about consent, and consent is the principle on which new a cyber-flashing measure should be based. A consent-based approach focuses on the core wrong and makes it easier for recipients to report instances of cyber-flashing.

Nearly four years ago, I presented my upskirting Bill to the House. I argued then that upskirting should be an offence regardless of the motivation of the perpetrator. That is because upskirting causes significant harm to

the victim regardless of the intentions behind it. The same is true of cyber-flashing. It was the approach taken in Texas where it is now illegal to send unsolicited genital images. I recommend Bumble for its work on this campaign, and I hope that Members across the House will add their support to it, so that we can replicate the approach in England and Wales that has been taken by Texas. Various Ministers have now signalled their support for criminalising cyber-flashing. That is very welcome, but the Government must act without delay.

As digital spaces become an ever greater part of our lives, we must ensure that an increasing number of people have a route to justice.

3.55 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Let me start by commending the work of the Joint Committee. I do so in large part because it reflects the fact that, thankfully, there is precious little partisan politics in this area. There is huge agreement across the House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister. He is the latest custodian of what I fear will become the largest Christmas tree Bill in Parliament. We run the risk of presenting this piece of legislation as something that will fix the entire internet. When I was the Minister with responsibility for this matter, I felt two possibly conflicting things. The first is that our guiding and most important principle is that what is illegal offline should be illegal online. There are huge parts of this Bill where that need not even be a conversation. The cyber-flashing example is an interesting one, because flashing is illegal in the real world. The idea that it might not be illegal online is absurd. We should not even be having that conversation. There are many pieces of this Bill where, in fact, what is required is simply a tidying up exercise, reflecting the fact that our legislation has not kept pace with the changing nature of the digital world.

The second feeling that I had was that, in many cases, we had existing laws that did not even need as much modification as perhaps we might think. There is an important issue of the existing resources that the police allocate to online criminality. That is not to denigrate the fantastic work that the police do—of course it is not—but, too often, we will have had constituents who have gone to their local police forces and found that online crime is treated fundamentally differently. The Home Office is on board with addressing that, but it does need to change.

I am, however, fundamentally optimistic about what this Bill can achieve. We are now all agreed that it is only right that elected people regulate the public square, and the public square now firmly includes Facebook and Twitter, so it cannot be right that Mark Zuckerberg has more power than my hon. Friend the Minister, or, indeed, the Prime Minister of many countries. That cannot be right, and this Bill goes a long way to fixing that.

I want to touch on a couple of specific points. The first is that it is plainly also right that we should be regulating advertising at the same time as we are regulating other content. There has never been a doubt in the Government's mind that that should happen, but, importantly, I know that there is some ambition to align the timetables of both of those pieces of work.

[Matt Warman]

Likewise, the place of journalism online is incredibly important. We can overthink who is a journalist in the modern world, but we should be able to make some sensible progress on whether the self-regulated journalism that we have in this country adopts a different status online, and Ofcom, in its work in this Bill, should reflect that.

My final point on those specific issues is that I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and former Secretaries of State who spoke in the debate wanted the primacy of free speech of the individual to be protected in all the work that we have done in this Parliament. I know it is difficult to embed that in a Bill, but we must address the fact that, just as large numbers of people are—rightly or wrongly—genuinely hesitant about taking the vaccine, large numbers of people genuinely worry that the Bill will allow serious constriction of free speech online. For me, that potentially has a chilling effect, which we should all be concerned about.

I commend the Minister for how he has engaged with colleagues across the House. We need to communicate better about how the Bill will tidy up some aspects of the imperfections that I have mentioned and make a real change and difference to how people experience social media. Fundamentally, we need to be clear that the Government's commitment to protecting free speech runs like a golden thread through the Bill and that the measure will not potentially undermine that. None the less, I think we all agree that the Bill will perform an essential function in an area that is essential to all aspects of modern life.

4 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and his colleagues on the Committee on their work. In particular, as he knows, I warmly welcome the recommendation that paid-for advertising should no longer be excluded from the scope of the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) put me in touch with one of her constituents who had some experience of online scamming. He explained that he is an experienced fund manager who used to run his own investment management firm. Last February, he clicked on a link that offered suspiciously high returns because he wanted to see what the scam was. Over the following months, despite repeatedly telling every caller that he was not interested, he was subjected to a daily barrage of calls, which petered out only in October. He said:

“When I started challenging them after a couple of months, they started becoming abusive... threatening to sue me for slander when I pointed out what they were doing was illegal...It actually became very stressful...Having warned Google many times, it fails to take action.”

We now have a well-established organised crime industry staffed by a large number of accomplished thugs, sustained by cheap and easy access to victims on Google and on Facebook. My interest arises, as the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe mentioned, from the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry on pension scams.

In a letter to the Work and Pensions Committee last May, the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority told us that

“fraud now accounts for one-in-three crimes in the UK, costing up to £190 billion a year. An estimated 86% of fraud is committed online...Action Fraud has told us that victims of pensions-related scams who had worked their whole lives to build a retirement fund had lost £82,000 on average...Online platforms, such as search engines and social media platforms, are playing an increasingly significant role in putting consumers at risk of harm by exposing them to adverts for financial products...Fraudsters have unprecedentedly cheap access to an online population of consumers who find it difficult to differentiate genuine offers from the fraudulent...There are ads online for firms that don't exist, for firms that claim to be regulated but aren't, for firms that claim to be based in the UK but aren't and for clones of legitimate authorised firms.”

That is why I applaud so warmly the Joint Committee's recommendation that the Bill should be broadened, as the Governor of the Bank of England said, to cover online fraud. I welcome the support for that move expressed in the debate.

I referred earlier to the Prime Minister's statement to the Liaison Committee last July that

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

However, the current draft of the Bill excludes most of the online fraud problem, so I urge the Minister to tackle it head on in the Bill. The public certainly want that; Aviva has published research concluding that 87% of the public want the Government to legislate to stop search engines and social media platforms promoting financial scams through advertising.

Until now, Ministers have said that the problem will be addressed by separate work on online advertising. That really is not enough. That work is proceeding at a snail's pace. In February 2019, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced that it was considering the regulation of online advertising, but three years on, there has been no progress at all. We now understand that there will be another consultation later this year. It will be years before that work delivers, and in the meantime thousands will have lost their life savings and UK financial services will have suffered further damage. The Government must not surrender to organised crime. I urge the Minister to accept the Joint Committee's recommendation.

4.5 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): It was a privilege to serve on the Joint Committee, which was chaired admirably by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). It was a cross-party, cross-House experience to which we brought a wealth of our own experience, and the report seems to have been warmly received.

There is no doubt that the Committee's experience of listening to hours of harrowing testimony and reading the written evidence was truly humbling, but I have always questioned why we actually need the Bill—that was my constant narrative all the way through. As we trawled through the written evidence and listened to hours of harrowing verbal evidence, it was unclear to me why the tech companies did not remove harmful content at the first opportunity and monitor their systems. They should be doing that in the first instance.

Those systems cause so much pain and upset. They have led to insurrection, to prosecutions, to people being robbed of their hard-earned money and to people dying. The problem that our Committee faced is that many tech companies are now bigger than a single news agency—arguably than any Government, for that matter—and have a monopoly on people's thoughts and beliefs, driven by algorithms that are driven by immense profit.

In the time that I have, I will focus on the governance element of our recommendations. Robust regulatory oversight will be critical to ensuring this Government's ambition for us to be one of the safest places online in the world. To put in context why that is so important, let me explain about killer algorithms.

An algorithm is a series of instructions telling a computer how to transform a set of facts about the world into useful information. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) touched on the point that an algorithm can constantly recommend pictures of dogs to dog lovers like me, but the dark side is that it can also constantly recommend to a vulnerable teenager pictures of self-harm, suicide content, violent sexual pornography or unsolicited contact with adults they do not know, right the way through to more insidious harms that might be built up over time.

We heard the sad story of the suicide of Molly Russell from her father during the evidence sessions. She was a 14-year-old who killed herself after viewing images of self-harm and suicide online. The coroner heard that in her last six months she used her Instagram account more than 120 times a day, liked more than 11,000 pieces of content and shared over 1,500 videos. An inquest is examining how algorithms contributed to her death.

During the evidence sessions, we also learned of Zach Eagling. Gorgeous 10-year-old Zach has epilepsy; I have had the privilege of meeting him. He was subject to the most deplorable and deliberate practices targeting epilepsy sufferers with flashing images.

Those were two of the stand-out moments that broke my heart during the evidence sessions. Why were the tech companies not stopping these killer algorithms? Why did they allow this to happen? In principle, tech companies self-regulate already, but they have failed. Lack of accountability, combined with commercialisation, has created a perfect storm in which social media can literally kill, so the natural conclusion is that tech companies must be held liable for systems that they have created to make money for themselves and that have had harmful outcomes for others.

Our report recommends compelling service providers to safeguard vulnerable users properly and regulate illegal content. For me, the key recommendation is

“that a senior manager at board level or reporting to the board should be...made liable for a new offence: the failure to comply with their obligations as regulated service providers when there is clear evidence of repeated and systemic failings that result in a significant risk of serious harm to users.”

Let me use the case of 10-year-old Zach. This is what it would mean to him if our recommendations were accepted: sending flashing images to epilepsy sufferers would become a criminal offence.

The human cost of the internet is unquantifiable, and I applaud the Government for what will be a ground-breaking and truly world-leading Bill. Our recommendations will ensure that the Bill holds platforms

to account and achieve the Government's aim of making the United Kingdom the safest place in the world to be online. We owe that to Molly Russell and to Zach Eagling. The tech companies should be removing harmful content and enforcing safety by design at the first opportunity. Surely they do not have to wait for the Bill; they can do the right thing now.

4.10 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Like other hon. Members, I place on the record my sincere thanks to members and staff of the Joint Committee for their invaluable work. The Bill has huge potential for good and is so desperately needed. The Committee can take satisfaction that the recommendations in the report would most certainly assist in achieving the Government's aim or stated objective of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online.

I will address some issues around the anonymous abuse that some describe as “legal but harmful”—the report offers some very constructive proposals to address that—as someone who has been on the receiving end of torrents of such abuse over many years, and in solidarity with a colleague and friend, Diane Dodds, who is a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, a former Member of the European Parliament, and the wife of Lord Dodds of Duncairn. In his time in this place as the Member for Belfast North, Lord Dodds was a tireless campaigner for the fortification of flour with folic acid. Many will know that he did so as a father who had lost his beloved son Andrew, who was born with spina bifida and passed away aged eight.

Over the new year period, Diane shared a post on Twitter. In it, she was pictured with her two dogs, and extended best wishes to followers for the year ahead. An anonymous troll responded:

“Nice looking dogs, have they taken the place of your dead son?”

I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and Members across this House, will share my revulsion that such a vile and callous remark was made to a mother who still grieves the loss of her child. Yet when the comment was reported, Twitter's initial response was that it did not violate the rules. Only after three days of significant media attention did Twitter change its stance and suspend the account.

Will the Bill address that form of online abuse? Will it lift the cloak of anonymity and extend the veil of protection to people being attacked and abused online in such a callous, vindictive and cruel way? In that regard, I believe that the report of the Joint Committee and its recommendations make for better legislation and better protection for users online by rightly addressing issues with the lack of traceability by law enforcement, the frictionless creation and disposal of accounts at scale, the lack of user control over accounts they engage with, and the failure of platforms to deal with abuse. I endorse all the report's recommendations in that regard.

I bring particular attention to the proposal that the higher-risk platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow that choice of verified and non-verified accounts to be offered to users, and then subsequent options for the interaction of the two. Such an option would not only protect people like Diane; it would protect the schoolchild who is being abused because of their image. Verification is key and must be legislated for. Otherwise, the Bill is toothless.

[Carla Lockhart]

The report also deals with the rather disturbing trend of multiple account creation and the use of such accounts to spread a message in a short time. In Northern Ireland, we see the method in action daily; it is used by foot soldiers or keyboard warriors of one political party to spread their message and falsehoods, and with the more sinister motive of silencing opponents. In our democracy, we need protection from such tactics, and I commend the Joint Committee for its proposals on that.

I wish briefly to mention the joint report and its approach to pornography. I believe that the Joint Committee should have offered a more robust approach to improving the legislation and safeguarding children in particular from the serious harm caused by pornography. First, if the report's suggestion of replacing clause 11 of the Bill with a list of online harms is accepted by the Government, pornography should be listed as an online harm. For many of us in this House it was troubling that the Government in 2019 abandoned part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017, leaving children with no protection online.

Secondly, it is welcome that the Joint Committee has proposed age verification through the age-appropriate design code. Two concerns remain: whether the provision is as robust as the Digital Economy Act, and the timeframe for enacting it and the children who will consequently stumble on this type of material. In the interim, the Government must implement part 3 of the 2017 Act, and then the design code and this Bill can be used to offer greater protection.

4.15 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): This is a comprehensive, thoughtful and constructive report, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and his Committee for their tireless work.

Generally speaking, I welcome the work to tackle online abuse. In particular, I note the contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) and the vital work on preventing cyber-flashing by my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones). In my previous contributions on this subject, I have noted some horrific examples of antisemitic abuse, which for me underscore the importance of what this Bill will do. We cannot continue in a world where there are nearly two antisemitic tweets for every Jewish person in the UK. Measures to tackle that are central to the Bill and rightly take pride of place within it.

However, in the time I have available I will speak on an issue that has not always been front and centre of the debate: online fraud. City of London Police, based in my constituency, is the national lead for economic and cyber-crime and for fraud. Its contributions to the Committee, alongside those of the Office of the City Remembrancer, cannot be overstated. It was made clear in the Joint Committee report that fraud and cyber-crime are on an upward trajectory, affecting more people more often than any other crime today.

We know that fraudsters are increasingly sophisticated. They are always looking for the next chink in our digital armour, so I am glad that paragraph 186 of the report makes it clear that we need to act on the human consequences of online fraud—not just the financial

effects, but the psychological effects. Unfortunately, I suspect that the covid pandemic may have been one of the triggers for the increase in sophisticated cases of, for instance, online romance fraud.

It is therefore right that we have moved beyond the scope of the White Paper to include fraud in the Bill. Now we must ask ourselves how we as legislators can effectively tackle online fraud in this Bill, recognising that acknowledging online fraud is a first step, but behind that acknowledgment there must be robust recommendations and proposals to ensure safety. This is not about paying lip service to stopping online fraud. The forthcoming Bill cannot stop at being simply reactive, and the Committee is right that any measures to counteract fraud must prioritise prevention.

It is not enough for providers simply to undertake a risk assessment for fraudulent content and take down that content when reported. To combat online fraud effectively, we need legislation that requires platform operators to be proactive in stopping fraudulent material in the first instance—not simply removing it when people tell them about it. I welcome the recommendations that clause 41(4) be amended to add an offence of fraud and similarly that related clauses be introduced or amended so that companies are required to address it proactively.

Alongside that, the draft Bill's proposals explicitly exclude paid-for advertising from the scope of the legislation, which would undermine any meaningful effort to properly combat all online fraud in the Bill and potentially create a loophole for criminals to circumvent legislation. As such, I support the Committee's recommendations in paragraphs 268 to 271 of the report, which would bring such advertising into scope. This would make sure that Ofcom is responsible for acting against service providers who consistently allow paid-for advertising that creates a risk of harm to their platforms.

I know that the Government will respond with strength on this issue, and I welcome the Minister's meetings with me to discuss it in full. I am glad to see such widespread support in this place for the report. I am in no doubt that we need to protect our citizens against aggressive and malicious abuses of technology. It is now or never.

4.20 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate the whole Committee on this incredibly thorough and useful report. I am sure that it will play a key role in improving this legislation.

I want to focus my remarks on suicide and self-harm. The reason for that is the tragic case of a young man from my constituency, Joe Nihill, who took his own life at the age of 23 after accessing suicide-related information on the internet. I have raised this with the Secretary of State before in DCMS questions, and I know that she feels very keenly the need to tackle such content online. I again pay tribute to Joe's mother Catherine and his sister-in-law Melanie, who have been running an inspiring campaign. Their campaign was inspired by the fact that Joe, in the note that he left to his family before tragically taking his own life, asked for action on this kind of online content.

I welcome the Committee's report, particularly its recommendation that encouraging or assisting suicide is included in the primary legislation as a priority illegal

harm. That is really important. I also welcome the Committee's recommendation, in line with the Law Commission's recommendation, that encouraging or assisting a person to seriously self-harm should be made illegal.

The two issues where I would like the Government to improve the Bill in relation to suicide and self-harm relate to the size of the platforms covered and the age of the people protected. We do not want the smaller platforms to be let off the hook unintentionally through loopholes. I ask the Minister to be mindful of this and to ensure that even smaller platforms such as online community groups, forums or message boards, where some of the most harmful content in relation to suicide and self-harm can be found, are covered as well. It is also really important that the Government agree with the idea of ensuring that we cannot have the age of 18 as a cut-off point, because that would be to miss an opportunity with this Bill. As I said, my constituent Joe, a popular young person, was 23, so the fact that he was over 18 did not mean that he was safe from this kind of harmful online content.

It is important to reflect on the written evidence that was sent to the Committee from people who had contacted the Samaritans. We have heard this already, but it is important to reiterate it. In relation to ensuring that the smaller platforms are covered by the legislation, one piece of evidence said:

"If suicidal people can't find what they are looking for at large sites they will just go onto the smaller sites so it doesn't solve the problem."

Another said:

"The people using the bigger sites will just flood the smaller sites if their content starts getting removed. The standard needs to be the same across all sites."

Unfortunately, some of the people behind this harmful content are very ingenious when it comes to evading responsibility. Things get taken down and then put up somewhere else. We cannot allow them to carry on doing this, because people are paying the price with their mental health and with their lives. Another respondent with lived experience told the Committee:

"Harmful and accessible suicide and self harm online content can be harmful at any age. I am in my fifties and would be tempted to act on this information if I felt suicidal again."

That was quoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), but I think it is worth reiterating.

In conclusion, I welcome this report. I know from speaking to the Secretary of State outside the Chamber after DCMS questions that she takes preventing suicide and self-harm very seriously. Will the Minister confirm that, in relation to suicide and self-harm content, all platforms and people of all ages will be in scope in the final Bill that is presented to the House? That would be a real legacy for the campaign inspired by Joe Nihill, who sadly lost his life in my constituency.

4.25 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I come to this report through the prism of my work on body image. The Minister will be pleased to hear that I will not give again the speech that I delivered yesterday, when he was kind enough to join proceedings on my private Member's Bill about digitally altered body images that should carry a logo. Although I would welcome the Government

taking on that Bill, I have to play on the Government's playing field, which has led me to assess this Bill through that prism.

I should congratulate the Government on what they are trying to achieve: a world-leading, world-beating risk assessment across the internet. To achieve that would be no mean feat. I have not heard mentioned enough the role that Ofcom will play. Having met Ofcom, I know that it would need the tools and ability to investigate and to levy very heavy fines and punishments on companies for breaching the rules. They are going to be the key to holding this all together.

Body image falls on the side of content that is legal but harmful. Clause 46(3) of the draft Bill states:

"Content is within this subsection if the provider of the service has reasonable grounds to believe that the nature of the content is such that there is a material risk of the content having, or indirectly having, a significant adverse physical or psychological impact on an adult of ordinary sensibilities".

It repeats that in several versions. I am pleased to see that that matches up with the report, but I appreciate that there is a difference of opinion on whether clause 11 should remain. Both pick up on the fact that

"Knowingly false communications likely to cause significant physical or psychological harm to a reasonable person"

should be called out. The report goes on to state:

"As with the other safety duties, we recommend that Ofcom be required to issue a mandatory code of practice to service providers on how they should comply with this duty. In doing so they must identify features and processes that facilitate sharing and spread of material in these named areas and set out clear expectations of mitigation and management strategies".

After reading those points, both in the Bill and the report, I think a gap has been missed. There is no problem with seeing one doctored image; it is the volume of doctored images—the repeated images of shoulders distorted, waists thinner, breasts bigger—that has an impact. That is the same with people who are looking for information on dietary requirements. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), who is no longer in her place, hit the nail on the head perfectly. It is about algorithms. That is where I want the Bill to be stronger. In every meeting that I have had with TikTok, Instagram, Facebook or Snapchat—you name it—when I have asked about algorithms, they say, "We can't tell you more about it because it's commercially sensitive," but they are fundamentally what is driving us down the rabbit holes that the report rightly picks up on. How will we in this House determine what things look like if we do not understand what is driving them there in the first place? The horse has literally left the stables by the time we are picking up the pieces.

I am pleased that in previous debates the Minister has said that Ofcom will be able to request this information, but I would ask that we go one step further and say that that information could be exposed to the public. Why? It will undermine the whole model driving these companies in their commercial activity, because it will lay it bare for us all to see. That is key to the transparency that we need. Otherwise, how do we police the volume of images that are being delivered to our young people, whether they are body images or about self-harm, race hate or race-baiting, or whatever people want to call it or whatever their niche happens to be? As we heard in this debate, social media plays on not only people's interests, but their insecurities. That is what we have to tighten up

[Dr Luke Evans]

on. The Bill and this report, working in conjunction, can really do that. However, I urge that the volume and, most importantly, the algorithms are considered.

4.30 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called in this important debate. I wish to talk about online fraud; in my capacity as chair of the all-party group on fair business banking and as a member of the Treasury Committee, I think that is a matter of extreme importance. I congratulate the Joint Committee on its work, and my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), its Chairman, has done excellent work on this, particularly in pages 58 to 60 and 75 to 79 of the report.

