

**Thursday
27 January 2022**

**Volume 707
No. 109**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Thursday 27 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

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Flash Flooding: London

1. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle the risk of flash flooding in London.
[905285]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I pay tribute to all those who responded to the flash flooding incidents in London last summer, which took everybody so by surprise. I know that her constituency was particularly affected. We have doubled our flood defence programme to £5.2 billion, with 34% of planned projects aimed at surface water management. That includes £13 million this year for 32 schemes across London, which will better protect 2,300 properties.

Felicity Buchan: In July my constituency experienced devastating flooding, with more than 2,000 homes affected. Many residents are still in temporary accommodation, and many have lost all of their belongings, especially those in basement flats. In 2007 we experienced similar flooding. At that time, a plan was put in place to put in an emergency relief sewer. That never happened; it was not actioned. What can my hon. Friend and the Department do to hold water companies to account and ensure that Ofwat is tough in regulating them?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and my sympathy goes out to those who suffered and indeed are still suffering. We expect water companies to carry out their duties and deliver on their commitments, and we fully support the regulators in holding them to account. In the 2019 price review, Ofwat confirmed that Thames Water had incurred a penalty of £148 million for cancelling the Counter's Creek project, which I believe is the one she refers to. As Members will know, the Government are now taking strong action on the water companies, through our statement to Ofwat. I have met my hon. Friend before, but I would be particularly happy to discuss this project with her.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: This is a very closed question—I am sure Barnsley must be linked somehow.

Dan Jarvis: As you and the House will know, Mr Speaker, flooding is of course a challenge right around the country. I am grateful for the Minister's support today, and as she knows, tomorrow we are launching Connected by Water, which is a pioneering regional flooding strategy for South Yorkshire. It is the first of its kind and will protect thousands of businesses and homes, but as the Minister also knows, there is a bit more to do. Will she commit to working with us to secure the additional £76 million that we need to deliver it?

Mr Speaker: I think that is the worst connected question I've ever heard in this House. Perhaps the Minister wants to be generous and say very briefly how it could possibly be connected.

Rebecca Pow: "Cheeky" is the word I would use, Mr Speaker. I am doing a speech for that event tomorrow. I am pleased it is being held, and it is important that everyone works together. I understand the issues the hon. Gentleman is facing, and always, as he knows, my door is open. I think he will agree that we have done a great deal for his area to help sort the flooding out, and more work will continue.

Fly-tipping

2. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping.
[905286]

3. **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping.
[905287]

9. **Paul Howell** (Sedgefield) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle fly-tipping.
[905296]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): Criminals should have no place to hide when they mindlessly dump waste. Fly-tipping blights lives and neighbourhoods, and wrecks our environment. We are consulting on legislative reforms to the way waste handlers are regulated, and introducing digital waste tracking.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for her answer. In the London Borough of Harrow, dealing with fly-tipping on the public highway costs council tax payers £1.5 million each year just to clear it up. The worst aspect is fly-tipping on privately owned land. What further measures can my hon. Friend take to highlight those people, catch them, put them through the courts, and get justice for people with privately owned land?

Jo Churchill: We know that fly-tipping incidents have increased. We had 1.13 million of them last year. We are taking that robust action, which we have been enabled to do through the Environment Act, and our recent consultations clearly set out how we will ensure that offenders face the full force of the law. Last year, we launched a grant scheme to provide £350,000 in funding for councils to tackle fly-tipping, but I commend Harrow Council for having made a large investment—£300,000—in its enforcement team. It is taking an area-based approach, it is delivering more fines, and it is using the full fixed penalty of £400. However, I urge my hon. Friend to urge his council to bring more prosecutions forward, as they did not do so last year.

Andrew Selous: Will the Government ensure that the section 33 offence attracts a fixed penalty of at least £2,000, much more than the price of a skip? At the moment, it is a rational economic decision for people to fly-tip, albeit a horrendously antisocial one. The fixed penalty for the section 34 offence should also rise to £1,000, so that we can kill off the illegal waste industry that is turning parts of our beautiful country into a litter tip.

Jo Churchill: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend: fly-tipping blights our countryside and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), blights our towns. As I have said, we are taking robust action. We need to ensure that those fixed penalty notices are high enough to act as a deterrent, that more serious offences can be prosecuted, and that courts can hand down fines in excess of the fixed penalty notice should the offence be sufficiently serious. We are producing a new guide on how to present robust prosecutions, which should support tougher sentences, and digital waste tracking—the reform to waste carriers, brokers and dealers—will allow householders to know where their waste is going and that their contractor is legitimate and transparent. We must do more about this offence, which blights all our constituencies.

Paul Howell: Since I was elected, constituents have written to me continuously about fly-tipping, both in our towns and particularly on farmers' land. One of the reasons for the increase has been the ease with which the public can obtain waste removal licences: the checks and balances just do not appear to be sufficient. Will the Minister explain what the Government plan to do to increase the detail in which those checks are undertaken by the local authorities, to stop people providing a cowboy waste service that undercuts legitimate businesses, and stop them from abandoning that waste on the streets and farms of places such as Sadberge, Trimdon, Wheatley Hill and Wingate?