It is good to see that the Government are looking at online fraud within the context of this Bill, but they must look at paid-for content as well. It is crucial that we do that, and the Minister has been very good in engaging on this issue. He knows how important it is, given his background. When the FCA, the Treasury, UK Finance, the Advertising Standards Authority and the Treasury Committee are all in favour of including fraud and paid-for content within the scope of this Bill, it is incumbent on the Government to do so. Otherwise, as the Treasury Committee says, there will be large financial losses to the public. Up to 40% of all crime is now fraud and, as the report says, 85% of fraud involves the internet in some way or other, so it is crucial that we cover this in the Bill.

I am massively in favour of competition and absolutely congratulate the platforms on their market dominance, but they have taken that market share in paid-for content away from our local newspapers and other such media. It is therefore crucial that we put those platforms on a fair and level playing field with those other media. I do not think we do that, and we need to be far tougher with these platforms. Clearly, they make a huge amount of money, but in many ways they get away with murder in terms of the regulation of their content, in a way that newspapers never would have done.

In my days in business, when we were advertising in newspapers we had to prove that we were who we said we were in terms of being a business, and the newspapers would look at the content of our adverts and they made sure we verified our claims. Neither of those things happens with respect to these platforms; they simply take the money and the approach is, "Let the people who are viewing it beware." It is simply not a fair and level playing field. Newspapers were the gatekeepers but these platforms are absolutely not.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) said, what works offline should be covered online, but that is not the situation at the moment. So I agree with the report that we need the platforms to be proactive in making sure that fraudulent content is removed. It needs to be covered under clause 41(4) and "priority illegal content", so that platforms have to be proactive in taking this stuff down. We also need to be looking at clause 39 and removing paid-for ads to make sure that platforms are also proactive in removing paid-for online fraudulent content.

There is another thing we need to make sure is covered in the Bill in its final form. Fraud is not just an offence against individuals, as companies often get defrauded by mechanisms through these platforms, and we want to make sure they are covered as well. One way of doing that and focusing the platforms' attention on this—I am not quite clear on this and I probably need to spend a bit of time with the Minister and the Chair of the Joint Committee on it—is by looking at what redress is available to people who lose out. I know that the Committee is recommending an external redress process, but would that cover redress for financial loss? It think it should. So if the individual or the company cannot get redress through the company that they were defrauded by—it is pretty unlikely that they would—or the bank that facilitated the transaction, the platform should cover the redress to compensate those people for the loss. That would really focus the attention of platforms on making sure that this content was removed.

I am not sure that people know that the ASA, which looks at this kind of stuff and makes sure that advertising is appropriate, has no means of sanctioning a company for making claims that are not valid and do not meet with the expectations of the consumers. There are pretty much no sanctions for defrauding a company or individual in this way, or even for misleading them into buying the wrong product or making the wrong investment, as we saw with London Capital and Finance.

This Bill is a huge opportunity, and we have to make sure it is all-encompassing and ticks many of the boxes that others have spoken about in this debate.

4.35 pm

John Nicolson (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I also thank my friend, the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), for securing this important debate and for his skilled chairing of the Joint Committee. His expertise and diligence ensured a thorough pre-legislative process. I also extend my thanks to the hard-working Committee staff and to the other members of the Committee, with whom it has been a pleasure to work.

You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that SNP Members are not always fans of this place, but the Joint Committee was an example of cross-party co-operation aimed at delivering effective legislation. We all know that we need to find a way of keeping ourselves safe online and, in particular, of fighting disinformation, which is one of the scourges of our age.

I also thank our witnesses. I suspect some enjoyed the experience more than others. Some of those joining us from Silicon Valley looked more than a little uncomfortable at a few points, as indeed they should have given their inadequate testimony.

We all hope the online harms Bill will do what no legislation has done before by providing a proper regulatory framework for the internet. Its ambition and scope require a collaborative approach, and I welcome the UK Government's recognition of this. For too long the social media companies have been given carte blanche to make eye-watering amounts of money while spreading hatred, disinformation and harmful content.

With 11 evidence sessions and over 200 written submissions, I am able to highlight only certain key findings from the Committee, and I do not want to repeat what others have said, unusual though that is in

this House. Some findings stand out. During those sessions we heard from Rio Ferdinand about the racist abuse he receives and the devastating effect it has on his family. We heard about the misogynistic abuse and harassment that more than a third of all women receive online as a matter of routine. And we heard from Nancy Kelley of Stonewall about the abuse that LGBTQ+ people receive on social media. Stonewall highlighted the real-world consequences of this abuse, with people outed on social media losing their job or their home. Trans people have been subjected to an avalanche of online abuse, with a steep rise in offline abuse, including violent attacks, as a result.

The evidence sessions also illuminated why this abuse is so prevalent on social media. The more extreme and controversial the content, the more likely it is that people will interact with it. Algorithms push this harmful content on to people's newsfeeds, leading to yet more people viewing it. The reason for all this is cynically simple: the more that people view this content and stay on the platform, the more advertisements that the big tech companies are able to sell, and 99% of Facebook's income is from advertising. The problem is at the heart of the business model.

Just over a year ago, the US Capitol building was stormed by protesters who attempted to "stop the steal." Many of those taking part had been radicalised by disinformation that had spread like wildfire online. In these islands, despite the best efforts of all our health bodies, we have seen vaccine hesitancy. Social media is a gift to anti-vaxxers. It allows them to spread their conspiracy theories and lies to a vast audience. Regulating societal harms is by no means easy, but the UK Government must listen to the experts and the Committee report and reintroduce the measures on societal harms into the Bill. Only then will we be able to start tackling disinformation adequately.

Finally, the extensive powers granted by the Bill to the Secretary of State must be addressed. London School of Economics professor Dr Damian Tambini described the powers as

"closer to authoritarian than to liberal democratic standards even with the safeguards".

The proposed powers undermine the authority and independence of the regulator. The Government propose that the Secretary of State should be able to set strategic priorities for Ofcom and direct Ofcom to make amendments to reflect Government policy. What a disturbing mix. While the Minister is doubtless relieved that the Department is in the hands of the current calm and level-headed Secretary of State, let us imagine if one day a left-wing snowflake held that power—I see him shuddering from afar. Those powers should be significantly diluted or preferably removed, as the report recommends.

The Bill is ambitious and the report makes non-partisan, well considered recommendations for it. I join cross-party Members in asking the Government to make the internet safer for everyone by adopting those recommendations.

4.40 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I join the House in congratulating the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on convening the debate and on all his hard and excellent work in leading the Joint

Committee. This has been one of the most interesting debates in this place that I have ever participated in and, given the urgent need to improve online safety, it could not have come at a more crucial time. I am grateful to all members of the Joint Committee, who had a tough job in cleaning up this confusing and long-delayed Bill. It has been a very long time coming.

Current legislation on the online space is from the analogue age and lags far behind the digital age in which most of us now live. The Bill has the potential to be the world-leading legislation that we need it to be, sending a message to social media giants who, for too long, have got away with allowing—and in some cases even promoting—harmful content online. That cannot be allowed to continue. Most of us recognise the huge impact of the Government's failure to regulate the online space, notably on young people, yet still, as the Joint Committee report suggests, the draft legislation is not ambitious or broad enough in scope to tackle the issues at their root.

Let me be clear that some of the trends emerging online can be extremely detrimental to both physical and mental wellbeing. We have all heard desperately tragic stories involving young people. We heard such stories today from the hon. Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) and from my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and for Reading East (Matt Rodda) about young people harming themselves, taking their own lives and, in some cases, even being murdered at the hands of social media. I pay tribute to Molly Russell, Joe Nihill and Olly Stephens and to their families and friends for campaigning to make social media a much safer place so that no other young people have to go through what they did.

We all know about the other harms faced online, from the spread of fake news—including dangerous anti-vax content—to financial scams offering supposedly lucrative incentives that can be hard to decipher even for the most internet-literate of people. However, despite years of warnings from the Opposition alongside campaigning groups and charities, the Government have so far failed to take robust action. In my constituency, whenever I meet young people through a school visit or a community group, the conversations almost always centre around a common interest: social media. I know that those sentiments are not unique to my area. That is why it is so utterly wrong that tech giants have been left unaccountable for so long. Labour therefore welcomes the Joint Committee's recommendations calling for the Government to hold online tech giants to account for the design and operation of their systems. We firmly believe that regulation should be governed through legislation and by an independent regulator instead of by a distant body in Silicon Valley.

In recent weeks, we have been reminded once again of the real power and influence of material shared online in generating and spreading fake news. In the pandemic, tackling dangerous anti-vax content is critical to vaccinating the unvaccinated. With the majority of people requiring serious care in hospital for coronavirus being unvaccinated, Government inaction and complacency in tackling dangerous anti-vax sentiment is costing lives and putting pressure on the NHS.

Labour have repeatedly called on the Government to work cross-party to introduce emergency legislation that includes financial and criminal penalties for companies

[Alex Davies-Jones]

which fail to act to stamp out dangerous anti-vax content, yet once again they have failed to act. They must stand up to big tech companies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) said, we must ignore those companies' excuses and introduce financial and criminal penalties for failures that lead to serious harm. That is echoed in the Joint Committee's report, which recommends that responsibilities of individuals at the very top of online tech organisations go further, with full accountability for the messages that those companies are hosting and, at times, even promoting.

In our dialogue about the responsibilities of tech firms, we must remember that we need to consider the role of so-called niche organisations, too. In line with that, Labour commends the Committee's recognition of concerns raised by Hope not Hate and the Antisemitism Policy Trust, among others, about the harms caused by these alternative platforms. Our party leader raised concerns about one such example—Telegram—during Prime Minister's questions, and there are numerous other platforms on which misogyny, racism and homophobia run rampant, including BitChute, Gab, BrandNewTube and 4chan, to name just a few. It is absolutely right that the Government look again at categorisation so that harm caused on and by such platforms is assessed by risk and not the current determinants of size and functionality.

The Committee has also rightly noted that, while search does not operate in the same way as user-to-user platforms do, harm can still be caused through algorithmic programming and auto-prompts. We therefore urge the Government to include search engines and search services within the regulatory scope of the Bill, recognising that they, too, have a role to play in addressing not just illegal but legal and harmful content, too.

This brings me to another excellent recommendation raised by the Joint Committee. Notably excluded from the draft legislation is the ability to regulate and hold social media giants accountable for paid-for advertising hosted on their websites. We have heard from a host of Members from across the House about how important it is that that should be included in the legislation. The Committee concluded that

"The exclusion of paid-for advertising from the scope of the Online Safety Bill would obstruct the Government's stated aim of tackling online fraud and activity that creates a risk of harm more generally."

The Government have repeatedly claimed that regulating paid-for advertisements is beyond the scope of this legislation and that instead it will be the role of the online advertising programme to manage how adverts are monitored. But we are now almost three years down the line since the OAP was first mentioned, and we still have little more than a press release and an outdated call for evidence to confirm exactly how the programme will function.

As right hon. and hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), have said, the Government must adopt the Joint Committee's recommendation and expand the Bill to include paid-for adverts, which are central to so many instances of fraud and harm online more generally. Of course, crucial to this debate is therefore the need to

define exactly what constitutes harm. As the Joint Committee recommends, the Government must publish their definition as soon as possible. The concept of harm underpins the entire evolution of how this legislation will be drafted and eventually enacted. It is vital that the Government's definition is published before the Bill is introduced to ensure that Ofcom, as the regulator, is fully prepared and resourced for its role. I hope that the Minister will be able to give the House an update on that point in his comments.

I move on to address some of the detail in the Committee's recommendations. I am pleased that the Committee has addressed many of the concerns raised about the complexity of the Bill in its current form, and Labour supports the move to bring our focus firmly back to the regulation of social media giants' systems and progress. The Joint Committee's report rightly reflects the strong concerns about the scale of the Secretary of State's powers in the Bill, and we have heard from other Members about concerns regarding the scope of the regulator's independence in many areas. We also know very little about the disinformation and misinformation unit, and that is required—Madam Deputy Speaker, I could go on. We know that this legislation is vital.

To conclude, I believe that, without the big changes recommended by the Joint Committee alongside a faster-paced and increased understanding of the wider issues, more people will find themselves at risk of harms online. The danger is that, even with the excellent recommendations of the Joint Committee, the Online Safety Bill will be inadequate and simply out of date when it eventually becomes law. The Government have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change that, and I urge the Minister to take seriously the concerns raised by Members in the House.

4.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing today's debate and chairing the Joint Committee with such aplomb and expertise. I thank Members from all parties on the Committee—from not just this House, but the other place—for their incredibly hard work. I put on the record my thanks to them; as my hon. Friend said, Baroness Kidron and Lord Gilbert are with us today. I thank them all for their extremely thorough and detailed work. We have been studying their report—all 191 pages—very carefully, and it will definitely have an impact on the legislation as it is updated.

I also thank the Select Committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), for the work. I look forward very much to its report, which my hon. Friend said would be published imminently. I encourage the Committee to ensure that it is indeed published as soon as possible, so that we can take account of its recommendations as well. I can confirm that we will be making changes to the Bill in the light of the recommendations of the Joint Committee report and those of the anticipated report from the Select Committee. We understand that there are a number of respects in which the Bill can be improved substantially. The Government certainly have no monopoly on wisdom, and we intend to profit from the huge experience of the

members of the Committees, and Members of the House, in making improvements—significant improvements—to the Bill. We intend to produce a revised and updated Bill before the end of the current Session.

We intend this Bill to be a world-leading piece of legislation. We believe that the United Kingdom has an opportunity to set a global example which other countries will follow. As the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said, the Bill has been some time in gestation, but because this is such a complicated topic, it is important that we get the legislation right.

This is, I think, a good moment to thank previous Secretaries of State and Ministers for the work that they did in laying the foundations on which we are now building—in fact, in building the walls as well; we are just putting the roof on. In particular, I know of the work done in this area by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Jeremy Wright) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and also the work done by my hon. Friends the Members for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). I am sure that the whole House will want to thank them for the fantastic work that they did in taking us to the point where we now stand.

I entirely agree with the sentiments expressed by the Chairman of the Joint Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, who said in his opening speech that social media firms had brought this legislation on themselves by the irresponsibility that they have often shown by placing profit ahead of humanity. That was powerfully illustrated by the evidence presented to the Joint Committee, and separately to the United States Senate and *The Wall Street Journal*, by the Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, who explained how Facebook's use of algorithms—mentioned by Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Gosport and for Bosworth (Dr Evans)—prioritised profit by promoting content that was harmful or incendiary simply because it made money, with scant, if any, regard to the harm being caused. Our view is that such an attitude is not only inappropriate but wrong.

Two or three Members have referred to the tragic suicide of 14-year-old Molly Russell, which followed a huge amount of very troubling suicide-related content being served up to her by Instagram. That sort of thing simply should not be happening. There are all too many other examples of social media firms not promptly handing over identification information to the police—I encountered a constituency case of that kind a couple of years ago—and not taking down content that is illegal, or content that clearly contravenes their terms and conditions.

This state of affairs cannot persist, and it is right for the House to act. I am heartened to note that, broadly speaking, we will be acting on a cross-party basis, because I think that that will make the message we send the world and the action we are taking all the more powerful. However, as Members have said today, even before the Act is passed, social media firms can act. They can edit their algorithms tomorrow, and I urge them to do exactly that. They should not be waiting for us to legislate; they should do the right thing today. We will be watching very closely; the House will be watching, and the public will be watching.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Philp: Very briefly.

Kevin Hollinrake: I will be very brief. My hon. Friend has talked about cross-party working, and there is clearly cross-party consensus that paid-for advertising should be included in the scope of the Bill. Is that something that he intends to do?

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend anticipates my next point. I was about to come on to some of the specifics—very quickly, because time is short.

I am not going to be pre-announcing any firm commitments today because work is still ongoing, including the collective agreement process in Government, but on fraud and paid-for advertising, we have heard the message of the Joint Committee, the Financial Conduct Authority, the financial services sector, campaigners and Members of this House such as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) raised this, as did the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I was at Revolut's head office in Canary Wharf earlier today and it raised the issue as well. It is a message that the Government have absolutely heard, and it is something that we very much hope we will be able to address when we bring the Bill forward.

I cannot make any specific commitments because the work is still ongoing, but that message is loudly heard, as is the message communicated by the right hon. Member for Barking, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on the work by the Law Commission on the communications offences, which will really tighten up some of the issues to do with what are essentially malicious or harmful communications, issues such as cyber-flashing and issues to do with epilepsy that we have heard about this afternoon. We are studying those Law Commission proposals very positively and carefully, as the Joint Committee recommended that we do.

We have also heard clearly the messages concerning commercial pornography. We understand the issues presented by the fact that the Bill, as drafted, does not cover that. Again, that is something we are currently working on very hard indeed.

Anonymity is another important issue raised today by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), among others. They and the Joint Committee have suggested that users should be given the option to protect themselves from anonymous content. They also addressed the critical question of traceability when law enforcement needs to investigate something. Again, those messages have been heard very clearly and we are working very hard on those.

That brings me to the tragic case raised by the hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) of his constituent Olly, who was so appallingly murdered; the murder appears to have been organised online. Under the Bill as drafted, organising an act like that—an illegal act—will be dealt with. I have just mentioned the point about traceability, which we are studying very carefully. The hon. Member said he had some concerns that the social media companies did not provide the police with the identification information required when requested.

[Chris Philp]

I had a similar case a couple of years ago with Snapchat. If he could look into the details of that and come back to me with the specifics, I would be very interested to hear those, because that would give us additional evidence if further steps need to be taken via the amended Bill. If he could come back to me on that, I would be very grateful.

A number of Members have rightly raised the point about transparency and understanding exactly what these social media firms are doing. The right hon. Member for Barking made that point powerfully, as did the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). Of course, the Bill does give Ofcom extremely wide-ranging powers to require information to be delivered up. It also imposes transparency obligations upon these companies. There are criminal sanctions on individuals if those provisions are broken, and we have heard clearly the suggestion that those be brought forward and commenced much earlier. The Bill will also contain strong protections for free speech. I have not got time to talk about that more, but protecting free speech clearly is very important.

The country demands action, this House demands action and we will take it.

4.58 pm

Damian Collins: I thank all Members who have contributed to what has been an excellent debate. We have heard from Members from each nation of the United Kingdom and almost every political party represented in the House as well, all of whom were supporting the principle of the Bill and supporting a majority of the recommendations in the report. I think we all share an urgency that we want to get this done.

Members spoke not just out of an appreciation of the policy issues, but from personal experience. The right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) talked about the abuse that she has received, as so many other Members of the House have. The hon. Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) raised a case on behalf of his constituents and my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans) did so with regards to his campaign on body image. We know ourselves, from our personal experience and the experience of our constituents, why it is necessary for legislation on this. There is also a question about how the House scrutinises the powers we will give Ofcom and how the regime will work in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Report of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill, HC 609.

Public Prosecution Service and Legacy in Northern Ireland

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), I wish to make a short statement.

I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of the resolution on matters of sub judice to extend the waiver granted for proceedings in July to allow limited reference to active legal proceedings and open inquests in relation to the historic troubles-related deaths. As before, reference to those cases should be limited to the context and to the events that led to the cases, but Members should not refer to the detail of cases or to the names of those involved in them. All Members should, however, be mindful of the matters that may be the subject of future legal proceedings and should exercise caution in making reference to individual cases.

5.1 pm

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I take your words of caution seriously. I have worked hard with the Clerks to make sure that what I say falls within those boundaries. I thank you for granting this debate this afternoon.

This is an incredibly important subject. I have long been an opponent of the treatment of elderly veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the period known as the troubles. I have always thought that if people were actually aware of what we did to these veterans, they would be outraged, and so it has proved. I do not intend to spend time on their experiences in this debate. I have tried to be their voice at every opportunity, and I will continue to do so. I am so proud of them—we are so proud of them—and this weird shame, fuelled by those trying to rewrite this country's history during that period at that generation of security force personnel who sacrificed so much to keep us safe, must end.

Today, though, I want instead to speak about why we are here and how we got here, and I must do it here. Every comment on any inference of unfairness in the justice system in Northern Ireland is often met by aggressive and threatening behaviour from those who have built themselves a very comfortable life off the public purse by prolonging awful experiences for the families of those who suffered during the troubles and veterans who were caught up in the diabolical blood-letting that occurred during that time in Northern Ireland.

I want to be clear about the context of my remarks. I know that different groups will take whatever they want from what I say today, and that is fine, but I want to be crystal clear at the outset: I have never campaigned for anything other than fairness in how we deal with legacy in Northern Ireland. I accept I come from the position of defending the majority of veterans who served their country with great distinction and upon whom the majority of the unfairness in recent years has fallen. I have been repeatedly clear to all on all sides on the need to prosecute and hold to account those who, with our flag on their arm, chose to step outside the professional boundaries all operators know and understand and could not adhere to the standards and values on which the British armed forces are built.

I have been equally clear, whether it has been in my dissemination of the Iraq or Afghanistan legacy systems, or that of Northern Ireland, too, that I have huge sympathy for the victims of those conflicts who lost loved ones and seek redress—particularly those who lost loved ones as a result of state actions. It is inhuman to think otherwise. I always approach these things as if it were my son or daughter, my mother or father who had lost their life. The state's intervention in these things must always adhere to the highest standards, whether in the use of force or in investigations.

While I will always be in awe of the stunning bravery and humanity of the vast and totally overwhelming majority of those who served the state in Northern Ireland, it is clear that not every action met those standards. If we are to progress, we must accept that, for it is an undeniable truth, and to deny it prolongs the pain of those who were affected.

However, we must be equally honest about how difficult it is satisfactorily to redress these issues through the courts today in the 2020s—so difficult, it is impossible in the overwhelmingly vast majority of cases. The standard of investigations into many of the cases were unacceptably poor. We must deal with the world not as we want it to be, but as we find it. Those deficiencies have been exploited by a small but very vociferous and very aggressive group in Northern Ireland who operate predominantly but not exclusively in the legal and political systems. They place the interests of both groups of protagonists, both victims and veterans, far below their own interests, be they financial or electoral, and have built a grievance industry on these issues, which serves no one but themselves.

It is inevitable, given the studious record keeping of the state in Northern Ireland when contrasted with the murderous chaos conducted by the terrorists, that this pursuit of political and financial gain was inevitably going to be conducted only one way: against those who strived night and day to prevent civil war in Northern Ireland, and not against those who woke up in the morning and made deliberate and conscious choices to go and kill women and children in pursuit of their aims. There will never be any moral equivalence between the two. The people of these islands will never accept any moral equivalence and those who push that narrative are doing the terrorists' work for them.

It is also a fact that when the Good Friday agreement was entered into, it was decided that the price worth paying for peace in Northern Ireland was to permit those who had previously led and directed that terrorist activity to enter Government. This applied equally across the board. Thus the leaders of the IRA and loyalist groups entered politics, exercising control over the Executive and, crucially, permitting these extremists and their associates to use the powers of the state to prolong their grievances—and while doing that, of course, concealing their own murderous behaviour. They seek to prosecute the very security forces that fought them and thereby won the peace. All this is very predictable and very inevitable.

Where is the evidence? Well let me give the House a couple of examples. I will stick to what you said earlier, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will stick to facts that are in the public domain and only comment on public officials. I am determined not to rely on the parliamentary privilege you have granted today and I will be very careful.

It is a fact that when the five cases—none of which has resulted in a conviction—that came before the courts this year were decided on, the Director of Public Prosecutions in Northern Ireland was an individual named Barra McGrory. I make no assertions on his motives at all, but it is a fact that Barra McGrory was, previous to his appointment, a long-term solicitor in Northern Ireland for the republican cause. His family members were present at the peace talks in Northern Ireland at the behest of the IRA. He represented Martin McGuinness at the Bloody Sunday inquiry and he represented Gerry Adams over many years.

It was Barra McGrory who decided to prosecute soldiers A and C in April this year, the trial that precipitated my leaving Government. It was the same Barra McGrory who asserted soldiers A and C had murdered a friend of Gerry Adams, the murderer and terrorist Joe McCann. I say murderer and terrorist, because it was accepted in court that Joe McCann had shot 15 soldiers. It is clear to any straightforward individual that Barra McGrory should have never been involved in this case in any way. Indeed, soldiers A and C were duly acquitted earlier this year because there was no admissible evidence against them. The judge said he was “surprised” this had not been realised before trial, clearly referring to the prosecution.

The problem with evidence was again raised in the recent trial of my friend Dennis Hutchings, when Barra McGrory, in almost total isolation and against advice, decided to prosecute Dennis. I say in isolation, because since Dennis has died the senior police officer charged with reviewing the evidence in that case has come forward and confirmed that he was very clear that this case should not be pursued, only to be overruled personally by Barra McGrory in his role as Director of Public Prosecutions. This happens everywhere in Northern Ireland. The Police Service of Northern Ireland, one of the most stretched and tested police forces in this nation, is overseen by the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Sitting on that board, holding the PSNI to account, is Gerry Kelly, who in a previous life shot a prison officer in the head and was convicted of causing a series of explosions in London.

I could go on about the total infiltration of the justice and political systems in Northern Ireland by those who, given their convictions, in any other country would be prevented from going anywhere near elected office or public service and handed the levers of state to re-write history in their image. It is madness. It destroys lives and it is preventing Northern Ireland from really coming to terms with its past and moving on to the bright future that almost everyone I have met there over the last year is eager to embark on.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for informing the House about the reality in Northern Ireland, and for the love and support that he offered to Dennis Hutchings—a good friend is hard to find, and he was a good friend to Dennis. Does he agree that of fundamental importance to the effective working of a justice system is public confidence in the structures of that justice system, and does he recognise that the reality in Northern Ireland is that cross-community confidence in the Public Prosecution Service is simply not there? Owing to its disgraceful pursuit of the Hutchings case and its inaction after the funeral of IRA terrorist Bobby Storey, Unionist confidence in the PPS is non-existent.

Johnny Mercer: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I have a lot of sympathy with that view, which I will come to in a moment.

Everyone understands that political settlements such as the Good Friday agreement require serious compromise—we saw the release of some horrendous criminals in 1998—but there must be a line. It is so terribly sad to see the effect on the veterans community; the poor victims' families being dragged down this pathway, which promised not justice—for these so-called legacy practitioners are not stupid—but a version of “justice” that plays on victims' worst fears; and a country ultimately thwarted by its past as it attempts to find peace.

After this year—this relates to what my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) said—there must be some sort of public inquiry into the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland. It takes public money, and plenty of it, so it must be accountable for its decisions. This year its professional decisions have been proved wrong time and again. It is not good enough and the people of Northern Ireland deserve better.

Let me move on to the second part of my speech, which relates to the Government's proposals for how to deal with legacy in Northern Ireland. In a question to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland before Christmas, I asked if he had any intention of keeping his word on these legacy proposals. He replied that he did not recognise what I was saying, so I want to help him understand the depth of feeling on this issue.

When I first brought forward the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill two years ago, in my then role as UK Veterans Minister, I was crystal clear from the outset that we could not do that without making similar provisions for those who had served in Northern Ireland. That was a manifesto commitment, and one that every single Conservative MP stood on. Indeed, it was repeated ad infinitum by the Prime Minister himself, at the election and from the Dispatch Box many times subsequently.

I made it very clear to the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary that it would be fundamentally wrong to create two tiers of veterans in this country: those who, like me, had served in Afghanistan or Iraq; and those who had served in Northern Ireland—one tier that would receive a degree of protection from lawfare, and one that would not. I secured a promise from the Northern Ireland Secretary that he would walk concurrent legislation through the House so that we would not create that discrimination against those who had served in Northern Ireland.

I will not rehash what happened. Suffice it to say, over the following 18 months, before I resigned, the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Defence Secretary and No. 10 all consecutively and repeatedly blamed each other, to me personally and in the newspapers, and not a single word of progress was made. When the Bill reached maturity, I was forced to break promises that I had repeatedly made to Northern Ireland veterans on the Government's behalf from the Dispatch Box, and my position was untenable. Those are the facts of the matter.

During that time, the Northern Ireland Secretary promised draft legislation over and over again—I have written this all down but will not go through it now, because it bores even me. It is safe to say that this is the eighth self-imposed deadline that he has missed for

coming forward with that draft legislation. He has produced the Command Paper detailing his thoughts, which came out in the summer. It should be noted that a Command Paper is not legislation. I welcome anything that shows that thought is being put into this matter, but I and countless others far more qualified and knowledgeable in this space than me were dismayed by its contents. I wanted to understand where these proposals had come from. I spoke to countless groups, including victims, veterans and political parties, and not only could I not find anyone who advocated the approach set out in the Command Paper, but I could not find anyone from any of these stakeholder groups who had been actively engaged.

Any proposals must have some degree of consent from those in Northern Ireland. Of course there will be no rapturous applause whatever is done in this space, but equally, people in Northern Ireland—victims, veterans and other groups—are not stupid; they understand the nuances of what can and cannot be achieved in legacy. To cut off pathways to justice for British citizens who have had their children murdered by terrorists is too much to ask. Releasing convicted murderers was one thing, and on-the-run letters were another, but denying any hope of answers for those who lost loved ones, from whatever background, is a step too far.

There is an almost childlike naivety in these proposals. Does the Secretary of State seriously think that those who have answers for the families—I remind the House that 90% of those killed in the troubles were killed at the hands of terrorists—and who are now off living a comfortable life in places like the Republic of Ireland or the United States will suddenly discover their soul and take part in the process?

The Secretary of State says that he has heard no alternatives. Even a cursory glance would show that there are many alternatives to that approach and many actors trying to influence his thinking. He may not choose to listen—that is his prerogative—but that is a different thing from saying that there are no alternatives.

Look at Op Kenova, for example, and the work of Chief Constable Jon Boutcher. Investigating one of the hardest parts of the conflict—agent handling—he has worked hard to bring both families and security forces with him. It is his life's work, with no allegiance to either side but a relentless focus on the truth and on what is within the art of the possible in the justice space. To say that he has not prosecuted anyone completely misses the point; 22 files are currently with the prosecution service, but he does not have the resources to process them in a timely manner.

Finally, legacy is not an amateur sport. We cannot just charge at it with a set of election slogans and tough it out; victims, veterans and the nation deserve far better. There are plenty of options other than those in the Command Paper. We can give far more flexibility to prosecutors in the factors that they must take into consideration before proceeding to prosecution, including the recovery of key information for families. We can ensure more rigour in the process to arrive at better decisions than those that are currently being made, and of course, as I outlined in the first part of my speech, we can be far more fair-minded about who actually makes these decisions.

The issue must lie with the legacy professionals. We must take the politicians out of it and do right by the victims and veterans. It is difficult but absolutely possible

to deal with legacy in Northern Ireland in a professional, courteous and fair manner, but it requires a political commitment and skill that we have simply never seen from the UK Government. I am calling on them for it today. The victims deserve it, the veterans who served at the command of this House deserve it, but chiefly the young people of Northern Ireland deserve it. They want to grasp their future with both hands, unmolested by the quarrels of an older, more violent generation. We should be on their side and get this done.

5.17 pm

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Conor Burns): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) for his speech on a hugely complex and sensitive area.

Northern Ireland has moved on dramatically since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement was signed. We have moved society in Northern Ireland into a much better place than the one I remember—going to primary school with armoured cars on the streets, troops patrolling residential roads and, sadly, atrocities by terrorists a daily event—but in candour, what we have not done in the 23 years since the Belfast/Good Friday agreement is move Northern Ireland to a point of genuine acceptance of her past and reconciliation between the different communities.

At the outset, as someone who has never served in the armed forces, I want to make clear the admiration I have for those who have served Queen and country and who in Northern Ireland were at the frontline—a frontline that we in the United Kingdom did not want to create, but a frontline created by the actions of terrorists who were murdering innocent civilians and many members of our security forces, both in the Army and in the police.

I know the sincerity of my hon. Friend. Since he came into politics, his driving focus has been to secure adequate protections for those veterans who gave service so valiantly in Northern Ireland. I say to him that that is still an aim that this Government thoroughly share, as I hope was demonstrated through the delivery of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021, but our objectives in Northern Ireland are, rightly, far wider. We are unequivocal in our commitment to introduce legislation to address legacy issues in a way that focuses on information recovery and reconciliation.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I recognise that my right hon. Friend has arrived to his position fairly recently, so this is more of a trail of what has gone before. None the less, there is a genuine and deep concern among many of us. I served in Northern Ireland, and lost people in Northern Ireland. I remember Captain Robert Nairac being tortured and murdered. His family never found his body—no one ever told them. We have had to put up with that for all these years, watching others who committed those murders go free. I simply say to him that, for me, this legislation—this requirement to protect our veterans—is not just an add-on. For me, it is part of my life. Can the Minister please tell us whether that is how the Government see it, or is it something to be shoehorned into the future?

Conor Burns: My right hon. Friend speaks powerfully. I think I am correct in saying that I am one of a very small number of Ministers to serve in the Northern

Ireland Office who was born in Northern Ireland. I still have a large number of my family across the island of Ireland and in Northern Ireland. For me, this is absolutely essential.

Shortly before Christmas, I returned to my old primary school, Park Lodge, in north Belfast. One of the children in a primary 7 class in a Q&A asked me what was the difference between Northern Ireland today and the Northern Ireland in which I spent the early years of my life. In answering that question, I realised that the Northern Ireland that I remember is but a distant history for those young people, but we believe passionately that addressing these legacy issues is vital to underpin a better future for Northern Ireland. My right hon. Friend, whom I have heard speak on this many times over the years, is right that those who went to Northern Ireland to serve Queen and country, to uphold the rule of law, and to resist a brutal, barbaric campaign of Irish republican terror did so courageously, and it is wrong that they should now be hauled through processes for events some of which are 40, 45 years old or even older. That is what we are trying to address.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I differ rather from my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer), as he knows, in that I actually agree much more with the Government's suggestion that it has to be a combination of a statute of limitations and a truth recovery process. The problem that we have is that the Government seem to have thought their idea through very clearly, and yet, whenever we expect it to come forward so that we can then drill down deeper to see in which way it needs to be adjusted—perhaps a bit further away from my view and the Government's and a bit further towards my hon. and gallant Friend's—nothing ever happens. Having often spoken to him about the matter, I believe that the Secretary of State is well seized of the issues. We cannot understand the reasons for the delay. He needs to bring it to the House and let us get to work on it, because we all want the solution.

Conor Burns: My right hon. Friend speaks powerfully about how frustrated colleagues are that we have not yet brought that legislation to the Floor of the House. I say to my hon. and right hon. Friends and to all hon. Members that we are absolutely committed to making sure that, when we do bring these proposals to this Chamber, they will be robust and watertight. It would be negligent of the Government to proceed at pace until we are satisfied that the proposals we are bringing forward—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The Minister knows the history very well. The Secretary of State promised the Bill by last July. He did not deliver it. Then he faithfully promised the House we would have it by the end of the autumn. He did not deliver it. Yesterday he allegedly briefed the press that it was now delayed until after the Assembly elections in May. He did not inform the House—there was no written statement, no oral statement. We have five minutes left, so, rather than the Minister's reading out a lot of Northern Ireland Office boilerplate, will he please just answer one question? Is it true that the legacy Bill is now effectively delayed until after the Assembly elections—and if it is not true, when will the Bill be introduced to Parliament? That is an extremely straightforward question. What is the answer?

Conor Burns: My right hon. Friend and I have discussed this on a number of occasions and he has robustly questioned the Secretary of State. Let me give him a very honest answer to the question about the legislation's being delayed and coverage of an alleged private briefing by the Secretary of State. That is categorically not correct. As far as I am aware, there has been no briefing from the Northern Ireland Office to the press about a delay to the Bill, and I have not been in any conversation in the Department with the Secretary of State or officials, or in any meeting in the NIO, where we have discussed delaying the Bill until after the Assembly elections or, indeed, any association between this proposed legislation and the timeline to the Assembly elections in May. That is not true.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If there is going to be a delay, which there clearly is, can we know the reason why? Let us know, as people who are interested. My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and I both served in Northern Ireland—I did over three years there, so I would really like to see this sorted out before I die.

Conor Burns: To give my right hon. Friend an assurance that this will be resolved before he dies would require advance information from on high that unfortunately is not available to me. I hope he will have a long life and that he will see the Bill introduced and become law in good time.

The Government published the Command Paper mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View in July. I joined the Government in September. There was a large amount of feedback on that Command Paper and there has been a massive amount of engagement. The delay is to ensure that we get this right and that it not only achieves the Government's objective to provide the necessary protections to those who served so courageously in Northern Ireland, but is also a measure that will advance the agenda of reconciliation and cross-community understanding in Northern Ireland.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: That is the point of the whole debate, so let us get to it. I must tell my right hon. Friend the Minister that the Secretary of State told me specifically in terms that this Bill was now sitting solely for sign-off. It was all done, it was drafted and it was ready to go before Christmas. My question therefore is, how did it suddenly discover a whole set of consultation that needs to happen when it had gone to sign-off? I really find this very difficult. If the Minister cannot answer now, can he please go back to the Department and say, "For God's sake, get this clear"?

Conor Burns: I will be very happy to meet my right hon. Friend and talk about that in a degree of detail, but I keep coming back to the central point that it is important, before the Bill is brought forward, that we are confident it achieves the Government's ambitions for it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View knows from his previous incarnation as a Defence Minister, that requires sign-off across Government and we need to be absolutely certain that we will not end up creating inadvertently another mechanism by which innocent people are dragged through processes they should not have to face.

Dr Julian Lewis: Who is blocking the Bill? The Bill is ready; who is blocking it?

Conor Burns: No one is blocking the Bill. There is ongoing engagement across Government to ensure that the Bill, when it is brought forward—

Mr Francois *indicated dissent.*

Conor Burns: My right hon. Friend is scoffing, and that is fine, but it is absolutely, unambiguously, unequivocally the Government's commitment that the Bill will be brought forward and put before this House.

Mr Francois: You have already broken multiple deadlines—we don't believe you!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. That is unacceptable. Minister, there are five seconds left.

Conor Burns: My right hon. Friend is obviously and rightly angry—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sorry—

Conor Burns: I hope we will mollify him when we bring forward the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

5.30 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 January 2022

[MRS SHERYLL MURRAY *in the Chair*]

Water Quality in Rivers

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): 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 the 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 before coming on to the estate. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

We begin with the Select Committee statement. Philip Dunne will speak on the publication of the fourth report of the Environmental Audit Committee, “Water Quality in Rivers”, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement, and I will then call Philip Dunne to respond to these in turn. Questions should be brief.

1.31 pm

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving me the opportunity to introduce the Environmental Audit Committee’s latest report, which, as you say, is on the topic of water quality in rivers. This is an issue of particular interest to me, as I had a private Member’s Bill in the last Session of Parliament that was not able to progress, and our Committee has worked very hard for over a year in taking evidence, including from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who I am delighted to see in her place. As an Environment Minister, she has taken a particular interest in championing this issue in Government and in introducing measures to the Environment Act 2021, which became law two months ago and whose measures will in some respects pre-empt some of our recommendations. We are grateful to her for her interest in this subject.

I would like to take the opportunity—it is the first time we have been able to do so—to welcome our latest recruit to the Committee, the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz). We look forward to her contributions to our Committee in due course.

By way of introduction, we have been concerned about water quality because of the extraordinary evidence that we have received from campaign groups up and down the country. We recognise that we are presiding over a cocktail of contamination in our rivers, stemming

from more than 60 years of under-investment in drainage networks, sewers and treatment plants, mostly because they are underground, out of sight and not at the top of public consciousness, other than when there is a disgusting sewage spill—an incident that captures public attention. For 60 years, however, we have been developing more and more housing, industry and agricultural buildings above ground, without putting corresponding investment underground to deal with the effluent that a growing population of both humans and animals creates. That is something that we absolutely have to put right.

At present, only 14 of England’s rivers are in good ecological health, and not a single one gets a clean bill of health for chemical contamination. Getting a full overview of the health of our rivers, and the pollution affecting them, has been hampered by outdated, underfunded and inadequate monitoring regimes, which is why it has taken our report to pull all the data together. Water companies appear to be dumping untreated or partially treated sewage in rivers on a routine basis, often breaching the terms of the permits that, on paper only, allow them to do so in exceptional circumstances. That was one of the most significant findings. We think part of the reason is that they have been allowed to self-monitor for the last 12 years or so.

One of the Minister’s innovations in the Environment Act is to increase the amount of monitoring, using the latest technology, so that we can understand, in real time, the impact of discharging sewage into our river systems. We have not been able to do that until now, other than through individual lab testing. Monitors will be placed upstream and downstream of the outfalls, and that will have a transformative effect, not least in allowing the public to know whether there has been a sewage discharge before they intend to visit a river.

However, it is not all about sewage. Water companies have to deal with an increasing volume of plastic and other non-biodegradable material being flushed down our toilets, and that includes wet wipes. I support my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) in his move to promote a private Member’s Bill to ban the use of plastic in wet wipes, which act as a dam in the sewerage system.

A combination of excessive amounts of non-biodegradable material gets caught up in meshes and added to by fats, oils and greases coming out of food service establishments to create fatbergs—we had evidence that some are as big as blue whales. Those need to be removed from the sewers, and water companies are spending £100 million a year of their scarce resource on removing that material. Some 7 million wet wipes a day go into our sewers, so we as individuals can do something about that to try to reduce that problem.

The problem is not all about the water companies; it is also, we found, due to diffuse pollution from agriculture. That, in fact, accounts for slightly more of the causes of pollution than sewage from water treatment plants. Intensive livestock and poultry farming is putting significant pressure on particular catchments. I think there are 14 across England where development is on hold because of the nutrient load already existing in our river systems. One of the worst is in the River Wye catchment, where it appears that there has been particular pressure, building up over a number of years, from poultry farming. We have therefore called for a nutrient budget to be calculated for each catchment, and for the Environment Agency’s

[Philip Dunne]

good resources to be used to review it so as to establish a framework that would allow development to take place without adding to the nutrient load in the receiving waters.

Going back to the water companies for a moment, we were alarmed by the degree of permit breaches, which were brought to our attention not so much by the Environment Agency or the water companies themselves but by citizen scientists doing their own investigations under freedom of information requests. We think it is important that the Environment Agency and other regulators get a proper picture of the true number of sewer overflow discharges, because we fear they may be higher than is currently permitted.

We have made a number of suggestions about how, in considering how to allocate resource from the spending review, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs should consider giving additional resources to the Environment Agency so that it can adequately undertake its enforcement, which has, all too often, been slow—to put it mildly. We have seen an increase in fines imposed as a result of prosecutions in the last few years—two have been very significant—but, by and large, fines for enforcement of clear breaches, with discharge above permit levels, have been a routine cost of doing business. We do not think that that is appropriate, so we think that greater enforcement must be undertaken by the environment network.

We have also called on Ofwat to prioritise the long-term investment in waste water assets as a key outcome of its next pricing review period. As the Minister is here and will be finalising the strategic pricing statement guidance to Ofwat in the coming weeks, we strongly encourage her to consider giving greater priority in the next pricing review to capital investment by water companies, to allow them to invest more in improving the treatment capacity available across the network.