Jo Churchill: I agree with my hon. Friend: it is not fair that legitimate businesses are undercut by individuals who do not treat waste properly, and who take no care in anything they are doing. The waste carrier registration scheme needs reform urgently: that is why we are acting, and it is why we published our consultation. The measures that we announced will increase the competence and background checks that are needed to operate in the sector, and make it easier for regulators to take enforcement action to make sure we hound the criminals out of this industry and support our legitimate businesses, so that they play by the rules and treat that waste properly. We will make it easier for householders and businesses to act on a level playing field.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Everything that the Minister has just said is music to my ears, because illegal fly-tipping blights all of our communities and shames our country. It destroys our sense of place and our neighbourhoods. As the Minister will know, large-scale fly-tipping more than doubled in England between 2012 and 2019, with councils spending almost £13 million last year cleaning up somebody else's mess. Of course, part of the problem with enforcement is that the resources available to the Environment Agency and to local government have been cut. What more can she

say about ensuring that those enforcement agencies have the tools and the finances they need to get the job done?

Jo Churchill: We have supported the Environment Agency with additional funding of some £60 million in 2019—I think it was—and by making sure that they have the right regulatory framework in which to go forward. We are also supporting our councils, not only by equipping them with better processes and guidance in order to bring these criminals to account, but by making sure that the system is joined up so we know where the waste has been taken from, where it is going, and that it has arrived. We intend to beat this blight.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Fly-tipping is a blight across the UK, both in rural and in urban areas. What recent assessment has the Minister made of the need for fly-tipping to be treated as organised crime, so that investigations are properly resourced?

Jo Churchill: I do not think I can say any more than that it was described as similar to the narcotics industry. We need to treat fly-tipping with that much seriousness: we need to crack down and make sure that the people who are earning illegally and blighting others' lives are hounded out of this industry.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I first thank the Minister for her enthusiasm in the matter? She clearly means what she says and I thank her for that. The most recent statistics from back home show that in the past two years the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs cleaned up 306 illegal waste sites, costing half a million pounds or the equivalent of 15 nurses' pay. What discussions has the Minister had with her counterpart in the Northern Ireland Executive to discuss how we can combat these issues together and take the pressure off local councils?

Jo Churchill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I meet Ministers from the devolved Administrations regularly. I have not had specific conversations on the matter, but I would be happy to because fly-tipping knows no boundaries. We need to sort it out together.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I would like to begin by acknowledging that today is Holocaust Memorial Day. May we never see such hatred and wickedness again.

The Minister will know that many fly-tips consist mainly of household waste. Wales has seen its household recycling rates catapult from just 4.8% in 1999 to more than 65% in 2021. That is the difference a Labour Government makes. Will the Minister join me in acknowledging the success of the Welsh Labour Government and tell the House what lessons she is learning from them?

Jo Churchill: I associate myself with the hon. Lady's comments about the holocaust.

Consistent collections, ensuring we can collect the seven strands of waste, will allow all households in this country to make sure they are recycling. Coupled with

the deposit return scheme and other measures in the Environment Act 2021, they will ensure that everybody in England can recycle easily and consistently.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Minister mentions the deposit return scheme, because including cartons in the scheme is one extra step the Government could take to tackle fly-tipping. Please will she meet Tetra Pak, based in my constituency, to discuss the feasibility of the onward processing of cartons, which I believe would make that inclusion a practical possibility?

Jo Churchill: As my hon. Friend knows, we will announce more information on the deposit return scheme shortly. I would, of course, be happy to meet his constituent for further discussions. I do not think we should rule anything out, but nor am I making any promises.

Household Budgets: Food Prices

4. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the impact of food price rises on household budgets. [905288]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Food prices are influenced by a number of factors, including exchange rates and energy prices, both of which have risen since the coronavirus shock. Last year, we published the “United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021” which included a comprehensive analysis of household level food security. It showed that over the last decade spending among the poorest 20% of households has remained relatively stable at 16%.

Dr Huq: Shamefully, this country now has more food banks than branches of McDonald’s. As Jack Monroe, the bootstrap cook, highlighted, inflation at a 30-year high has put many staples out of reach of household food larders, yet at the same time supermarkets have thrown away the equivalent of 190 million meals worth of food. Will the Secretary of State sit down with the big top 10 and charities such as City Harvest in Acton, the Felix Project and the newly launched Ealing Food Cupboard, and work out a way to link the two in a circular economy fashion to eliminate both landfill waste and food insecurity?

George Eustice: The hon. Lady raises an important point that we can reduce food waste. A number of supermarkets are already engaged in programmes to support local food banks. The Government support the FareShare charity, which also helps to redistribute food and tries to prevent food waste in the way she sets out.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to that question, many large retailers are keeping their budget lines at a higher price than they need to while not raising the price of higher-priced food, so I think there is an argument that they could do more to lower the price of food. Further to the Secretary of State’s comments on FareShare, can he see the £5 million that I think it is due to being used to get food directly from farms, processors and retailers straight out to the people who need it?

George Eustice: I am aware that my hon. Friend has asked previously whether FareShare could also be engaged in making sure that food from farms does not go to waste, and I have said that I am willing to discuss that with it. On his point about prices, we have a highly competitive retail sector and, generally speaking, it has absorbed some of the price pressures to date.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme

5. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of winding down the seasonal agricultural workers scheme on the food and drink sector. [905289]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We are not winding down the seasonal agricultural workers scheme; in fact, we have now extended it until 2024 and it supports both edible and ornamental horticulture. There are 30,000 visas already available, with the potential to increase that to 40,000 if there is demand.