We have a large number of recommendations. I do not have enough time to go into them all, but I will conclude by saying that one of our recommendations—which I think will have some resonance in this covid environment, in which many people have been using rivers for recreation—is that each water company should seek to get bathing water quality status in at least one river stretch or water body within its area before 2025, and then routinely seek to do so in subsequent pricing periods. I look forward to responding to any comments that Members might have on the report.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Environmental Audit Committee and its Chair for their comprehensive, detailed and extensive report. Of course, I have not been able to take all of it in yet, given that its publication date was today. My question is about the topic on which the Chair ended—namely, the capacity of the Environment Agency to deal with discharges into rivers, whether they are permitted or not. At the start of this week, we saw that the Environment Agency has been briefing staff not to pursue smaller-category incidents. I wonder whether the Chair of the Committee agrees that funding the Environment Agency to protect our rivers is crucial, and that it needs to be able to fully follow up on any incidents and not ignore even minor ones, which can later be found to be more significant.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman's Committee, and him in particular, on the campaign he has waged over the years on the issue of the purity of our water systems. I look forward to the Committee's work on monitoring the implementation of these recommendations.

As the right hon. Gentleman will know, however, my anxiety about the report is its timidity with regard to the operation of the water companies themselves. My view is very clear: as long as those companies operate as profit-making organisations, I do not see how they will act on long-term investment or, to be frank, the standards of behaviour we would expect of either a body in public ownership or a not-for-profit organisation. I wonder whether this report will result in opportunities for the Committee to look at the whole issue of ownership and management of the water companies themselves.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Other Members have indicated that they would like to ask questions, but before I call them, perhaps you would like to respond to those two questions, Mr Dunne.

Philip Dunne: Thank you very much, Chair; I certainly would. I thank the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) for her contribution to this issue. I attended a debate, I think in this Chamber, in which she raised issues about the Tyne. She has been a strong champion in her area, trying to make sure that that river is cleaned up. In response to her specific query, the Environment Agency took the view that water companies could be relied on to self-monitor. It is palpable that that has failed, so we are calling for the Environment Agency to be adequately resourced so that it can perform its functions appropriately.

I do think there is help on the way through technology. Technology now exists, to an extent that it has not in the past, that allows for continuous monitoring of water quality within water bodies, and for that information to be passed through telemetry back to a database. That information can then become available to the public and the water companies themselves so that if there has been a sudden incident, they can pick up on it. There might have been a breakdown in a system, and if that information is available in real time, those companies will catch it much quicker than they have been able to do hitherto. That will not involve as many employees of the Environment Agency being on hand to do the testing themselves physically and then go back to their laboratory, so it will speed up the whole process of identifying problems in the system. I think that will ultimately be to the benefit of all of us, our rivers and all the species that rely on them as arteries of nature. I am hopeful that there are solutions and that the Environment Agency will receive a good settlement from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

In response to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), I reciprocate by offering him my thanks for supporting my private Member's Bill 18 months ago. He will not be surprised to hear that I take a slightly different view from him on the issue of ownership of the water companies. In the 10 years before the water companies were owned by the state—as they were up until 1991, I think—the collective capital investment of the water companies into water treatment capital expenditure was of the order of half a billion

pounds a year. In the next 10 years, it was of the order of £1 billion a year, so under private ownership there was around double the investment in water treatment specifically.

Having said that, there are issues about the nature of current ownership and the fact that several of the companies have been leveraged through private equity ownership, which has caused some challenges regarding available capital expenditure. At least one of those companies has suspended dividends for the last three years, I think. There is recognition on those company boards that they need to change some of their behaviour.

I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will seek to promote the report's recommendation that, in the event of persistent material breaches of permit conditions, it would be inappropriate for water company boards to pay themselves significant bonuses without taking proper action to remedy those breaches. I am sure he will agree with that and not regard it as timid.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): As the Member of Parliament for Stafford, which has a number of significant waterways, including canals and rivers, I welcome this Environmental Audit Committee report. Does it address whether the recent Environment Act 2021 has done enough to tackle storm overflows and specifically water pollution?

Philip Dunne: That is an excellent question, which gives me the opportunity to highlight some of the things that have happened through that Act and beyond it, which the Government are doing to get on top of some of these issues.

First, amendments about monitoring and other amendments were made to the Act during the course of its passage, in particular the requirement on water companies to reduce sewage discharges progressively

over time. That was added in the House of Lords and I very much welcome it, because it reflected the core of my private Member's Bill.

Secondly, as we have just discussed, the Government will issue—as they usually do—a new strategic policy statement to Ofwat. We do not yet know what that statement will say, but we have seen a draft of it and all the indications are that the Government will consider adjusting the prioritisation of capital expenditure, so that at least some more, I hope, will go towards water treatment. We are currently at about £1 billion a year being spent on these issues through the water industry national environment programme. Personally, I would like to see that amount doubled, but we will have to see where the Government come out on that.

The Government have also set up a storm overflows taskforce, which is doing important work in advising the Government on other things that can be done. One of the elements in the Environment Act is a requirement for a report to be published by September of this year that will give the Government an opportunity, and a focus within DEFRA, to require an update and to get all the actors in this area—all the different water companies and the regulators, as well as the campaign groups that are helping the Government—to pull together to come up with other measures that can be taken outside of legislation.

There are other matters—as the Minister might prompt, there are a lot of other issues—but those are the ones that leap to mind. As I said at the outset, she has put a great deal of personal commitment behind this process and I hope that, for her own sake and that of the rivers, during her tenure we start to put in place the building blocks to transform the quality of rivers across the country.

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Global Vaccine Access

1.50 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when not speaking in the debate. This is in line with current Government guidance and that of the House of Commons Commission. I also remind Members that they are asked by the House to take a lateral flow test before coming on to the estate. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated and when entering and leaving the room.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered global vaccine access.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the time for the debate. I thank those Members who are here and those who have given apologies—a number who intended to speak are speaking in the other Backbench Business debate in the Chamber—for their support. I also thank those members of the International Development Committee who are here.

In preparing for the debate, I looked back at the Backbench Business debate focused specifically on covid-19 vaccine access that I secured all the way back in November 2020. It is an odd achievement, but I was the first Member to use the phrase “vaccine nationalism” in the House. On reflection, I am saddened that, more than a year later, we are having a similar debate relating to covid and other vaccine programmes, with a number of issues unresolved.

I will focus the majority of my remarks on covid-19; it is difficult not to. In some respects things have changed considerably in the past 14 months. We now have a number of licensed vaccines in the UK, 90% of over-12s have had at least one jab or jab—whatever you prefer to call it—and more than half are fully boosted. I commend and thank all those who have worked tirelessly to create these vaccines and to ensure that they reached the public and those who need them. However, it has sadly not all been good news.

In November 2020, we were only just hearing about the delta variant spreading in India—a strain that would not enter the UK until February last year. We almost never talk about it now, as in a few short weeks from the end of year, omicron spread throughout the world and entered the UK. It was a stark reminder of something that has been said many times before: we are simply not safe until everyone is safe. While 90% of over-12s in the UK have had at least one vaccine—my own children are part of that number—that falls to 60% of the world overall.

Many countries—it will not surprise Members that it is mainly low-income countries—have hardly any access to covid vaccines. Some 2.3% of those in Nigeria have had a vaccine, 1.4% in Ethiopia, 9.8% in Afghanistan, 5% in Syria, 1.2% in Yemen and only 0.1% in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to name just a few; I could obviously go on. It is unsurprising that the consequence of this is that new variants emerge elsewhere and spread quickly through those unvaccinated populations,

eventually reaching the UK. No borders, physical or otherwise, can prevent that in what is an interconnected world.

That is why we are having this debate. In that previous debate, the Minister responding, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), told us:

“The UK is proud to be at the forefront of international efforts to develop vaccines, treatments and tests and ensure equitable access for the world’s poorest countries”.—[*Official Report*, 5 November 2020; Vol. 683, c. 575WH.]

Clearly, the situation has not moved at the pace required. I am sure the Minister will point out that the UK has pledged to donate 100 million vaccines, and that the Government reached their target of donating 30 million of those before Christmas. However, we know that getting vaccines out of the UK is only the first part of the story. We have to think about what happens to those vaccines when they arrive. Organisations on the ground report that vaccines arrive in an ad hoc manner, sometimes with little notice. Too often, they arrive with a limited shelf life, leaving in-country health teams—already overstretched, as health teams all over the world are—scrambling to get doses out to people in time. There is also no requirement currently for donations to be sent with necessary supplies, such as syringes and dilutant in order to administer those doses. Without those, a vaccine in a tube is arguably completely useless.

The United Kingdom donates vaccines that it has purchased and deemed surplus to requirements here in the country. That might suit the Government as a way to marry up vaccinations at home with meeting our commitments abroad, but sadly it leads directly to the position that I have just described, so I ask the Minister to address the following questions. Who decides what donations will be made, and when? What processes are in place to ensure that doses are sent in a timely, regular and predictable fashion? Will the Government commit to end the policy of over-purchasing vaccines and donating the surplus, and will they instead commit to putting a policy in place whereby vaccines are donated in large volumes and in a predictable manner, to allow countries to plan their roll-outs?

Will the Government publish the timelines for expected donations from the UK in the coming months as the UK sends the additional 70 million donations that it has pledged? Will they commit to ensure that donated doses have a minimum 10-week shelf life when they arrive in a country, with the exception of when individual countries have stated that they are prepared to take doses with a shorter shelf life? It is clear that in several of the countries that I have described, there are simply not the internal mechanisms in order to be able to deliver vaccines before they expire. Finally, will the Government commit to donate syringes with the vaccines, to ensure that they can actually be used on arrival and that that is something else for countries not to worry about?

I would be grateful if the Minister could address accounting for the cost of the donations. If doses of vaccine are purchased by a country for use on its own population and are then donated, which is exactly what is happening in the UK, the donations are being accounted for in our official development assistance—ODA—budget. To put it more clearly, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have budgets. The Department for

Health and Social Care is using some of its budget to buy vaccines, and when it cannot use them, the FCDO donates them.

However, the FCDO then gets to say that it has purchased those vaccines from its ODA budget, thus artificially reducing the amount of money left to spend elsewhere. Even more concerning is the fact that the UK Government could account for those doses in the ODA spend at a higher price than they paid for them, thus effectively saving money that was committed elsewhere. I ask the Minister to clarify whether this is indeed her Department's approach. Will she commit to account for the donations outside the ODA budget? If her Department is not in a position to do so, will she commit to ensure that the donations continue to be accounted for as part of ODA at their actual purchase price?

These are partially problems of oversight as we respond to a global pandemic at speed, but they are related to the problem of the Department for International Development being subsumed into the Foreign Office. They are problems that I warned about when the merger was first proposed, and I secured an urgent question on the merger in June 2020, but here we are, potentially dealing with some of those problems at a time when efficacy is key to successful delivery.

I welcome the fact that there remains a Select Committee dedicated to scrutinising international development work. I have already referred to its Members who are present, and I wholeheartedly commend their work, but it says everything about how the Government are treating international development that when I was preparing for the debate, it was not initially clear which Minister would be answering. That is because there is no longer a Minister responsible for international development. I am delighted to see the Minister for Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean here today, and I look forward to her remarks, but it is not the same as having a Secretary of State or even a named Minister responsible for international development as a portfolio.

This is part of a broader narrative—a narrative of the Government stepping back from our commitments to the wider world. I am sure the Minister will say that we are better than other countries in this space, but that is just not good enough when we are stepping back and damaging our historical reputation as world leaders. As we all know, we have cut ODA spending from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%. It is an action, but not the right kind. Yes, there is a promise to restore spending at some point in the future, but there is no clarity about when that will be. The Chancellor was not as clear as he could have been, and an increase in the future does not help those in need now.

Cutting ODA spending hurts us all. The Minister will know the importance of having soft power on the ground, making friends and being trusted. Cutting spending, programmes and assistance simply does not do that. I have previously spoken in this place about the impact on the British Council. It is the same thing, because such actions break that trust. They destroy our friendships and reduce our power. We cannot be global Britain when the Government choose to step back.

I want to refer briefly to the fact that ODA cuts also hurt us at home. The University of St Andrews in my constituency of North East Fife receives funding for research projects through ODA spending. I have spoken previously about how cuts in that spending have put

research projects at that university at risk. I am sure the Minister will say that our scientists have led the way in getting a vaccine in the first place, which is right, but what message does it send about how we value this research when its funding is at risk? Without that funding, will we be prepared for whatever comes next?

While we can improve how we are donating vaccines, this will not be the whole solution. COVAX does not aim to vaccinate whole countries. We will be safe only when countries are able to vaccinate their populations themselves. I have just spoken about the importance of incentivising and paying for research, but it is not contradictory to say that we must also engage with discussions about how low-income countries can manufacture their own vaccines.

The trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights waiver has been on the table for discussion for months. Why are the Government not at least engaging with these discussions? What do the Government plan to do to meet the covid vaccination need without such a waiver? If there is a plan about this, I would be keen to hear it, as donations will simply not be enough.

In a debate about global vaccine access, it would be remiss of me to talk only about covid. While covid has dominated the health agenda for the past two years, other diseases continue to spread. When it comes to routine immunisation services, the UK has a commendable record and is the largest sovereign donor to GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, but the pandemic has severely put back GAVI's work.

In 2020 alone, 3 million more children missed out on a measles vaccination than in 2019. Yes, it is vital that low-income countries get urgent access to covid vaccines, but once that is done, we must tackle the backlog of missed immunisations. It is money well spent, as \$1 spent on immunisation is estimated to save \$21 in healthcare costs, low wages and lost productivity. Put simply, we keep people alive. Will the Minister today commit to maintaining the £1.65 billion donation to GAVI that the Government have committed to between 2021 and 2025?

Having praised our work with GAVI, the UK's record with other vaccination programmes is sadly less laudable, with a 95% cut in our commitment to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. The Minister might say that they committed £100 million as planned, but with only £5 million actually delivered, there is no other way to describe this as anything other than a brutal cut that will have a catastrophic impact on the delivery of services. Do we really want to see polio return in the 21st century? Is the legacy of battling covid-19 going to be tens of thousands of people infected with a disease that we were close to eradicating? Will the Minister commit to reinstating this funding as a matter of urgency?

It is very simple. What we have learned in the past two years is that health is a global issue. It is not just right to support worldwide health initiatives, but it benefits us too. When it comes to covid, we have seen that a global pandemic is exactly that: global.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. If Members stick to around three minutes each, we should have time to fit everybody in. There seem to be a substantial number of Members who want to contribute. I call Theo Clarke.

2.3 pm

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate on global vaccine access.

I start by thanking the healthcare workers, NHS staff and volunteers who have helped Britain to have one of the most successful coronavirus vaccination programmes in the world. I also pay tribute to our scientists who have worked to develop coronavirus vaccines, and thank the Government for funding this vaccine development. I was grateful to receive my vaccines at the Kingston Centre and St George's Hospital in Stafford, and I was delighted to hear that over 2.5 million vaccines were given in the west midlands in December alone. Seeing the vaccine roll-out in my own Stafford constituency has made me passionate about the need for global vaccine access.

Britain has always been at the forefront of global healthcare. The efforts of consecutive British Governments and the generosity of the British public has helped to eliminate many diseases globally. Britain was a founding member of GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and this Government are continuing to champion access to vaccines.

As Chair of the International Development Sub-Committee, I welcomed the Independent Commission for Aid Impact's recent information note on GAVI that highlighted the need to establish worldwide vaccination programmes for dangerous diseases, such as polio, as well as rolling out coronavirus vaccinations. In September, I met with GAVI at its headquarters in Geneva, to discuss the coronavirus vaccine roll-out, and to ensure that the poorest and most marginalised communities in the world are not left behind.

I welcome that Britain is one of the most generous donors to GAVI, pledging £1.65 billion from 2020 to 2025. During the height of the pandemic in June 2020, Britain led the hosting of the GAVI replenishment conference, and I was pleased that fundraising target the was exceeded, with world leaders pledging \$8.8 billion. That was a crucial step in tackling the coronavirus pandemic, which, as we know from experience, shows that vaccines do work in protecting us from infectious illnesses.

Polio provides another example of how vaccines can be used to tackle terrible diseases. In 1988, over 70 million people worldwide were infected with polio, and more than 350,000 people developed paralytic polio. The Government's generous financial support for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative meant that 2018 saw only 33 cases of polio worldwide. That represents millions of people being saved from the perils of polio by one simple vaccine. That is a real example of how vaccination programmes do work, and why we must follow this model and continue to provide global access to vaccines in order to end the coronavirus pandemic.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Theo Clarke: I will not take interventions at the moment. As vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, and having visited numerous health programmes across eastern, southern and western Africa,

I have seen at first hand the devastating impact that diseases can have on people already living in challenging circumstances. I welcome the recent breakthrough with the malaria vaccine which, like the coronavirus vaccine, has the potential to make a real difference throughout the developing world.

I repeatedly raised the importance of COVAX with the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), and have done so again with other Foreign Office Ministers, including raising the issue in the Chamber and in International Development Committee evidence sessions. I welcome that Britain took the lead regarding COVAX when hosting the G7 last summer, committing the UK to providing 80 million vaccine doses and helping to secure commitments to COVAX of nearly \$10 billion from other developed countries. The Government should be commended for meeting their ambitious target to donate 30 million vaccines to COVAX by the end of 2021.

On my visits to Kenya, as trade envoy, I have seen at first hand the difference these COVAX vaccines have made. On my most recent visit in November, I went to the Kenyatta University Hospital and met with Kenyan doctors and healthcare professionals. This hospital in Nairobi works in partnership with the University of Manchester in order to improve healthcare treatments and tackle infectious diseases. The British also developed the Oxford AstraZeneca vaccine, which has helped to save lives and improve the life chances of people living in Kenya; I am pleased this has been replicated across the Commonwealth, with over 2.5 billion doses being used in over 170 countries. At the G7 the Prime Minister said that we need a plan to vaccinate the world. If we want a definitive end to this pandemic, then I agree with him.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to try and stick to the three-minute time limit if they can.

2.8 pm

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate at a time when the pandemic is wreaking devastation on the poorest and most vulnerable nations on earth and brutally exposing their lack of access to vaccines. I know that she is a longstanding campaigner on the issue of equitable access to vaccines for everyone. I also thank organisations such as Global Justice Now for the important research they have done to raise awareness of this issue. I am a member of the International Development Committee; it is good to see other colleagues from the Committee attend this popular debate. The Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has done a lot of good work on this issue.

One of the reasons for the pernicious spread of coronavirus, and the high global death toll, is the failure of Governments, such as ours, to support the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights waiver, proposed by the Indian and South African Governments last summer, just months before the omicron

variant emerged. That was despite India and South Africa proposing, as far back as October 2020, that a waiver of intellectual property rules on covid-19 vaccines, tests and treatments would allow low and middle-income countries to manufacture life-saving tools. Despite most countries, including the United States, supporting the waiver, the UK, the EU and Switzerland all prevented progress.

Action at the time would have led to life-saving covid vaccines, medical equipment and medicines all being produced licence-free. However, more than a year after the start of the global vaccination drive, our Government are still putting hundreds of thousands of lives at risk by not supporting the waiver. The reality is, as we all know, that no one is safe until everyone has access to vaccinations and all nations are immunised.

Sadly, instead of supporting lower and middle-income countries, our Government have actively blocked them from making their own vaccines and have continued to oppose a waiver on intellectual property rights. I would therefore like to hear the Minister respond to the concerns that she and her colleagues are continuing to block solutions to the covid pandemic, given the severity of the crisis affecting both the NHS and the economy as a result of rapidly escalating levels of omicron cases. Denying lower and middle-income countries full, unfettered access to vaccines is incredibly short-sighted and will lead to a situation whereby our own population will remain at risk.

A global disease needs a united, global effort to eradicate it and reduce the risk of further mutations. An intellectual property rights waiver is therefore a vital way to achieve that, and we must follow the lead set by the Biden Administration in supporting that. The Government abolished the Department for International Development. That was extremely short-sighted and regressive, and will ultimately cost many, many lives. What happened was shameful. To put the situation into context, in a six-week period over November and December, the EU, UK and US all received more doses than African countries took stock of in the entire year. That is truly shocking.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Some 700 million doses of the vaccine were delivered instead of the 2 billion that were promised through the COVAX programme by the end of the last year. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that what is inherently wrong with the COVAX programme is that it has an unequal distribution embedded in it, and for that reason ensures that facilities that are given exclusive licences are over-relied on. Facilities can also implement export bans in their countries to stop the vaccine being distributed more widely.

Navendu Mishra: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, and I fully agree with her.

I will finish on the point that, despite having already made billions in profit, Pfizer and Moderna continue to refuse to share the new generation of vaccine technology with the World Health Organisation's mRNA hub in South Africa. That is a major concern, and little appears to have been done since Amnesty International urged Governments, including our own, to deliver 2 billion vaccines to low and middle-income countries before the end of 2021. The continued failure to act will fuel an unprecedented human rights crisis and lead to an untold number of deaths in those countries. We must do more, and the Government have to do a lot better.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): To be fair, I am going to have to impose a formal three-minute time limit. That might reduce further because I intend to call the Front Benchers at 2.38 pm. I call Harriet Baldwin next.

2.12 pm

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I will try to be as quick as possible, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this debate.

I want to report to the House from my privileged position as chair of the British group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. When we had our first in-person gathering of the Parliaments of the world in Madrid in November, one motion came out top of all of the motions put forward from all the Parliaments in the world. Over several days we were able to come up with a form of words that every single politician from every single Parliament that attended was able to sign up to. I want to share it with the House because it demonstrates the value of the work across Parliaments, and also addresses some of the points that the hon. Lady raised in her opening remarks that would make it difficult for me or perhaps even the Government to support everything that she asked for. If Members look up on the internet the Inter-Parliamentary Union minutes of the meeting, they will find links to the motion. I call upon colleagues to look at that because I do not have enough time to go through all of it.

The motion's crucial wording is around the issue of the World Trade Organisation. There were German parliamentarians at the IPU who would not have been able to support the TRIPS waiver wording, but parliamentarians did work together and came up with some wording that everyone was happy to endorse. It implores parliamentarians to work with their national Governments to exert a global, collective influence on the World Trade Organisation to eliminate all export restrictions and other trade barriers on covid-19 vaccines and the inputs involved in their production. This issue is so important because, as we heard in the opening remarks, we will not be safe until everyone in the world has been vaccinated. The more parts of the world lag behind us on vaccination rates, the more the virus will be able to mutate.

Extensive covid-19 immunisation is a global public good. Although the Government are doing much good work in this area, I call on them to do even more, because it is so important to our health. It is a development issue; it has never been so obvious to everyone in this country that by helping others around the world, we help ourselves. Let us do it. Please read the motion that we all agreed.

2.16 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Thank you, Mrs Murray. Last month, the former Prime Minister and World Health Organisation global health ambassador Gordon Brown said that the global vaccine roll-out was a

"stain on our global soul".

The numbers are stark: three quarters of health workers in Africa remain unvaccinated; less than 5% of people in low-income countries have been fully vaccinated.

[John McDonnell]

Companies such as Pfizer have made huge profits from their vaccines, but just 1% of its global supply has been delivered to COVAX.

Corporate philanthropy is not going to solve this crisis. We cannot sit back and hope that the pharmaceutical giants will do the right thing; to do so is a death sentence for millions of our fellow human beings. I have to say, in terms of the Government's performance, that the UK has disgraced itself by voting to block the temporary TRIPS waiver that would put human life above private profit.

As has been said time and again, we live in a global world and we will not be safe from the virus until we are all safe. We know that the more there is transmission anywhere in world, the more likely that new variants will emerge; some will be more virulent, and others may be more lethal than omicron, although hopefully most will be mild.

As campaigning group Global Justice Now has said:

"Until we allow low and middle-income countries to access covid-19 vaccines, we will be trapped in an endless cycle of variants".

If we want this pandemic to end, we have to stop its global spread—that means vaccinating everybody. The first way to achieve that is for the UK to stop blocking the TRIPS waiver at the WTO; secondly, to encourage UK pharmaceutical companies to share their technology with the World Health Organisation covid technology access pool and the mRNA technology transfer hub in South Africa.

A lot has been said about windfall taxes in recent days. Pharmaceutical companies have made windfall profits, largely derived from public funding. If they do not start sharing their vaccines and technology and start saving lives, I can think of no better circumstance for a windfall tax, with every penny used to fund vaccines around the world. If any Conservative Members are anxious about that, let me just say that it was Rab Butler who introduced a windfall tax 70 years ago this March.

I believe the time to act is now. The Government can do the right thing—they can save lives. If they do not act, their inaction will be, as Gordon Brown said, a stain on our global soul.

2.18 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this debate.

I want to take this opportunity to remember my friend, the former Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who made his last speech last Thursday while I was in the Chair. Our thoughts are with his family. He was a wonderful colleague and friend to so many of us, and he was a powerful advocate for international justice and standing up for those who are vulnerable; his last speech was about the settlement of Afghans.

Today, we debate the need for vaccinating the world and protecting people in some of the poorest communities around the world. In that spirit, I want to highlight a number of points. First, we are all incredibly grateful to the NHS and all those who have been involved in the vaccination effort in our country. As we mark the tragic milestone of 150,000 fellow citizens having lost their lives in our country, let us not forget that the battle

against covid is not over, as many hon. Members have said. That is why it is important that we recognise both the moral imperative, as has been pointed out already, and the economic imperative. It is in our self-interest, as well as in the interests of the rest of the world, to work to vaccinate the world.

The UN Secretary-General said,

"COVID-19 is menacing the whole of humanity—and so the whole of humanity must fight back."

Sadly, many Governments across the world have been found wanting, including our own. We have seen the failure to meet the target that has been set to vaccinate sections of the population in different countries. Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organisation, said,

"More than 5.7 billion doses have been administered globally, but only 2% of those have been administered in Africa."

That is the case in many parts of the world. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who has been quoted today, pointed out the many huge economic benefits that the UK and other countries would gain if we vaccinated the world. That is why it is important in terms of preventing new variants from taking hold and from undermining our economy, our security and our own health, as well as global health, but also getting out of this continuous battle with the pandemic.

We will not be able to end the pandemic if we do not act together. We must remove the barriers and ensure people around the world are vaccinated, backed by resources from our Government. That is why it is important that the Minister addresses the issues that have been raised so far.

2.22 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing this important debate. During yesterday's vaccine statement, the UK Government Minister dodged an issue of vital importance to international vaccine security by choosing to hide behind commercial sensitivity rather than answering my questions about Scottish vaccine company Valneva. The UK Government Minister showed a fundamental lack of understanding of the issue. Let me be clear that my questions are not centred on the commercial considerations, as important as they are. The challenge that we face on vaccines is centred on public health and meeting our international obligations and responsibilities.

The UK Government's overemphasis on vaccination as the sole plank of infection management is deeply problematic, but even with the vaccine success delivered by Dame Kate Bingham, they have placed all their eggs in the mRNA basket. That is the wrong move. The Valneva vaccine is the only adjuvanted, inactivated whole virus covid-19 vaccine candidate in clinical development in Europe. The UK Government pulled the contract just before the phase three results were published, which demonstrated the vaccine to be highly effective and safe.

In addition, the safety and efficacy of the Valneva vaccine was questioned by the Health Secretary, who said in the House of Commons on 14 September that

"it was also clear to us that the vaccine in question that the company was developing would not get approval by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency".—[*Official Report*, 14 September 2021; Vol. 700, c. 820.]

That statement was untrue and had to subsequently be corrected. We have had the correction, but the company is still awaiting an apology. Importantly for the purposes of the debate, I will focus on the clinical advantages, over solely relying on mRNA. Inactivated vaccines are a well-established, tried-and-tested technology used over the last 100 years to vaccinate billions, including for seasonal flu, hepatitis A, polio and rabies, so the Valneva vaccine could play a vital role in tackling vaccine hesitancy among the general UK population. From a purely public health perspective, its availability and use could help to close the vaccination gap by increasing coverage among those who remain unvaccinated or are hesitant about novel mRNA technologies.

All of this is important, but the great advantage for global vaccine access is that the Valneva vaccine would allow the UK to meet its global humanitarian responsibilities by supplying such vaccines to COVAX, the international vaccine-purchasing agency. The Valneva vaccine does not require the same complex cold-chain infrastructure, making it easier to store, distribute and deploy internationally. Dame Kate Bingham said that the decision to cancel the Valneva contract was “problematic on various counts” and “short-sighted” and, in her lecture on 23 November, she said that it was “inexplicable”. Do the UK Government not get that?

2.25 pm

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) on securing the debate; I was pleased to support the application.

We are deeply lucky to live in a country that can afford and has access to the newest vaccines in sufficient quantities. Millions, indeed billions, of people around the world would beg, borrow or steal to have only the issues that we do. We are always griping about healthcare—the long waits and the crowded surgeries—but we know we are the lucky ones. I am ashamed of the speed of our response to the need for vaccines in other countries. Human Rights Watch estimates that about 75% of covid vaccines have gone to just 10 countries. Vaccines are key to preventing innumerable diseases but, sadly, eradication is often not possible because not enough profit is on offer.

Tuberculosis is a prime example, and I am pleased to declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis. TB was mostly eradicated in this country 50 years ago, although several thousand cases still occur yearly. Across the globe, however, millions of lives are blighted by it. That is because there is no economic impetus to develop a vaccine, but that is what the world needs. Investing in vaccines is cheap in comparison, so let us use this horrific pandemic as a wake-up call that strengthening health systems is cheap compared with what could happen.

In what little time I have available, I want to speak further on fulfilling our international responsibilities. The amazing work of multinational teams of researchers and scientists in British laboratories and, indeed, those everywhere have taken vast strides for humanity in the last two years. The knowledge, though, must be shared—not kept as a trophy, but used to spread health. The World Health Organisation set a target to vaccinate 40% of people in Africa by the end of 2021, but 92 countries

missed that target because of lack of access. Sadly, in relation to Nepal, the real impact, despite the warnings of civil society and the requests from Kathmandu, was that no doses came forth when they were required.

The Minister may have prepared commitments to share today, but better than that would be an admission that commitments have not always been met in the past and that action is preferable to fine words.

2.29 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for initiating this debate on an issue that I know she and others have been highlighting since covid vaccines became a reality. The roll-out has been incredible across these islands. It has been a real victory for science and for the national health service. In public policy, it is not often that we get a silver bullet but, for covid-19, the vaccines are just that. They save lives—as vaccines have done over decades—and they help, in this context, to prevent the emergence of variants and to break the cycle of lockdowns.

News of breakthroughs in the science and the race towards vaccines for things such as malaria and HIV are bright spots on what is otherwise a fairly grim global horizon, and designing in access to vaccines will be important as that research advances, too. We are absolutely blessed to live in countries that enable us to access vaccines so efficiently and allow us to get back to some sort of normality, notwithstanding the challenges that health services continue to face.

However, the inequality of access to vaccines is stark. It is now a cliché to say that nobody is safe until everybody is safe, but it is true: inequality of access is inherently unfair, and if that alone does not move people, we know that it undermines getting back to normal in this country. Uneven access to vaccines is not unprecedented: during the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, rich countries again bought up global supplies. Back then, too, self-interest dominated, despite the known risks of not getting a grip globally, and despite the fact that the interface of vaccinated and unvaccinated populations is a recipe for disaster. As others have pointed out, vaccination rates remain dangerously low, despite the fact that vaccine makers worldwide have produced enough to vaccinate the world several times over. Not only are poorer countries left without access but they are more vulnerable due to weaknesses within their health systems, and inherent weaknesses due to other diseases that present challenges.

COVAX is key, but as we know, it has not worked to best effect. It had delivered only 700 million of a planned 2 billion vaccines by the end of last year, and as others have said, three quarters of health workers in Africa have not been vaccinated. Some 16% of the world's population live in countries that have bought up more than half of vaccine supply, and suggestions that we are choosing between our own populations and those of poorer countries are simply not true. As others have said, it is vital to ensure that the logistics are in place. This really exposes how penny wise and pound foolish the recent cuts to aid have been, leaving health services unable to vaccinate their populations.

The TRIPS waiver, as others have made clear, is an absolute no brainer. As has been beautifully said, this technology should not be kept as a trophy: claims that it

[Claire Hanna]

would stifle innovation are bunkum. It is hard to see how we do not all benefit from access to this technology, and it is really important that this country does not stand in the way of it.

2.32 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Murray. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this important debate and for her opening remarks, most of which I definitely agree with.

The emergence of the omicron variant signifies the truly global nature of the coronavirus pandemic. In just a few weeks from the announcement of the first omicron case on 24 November 2021, this variant was running my constituency of Vauxhall ragged, with an estimated one in 20 people in London having covid-19 on 16 December. That is a truly staggering timeline, which proves that tackling this global pandemic requires a global response. Unfortunately, what we have had is a patchwork response divided along national lines: while richer countries have been able to offer at least one dose of a vaccine to 77% of their population, poorer countries have been able to offer the same treatment to just 8%. That is profoundly unjust to some of the poorest people in the world.

We do not know who will be patient zero for the next variant, but we do know that vaccinations will help stop the spread of covid-19 within our society. We also know that in many of the world's poorer countries, the global HIV pandemic is a serious health problem in society. Although sustainable development goal 3.3 aims to end AIDS by 2030, many countries are struggling to get to grips with the virus, and 1.5 million people acquired HIV in 2020. For those living with HIV, covid-19 can be devastating: those living with HIV are twice as likely to die after being infected with covid-19, and many people with HIV who live in poorer countries cannot get access to the vital treatment or therapy that they need.

The presence of covid-19 within immunocompromised people is not only dangerous to them but can make the pandemic more dangerous for us all. While we do not know where variants will emerge, we do know that the ability of covid-19 to persist longer in the bodies of immunocompromised patients may give it time to evolve and mutate, so tackling covid-19 in the long term may be intrinsically linked to tackling diseases such as HIV. However, rather than a step up in our efforts to tackle HIV, screening in Africa and Asia has dropped by 40% and the UK Government cut funding to UNAIDS by 83%. Will the Minister speak to her colleagues in the Treasury about reversing this cut for UNAIDS so that we can tackle these two deadly viruses together?

2.35 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): First, I apologise to you, Mrs Murray, and to the Minister as I will have to leave straight after I have made my remarks to address a sensitive issue in the Chamber on behalf of one of my constituents. It was a year ago that the first covid-19 vaccines were approved—a moment of hope that humanity could overcome this disease. Scientists did their duty and played their part, but I am afraid the

truth is that world leaders failed to deliver the vaccines to all. At least 5 million people have now died of covid globally, but *The Economist* estimates the true excess deaths figure to be almost 20 million.

Huge public funding went into producing the vaccines. At least 97% of the funding for the AstraZeneca vaccine, for example, has been identified as coming from public funds, taxpayers or charitable trusts. The US Government funded and co-developed the vaccine sold by Moderna. Governments should have insisted that, in exchange for billions of pounds of public funding, vaccine producers must share any successful formula openly. Instead, our Government put the interests of pharmaceutical companies first. Companies such as Pfizer, Moderna and BioNTech make \$1,000 every second in profits from covid vaccines. Putting profits first means that less than 6% of people in low-income countries are fully vaccinated. Literally millions of people around the world have died avoidable deaths, and this has created the conditions in which new variants have emerged.

I will touch on what I am afraid is our Government's shameful role. South Africa and India led the call for a temporary vaccine waiver, allowing technology to be shared. This has now won huge international support from many Governments and from President Biden, yet our Government, along with the Government of Germany, have been leading the opposition, putting profits before lives by blocking the global sharing of vaccine patents that would allow poorer countries to produce their own vaccines. A frankly racist idea, spread by those who make vaccine profits, is that Africa, Asia and Latin America are somehow incapable of making their own vaccines, even if patents were waived, but vaccine experts recently identified more than 100 companies in Africa, Asia and Latin America with the potential to produce mRNA vaccines.

Even if people are not morally outraged by the millions of unnecessary deaths, there is a simple additional reason to back the waiver: no one is safe until everyone is safe. The virus will keep winning if profit is put first. The covid-19 vaccine must be for the global public good—a people's vaccine, not a vaccine for profit.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (in the Chair): Order. I call the SNP spokesperson, Dr Philippa Whitford. The Opposition spokesperson and the Minister have about 10 minutes each, which will allow two minutes at the end for the lead Member to wind up the debate.

2.38 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mrs Murray. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing the debate. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on vaccinations for all and vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on coronavirus, which has been taking evidence every fortnight since July 2020, including hearing from Health Ministers across sub-Saharan Africa and other places who emphasise what we have been hearing today—the difficulties they have in accessing supply and the poor quality of supply they actually get.

It is certainly true that all of us have gained from the researchers who have developed new vaccines, and I pay tribute to the staff of the four national health services

across the UK for the speed and skill with which they have delivered them. We have vaccinated almost 80% of adults with a third—or booster—shot, whereas access to even one shot in low-income countries is well below 10%. That simply highlights the inadequate access and inequity across the globe. High-income countries have literally hoovered up the vaccines as they were developed over the last year. That is indefensible. It is very reminiscent of AIDs, when people in Africa who were suffering from HIV or AIDs could not access the treatments that were available in the richer countries.

Last spring—well, actually, the spring before: 2020; I keep forgetting it is a new year—we heard lots of warm words about a global response to a global crisis. That is simply not what we have seen. We have seen that COVAX was established, and that the UK Government gave more than £500 million to it, but they did not give any vaccines until quite late last year. COVAX was meant to procure directly from companies. That never happened. Therefore, COVAX has ended up completely dependent on getting donated doses from wealthy countries that simply did advance procurements. That is the reason COVAX has delivered less than half of the 2 billion doses it was aspiring to deliver last year.

The UK Government promised 100 million doses in June 2021 at the G7—80 million to COVAX, and 20 million bilaterally. Less than a quarter of that has actually been delivered to COVAX. We are at the beginning of 2022. The 100 million is meant to be delivered by this coming June, which means 9.1 million per month to COVAX and a total of 11.5 million if we include any bilateral donations. The UK needs to radically step up donations of doses. That is the acute response, because that can be done in the short term. The UK has enough excess that it could carry out its third doses—and for many vulnerable patients, fourth doses, which I have had myself, as an immunocompromised person—and still accelerate the donation of doses to more than meet its target by June.

The problem is that wealthy countries think they can protect their own populations purely by vaccinating them. Omicron shows that that simply is not true. When we have large parts of the world, particularly in the global south, with low access to vaccines, that will generate high spread, and therefore more mutations—eventually, there will be new variants. Some of those variants may be as infectious as omicron—as transmissible and as good at escaping either natural immunity or previous vaccination—but may turn out to be much more severe. The fairy story that, inevitably, a virus is committed to becoming milder, is something that we are not in a position to count on.

We still, right now, two years into this crisis, need a global response. I therefore call on the Government to accelerate their donations, using the excess that we have. However, those must be predictable and in collaboration with the low-income countries that are receiving them. They also must have a decent shelf life.

We heard of Ministers having to visit their ports, every day, in case something had arrived. They had to keep stopping their own programmes because, suddenly, they got a delivery with a few weeks left on it. That is disrespectful to countries that do not have the health infrastructure that we have across the UK. It is critical to include consumables such as syringes and needles. It is also important to try to support the wider covid-19 responses.

Anyone looking at the WHO data will notice the incredibly low levels of covid—supposedly—in Africa. Africa does not have low levels; it has low levels of access to tests which means that cases are not being registered. We should not be using the doses as part of the already-reduced ODA budget, and certainly not charging more than the UK Government have paid for them.

That is the short-term approach, but the medium-term approach is to massively increase global production. The problem is that the TRIPS waiver has been being discussed for basically over a year. We would be in a totally different position if that had been moved on at the beginning. The UK is one of a dwindling number of countries that is blocking it. Over 130 countries now support it.

It is important to recognise that most of the leading covid-19 vaccines have been developed with public funding, either from university settings, which are largely publicly funded, or through the huge injection of funding made by the UK, US and EU Governments, and others. We touched on polio. The fact is that Salk did not patent his vaccine, Alexander Fleming did not patent penicillin and Röntgen did not patent X-rays, because they saw them as part of the global good.

As well as getting rid of the blockage of intellectual property rights and patents, it is important that there is proper sharing of data and technology transfer. Médecins Sans Frontières has identified 100 companies across Africa, Asia and Latin America that are certified by the European Medicines Agency, the United States Food and Drug Administration or the WHO for good manufacturing practice. To imply that it is not possible to produce vaccines to high qualities in the global south is frankly insulting.

The technology of messenger RNA vaccines holds hope for action against many tropical diseases in the future, such as TB, malaria and others. Sharing that technology now is not just about dealing with covid-19. It opens up the ability to tackle the scourges of infectious diseases that many countries face.

The UK should be increasing production of vaccines, to become a net exporter, instead of an importer. It is inexplicable why the UK Government pulled funding from the Valneva production site in Livingstone, when the trial data was about to be published. That vaccine was successfully developed using a traditional whole-virus approach, and people who were unwilling to take the messenger RNA vaccines may have been willing to receive the Valneva vaccine. It has not yet been trialled, but because it uses a whole-virus approach, it may provide a broader reaction that remains viable even when other variants arrive.

In comparison to delta, which had four mutations on the spike protein, omicron has 32 mutations. It is a totally different shape. Therefore, sadly with the AstraZeneca vaccine, the key no longer fits the lock. Pfizer does, but it wanes. We need to have broader vaccines so that we might be a bit more resistant to variants in the future.

The Government must maintain their support for routine vaccination. That means honouring the replenishment commitments to GAVI, because routine vaccinations have suffered due to the disruption of the pandemic. The UK has always been a leading funder of vaccination, and it must not pull back now. We must also think

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

about future pandemics. The replenishment of the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations is coming up this year. The UK needs to commit to that.

We are all talking about the humanitarian and the moral need to support people in poorer countries to have the access we have had, but on top of the lives lost and the huge, multi-trillion economic hit to the world, it is important that we recognise that this was a global challenge. The international community has failed, so far. If we cannot get our act together now in facing this, that does not give great hope for that other challenge—the climate crisis.

2.48 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is my pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this hugely important debate. I think this issue will define this year, and the way this pandemic is remembered in history. I thank Members from across the House for their contributions.

From the very start of the pandemic, Labour and I have been clear that achieving global vaccine equity is a moral and economic imperative, yet the Government have failed time and again to answer the calls from our partners abroad, and the result is a catastrophic disparity between the countries that have and the countries that have not.

The facts speak for themselves. In the west, 70% of adults have received a vaccination, but many people in the world's poorest areas are yet to receive a single dose. Nowhere is the covid divide clearer to see than in Africa, a continent in which immunisation rates in many countries are below even 1%, and three in four healthcare workers are yet to receive a single dose. The EU, the UK and the US received more doses in the last weeks of 2021 than African countries received all year.

From our own struggles with the pandemic, we know how desperately important it is to get jabs into arms, and of course we encourage everyone to get vaccinated; it is the way that we beat this virus. Yet why is it that when it comes to the rest of the world, last year we lagged behind the EU, the US, France, Germany, Italy and Canada in the number of doses donated to low and middle-income countries? I know that the new Foreign Secretary is perhaps a bit distracted at the moment with her own leadership ambitions, but seriously, is this global Britain? The world is right to wonder why this Government have fallen so far behind. Although Britain could be once counted upon to be a dependable and trusted leader on the world stage, our reputation has been tarnished by the Government's failure to heed warnings about the virus mutating in less vaccinated regions and to take decisive action.