Dr Whitford: Instead of the 70,000 seasonal agricultural workers needed across the UK, the Government are limiting visas to 30,000, which is less than half of what is required. The National Farmers Union of Scotland has warned that, just like last year, we will again see millions of pounds-worth of crops lying rotting in the fields. Will the Secretary of State explain why the UK Government are not providing enough of the visas required? If they cannot manage an immigration scheme without harming one of Scotland’s key sectors, perhaps the Scottish Government should manage our borders.

George Eustice: As the hon. Lady may know, I worked in the soft fruit industry before coming into politics, so I am very familiar with the soft fruit industry in Scotland. It is one of the reasons why the Government have put in place the seasonal workers scheme, and we have had such a scheme since the second world war. Last year, we had a scheme with 30,000 visas, but only just over 25,000 were required. Many settled EU citizens will also continue to return to do seasonal work and we judge that 30,000 is probably the right number.

Bees: Thiamethoxam

6. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of his authorisation of the use of the pesticide thiamethoxam in certain circumstances on the bee population. [905290]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The emergency authorisation of thiamethoxam has been granted for sugar beet, which is a non-flowering crop so there is no direct risk to bees. However, due to the risk that thiamethoxam can stay in the soil for a period, we impose strict conditions on authorisation, including a requirement not to sow other flowering crops such as oilseed rape in the same field for at least 32 months.

Mr Hollobone: Residents in the Kettering constituency want to see a larger and healthier bee population, but they do not want the England sugar beet crop destroyed by aphids. Will the Secretary of State outline the economic

impact on sugar beet production if that pesticide is not used and what examination he has undertaken of alternative means of controlling aphids?

George Eustice: As part of our assessment of emergency authorisations, we consider the economic impact, and it is considerable. The sugar beet industry is an important crop for this country. As hon. Members will be aware, 12 other EU countries have also granted an emergency authorisation for sugar beet, so it is a common approach across Europe, but we have taken many steps to ensure that there is no risk to pollinators.

Nature Recovery Networks

7. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he plans to take to help increase farmer and other land manager engagement with nature recovery networks. [905292]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): England's nature recovery network is backed by the national delivery partnership, which includes partners such as the Country Land and Business Association. Earlier this month, I set out further details of our new farming schemes, including local nature recovery, which will incentivise farmers to make space for nature on their land and contribute to the network.

Mr Sheerman: I do not want to upset the Secretary of State, but I really like this policy and approve of it wholeheartedly. The fact of the matter is that most of our constituents are not Greta Thunberg or Bill Gates, but they want to roll up their sleeves and do something in their local community. That is why I like the schemes. I am involved in one in John Clare country, in the poet's neighbourhood, and one in Huddersfield. I speak to farmers, charities and people who really want to do that, but there is a blockage relating to how people get the money and a bit of resource to do it and how they open that up. Farmers, in particular, think it is a magical mystery tour. They want to do it but they cannot get on the journey.

George Eustice: It is great that we have cross-party consensus on the importance of nature. We also have the local nature recovery strategies that local authorities are putting together, making space for nature within local communities and new local nature reserves. In terms of schemes for farmers, we have already announced full details of the sustainable farming incentive and there will be many more details to come on things like landscape recovery for them to engage with.

UK-EU Catch Limits

8. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure a greater share of the UK-EU catch limits for the UK fleet in 2023. [905293]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): We have seen uplifts in quota share across the UK, with an increase of approximately 15% already. It will continue to increase year on year until 2026. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that there have been some particularly significant uplifts for the pelagic sector.

David Duguid: I look forward to continuing to work with the Minister to deliver the best future for Scottish fishermen as we move forward outside the common fisheries policy. Could she provide an estimate of how much the Scottish fishing industry has benefited in 2021 from being outside the CFP and particularly from negotiating as an independent coastal state for the first time?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend, a great champion for the industry, will know that Scotland has so far been allocated 36,000 of the 60,000 tonnes of additional UK quota. The Scottish industry is also benefiting from additional white fish quota and from the ability to undertake quota swaps.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): More data may help in the negotiations, but data is no justification for the much-loathed catch app that the Government are imposing, which requires fishermen to guess the weight of their fish before they land them. When I was with Essex fishers in the estuary earlier in the week, they told me just how difficult that is.

I am not going to slap a dead fish on the Dispatch Box, Mr Speaker, because that would not meet with your approval, but I do have a copy of Tuesday's *Hansard*, so I wonder whether the Minister can guess its weight. If she is not within 10%, will that make her a criminal? That is what the new rules will do to England's fishers from the end of next month.

Victoria Prentis: The hon. Gentleman knows that as a cook I am quite keen on guessing the weight of things, but I confess myself totally unable to guess the weight of *Hansard* without touching it.

In answer to the hon. Gentleman's serious question, we will continue to work with the fishing industry on the best way to make sure we have the data that we need—as I think he would agree—to assess the future sustainability of stocks.

Food Labelling

10. **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): What plans his Department has to improve the quality of food labelling. [905297]

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): Now that we have left the EU, we can review food labelling to make sure that consumers have the information that they need to make healthy and sustainable choices. We have already launched a consultation on animal welfare labelling, and we will consider the wider aspects of labelling in the coming months.

Huw Merriman: We know that our consumers want to buy British and buy Northern Irish to support higher animal welfare standards and our farming community, but sometimes they find food labelling confusing and misleading as to country of origin. What action have the Government taken to clarify the confusion? What steps will the Minister take, particularly with regard to making the technology even better in future?

Victoria Prentis: Country-of-origin labelling must not mislead. If the main ingredient has a different origin—for example if a British pie has French meat inside—the label must say so. I have spoken to my hon. Friend about possible technological solutions to labelling issues, such as using QR codes, which can give consumers much more information about a product. We will continue to work on those solutions.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The Scottish Government—rather sensibly, I think—are awaiting the outcome of the EU review of genome-edited and genetically modified organism products, but the UK Government are pushing rapidly to introduce the production of genetically engineered crops and foodstuffs in England. Through the back-door route in the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, they will enter the rest of the UK even if devolved Governments continue to prohibit them. Will any GE or GMO foods introduced in England be labelled as such so that consumers throughout the UK can make informed decisions about the food that they put in their mouth?

Victoria Prentis: As I said, we are undertaking a comprehensive review of labelling; one issue that will be considered is whether a product is produced by GE, which probably will not happen for several years. The hon. Lady will know, although she opposes it, that we have made steps towards bringing in some GE pilots, which I think are going well. I look forward to working with hon. Members across the House on how to label such substances in future.

Coastal Communities

12. **Damien Moore** (Southport) (Con): What steps he is taking to support coastal communities. [905299]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Coastal communities are key to our levelling-up agenda. A positive picture is emerging for our fishing industry, with a quota uplift of £146 million by 2026. In addition, our £100 million UK seafood fund will invest in coastal communities across the UK.

Damien Moore: Research has shown that, with rising sea levels, Southport could resemble an island by 2050 if no further action is taken. Will my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State commit to visiting Southport to explore what further steps we could take to protect my constituents' homes from rising water levels and the increased risk of flooding?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, the Government have increased spending on flooding to £5.2 billion so that we can better protect 336,000 properties across England. I would, of course, be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and visit his constituency to discuss the particular challenges that Southport faces.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The fishing industry in Shetland is being hammered by Spanish boats engaging in the completely unsustainable practice of gill netting. I have spoken to the fishing

Minister about this in the past. What is being done to stop it or to ensure that, if it is to be done, it is to be done safely?

George Eustice: We keep different gear types and fishing practices under constant review. Concerns are sometimes raised about gill netting; that can be a sustainable form of fishing in some inshore waters, but not in all cases. I would be willing to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss his particular concern, although in some areas it will be for Marine Scotland to make the technical decisions.

Topical Questions

T1. [905303] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Earlier this month, I set out further details of our future agriculture policy. Local nature recovery will support farmers who want to make space for nature on their holdings, and landscape recovery will support land use change. However, ensuring that tenant farmers can access our future policy is going to be very important, so today I can announce that my noble Friend Baroness Rock will be chairing a new working group to investigate how we can ensure that tenant farmers access our schemes.

Peter Aldous: The consultation on the joint fisheries statement is welcome, and REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries—will be making a representation. However, there is a concern among East Anglian inshore fishermen as to the bureaucratic burden being imposed with regard to vessel testing stability, inshore vessel monitoring and the under-10-metre catch app. Accurate data is important, but I urge my right hon. Friend to ensure that obligations imposed on SMEs and self-employed individuals are proportionate, realistic and underpinned by common sense.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend has been a long-standing champion for fishermen in his area and the inshore sector in particular. We have introduced the under-10-metre catch app to ensure that we have more accurate data, but I should point out to him that in this current year we have also increased the amount of quota in the inshore pool by around 70%, with the additional quota that we had as a result of leaving the European Union.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This week, I convened a roundtable discussion with leading members of our food and drinks sector. To the surprise of many, I am sure, the Prime Minister's having his cake and eating it and stuffing suitcases full of booze were unfortunately not quite enough to sustain the industry through these difficult times.

What is clear is that the sector is struggling: the impact of inflation, the CO₂ crisis, the rocketing of feed, fuel and energy bills, and labour shortages are all increasing costs, reducing profit and ultimately pushing prices up for consumers. Those same businesses will be listening closely today. On behalf of those people, may I ask the Secretary of State what the plan is to control inflation, tackle fuel and energy costs, address labour shortages, solve the CO₂ crisis, and finally back British business?

George Eustice: I, too, regularly meet food industry representatives—indeed, yesterday I met the retailers, and I meet manufacturers as well. The food industry is Britain's largest manufacturer: bigger than aerospace and automotive combined. It employs millions of people and brings prosperity to every part of our United Kingdom. There are some cost pressures at the moment, caused by gas prices, which my ministerial colleagues elsewhere are looking at, but we continue to work closely with the industry to manage its challenges.

Jim McMahon: Essentially there is no plan, and the lack of a plan is a theme running through the Government.