With the COVAX facility falling short of its pledges last year by over a billion doses and revising down its forecast for 2021-22 by 25%, as well as revelations that many vaccine producers not only failed to prioritise deliveries to COVAX but violated their contractual obligations, now is the time for outward-looking nations to redouble their efforts to vaccinate the world. This is not a question of trying to achieve the impossible, nor is it a choice between jabs at home or jabs abroad. We have the expertise, the technology, the resources and the production capacity, so what is stopping us?

First, there has been a shameful level of mismanagement. It is an absolute scandal that despite repeated promises by the Government to distribute surplus vaccines, more than 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine had to be destroyed after passing their expiry date in August last year. In the same month, it emerged that the UK had taken 500,000 doses from COVAX that were meant for poorer countries. What on earth was going on? The reality of the global vaccination effort is that the increasing reliance on ad hoc donations from high-income countries to fill the gaps has meant vaccines arriving in countries late, with little notice and limited shelf lives. That makes it impossible for people in those countries to plan vaccination campaigns and increase absorptive capacity so that they can get those jabs into arms.

I note that of the 30 million doses that the UK pledged to donate last year, only a third had been delivered by November, with the Government leaving it until the absolute last minute to fulfil their promise. Life-saving health interventions must not be treated like essay deadlines. We must do better and give countries adequate notice, with transparent and ambitious timelines, as well as a good level of shelf life on doses when they arrive.

Striving for vaccine equity is not only a moral imperative, but wholly in Britain's best interests. We know from painful experience that viruses evolve and mutate. Our country's heroic efforts in the fight against covid have been seriously set back not once, but twice, with the emergence of the more transmissible delta and omicron variants. Neither of those variants originated in the UK, but once they arrived here they quickly swept the country. That is why it is so important that our fight against covid is global.

We know, with great sadness, that another strain of this deadly virus will emerge if we continue down our current path. That is why it is unbelievable that the Government cut by 70% research programmes that track variants. As Gordon Brown so rightly pointed out:

"The grim truth remains that until no one anywhere lives in fear, then everyone everywhere will have to live in fear."

Simply put, the current pandemic is not something that we can booster our way out of. As the emergence of omicron has shown us, as soon as a booster is administered in the west, another strain of the virus may mutate elsewhere, most often in the fertile breeding grounds where vaccinations are difficult to access.

We must remember that striving for global access to vaccines also makes economic sense. Covid is not just a health emergency but an economic emergency, and instead of being preoccupied with how much global vaccination would cost, we would be better served by considering how much it would save.

Will the Minister therefore confirm how much it costs us per dose to procure vaccines, and will she tell us at what price doses are currently being accounted for on the Government ledgers? Does she agree that donations to low and middle-income countries should not be counted towards the 0.5% ODA target? The sooner we can put an end to the health crisis, the sooner we can put an end to the economic crisis. Only when we can confidently say that the pandemic is over will global supply chains be able to adjust, our economy recover and businesses have the confidence to invest and thrive.

As the managing director of the International Monetary Fund put it, the costs of ensuring global vaccine equity would be

“dwarfed by the outsized benefits”,

with economies likely to see

“the highest return on public investment in modern history.”

This is not rocket science. It is the common sense that Opposition Members have been pleading with the Government to adopt since the pandemic first began.

If the Government are serious about global Britain, they also need to be serious about global health. If we are to have any chance of stamping out this virus once and for all, we need to work with national Governments to ensure that those with the greatest need can access vaccines, regardless of their location or the depth of their pockets. Labour has led the way on this issue, setting out the steps that the Government should take. I encourage the Minister to look at the 10-point plan that the former shadow International Trade Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and I laid out in May last year.

In particular, I urge the Government to show global leadership by working with other Governments to negotiate a temporary patent waiver with the World Trade Organisation to allow developing countries to speed up their own vaccine production. The UK is out on a limb on this now. The majority of countries around the world have expressed support for the TRIPS waiver. It is backed by hundreds of human rights lawyers, IP scholars, civil society organisations, economists, medical experts, scientists, most Commonwealth countries and the First Ministers for Scotland and for Wales, as well as by India, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and the US. Only the UK, Switzerland and the European Union are still blocking this. There are more than 100 manufacturers across Africa, Asia and Latin America with the potential to produce mRNA vaccines. Let us give them the tools to manufacture more of the vaccine and get the world jabbed as soon as we can.

Finally, I urge the Government to leverage the UK's world-leading expertise and work in close co-operation with national healthcare providers and trusted partners on the ground to ensure that systems are in place to allow vaccines to be distributed in an efficient and swift manner. After all, there is little point in turbocharging global vaccine production if those vaccines cannot be distributed to the people who desperately need them.

As we enter the new year, the Government have an opportunity to finally do the right thing. As a proud, outward-looking nation, we simply cannot continue down our current path, looking on as spectators while the world suffers vaccine apartheid. To do so would be not only grossly unjust, but catastrophic to the UK's interests—our reputation, the world economy and our security.

The Government must commit here today, without qualification, to taking the urgent steps that Labour, Gordon Brown and so many more have urged all along: to look beyond our borders, recognise our mutual common interests and do the right thing. Let us make 2022 the year that we close the great covid gap and do our part to vaccinate the world.

2.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Murray. I thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for securing this debate, and I thank the many hon. Members who have contributed to it. I will try to respond to many of the points that have been made.

It is now almost two years since the start of the pandemic. We have seen extraordinary and unprecedented progress in so many areas, but too many people across the world remain unvaccinated and vulnerable to the virus, particularly in lower-income countries and in the most marginalised communities.

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

Our G7 and UN Security Council presidencies last year drove an important international response on vaccine access. It included a G7 agreement to share and finance at least 1 billion doses for developing countries by June this year. Furthermore, last month, within days of becoming aware of the omicron variant, we convened G7 Ministers to agree a co-ordinated response. On 30 December, the Foreign Secretary announced £105 million in UK aid to help vulnerable countries respond to the omicron variant, including support to scale up testing, improve access to oxygen and provide communities with hygiene advice.

Last year, we also worked with a wide range of partners to design and fund the COVAX facility, with the participation of over 191 countries and territories, including up to 92 developing countries. Yes, COVAX faced constraints in 2021, but supply has increased rapidly, and the facility has delivered to 86 low and middle-income countries. We were a founder and, with our commitment of £548 million, we were one of the largest donors. The UK continues to support vaccinations through its contribution to the World Bank's African Vaccine Acquisition Trust scheme. We have also pledged funding for developing covid-19 treatments and rapid diagnostic tests, and we have deployed emergency medical teams.

The UK has also committed to sharing 100 million vaccine doses. We have donated over 30 million doses so far, meeting our goal for 2021, and UK donations have helped to immunise health workers and those most vulnerable to covid-19.

Wendy Chamberlain *rose—*

Vicky Ford: The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), asked about the cost of those donations—I suspect that was the intervention that the hon. Member for North East Fife wished to make. The cost of covid-19 vaccine donations for 2021 has been additional to the ODA budget in the 2020 spending review. Our total ODA spend in 2021 will remain within 0.5% of gross national income, given growth forecasts. Departmental ODA budgets are increasing significantly over the period of the next spending review, and they will fully cover the cost of vaccine donations to meet the Prime Minister's commitment to donate 100 million doses by June 2021.

Wendy Chamberlain: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: I am not going to take interventions right now, because I want to try to answer the points that Members have made in their speeches.

The spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), seemed to believe that the UK holds a stockpile of covid-19 vaccines. That is not the case; the UK does not stockpile covid-19 vaccines. We manage our supply chain very carefully, ensuring that vaccine doses are used and have an impact as quickly as possible, either in the UK or beyond. A number of Members spoke about vaccines that may have gone to developing countries, but were too close to their use-by dates. Right now, vaccines that are delivered by COVAX are delivered in consultation with countries that are ready and able to begin an immediate roll-out, and they are distributed in line with the World Health Organisation's equitable allocation framework. For bilateral donations, we have sought assurance that recipients have the capacity to roll out that quantity of doses in line with their national vaccination programmes, ahead of their expiry dates.

Supply is increasing, but it needs to be sustained and consistent, so that countries can plan and implement their immunisation campaigns. A capacity to deliver vaccines quickly is now a priority of our focus. A new inter-agency global co-ordinator for delivery has been appointed to focus on in-country delivery, and several countries, such as Mozambique, Rwanda and South Africa, have already administered most of the vaccines they have received so far. Yesterday, I spoke to our team in Ghana, where right now they are vaccinating half a million people every day, and even using drones to deliver vaccines to the hardest-to-reach communities. It is a truly remarkable effort, and we donated over a million vaccines to Ghana before Christmas as part of that work.

Although our vaccine donations make a difference and are a critical source of short-term supply, I recognise that dose sharing alone will not vaccinate the world. That is why the UK also backs the Oxford-AstraZeneca model of voluntary licensing to expand the production of affordable vaccines. About 2.5 billion Oxford-AZ doses have been delivered at cost to more than 170 countries, and about two thirds of those have gone to low-income and lower middle-income countries.

In addition, last year we announced a quarter of a million pounds for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations in order to accelerate the collaborative development of vaccines against new diseases, including covid-19. CEPI is also providing funding to other UK institutions for the development of vaccines against other diseases, such as Lassa fever, Marburg virus disease and middle east respiratory syndrome. In March this year, the UK will host the global pandemic preparedness summit, which will mobilise resources for CEPI's five-year strategic goal to reduce the time it takes to develop vaccines against new threats, including new covid variants.

The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), the hon. Members for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) and for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and others called for an intellectual property rights waiver, but that is not the solution. There is a serious risk that a TRIPS waiver could undermine the intellectual property framework that helped to produce covid-19 vaccines, and could disincentivise future research and development investment.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Vicky Ford: I will answer the points that have been made on this, and if I have time, I will give way at the end. The flexibilities within the TRIPS system that were used to tackle the HIV/AIDS crisis are really important. We remain open to all initiatives that will have a demonstrable impact on vaccine production and distribution, and we continue to engage constructively in discussions at the World Trade Organisation to that end. However, we need to focus our efforts on actions that will make timely and substantive differences, such as further voluntary licensing and technology transfer agreements. That is why we support the voluntary licensing approach taken by the team at Oxford University and AstraZeneca. Their collaboration with the Serum Institute of India has massively scaled up manufacturing for global supply.

On manufacturing, we are also providing technical support to develop business cases for Biovac to manufacture vaccines in South Africa, to Institut Pasteur in Dakar, Senegal and to the Moroccan Government. This technical support is helping to catalyse the investment that will see those vaccines produced on the African continent this year. We are also engaging with the new Partnership for African Vaccine Manufacturing. Focusing on supporting manufacturing on the continent of Africa is absolutely one of my key priorities. However, vaccine supply must be matched by the capacity of health systems to deliver them. We have been working to support and strengthen health systems in some of the most vulnerable countries, and we recently launched the "Health Systems Strengthening" position paper, which sets out our determination to do more on building overall capacity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) and others point out, Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance is really important, and we continue to be a leading supporter. Our commitment of £1.65 billion over five years will help to vaccinate 300 million more children against preventable disease and improve health system resilience against future pandemics.

Navendu Mishra: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. We do not have time for an intervention, I am afraid. Wendy Chamberlain has to sum up. The Minister will draw her remarks to a close.

Vicky Ford: I will. I hope I have answered as many as possible of the questions that have been raised. That is what I have tried to do. The goal to vaccinate the world is monumental, and it is one that the UK is firmly committed to supporting. We have taken global leadership on that, especially during our G7 presidency. The points raised about manufacturing and distribution are live issues that we are tackling now. We will continue to champion the collaborative approach through CEPI, including on producing new vaccines for covid-19.

3.8 pm

Wendy Chamberlain: I am pleased to have you in the Chair for the conclusion of the debate, Mr Hollobone. With Thursday afternoon Westminster Hall debates, there is always the pressure to get back to our constituencies, and the fact that this debate was so well subscribed shows how important it is to many Members. I thank them for their attendance.

Let us think first about what we have agreed on. We are very proud of those who are involved in the development of vaccines, and those in our NHS who are involved in the supply and delivery of vaccines within the UK. We are also all proud of the UK's previous record as a global leader in international development.

However, our differences of opinion, which became clear in the Minister's concluding remarks, are about whether the UK is doing enough, whether it should be doing more and how it should be doing it. In relation to the TRIPS waiver, I absolutely get the intellectual property considerations, but why do 130 countries feel differently from the UK in that regard?

I say to the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) that I looked at the IPU bits, and unfortunately it felt a little bit like COP26; where we have got to is the equivalent of moving from "phase out" to "phase down", and there is clearly more to be done there. On Valneva, which the hon. Members for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) raised, if we can develop a vaccine that does not have those storage requirements, I do not know why we are not looking at that.

There was a degree of disquiet on this side of the Chamber when the Minister talked about donations. I saw somebody on Twitter say, in response to the debate, that our current approach is a bit like clearing the pantry of food that is about to expire, donating it to a food bank and feeling like a philanthropist.

Finally, there were lots of stats in the debate, and I thank the Members who raised them. As we have seen over the past few days, statistics are loved ones—they are people.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that the hon. Lady has run out of time.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Smart Motorways

[MR PHILLIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

3.11 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we begin there are some notices that Mr Speaker requires me to read. May I remind Members that they are expected to wear face coverings when they are not speaking in the debate? This is in line with current Government guidance, and that of the House of Commons Commission. I remind Members that they are asked by the House to have a covid lateral flow test before coming on to the estate. Please also give each other and members of staff space when seated, and when entering and leaving the room.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Third Report of the Transport Committee, Rollout and safety of smart motorways, HC26, and the Government response, HC 1020.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is the Government response that I am particularly pleased to be discussing; Select Committees scrutinise and then put forward our recommendations, and in this particular instance, it is a great pleasure that the Government have accepted all the key recommendations—and gone further. I am grateful to the Minister, who is taking my thanks on behalf of the Department.

I also want to mention the previous incarnations of the Transport Committee and the work that they have done. I thank our former chair, Dame Louise Ellman, who chaired the Committee in 2016. I was a member of that Committee when a number of recommendations were made. For reasons that I will mention later, I believe that if those recommendations had been carried forward then we might not be where we are now. I also thank my predecessor, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who continued to shine a light on some of the failings of smart motorways. It has been a collective endeavour—a mission over the last six years—but I am pleased that progress is being made. It is also important to ensure that the Committee continues to focus on those assurances, and ensure that they are scrutinised and, ultimately, delivered. We will do so.

It would be remiss of me not to explain more about smart motorways and what their design and technology is there to do. It is there to control the flow and behaviour of traffic. There are three types and often people are baffled by the differences; I hope that I can explain them.

First, there are all lane running motorways, which tend to get the most focus because they do not have a hard shoulder at all. They rely on a series of emergency areas for motorists who become stranded. In 2019, there were 141 miles of all lane running motorway network. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles, which is measured from 2015 to 2019 for the purposes of this speech, was 0.12%.

Secondly, there are controlled motorways. These have a permanent hard shoulder at all times, but still have the smart technology. In 2019, they also accounted for 141 miles, with a lower fatality rate of 0.07%.

[*Huw Merriman*]

Thirdly, there is a dynamic hard shoulder motorway concept, which is where the hard shoulder is switched to a lane at busy times during the day. There are just 63 miles of this design, with a fatality rate of 0.09%. In comparison, there are 1,564 miles of conventional motorway, without the smart technology, which have a fatality rate of 0.16%.

The data shows that between 2015 and 2019, all three forms of smart motorways had lower fatality rates than conventional motorways. However, many are concerned because the data from 2019 alone shows that the reverse is true: smart motorways tend to be less safe.

The Transport Committee launched its latest inquiry in February 2021 and reported in November, with the Government responding this week. I will summarise what the Government have agreed to do.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): Surely, to put it in context, it is best to start with why one would want to do this scheme in the first place. It is about traffic management and, in particular, reducing congestion in very crowded parts of our motorway network, especially at peak hours when people are going to work and with lorry traffic moving through. It is an enormously important part of our economy, particularly around the midlands motorway box where, I think the hon. Member would agree, the M42—the original smart motorway—works extremely well.

Huw Merriman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and take his point on board, although it is a bit difficult to go back to the start and do as he has suggested. However, it is a familiar topic about smart motorways that will come up later. He is absolutely right. If the design guide had followed the prototype—I intend to refer to the M42 and where things then moved—we might have found ourselves in a very different place.

The right hon. Gentleman touched on the reason for this scheme, which, again, is to create the extra capacity that is needed to get people off the more dangerous A and B roads and on to the motorway network. Unfortunately, because of what has happened, there is a danger that the opposite is true, and if he will allow it I will expand on that.

There are seven key points in the recommendations that were accepted. First, there will be a pause of the roll-out of all lane running motorways yet to commence construction until five years of data is available for the smart motorway network built before 2020.

Secondly, the Government will pause the conversion of dynamic hard shoulder motorways to all lane running motorways and revisit the case for controlled motorways. Is it all about all lane running smart motorways or are other smart motorways better?

Thirdly, emergency refuge areas will be retrofitted to existing all lane running motorways to make them no further than 1 mile apart, for which the Government have announced £390 million of funding.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): My hon. Friend will know that I was the roads Minister from the summer of 2016 through 2017, and had been at the Department for Transport prior to that under a different Government. As Minister, I raised the issue of the frequency of those refuges with my office

and with Highways England. It seems to me that, for the reassurance of motorists and motoring organisations, it is vital that they come more frequently. The Committee's report recommends that. I am pleased with the Government's response, which seems to be positive. However, it is critical that on all lane running motorways—that is the difference he highlighted earlier—those refuges are regularly available so that people can get off the road if and when they need to, without delay.

Huw Merriman: I thank my right hon. Friend for the expertise he brings to this debate. He makes some fascinating points. I am interested in whether the advice was followed by Highways England, as it then was. This was a new concept. Our recommendations included giving Ministers and the Department a little more independent advice from the Office of Rail and Road—the roads regulator. Had that been the case, there might have been checks and balances in the system, so the advice that he received might have been better for him. He rightly makes the point that if the build-out had been followed as he approved, we might not be where we are.

The fourth point was the granting of powers to the Office of Rail and Road to evaluate the Government's smart motorways project plan. Starting this year, the regulator will report on progress annually, and carry out an evaluation of stopped vehicle detection technology and other safety measures.

The fifth point, which comes with a consultation requirement, is to introduce an emergency corridor manoeuvre into the highway code to help emergency services and traffic patrol officers to access incidents.

Sixthly, the Government will investigate the granting of new road safety powers to the roads regulator before changes to design or operational standards are implemented on our motorways and key roads. Again, Ministers would then have that independent four-eyes approach when their advice comes through.

Finally—this is important—we need to revisit the entire business case and rationale for smart motorway conversion. It is interesting that the expectation was that for every £1 spent on smart motorways, £3 would be delivered back, because we would be creating more capacity. There have not actually been that many studies of whether that has been achieved, because a longer assessment period is needed, which is now consistent with the safety assessment. However, one project on the M25 was delivering almost £3 back, although it is fair to say that the experts' view is that it dissipates after a year, as more people use the motorway network.

The headline is a pause on new smart motorways, but the aspect that I am really determined to ensure that the Committee follows is all the retrofitting work that is needed to make the existing smart motorway network safer. That means vital work has to start on reducing the width between emergency refuge sites. We have seen that if a car is travelling at 60 mph and the distance interval is 2.5 km, it takes 75 seconds for that car to get to the emergency refuge areas. Some 40% of all breakdowns occur in a live lane, and that has to be impacted by the fact that the emergency refuge area is too far for the cars to get to, so it is essential that this is delivered.

I will touch on the stopped vehicle detection technology, which the Government are committed to ensuring is rolled out on the existing network by 2022. The Government

are right to say that it was originally planned for 2023, so it will happen a year earlier. The Committee's frustration is that we were given assurances by Highways England, the predecessor to National Highways, in 2016 that "going forward" the stopped vehicle detection technology would be put in place in the delivery of all new smart motorways. That has not occurred. When we heard from National Highways, as it now is, in our current inquiry, we were told that "going forward" actually meant "after two years", whereas, to me, going forward means "immediately".

Of course, the challenge now—it will be a funding challenge as well as an operational challenge—is that once those motorways are open and running, it is a lot harder and more expensive to retrofit the technology in place, which we have been told will be one of the blockers. In my view, that is precisely the reason they should have been put in to start with. I know the Government are now committed to ensuring that whenever they finish the existing smart motorways—which, rightly, cannot be stopped because they are almost there—they cannot open until the technology is in place.

John Spellar: Maybe a future programme for the hon. Gentleman's Committee is why such bad advice is being given to Ministers inside the Department. Given that the M42 already had a system that worked and delivered much more predictable journey times, reduced fuel use, reduced pollution and, incidentally, reduced accident rates—that is all in the data from the M42 experiment—why did they cut corners after that? In the same way, they saved about £10 million on the paper licence, but it is costing about £100 million a year. Is there not clearly a systemic failure in advice and capability inside the Department for Transport?

Huw Merriman: I would be interested in hearing from former Ministers and the current Minister, but from my study of the matter over the last six years, I think the answer is that the culture has been about creating the capacity. That makes perfect sense, because if we create the capacity on the motorway network, we take traffic off the more dangerous roads. However, the difficulty is that we have then not focused on ensuring that the new roads are as safe as they can be. If we had the refuge areas at shorter distances and had the stopped vehicle detection technology, that could be done.

It was quite interesting that when we spoke to then chief executive of Highways England and asked why some of the motorways were open, notwithstanding the measures that had been put in place, he maintained that drivers wanted to try the road once the tarmac had been delivered. He stated: "We get a lot of negative feedback from the public, who say, 'We know this is a smart motorway and you're opening it. Why can't we use that lane now?'" I think it is that that has driven the feeling of, "Let's get on and move it," and then the safety measures and the design side seem to get cut.

I think there was a mentality in the agency that it designed this, so it became very defensive about it and tried to stretch it as much as it could. I would say that the safety bit got somewhat left behind and was not given the prominence that it should have been given. We know that the agency has a zero-harm policy: it aims to reduce harm, in terms of deaths, to zero by 2040. That is a lofty target, but it is also one that should be focused on every bit as much as creating the capacity.

I will end with this summary, because it is important that everybody else has the opportunity to speak and that we hear from former Ministers, with their ministerial expertise—there are two here to provide that. It is welcome that the Government have agreed to these recommendations. I applaud them for doing that, but it is essential that we now crack on with the safety measures that should have been there in the first place. They have not been there, but we now need to focus on getting them delivered as soon as we can.

It is vital that we use the Office of Rail and Road more, as it is the regulator and is able to challenge some of the assumptions. I welcome the acceptance of that recommendation, but the Office of Rail and Road is going to have to change as well. Of 350 employees inside that organisation, only 19 are dedicated to roads. It used to be the Office of Rail Regulation, but has been extended to cover roads; in reality, it is about rail. We do not want to get to a situation in which the culture is such—as perhaps it is with rail—that safety becomes the only issue, and we cannot ever get on and deliver innovations, because that might not be 100% safe; nothing is. We need to ensure that we still have a road-building programme in place.

Ultimately, it is really important that the Government look to whether they will continue with smart motorway build-out by assessing the data over this paused period. I very much hope that if the safety measures are brought in, that will strengthen the case for smart motorways, because the final point that I want to send to the public is that smart motorways are safe. The motorway network in this country is one of the safest in the world. People should be encouraged to use the motorway network. But we can make those smart motorways even safer, and I very much hope that this report and the Government's response to it will help to that end.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate will last until 4.30 pm. I am obliged to start calling the Front Benchers no later than seven minutes past 4. The guideline limits are 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister, and then the Chairman of the Transport Committee will get three minutes to sum up the debate at the end. There are five Back Benchers, with a humongous amount of highways expertise, seeking to contribute, and it is Back-Bench time until seven minutes past 4. The first of those will be Grahame Morris.

3.28 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I appreciate your calling me in this debate, Mr Hollobone. It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I begin by commending the work of the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and the way in which he has not only gone about the gathering of evidence for the inquiry, but actively promoted the response from the Government and the conclusions of the Committee. He is to be commended for that. I would also like to record, on my behalf, and, I am sure, that of all members of the Transport Committee, our thanks to the members of staff, the subject specialists and all the support staff who have been involved in preparing this third report of the current Session.

[*Grahame Morris*]

As I believe the Chair of the Committee has already pointed out, this is not the first Transport Committee report scrutinising all lane running motorways. Although I welcome the Government's acceptance of the Transport Committee's recommendations, safety risks on all lane running motorways, such as those raised by our predecessor Committee in 2016, should have been addressed before those motorways were rolled out.

My own party and I personally have long felt that the Government needed to halt the roll-out of smart motorways. The Committee identified considerable evidence that there are serious flaws. It is a tragedy that so many lives were lost before action was taken.

John Spellar: There is a slight danger of conflating smart motorways and all lane running motorways. There are smart motorways that work, as with the M42, which is a key part of the motorway box around Birmingham and vital to the economy of this country. We therefore need to differentiate, and to look at what has worked and at why that was not followed through on. It is enormously important not just for those travelling to work, but—given that this country and its economy runs on its trucking industry and its drivers, as we found out recently—to keep things flowing. We have to look at extending that, rather than wrapping all those together in one framework.

Grahame Morris: That is a reasonable point. I certainly do not disagree with my right hon. Friend. I point out that our third inquiry was launched in response to concerns that the Committee had received about the increasing number of fatalities and to criticism by professionals, including coroners, about the risks that arise when we do not have hard shoulders, or when they are used as an additional lane.

As we heard in the Chair of the Committee's opening remarks, the number of miles of motorway without a hard shoulder increased from 172 to 204 between 2017 and 2019. Over those two years, the number of deaths on motorways without a permanent hard shoulder increased from five to 15. At least 38 people have been killed on smart motorways in the past five years. On one section of the M25 outside London, the number of near misses has risen twentyfold since the hard shoulder was removed in April 2014.

Thanks to the dedication of bereaved families, the roll-out has been paused. As part of the Committee's inquiry, we heard some of the most harrowing and moving evidence from the families of those who, tragically, have died on smart motorways. That testimony, I believe, was very valuable and I thank all those who gave evidence in person and in writing.

All lane running motorways were primarily a money-saving exercise. We skirted around that issue earlier. In the rationale, they were introduced to add capacity while delivering savings on capital, maintenance and operational costs compared with previous smart motorway designs. The aim was to achieve the savings required by the 2010 spending review while maintaining Highways Agency safety standards. Clearly, those motorways could reduce the costs of implementation by up to a quarter.

It is now evident, however, that cost-cutting has played a part in the utterly inadequate roll-out of smart motorway features. That has put lives at risk. Many of

the problems with the safety of all lane running motorways remain, years after the original Transport Committee report.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): National Highways has been given £27.4 billion this year. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that it might be a case not of a shortage of cash at National Highways, but more a lack of focus on the need for safety?

Grahame Morris: Some important questions need to be asked, and agencies and individuals need to be held to account for the decisions made.

It is staggering that since the first smart motorways went live, those basic standard safety features referred to earlier and in the statement this morning have still not been fully implemented—that smart technology to detect broken-down vehicles in live lanes. Emergency refuge areas are too far apart. CCTV cameras on smart motorways are not routinely monitored, which is an incredible admission that the Committee uncovered. Compliance with and enforcement of red X signs remain problematic.

Cameras capable of enforcing compliance will not be fully rolled out until September this year. As the Chairman of the Committee alluded to, the Committee was originally promised that the deadline for that would be six years earlier and that those cameras and that technology would be implemented in 2019. Also, we have now been told that stopped-vehicle detection will not be rolled out across all lane running motorways until September this year, six years after the Transport Committee was told that the technology worked and would be part of the standard roll-out of these schemes.

Emergency services and traffic patrol officers still struggle to access incidents in a timely manner, especially during periods of heavy congestion. Of course, the introduction of all-electric vehicles brings a whole new dimension into potential chokepoints and road traffic accidents, if such vehicles were to run out of power on an all lane running motorway.

The Committee's report makes it clear that engagement and clear communication with the public about smart motorways will be key to their safe and successful roll-out, so education is a key issue. However, almost half of the British public do not know what to do in the event of an emergency on a smart motorway. We do not have any smart motorways or all lane running motorways in the north-east, but my constituents travel down to London and use these roads, which do not have a hard shoulder, so education is absolutely vital. However, it was a profound mistake that the first public information awareness campaign about smart motorways was not launched until 2021, years after they came into operation.

We know that smart motorways, given their current form and inadequate safety standards, are not fit for purpose and put lives at risk. I believe that Ministers were wrong to press ahead with them when there was strong evidence that safety-critical features should be introduced as the sections of smart motorways were being developed.

I am pleased that the Government have acknowledged the Committee's concerns and paused the roll-out of all lane running smart motorways until five years of safety and economic data is available, and improvements have been delivered and independently evaluated.

I will conclude with several questions for the Minister. First, is it not illogical that hundreds of miles of smart motorway will continue to be used? What about the remedial work? How is that being programmed? Does she agree that the delay of the roll-out programme, caused by the delays in installing the relevant technology to detect broken-down vehicles, has risked lives, and that the continuing use of hundreds of miles of smart motorways before remedial work has been carried out is a risk to public safety? And will she and the Department for Transport engage with the Transport Committee to agree what data will form part of the evidence-gathering assessment over the next five years to determine the relative safety of smart motorways?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. To ensure that everyone gets in and can contribute, I am imposing a seven-minute limit on speeches.

3.38 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, Mr Hollobone, and to serve on the Transport Committee under its Chairman, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

This report is the most substantial and impactful that the Transport Committee has produced for many years. It has looked to address some particularly difficult issues. All of us—both Members of Parliament and the Government—should ask ourselves why has it taken six years and three inquiries to get to this point? None the less, I am pleased that we have reached a point where a Transport Committee report has been accepted pretty much in its entirety by the Government.

My contribution will focus specifically on safety. Today, National Highways is focused on delivery, providing capacity and basically getting tarmac on the ground but, as I asked a senior director of National Highways at a recent meeting, how many people have to die on our national road network for National Highways to take safety seriously? How can it be that a fundamental part of the system—stopped-vehicle detection technology—was not working, despite the assurances that had been given to the Committee and others that it would be delivered? That is an absolute disgrace.

I hope the Minister will address that issue in her response. I look forward to hearing what she, her Department and the Secretary of State will do to address the issue. It is fair to say that very few people believe—I certainly do not—that National Highways take safety seriously enough or ensure it features in its decision making.

That leads me to the role of the Office of Rail and Road. As most Members here will know, before I came to this place my career was with the railways. I worked in the transport industry for 20 years, and I had many dealings with the ORR, in different ways. As my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee said earlier, only 19 of the 350 employees of the ORR are focused on highways, because highway safety is not really part of the ORR's portfolio.

In the same way that the ORR has safety responsibility for the railways, we should deal with the safety issue of our highways by having a proper safety regulator, in order to hold National Highways, and other organisations,

to account. As we have seen in this report, and heard in other contributions, we have an organisation that has been able to wriggle out of delivering key safety measures. That is a national disgrace, and a matter of huge, enormous, personal pain for the families of those who have lost their lives on the smart motorway network.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Chair of the Committee and the Transport Committee team for what they have done. This is undoubtedly the most impactful report we have seen for a long time. I am especially pleased that the Government have supported pretty much everything we said, but we now need to see the Government taking these actions forward. Going forward in my role on the Committee, I will focus on ensuring that the safety issues I have outlined, specifically around National Highways' responsibility to deliver safety matters and the ORR's responsibility to address safety, are dealt with in the future.

3.43 pm

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I have enjoyed the contributions from all members of the Transport Committee. I welcome its report and the Government's response.

I take a slightly different perspective on this debate, because the spine of my constituency is junctions 28 to 30 of the M1, in which we have 30 miles of all lane running smart motorway. To the south is junctions 25 to 28, which is a controlled motorway, and to the north is junctions 30 to 35a, which is 19 miles of smart motorway. The section just to the north of my constituency, around Woodall services up to Sheffield, is the section in which unfortunately many people have lost their lives, including people from neighbouring Rotherham and Mansfield. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) referred to people giving evidence and those bereaved families, and our hearts go out to them.

It is a very difficult stretch of motorway from Nottingham up to Leeds, and it is undoubtedly over capacity: the amount of traffic that goes up that stretch is beyond what that road was initially designed to cope with. The smart motorway was seen as a solution to that issue, but I am not sure that it has been wildly successful. Anyone who lives in my constituency will know that we make regular appearances on the Radio 2 traffic bulletins, because the section between junctions 28 and 30 seems to have an accident on a fairly regular basis.

It is with that in mind that I read the report, and there are significant concerns about whether the introduction of the smart motorway has had the desired effects. I am not sure that it has. I am not sure that it has improved safety—as my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) just outlined, there are significant concerns about that—but there is also an issue with the road network in my part of the world and the fact that the A1, which covers a very similar stretch, does not do its fair share of lifting, because it is not really fit for purpose and needs significant investment. I am sure that if my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) were here, she would argue the same case.

However, I want to go back to the context that the M1 is absolutely central to the local economy in Bolsover. We have a huge number of logistics firms, so when the smart motorway—or the motorway in general—is not

[Mark Fletcher]

working, that has a big impact on the local economy. A number of my constituents are constantly caught in traffic jams because when the M1 is not running, to my west it can back up almost all the villages in my constituency, and to my east there is a significant pressure because people try to get over to the A1 on the A619, which runs through parts of my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith). That has a big impact on a lot of my villages, Whitwell in particular, because of the number of diverted heavy goods vehicles.

Added to that context—the Minister will smile wryly at this point—is the fact that some of my motorway junctions on that particular stretch are not fit for purpose. In particular, junctions 28 and 29 are suffering, which is having a huge, detrimental economic impact on us. I am working with Highways England—or whatever it is referred to now—to improve that particular situation, but a smart motorway on junctions 28 to 30 has brought a huge amount of congestion, an increase in near misses and a problem with air pollution, particularly in the south of my constituency around South Normanton and Pinxton. I appreciate that the rationale behind the decision to bring in a smart motorway was to increase capacity on a particularly difficult stretch, but I sympathised with the hon. Member for Easington when he said that it was perhaps just a cheap alternative to properly upgrading the motorway and strategic road network in that patch.

Given that we are in the heart of the country, it is worth pointing out to the Minister that further work needs to be done, and that is before we come on to safety. I drive down from my constituency to Westminster on a regular basis. There is a new bit of smart motorway being installed between, I think, junctions 13 and 16—hopefully someone will correct me if I am wrong—but there are other stretches in which the red Xs are totally ignored on a regular basis. I regularly see emergency vehicles unable to get to where they need to get to, and that is a worry, because we are creating an additional problem that I see on a weekly basis.

My hon. Friend the Chair of the Transport Committee spoke about the evidence regarding the benefit-cost ratio of smart motorways, and the fact that Professor Metz—I think it was him, but forgive me if I have got that wrong—was concerned about whether the return on those projects has been what we want them to be, or whether it is a one-off hit. I think he said that in the first year, they show a return on investment, but then the problems continue.

My experience locally indicates that although we have a smart motorway, it is not doing what it needs to do. As such, although I welcome the report and completely echo the concerns about safety, I have to conclude that I am not sure smart motorways are the answer. I appreciate all the comments made by the Chair of the Select Committee about smart motorways being a good thing, but I am not sure that I entirely agree with him. I wish the report had gone perhaps slightly further by looking at what else could be done to improve the road network, but that may be a separate point. It is an important report and I very much welcome the Government's proactive stance on taking forward the recommendations. I hope the Minister has heard the plight that many of

my constituents face, and that she will be proactive in looking for solutions with all the stakeholders involved. Again, I thank the Select Committee and thank everyone for listening.

3.50 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to contribute to this important debate on smart motorways. The American poet Robert Frost spoke of two roads. We heard from the Select Committee Chairman that, in the case of smart motorways, there are at least three types of road. In a sense, that is the first point I want to make because that has led to confusion. As the Select Committee rightly concluded, there is a lack of understanding among many drivers of what smart motorways are, and particularly what all lane running is and what to do if, as the Committee put it, they break down in a live lane. As the Select Committee Chairman pointed out, 40% of breakdowns happen in such a lane.

People break down for two reasons. It is either a vehicular failure or some incident in the car, perhaps illness or accident. They need to get off the motorway quickly. The Select Committee also pointed out, however, that, contrary to what one might expect, hard shoulders are not actually the solution. They can cause more difficulties than they solve and can be dangerous places. Refuges are the answer, and I will return to that in a moment.

The key point I want to make at the outset is that the management and accountability of these matters needs to be urgently reviewed. When I was a Minister in the Department for Transport—I do not know if I am unique in the House, but I am certainly very unusual in having been appointed to that Department as a Minister three times—I was involved in setting up what was then Highways England. We looked at it very closely because we understood that the governance of that organisation needed to be such that Ministers could take power to direct it. Indeed, when I was speaking to my officials at the time, I said, “I want it to look as little like Network Rail as possible”, precisely because Ministers seem to have little authority over Network Rail.

There is the power of direction in respect of Highways England—what has now become National Highways—and it is necessary sometimes for Ministers to use that power, whatever their officials tell them. I do think, informed by the report and the excellent Government response to it, that from now on in Ministers need to take a very proactive approach when dealing with smart motorways.

The second point I want to make is about regulation. It has been made already, but it needs to be made again because it warrants amplification. The Office of Rail and Road is long established and, as a result, has a distinguished pedigree in regulating the railway system, but it has taken on roads only relatively recently, and it seems to me that the regulatory function needs to be enhanced, as the Select Committee has argued—that is a further way in which the decisions in respect of roads generally and smart motorways in particular can be made accountable. Both accountability to the regulator and being answerable to Ministers are vital as we move forward, and will provide the public with greater assurance about the safety of these new types of road. After all, they are a “radical change”, as the Select Committee says, to our

road network, and confusing to drivers because of the various types of road that they may now encounter, particularly if they are not used to travelling a particular route. For instance, they may be going to a part of the country that they do not know and are therefore not familiar with the sort of road on which they are driving.

Finally, refuges are important not only because they provide an opportunity to get off the road in that 75-second period that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) mentioned, but because of what they broadcast about safety to drivers. They provide important reassurance to drivers that the road is indeed safe and that, in the case of emergency, there is a means of escaping the circumstances in which they might find themselves. That is why I made that point emphatically as Minister. I am delighted that the Select Committee has made it too, and that the Government have acknowledged and recognised it, although I notice the caveat in the small print that it is sometimes not possible to provide refuges at quite the regular intervals that the Select Committee recommends. None the less, I think the Government heard the message that I have emphasised once again.

It is important to see this in context. The most dangerous roads are not motorways, and they are not smart motorways. There is a good argument for thinking creatively and imaginatively about how we can make our roads more effective, as the Select Committee Chairman has said, and so build additional capacity to deal with congestion and so on. However, in order to do so, we must take the public with us. This pause is a huge opportunity for a programme of education, so that people know what kind of road they will encounter, what to expect and to feel safe accordingly.

The Select Committee has, as it should, done the House and the Government a great service. The Committee exists not only to scrutinise Government but to think about things that the Government would not otherwise consider. This is a good example of that. The Minister is an extremely diligent member of the Government. I hope she will indeed take seriously these recommendations, which are clearly made on the basis of both good faith and good information, and that we can move ahead to roads that are effective and make travel easier and, fundamentally, much safer.

3.57 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to speak on this important issue of road safety. Overall, this is an area where the UK has a very good and strong track record, with both deaths and injuries falling over many years. Some problem areas remain that have proven quite difficult to make improvements on. I think especially of rural roads and the challenges among younger drivers. However, we should note that that downward trend continues and we should welcome it. When I looked at the most recent data before coming to the debate, I was very encouraged, but I note that it is from the period of lockdown, so some caution is required about data points during this period.

We must never forget one important thing: behind every stat is a life lost, a family shattered. These are true tragedies, which is why we should never be complacent about any issues with road safety. There is always more

to do, and we should be spurred on to tackle more and more things. I welcome this report by the Transport Committee. It has done a good piece of work. I have to say that it is a Select Committee that I have had quite a bit to do with over the years, but mainly by appearing in front of it, rather than being a member of it. As the Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), said, the report, “Rollout and safety of smart motorways”, is the result of much detailed and prolonged work. The fact that its recommendations have been so quickly adopted by the Government shows how well that work has gone.

It is good to see all nine recommendations adopted by the Government, but I will speak about just one of them. Colleagues have spoken with great insight into other areas, but I will focus on the recommendation on stopped vehicle detection—SVD—technology. Technology is critical to the future of our transport systems. I do not just mean things like electric vehicles or hydrogen trains, although I know they are transformative and very exciting. I also mean using technology as a facilitator to reach a solution to one of the biggest challenges in transport, and that challenge is how to make it easier, cheaper and more sustainable to move increasing numbers of people and goods around our country.

I do not think this is a modal question. The challenges lie in all modes. We have not built a new railway line north of London since the reign of Queen Victoria, or a new runway in the south-east of England since the passenger jet was invented, or had a road investment programme since the 1970s, so we are looking at a period of sustained under-investment. There are reasons for that, one being that successive Governments have sought to use the existing infrastructure more intensely. In some cases, that has been more successful than others. Key successes include rail line usage, where we have seen increasing developments in rail signalling, and air corridor use. The key point is that the factor that made that possible is technological advance. More intensive use of existing infrastructure has been at the heart of the smart motorway development. As has been said, all various iterations go back decades.

Ultimately, to protect our environment, people do not really want to see huge amounts of new infrastructure. It is an environmental issue as much as a cost issue, unless we have absolutely no choice. Safety must be at the heart of all the technology and developments that will come into play. Technology is developing so fast that it has to be a factor in delivering safety on our road network, too. There have clearly been concerns about the safety of our roads, and smart motorways in particular. The speed and the size of vehicles can make us feel unsafe on motorways, and we know that the data shows, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) has said, that the hard shoulder is where people can feel most vulnerable and where problems can indeed arise. I experienced that myself recently, in the middle of the night. On a cold, dark night, a hard shoulder can be quite a grim experience.

When we bring in new technology, we have to take people with us and address their concerns. The pause that has been announced gives us the chance to retrofit, implement and review the SVD technology and perhaps improve it. The pace of the development is so fast that I am sure that developments will come into play sooner rather than later. We should expect all modes of transport

[Andrew Jones]

to become busier as we emerge from the pandemic, and that will include our roads. As that happens, road safety must never be compromised, but enhanced. My point is that technology and the advances in it are central now and will become even more so in future.

I want to finish with one request to both the Transport Committee and the Minister. I ask them to please put particular emphasis on recommendation 4 and the technology, its deployment and development, because I am absolutely sure it will save lives, and that should be the priority in road safety planning.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench speeches. First, Tan Dhesi on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition.

4.3 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hollobone. I want to convey my gratitude to the Chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and the other hard-working members of his Committee and their predecessors for all of their excellent work in this area. We have witnessed excellent speeches from right hon. and hon. Members who have extensive experience in transport.

The Labour party welcomes the Transport Secretary's announcement that he is pausing the roll-out of work not yet begun. The botched roll-out of smart motorways has cost lives. That is an undeniable fact. The Labour party has long warned about serious flaws in the whole process, and it is a tragedy that lives were lost before action was taken. It is thanks to the dedication of bereaved families and individuals such as members of the Transport Committee, a much-respected cross-party grouping, that the roll-out has been paused at all. We know that smart motorways in their current form, coupled with inadequate safety systems, are not fit for purpose and are putting lives at risk. Ministers were wrong to press ahead, as strong evidence warned against it.