Let us move on to sewage discharge. Yesterday, when asked what could be done to reduce sewage discharges in the River Wye, the Prime Minister suggested putting on his trunks and going for a swim. While it might be normal for him, most of us do not like being up to our necks in raw sewage. Yet investment is down, water companies are £50 billion in debt, private investment has not followed, and the only things that are up are sewage discharges and shareholder profits. That is hardly surprising when over the past decade the Environment Agency has had its grant cut from £120 million to £40 million, reducing its ability to investigate and enforce. What is the Secretary of State going to do to give everybody the right to clean water? And please, don't say you'll join the Prime Minister.

George Eustice: If the hon. Gentleman had followed some of the debate on the Environment Act 2021, he would know that this House has put in place legal obligations to reduce storm overflows in particular. That follows up on the Government's decision last summer to put that in their policy statement to Ofwat. We have also doubled spending on catchment sensitive farming and have increased the number of Environment Agency inspectors by 50.

Mr Speaker: We have only five minutes left. We really have to think about Back Benchers.

T2. [905304] **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): Two thirds of my constituency of Aylesbury is rural. Farmers there have told me that they really welcome the Government's new policies, which recognise the importance of benefiting the environment as well as of producing food, so can my right hon. Friend update me on the roll-out of future farming schemes in Buckinghamshire?

George Eustice: We have already planned this year to open the sustainable farming incentive. It will be open to all farmers and universally available. We have also increased the payment rates for countryside stewardship. Half of farmers are already in that, and we are encouraging the other half to join, too.

T5. [905307] **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows from the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that there are some 6.6 million people in food insecurity, with insufficient daily food of a nutritious standard. He also knows that food prices, energy prices and national insurance are going up, and universal credit is going down. Does he agree, therefore, that that figure will reach 10 million unless something is done,

and will he meet me and the co-operative movement to discuss a plan, including to put the right to food into law?

George Eustice: Our food security review, which was published before Christmas, showed that we have the lowest spending on food as a percentage of household income anywhere in Europe. Overall, food prices in this country are stable and spending on food is low. However, there are challenges for certain individuals. That is why we have things like the holiday funding.

T3. [905305] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that there will be financial support to help upgrade fishing vessels and ready them for five and a half years' time, when the TCA agreement with the EU ends, in particular our inshore commercial fleet, such as those operating from the port of Looe in my constituency?

George Eustice: Yes, we have a new £100 million fund to support a range of activities, including port infrastructure as well as upgrades to vessels.

T7. [905310] **Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): When I met Southern Water to discuss sewage discharges, it said, "Oh, it isn't our fault because we're not in charge of runoffs and there's a mixture of companies that do sewage treatment." Is it not time to follow the model in Wales and have one water board that is publicly controlled by the consumers, so that there is no more finger pointing in other directions?

George Eustice: The Environment Agency brought a prosecution against Southern Water in respect of its failures, and it received, as the hon. Gentleman will know, a record fine of £90 million.

T4. [905306] **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): Illegal waste sites have been a problem across North Staffordshire, and the number of organisations and agencies involved in regulating waste is allowing unscrupulous actors to go unchecked, so will Ministers look at better regulating waste?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): Yes, I will. As my hon. Friend knows, I have been up to his part of the world and have looked at some of the challenges there. We need to do more, we will do more, and we will keep monitoring until we get it right.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Government's recent decision to authorise a neonic, bee-destroying pesticide runs contrary to the advice of both the Health and Safety Executive and the Government's expert committee on pesticides. How on earth is this decision compatible with the Government's legal requirement to halt species loss by 2030, and will the Secretary of State look again at this particular decision?

George Eustice: I addressed this issue earlier. The chief scientist gave some analysis, along with others. We took a decision firmly based on the science. Twelve other EU countries have done so, too.

T6. [905309] **Suzanne Webb** (Stourbridge) (Con): Corbett meadow is a historic piece of land in my constituency and in the draft local plan it has been afforded the same protections as green-belt land. Does my hon. Friend agree that the recommendations should be carried forward into the final plan, not just because the land is our green lungs but for mental health and wellbeing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I cannot comment on matters in that specific plan, but I congratulate my hon. Friend on that work, as our wildflower meadows are so precious. There are only 3% left, and we need to get them protected and communities looking after them as much as possible.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Government promised a White Paper in response to the national food strategy within six months of its publication. That time runs out at the end of this month, so when are we going to see it? Please do not say “shortly” or “soon”.

George Eustice: We are working on it and it will be published in due course.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): In this “tree-bilee” year, the Environment Minister knows about Gloucester’s huge new project, Hempsted woods, where I hope every child will have the chance to plant a tree. She herself kindly planted an apple tree there last year. Does she agree that it would be very helpful if the Department could publish a crib sheet about how everybody in the country can access new trees to plant this year, as soon as possible?

Rebecca Pow: It was a pleasure to plant that tree; I hope it is doing well. I congratulate my hon. Friend on his tremendous work with the whole team in Gloucester to plant that huge wood. It will make such a difference to our tree target. It is a great idea of his to send out a list of all the myriad grants that are available for tree planting.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Churches and Cathedrals: Sustainability

1. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the steps needed to put the maintenance of churches and cathedrals on a sustainable basis. [905258]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church estimates that over the next five years at least £1.14 billion of maintenance and repairs are needed for churches and cathedrals. The Church is very grateful that 550 churches and cathedrals have already benefited from the culture recovery fund, but there remains an urgent need for predictable and sustainable sources of funding, which enable us to keep skilled builders and craft people in work.

Jerome Mayhew: Last week, the listed places of worship grant scheme was extended until 2025, which I welcome. It is absolutely crucial for churches such as All Saints in Beighton, in my constituency, and the repair work on its

thatched roof. Almost half the grade I listed buildings in this country are church buildings. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that that scheme should be now made permanent?

Andrew Selous: I am delighted that the thatched roof of All Saints, Beighton, has been fixed and that the listed places of worship grant scheme, which covers the VAT cost, was helpful in achieving that. The Government have extended that scheme for the next three years, but in order for churches and cathedrals to continue contributing some £50 billion a year to national wellbeing, my hon. Friend is right that we will need to put these repairs on a sustainable footing. That is why I will be copying this exchange to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Tackling Racial Inequalities

2. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle racial inequalities. [905259]

Andrew Selous: The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have established the racial justice commission, chaired by my good friend Lord Boateng, in order to help the Church of England become more like the nation it serves. The commission is making good progress and will report in 2023. It updates the archbishops every six months on progress.

Marsha De Cordova: Last April, the Church’s anti-racism taskforce published its final report that included a series of recommendations, including around participation and representation. However, I am concerned by a report by the Archbishops’ Council on racial justice, published this week, that rejects the recommendation to fund racial justice officers in each diocese and says the recommendations about shortlisting candidates from a black or ethnic minority background are unlikely to be met. That is worrying and unacceptable, as without proper commitment and investment to increase representation, there will be more decades of inaction. Does the Commissioner agree with me that there is role to play to ensure that there are adequate resources to assist the Church in achieving greater representation?

Andrew Selous: I agree with the hon. Lady that the Church has not done well enough in this area in the past, but I am sure that she will be pleased to learn that, on Tuesday this week, two UK minority ethnic bishops were consecrated at St Paul’s Cathedral. There are plans for more UK minority ethnic clergy to take part in House of Bishops meetings. I am sure that, like me, she will also be encouraged by the work of the Peter Stream in several dioceses, which has had great results in broadening both the ethnic and social diversity of those seeking ordination.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

3. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote freedom of religion or belief. [905260]

Andrew Selous: It gives me very great pleasure, on behalf of the whole of the Church of England, to thank my hon. Friend for her hard work as the Prime Minister’s

special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, and also to congratulate our mutual friend, David Burrowes, on his appointment as her deputy. The Church looks forward to working with her over the coming months to deliver a successful international ministerial meeting in London in July, which will make a real difference to those who suffer because of their faith or belief.

Fiona Bruce: I thank my hon. Friend for those words and welcome the international opportunities to champion freedom of religion or belief at the ministerial conference in London in July, which I am very proud that the UK is hosting, and at the Lambeth conference. Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the motion of the diocese of Lichfield at the forthcoming General Synod that the Church of England not only prays for the persecuted Church, but that its dioceses offer support to link dioceses in parts of the world where the Church is facing persecution, and that the next Lambeth conference addresses the issues of the persecution of Christians?

Andrew Selous: I am only sorry that, unusually, our hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) is not in his place to hear my hon. Friend's praise for his diocese. She is absolutely right that the Church of England's diocesan links around the globe or Anglican Communion enable that practical help to flow to those who are suffering because of their faith while also developing a greater awareness of this horrendous persecution. I also hope that she will engage directly with the bishops from areas of persecution at the Lambeth conference later this year.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Many of my constituents have written to me to express their concern about the persecution of Christians across the world. In particular, Newcastle boasts a large number of Nigerian diaspora Christians who are concerned following the launch of the Open Doors' World Watch List. What can local churches do to support the promotion of freedom of religion across the world with the Church of England?

Andrew Selous: I am particularly grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning Nigeria, because the situation there, in many cases, is extremely challenging for Christians. One practical thing that she could do is to get the Open Doors' World Watch List—the map—and send it to all the churches in her constituency, so that they can put it in their porch to make sure that everyone is aware of the situation. That will help them hold her to account, and we all need to hold the Government and those other countries to account to make sure that freedom of religion and belief holds.

Parenting and Marriage

4. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to support parenting and marriage. [905261]

11. **Crispin Blunt** (Reigate) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Church of England is taking to support family relationships, parenting and marriage. [905269]

Andrew Selous: The Church is deeply committed to marriage and will always be there to support every family and household. It is for that reason that both archbishops have launched a commission on families and households to look at what more the Church can do to provide the very best marriage preparation and enrichment and to strengthen family relationships.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What are the very best examples of preparation and enrichment and classes for parents, and what is the Church doing to spread it about?

Andrew Selous: My right hon. Friend asks a typically astute question, and, like any national institution, the Church has examples of outstanding practice, which are not as widely shared as they should be. Although there is excellent work in every diocese, I have been particularly impressed by the pre-marriage course, which is also for couples who are not engaged and want to explore marriage, and the marriage course run by the Reverend Nicky Lee and his wife, Sila. These have been run in 127 countries for more than 1.5 million couples and get tremendous feedback.

Crispin Blunt: I hope that my hon. Friend can give me a one-word answer to my question. Will he confirm what I understand was said by the Archbishop of Canterbury, which is that the Church of England has no objection in principle to suitably qualified humanist celebrants conducting marriages for those couples who so wish to make their vows to each other in that way?