We all want increased capacity and reduced congestion. We all want an increase in economic activity, but it must be done safely. In 2016, as the Chair of the Transport Committee has said, his predecessor Committee expressed deep scepticism about the design and implementation of all lane running motorways. The promised safety improvements were simply not delivered. Frankly, it is simply staggering that years after the first smart motorways went live, standard safety measures to detect broken down vehicles in live lanes have still not been fully rolled out. As the report has found, the CCTV is not routinely monitored. It is unacceptable that the distance between emergency refuge areas on motorways in operation today is far above what should be considered safe.

Coroners ruled that the lack of a hard shoulder contributed to four recent deaths. At least 38 people have been killed on smart motorways in the last five years. On one section of the M25 outside London, the number of near misses has risen twentyfold since the hard shoulder was removed in April 2014. Let us be clear: lives could have been saved if the safety-critical features identified by parliamentarians in report after report had been implemented.

Of course, we welcome the Minister's announcement, but the devil is in the detail, as right hon. and hon. Members have highlighted. It is that on which I would like to press the Minister, and on two key points in particular. The first is the implications for the existing 200 miles of live lanes currently in use, and the second is the precise plan for the retrofitting of those lanes. I have to say that we are deeply concerned that yesterday's announcement was an implicit acceptance that there are serious safety concerns on all lane running motorways, but they will continue to be in operation while the issues are addressed and the data evaluated.

At the very least, the announcement yesterday was an admission that the data do not currently support the continued roll-out of smart motorways. Otherwise, why has it paused for five years while we await further data? The clear implication is that motorists driving on the 200 miles of live lanes will be guinea pigs in order to justify the 67 miles left to be deployed. That is utterly illogical. It is quite simple: if Ministers cannot justify the safety of smart motorways on roads still to be built, they cannot justify the safety of those currently in use. The priority must be passenger safety.

Grahame Morris: My hon. Friend is making some solid points, and I just want to seek some clarification. It is also in relation to a point made by the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) in respect of recommendation 4 and the stopped vehicle detection technology. My concern is that the Roads Minister previously told the Transport Committee that although stopped vehicle detection technology improves safety, it is not necessary to make all lane running motorways safe, because

"all-lane running motorways were designed to—and do—operate safely without it."

Does my hon. Friend share my concern that we may not be using this five-year period to retrofit the safety-critical systems, if that is still the view of Ministers?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend is correct. I made this very point in the main Chamber earlier today, and I will come to the point about technology.

We reiterate our call for Ministers to reinstate the hard shoulder while the safety-critical work is carried out, the botched public information campaign is properly rolled out, and a further review of the evidence takes place.

Let me turn to the Government's pledges on remedial work. Back in June 2016, the Transport Committee said that the roll-out of smart motorways should not continue unless there are emergency refuge points every 500 metres. Typically, they are now 1.2 miles apart. The difference for drivers may not sound like a lot, but in reality it is enormous. Forty-five seconds could be the difference between breaking down in a live lane or not. On average, 38% of breakdowns in all lane motorways are in live lanes. It can take approximately 20 minutes for authorities to be alerted to the breakdown, the lane to be closed and support to arrive. That is simply unacceptable and it will be the reality on hundreds of miles of motorway while this remedial work is under way and while safety-critical features are still not in force. How can the Minister justify that?

On the remedial work itself, the Government committed to an additional £390 million to install additional areas—but they were silent on the detail. We know the stocktake

had an ambition for refuge areas 1 mile apart, so further clarification on this point is essential. Will the Minister provide a clear answer to the following questions? First, will 150 additional lanes be installed exclusively on live lanes currently in use, or does this include the 100 miles under construction? Secondly, when the remedial work is completed, what will the average distance between refuge areas be on ALRs? Thirdly, what will the distance be, once work is completed on the M25 in particular, where emergency refuges are furthest apart? Will the Minister deposit in the Commons Library an analysis of average distance between refuge areas on each motorway, making use of smart motorway technology and the estimated distance after this remedial work has taken place?

Ministers were warned that a gap of that distance was dangerous. They were wrong to press ahead in any event. They now must be open and transparent about the full implications of their announcement. On the roll-out of stopped vehicle detection technology, which my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mentioned, it is frankly scandalous that this technology has not been put in place in parallel with the upgrade of motorways. The Committee noted starkly that had this been in place—as was promised way back in 2016—lives would have been saved. Will the Minister outline whether it is still the plan for the roll-out to be completed this year? Will she also explain why, if there are question marks over the effectiveness of this technology, CCTV is still not being routinely monitored? That is a recurring problem, as has been pointed out by various media reports.

Finally, on communication, it is distressing to discover that nearly half of motorists do not know what to do if they break down on a smart motorway. It is extraordinary that the first information campaign was not launched until 2021. What plans do the Department have to launch an effective mass information campaign to dramatically boost those numbers. Taken in total, it is clear that in the absence of a safe distance between refuge areas, a proper independent evaluation of data, the Department's action plan, the roll-out of safety measures and low public awareness, existing all lane motorways simply cannot be considered safe. Ministers should have listened; they did not, and now the public are paying the price. Lessons must be learned.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I must begin by thanking the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), and all the other members, for their hard work. I was once a member of a Select Committee, so I know the number of hours in preparation and effort that are put in by both the members and the team of staff that support the Committee to ensure that the information and witnesses that inform an inquiry are using evidence-based information and are fair and balanced. On behalf of the Secretary of State and all of us in the Department for Transport, I put on record our gratitude to the Transport Committee for its report and the way it has collaborated and worked with the Government. That is why we are in the position to take forward not one, two, three, four, five or six, but all nine recommendations in the report.

I know that the Committee took evidence from many experts with differing views. I believe, as do the Secretary of State and the Roads Minister, Baroness Vere of Norbiton, that the resulting report is a thorough examination of issues. It is a rounded report, with sensible and pragmatic recommendations, which the Government will take forward. Members will have seen the Government's response, published yesterday, 12 January. I hope they will agree that it demonstrates our commitment to help ensure that these motorways continue to be as safe as they possibly can be.

Our motorways are among the safest in the world. Compared with the rest of Europe and the United States, we stack up particularly well. Are they as safe as they can be? There will always be room for improvement.

I pay tribute to everybody who has been involved in the campaign that has informed the recommendations. The actions we are taking are certainly, in part, a result of their effective campaigning.

I will make a number of general points, then will address some of the questions raised by right hon. and hon. Members today. First, we must remember why smart motorways were developed. A smart motorway can carry 1,600 additional vehicles an hour in each direction. They decrease journey times and provide more reliability on our busiest stretches of motorway. They have a lower impact on the environment, with five times lower carbon emissions from construction, a decrease in loss of biodiversity and a lower land take through construction. They are also provided at a lower cost—estimated at 50 to 60% less costly than widening—and are delivered more quickly.

Secondly, we should also acknowledge that the evidence to date supports the safety case for smart motorways. In terms of fatality rates, all-lane-running motorways are the safest in the country based on the available data. Smart motorways without a permanent hard shoulder account for 1% of fatalities, motorways with a hard shoulder account for 5%, and all other fatalities—94%—occur on other roads.

Sir John Hayes: While we are on the subject of other roads, it would be remiss of me not to make a case for Lincolnshire. We do not find motorways in Lincolnshire, smart or otherwise, but we do find a number of key arterial routes that carry an immense amount of traffic and need improvement. While I am here and the Minister is here, too, I ask her to look again at support and funding for those roads that feed our arterial routes—those connecting roads. When I was responsible for the road investment strategy, I made it clear that those connecting routes are critical, both in terms of capacity and in terms of safety. Let us have more money for Lincolnshire roads.

Trudy Harrison: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent case for road improvements in his South Holland and the Deepings constituency. I have some sympathy with that challenge. I, too, have no motorway in my Copeland constituency. It is about an hour and 20 minutes for me to get to junction 36 on the M6, so I know how important good connectivity is. I am sure the Roads Minister, Baroness Vere, and our officials, will have heard his calls.

Thirdly, we should recognise that the focus and attention of many stakeholders and the media has resulted in a significant investment in the existing smart motorway

[Trudy Harrison]

network, and we are now going even further to invest £390 million in additional emergency areas, which we have heard an awful lot about today. That will bring us an extra 150 emergency places to stop—safe refuges, as they have been referred to today—which I know are important in creating safe perceptions for drivers.

The Government accept that there is more work to be done to move to a position where all drivers feel confident on smart motorways. That is where we need to get to.

Grahame Morris: The Minister has quoted some statistics, but I would refer to the statistics that were quoted earlier in the debate regarding the number of accidents on smart motorways that have been caused by vehicles that have broken down. I cannot remember the precise figure, but I think it was 48. Could the Minister clarify her view on the retrofitting of stopped-vehicle technology? Is she committed to ensuring that this five-year period is going to be one in which the retrofitting of specialist technology cameras to detect broken-down vehicles will be accelerated?

Trudy Harrison: I absolutely can confirm that, and I will move on to that when I address Members' comments. The Government are bringing forward work to ensure that it is complete by September, which is six months ahead of the previous target.

We are taking forward all the recommendations made by the Transport Committee, including the recommendation to pause the roll-out of future all-lane-running schemes in order to gather further safety and economic data. We want to make sure that we have five years of that data across a wider network of open all-lane-running motorways. We want to complete and evaluate the roll-out of measures within the stocktake, which the Secretary of State commissioned, and the action plan with its 18 actions. It will enable evidence to be gathered to inform a robust assessment of options for future enhancements of capacity on the strategic road network as we prepare for the next road investment strategy. We will also take forward the recommendations to pause the conversion of dynamic hard-shoulder smart motorways to all-lane-running motorways until the next road investment strategy.

We will retrofit more emergency areas across existing all-lane-running schemes. We will conduct an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of stopped-vehicle detection technology. We will explore the introduction of the emergency corridor manoeuvre into the highway code, and we will investigate the benefits of health and safety assessments being undertaken by the Office of Rail and Road.

Chris Loder: I thank the Minister for the points she is making. Can I press her on the point about health and safety assessments by the Office of Rail and Road? It is very clear from a lot of the work that we as a Committee have seen that there is a fundamental and systemic problem with the prioritising of safety within National Highways. Does she agree that the need to have an assessment might not be quite as substantial as it should be? Will her Department look to consider a substantial regulatory role for road safety within the ORR going forward?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The Minister will want to respond to the intervention, but I remind her that she has four minutes left before Huw Merriman sums up the debate.

Trudy Harrison: Thank you, Chair. I am aware of that. To respond briefly to my hon. Friend's point, who has experience with the Office of Rail and Road, we will shortly be establishing an expert panel to help us review existing regulatory responsibilities. It will report back to Ministers later this year. I hope that is helpful.

Moving on to other Members' points, my good friend, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentioned how important it is to have places to stop in an emergency. As I have said, that £390 million, which is part of the £900 million, will be invested in ensuring that we have an extra 150 safe refuge areas at least every mile and, ideally, every three quarters of a mile. That is a huge improvement on what is available at the moment.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), I am delighted to hear that the M42 is working so well. I note his calls for better awareness. That is why the recommendation for the highway code to feature the emergency corridor manoeuvre is so important. I have just realised that I got the hon. Member for Easington mixed up with the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), who has the M42—apologies. I can confirm the continued working relationship between the Department for Transport and the Transport Committee, which has been an incredibly successful one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) has conducted an exceptionally passionate campaign for improvements on his section of the M1, with its 13 miles of all-lane running motorway between junctions 28 and 30. The Roads Minister in the other place will have heard those calls. I appreciate my hon. Friend's appreciation of the Transport Committee report and of the swift action taken by the Department.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings has great experience as a Transport Minister, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones). It is correct that hard shoulders are not safe places. Indeed, one in 12 fatalities on our motorways takes place on hard shoulders. It therefore does not make sense to stop the progress that is being made and to send people on to motorways where there are hard shoulders or, even worse, on to local roads—smart motorways are safest, in terms of fatalities.

To conclude, as we have heard today, the Secretary of State takes the concerns expressed seriously, as demonstrated by our response to the Committee's report and by the additional investment that we have committed to. I can say genuinely to right hon. and hon. Members that we are wasting no time in taking immediate steps to progress the actions set out in the Government response. I will keep the Commons and Parliament updated on progress. We will continue to be transparent with the data as it emerges, so that the public may assess for themselves the safety of motorways. I very much hope that they will have the confidence that they should have in our motorway network, especially smart motorways, thanks to the Transport Committee.

2.27 pm

Huw Merriman: Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Hollobone. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed.

I thank the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who represent the finest of our Committee membership. I am very fortunate as a Chair to have such brilliant members. We are not particularly diverse on gender, but we are on thought. We all work hard together to make recommendations. I am grateful to them.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher). I know junction 28 to 30 well—I was a candidate for two and a half years in North East Derbyshire. I would have been his neighbour had I been more successful there. He made good points about his fascinating local experience, and he has educated us all.

I heard fantastic speeches by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), who have experience in the Department—that was particularly fascinating. I thank them for their expertise—we will focus not just on recommendation 4, but on the lot, in delivering.

I thank the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for his words, and I thank the Minister of course. She is a popular presence, and we look forward to continuing to work with her.

With this pause, we clearly now have the opportunity to ensure that the safety record and evidence can be demonstrated properly on smart motorways. That must guide the Department and National Highways on what we do in future. Are they as safe as conventional motorways? Are they in fact even safer, which means that the case has been made for them to be rolled out further? We need to know that, and the time allows us to get that understanding and that crucial evidence base.

Equally during the pause, we have the opportunity to ensure that smart motorways can be retrofitted with the safety measures that the Committee has called for before. We know that those will now be delivered. We have to ensure that they are, and I know the Minister will take that seriously. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings is right: public perception is key. To get more people to use the motorway network, we must show them that it is safe. The RAC has shown that 84% of those polled were concerned about the removal of hard shoulders from the network and said that it compromised safety. That is crucial.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 13 January 2022

TREASURY

VAT: Penalty Reform

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer):

In the Finance Act 2021, the Government legislated to reform penalties for late submission and late payment of tax, initially from 1 April 2022, and to align interest charges for VAT with other major taxes.

Today, I am announcing that these changes for VAT businesses will now be introduced nine months later, on 1 January 2023.

HMRC is committed to becoming one of the most digitally advanced tax authorities in the world. The ambition and pace of change needs to be balanced with well-tested systems and good customer service, particularly when businesses are facing additional challenges and uncertainty.

This extra time allows HMRC to ensure that the IT changes necessary for the new penalties and interest charges can be introduced as effectively as possible, ensuring a high standard of service to customers.

[HCWS537]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Gibraltar: UK-EU Negotiations

The Minister for Europe (Chris Heaton-Harris): On 14 and 15 December 2021 the UK hosted a fourth round of negotiations with the European Union (EU) on Gibraltar, following previous rounds in December, November and October 2021.

Talks have been constructive and are making positive progress. Discussions have covered a range of issues within the political framework agreed between the UK Government, together with the Government of Gibraltar, and the Kingdom of Spain on 31 December 2020.

Ensuring the fluid movement of people between Gibraltar and the EU has been the key area of discussion. Other areas have included the movement of goods, law enforcement and criminal justice, transport, social security co-ordination, citizens' rights, and data protection.

Negotiations with the EU will continue in the coming weeks. The UK remains fully committed to seeking a treaty based on the careful and pragmatic balance achieved by the political framework. The UK has been clear we will not agree to anything which compromises UK sovereignty.

We are, of course, working closely with our Gibraltarian friends for a solution that works for the people of Gibraltar so they can go about their business. The UK Government and Government of Gibraltar agreed our joint approach to negotiations at the UK-Gibraltar Joint Ministerial Council on 29 March 2021. Since then, we have and will continue to work closely together as discussions with the EU progress.

The UK Government and Government of Gibraltar have also continued work to ensure robust plans are in place for all eventualities, including a no negotiated outcome. While the political framework provides the route to a treaty it is only prudent to prepare for all eventualities.

In parallel to the UK-EU negotiations the UK Government, with the Government of Gibraltar, are maintaining a regular dialogue with the Kingdom of Spain.

In December, the Foreign Secretary travelled to Madrid to meet the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares, to discuss strengthening the bilateral relationship between our two nations. The Ministers also welcomed the constructive nature of negotiations between the EU and the UK, reaffirmed their shared commitment to the political framework and agreed that it is in everyone's interest to conclude these talks in the first quarter of 2022. The UK looks forward to hosting the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs on a visit to London in the coming weeks.

[HCWS534]

Sanctions Regulations Report on Annual Reviews 2021

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

My noble Friend the Minister for South and Central Asia, United Nations and the Commonwealth (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon), has made the following written ministerial statement:

Today I am pleased to publish "The Sanctions Regulations Report on Annual Reviews 2021".

Section 30 of the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 requires the Minister to annually review each set of sanctions regulations to assess whether they are still appropriate for the purpose stated in them. The Minister must lay before Parliament a report containing conclusions of the review, the reasons for those conclusions, and a statement of any action that that Minister has taken or proposes to take. "The Sanctions Regulations Report on Annual Reviews 2021" meets the requirement of section 30.

Since the end of the transition period, the UK has been pursuing an independent sanctions policy, driven by our foreign policy objectives and projecting the UK as a network of liberty and defender of human rights. As set out in the integrated review, the UK uses our sanctions regimes as part of an integrated approach to promote our values and interests, and to combat state threats, terrorism, cyber-attacks, and the use and proliferation of chemical weapons.

[HCWS535]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

UK-India Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): Today I am formally launching free trade negotiations between the UK and India from New Delhi, where I am meeting my Indian counterpart, the hon. Minister for Commerce and Industry, Piyush Goyal.

In line with our commitments to scrutiny and transparency, the Department for International Trade has published, and placed in the Libraries of the House, more information on these negotiations. This includes;

The UK's strategic case for a UK-India free trade agreement (FTA)

Our objectives for the negotiations

A summary of the UK's public consultation on trade with India

A scoping assessment, providing a preliminary economic assessment of the impact of the agreement

A UK-India FTA would be a substantial opportunity for both of our economies and a significant moment in the UK-India bilateral relationship.

Trade negotiations are a priority for both countries and build upon the enhanced trade partnership launched by Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2021.

The UK-India bilateral trading relationship is already significant, amounting to over £23 billion in 2019, and both sides have agreed to double bilateral trade by 2030. The UK and India will seek to agree a mutually beneficial agreement supporting jobs, businesses and communities in both countries.

By 2050, India will be the third largest economy in the world. The size and growth of the Indian economy mean a deal would unlock opportunities in every nation and region of the UK and across all parts of our economy. Tens of thousands of UK jobs are already supported by trade with India, and a trade deal has the potential to almost double UK exports to India, boost our total trade by as much as £28 billion a year by 2035, and boost wages across the UK by as much as £3 billion.

The opportunity is illustrated further by looking at some specific sectors. UK exports such as Scotch whisky and cars currently face large duties of 150% and 125% respectively. A deal that removed these significant barriers to trade would make UK firms such as car makers in England's north-east and whisky distilleries more competitive.

Services account for almost half of current exports to India and our analysis shows UK companies—from insurance providers, to construction firms, to financial services—are set to gain from a deal as India's economy continues to grow. This could include opportunities for companies that trade digitally, as the Indian Government aim to have a trillion-dollar online economy by 2025 and increase internet access to more than 600 million people.

In addition, India's plan to rapidly expand offshore wind power generation is a major opportunity for the UK's world-leading renewable industry that could see UK wind turbines making a major contribution to helping the world reach net zero. UK exporters would benefit from a reduction of tariffs such as a 15% tax on certain wind turbine parts.

A deal with India would be a big step forward in the UK's strategy to refocus UK trade on the Indo-Pacific, where half the world's people live and 50% of global economic growth is produced. A new economic partnership with India, alongside UK membership of the Asia-Pacific trading bloc, the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership (CPTPP), would create a pillar in the region supporting free and fair trade.

During negotiations, and on the path to a comprehensive agreement, both Governments will consider the option of an interim agreement that generates early benefits for both countries. In parallel to trade negotiations, the UK-India Joint Economic and Trade Committee will continue to work in improving the UK-India trading relationship and addressing market access barriers outside of a trade agreement.

The first round of FTA negotiations will begin on 17 January. As negotiations progress, I will ensure that parliamentarians, UK citizens and businesses are provided with regular updates.

[HCWS533]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Review of Intergovernmental Relations

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations (Michael Gove): Today the UK Government have published an update on how the UK Government and the devolved Administrations intend to conduct formal intergovernmental relations with each other. All four Governments have agreed to work under these new arrangements. I will be depositing the Review of Intergovernmental Relations in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Review of Intergovernmental Relations, developed jointly by all four Governments, provides an up-to-date and fit-for-purpose system, introducing new structures for more regular, formal intergovernmental engagement and new processes to increase impartiality and to avoid, resolve and, where necessary, escalate disputes. It is a commitment to a co-operative spirit and to constructive collaboration with the devolved Administrations, through more transparent and accountable arrangements, and will be to the benefit of citizens in every part of the UK.

[HCWS536]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 13 January 2022

EDUCATION

Skills and Post-16 Education Bill

The following is an extract from the debate on amendment 32 during the third sitting of the Skills and Post-16 Education Public Bill Committee on 2 December 2021.

Alex Burghart: It has been this Government, during the pandemic, who have paid employers **and providers** £1,000 when they take on apprenticeships for young people aged 16 to 18.

[Official Report, Skills and Post-16 Education, Public Bill Committee, 2 December 2021, Vol. 704, c. 92.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart).

An error has been identified in my speech.

The correct information should have been:

Alex Burghart: It has been this Government, during the pandemic, who have paid employers **up to £3,000** when they take on **an apprentice**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 13 January 2022

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