Andrew Selous: I think I can make my hon. Friend at least partially happy by telling him that the Church of England has no principled objection to humanist marriage. However, I know he will be aware that any move from a premises-based system of marriage registration to a celebrant-based one in England and Wales would not be a minor reform and would affect everyone involved in registering marriages. I recognise that Humanists UK have made alternative suggestions recently; while I can understand his frustration about progress, he will know that it is for the Government, not the Church, to make the ultimate judgment on whether and how the current system should be changed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): As a former parliamentary churchwarden at St Margaret's and a lay canon at Wakefield, I remind the hon. Gentleman that there is a vibrant and lively Christians in Parliament group where some of the specific issues he has mentioned this morning could be better discussed. Could he get more involved in that and help us to get more hon. Members involved?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am a former chair of Christians in Parliament, which is ably run by our colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Sir Gary Streeter), and I participate in its meetings. I am glad the hon. Gentleman has given it wider publicity in these questions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response. I am a great believer in marriage, as you are, Mr Speaker. I have 34 years of married life—my wife has stuck me for 34 years, so well

done to her. I know the hon. Gentleman is equally committed to helping people stay married and stay in happy relationships. What is the Church doing to ensure that, where there are breakdowns and grievances, it can step in to help to resolve those issues and make the marriage last?

Andrew Selous: I thank the hon. Gentleman; sadly, some marriages cannot be saved, but he is right that many marriages, with the appropriate help and support, can be saved. All marriages go through difficult times, and he is right to say that that is an important role for the Church of England.

Christians: Middle East

6. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the level of threats to Christians in the Middle East. [905263]

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know takes issues of religious persecution very seriously indeed. We know from Open Doors and others of the extreme persecution suffered by Christians in, for example, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Qatar and Egypt.

Caroline Ansell: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer. As the newly elected chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Christianity in the Holy Land, I am grateful for the attention of Members of this House, the media and faith leaders across the world on the challenges that Christians face in the Holy Land and in the middle east more widely, as he expressed. I welcome the public assurances from President Herzog and Interior Minister Shaked that Israel will support the Christians of the Holy Land, but may I ask what efforts the Church of England is making to work with Her Majesty's Government to ensure that Jerusalem—a home to the three Abrahamic faith communities and, indeed, the religious capital of the world—is a place where Christian individuals and institutions can continue to flourish and thrive?

Andrew Selous: I know that, like me, my hon. Friend is deeply conscious that this is Holocaust Memorial Day. I can tell her that there are many strong relationships enabling the Church to support Christians and churches in Jerusalem, the land where Jesus walked. Last year, the diocese of Southwark signed a covenant agreement with the diocese of Jerusalem, opening new opportunities for pilgrimage, prayer and mutual support. The Bishop of Southwark goes to Jerusalem often and is in regular contact with our consul general and with Ministers in London about what can be done to ensure the peace of Jerusalem so that all faiths can flourish in the Holy Land.

Gay and Lesbian Relationships

7. **Dame Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): For what reason the Church of England has not made provision to enable a church blessing of gay and lesbian relationships. [905264]

Andrew Selous: The Church of England's doctrine defines marriage as between one man and one woman, and changing doctrine is a serious matter that involves

humbly seeking to discern the mind of God. The Church of England is engaging intensively with questions of identity, sexuality, relationships and marriage in ways that have not been done before. That process of learning, listening and discernment among clergy and congregations is enabling a deep engagement with difference and diversity as part of the Church's discernment of a way forward.

Dame Diana Johnson: I was interested to hear what the hon. Member said about supporting families and households, because in Wales and Scotland, there are blessings for lesbian and gay marriages, which shows the Churches' acceptance and understanding of all households and families. It would be good for the Church of England to introduce a Measure on this issue sooner rather than later, as we know that it often moves at a glacial pace, as it did on ordaining women and having women bishops. This would be a welcome change for the Church to make.

Andrew Selous: I thank the right hon. Lady for the question. What she suggests may be welcome, but the Church needs to discern what it believes the true teachings of the gospels to be. In order to determine where God is leading us, we are engaged in one of the most extensive exercises in consultation, learning and prayer carried out by the Church in recent decades. Both the destination and how we get there are important.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for City of Chester, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Elections Bill: Costs

8. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): What estimate the Committee has made of the potential cost of implementing the Elections Bill's proposed changes to the administration and conduct of elections. [905265]

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The Electoral Commission estimates that its work connected to the Bill will cost £16 million over the next five years. The estimate is based on its understanding of the Government's implementation planning. The commission's annual funding is subject to approval by the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission through the main and supplementary estimates process. The commission has not made its own estimate of the cost to others of the changes set out in the Bill. It has, however, highlighted that it is essential that implementation of the changes be appropriately funded if we are to ensure that the package of measures is realistically deliverable by electoral administrators.

Owen Thompson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his answer. Scottish National party Members have raised moral and democratic concerns about the Elections Bill many times, but those concerns are not separate from the financial considerations. For instance, voter identity provisions may carry extra administrative and enforcement costs. Will the commission take those indirect financial implications into account, looking forward?

Christian Matheson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for those comments. If he has views on the need for increased expenditure, he can raise them with the commission at the next meeting of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission. I remind him and the House, however, that it is not the commission's responsibility to justify the cost arising from legislation. In this case, it is the Government's responsibility as the sponsors of the legislation.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is a serious and well informed person. Is the Bill, and the change in funding that is necessary, an opportunity to split the role of the Electoral Commission? It could concentrate on the administration of all elections, and a separate, independent body could deal with enforcement. That way, we would feel there was a separation of powers.

Christian Matheson: The hon. Gentleman is always looking for the right opportunity to achieve that, and to challenge the position of the Electoral Commission. Obviously, the Government have not taken that decision. They have listened to, for example, the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and indeed our Committee on Standards. The Electoral Commission has a new chairperson, and a new chief executive is being appointed. I know the hon. Gentleman has concerns about its activities, but let us give the new leadership team a chance to bed in.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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

Church Schools

9. **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of the contribution of Church schools to education provision (a) in North Devon constituency and (b) across the country. [905267]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England runs 4,600 schools, including a quarter of all primary schools and two thirds of all small rural schools in the country. We are also a major provider of teacher training, and we work hard to ensure that all our children flourish, whether in our large urban schools, or in small rural ones such as those in North Devon.

Selaine Saxby: Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the many Church schools in North Devon, and will he say what steps are being taken by the Church to help pupils in these schools to catch up post covid, and to support their mental wellbeing?

Andrew Selous: I most certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking all the Church schools in North Devon for the fantastic work that they have done throughout the pandemic. We are supporting the leaders of all our schools in helping children to catch up on lost learning, and in promoting the wellbeing and mental health of pupils—through our trauma awareness training, for example.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

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

House of Commons Catering: British Food

10. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What steps the Commission is taking to increase the proportion of British food bought for sale in the House's catering outlets. [905268]

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman knows that the House of Commons food outlets serve 650 Members of Parliament, 420 members of the press lobby, and about another 17,000 passholders. It is the intention of all catering outlets, wherever possible, to buy British, and to serve seasonal vegetables, British meat and dairy, and, of course, the Champagne—or its equivalent—made in Hampshire and other parts of the United Kingdom, as well as local beers. However, those of course were not available during periods of lockdown, when no alcohol was served on the premises.

John Spellar: I thank the hon. Member for that helpful answer. May I urge him to take a proactive role and invite Members of Parliament to put forward local British suppliers so that we can benefit British businesses and British workers? Officials have no longer got the excuse of the EU to hide behind—it was never a real one anyway—so will they get on with that and have an active campaign?

Sir Charles Walker: Since we banished the EU from these shores, we have been just delighting in buying British. But there is more to do, and the right hon. Member needs to play an important part in that campaign. In the next few weeks, I expect him to lead a delegation to the Administration Committee of interested Members from across the United Kingdom, including Scotland and Wales—oh, and Jim Shannon—to demand that more is done. We shall try to meet those demands.

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I come to the business question, I understand that a Member has this morning stated in a media appearance that he has been granted an urgent question today. That is not the case. So, Sky News, please take down the notice that there is a UQ. No UQs have been granted at all.

I remind Members that, to be considered, UQ applications need to be tabled by the deadline. This Member was more than 30 minutes late in putting in a UQ application. All right hon. and hon. Members should take care to be accurate in their comments about business in the Chamber. They certainly should not announce that urgent questions have been granted when that is not the case. I remind Members, too, that Erskine May states:

“Neither the submission of an urgent question nor its subsequent rejection by the Speaker should...be...referred to”—

and certainly not on the media. I would be grateful if all Members followed that guidance. I am sure that the Member concerned will be heading to my office to apologise as a matter of urgency.

Business of the House

10.32 am

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I ask the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for the week commencing 31 January will include:

MONDAY 31 JANUARY—Motion to approve a ways and means resolution relating to the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Advanced Research and Invention Agency Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Dormant Assets Bill [*Lords*].

TUESDAY 1 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (11th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the Official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 2 FEBRUARY—Remaining stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

THURSDAY 3 FEBRUARY—General debate on the effectiveness of the Government's education catch-up and mental health recovery programmes, followed by general debate on the Committee on Standards' review of the code of conduct for Members of Parliament. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 4 FEBRUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 February will include:

MONDAY 7 FEBRUARY—Debate on motions to approve the Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order 2022 and the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2022, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill.

Anneliese Dodds: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. Today is Holocaust Memorial Day, and this afternoon's crucial debate will allow Members across the House to mark the day. I pay tribute to all the survivors for their bravery and generosity in reliving enormously traumatic personal experiences to educate us. I also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for all the work they do to ensure that such atrocities never happen again.

It started with the Prime Minister saying that no rules were broken. Then he said that he did not know about any parties. Then he said that he did not know whether he was there or not. Then he remembered that he was there but did not know that it was a party. Then he said that nobody warned him that the party was against the rules. This week, we were told that he was ambushed by a cake, although on the media earlier this week the Leader of the House said that he needs to wait for an internal inquiry to establish whether the Prime Minister ate the cake or not. Can the Leader of the House explain how we have gone from being told that no rules were broken to the Government being the subject of a police investigation? We do not yet know when the long-awaited internal inquiry into rule breaking at No. 10 will be published, but can he give assurances that when the report is published, it will be published in full, and that Members will have advance sight of it before any statement is made in the House?

While the Prime Minister is desperately trying to shore up his own position and the Leader of the House is busy threatening Back Benchers with an early general election, working families are hit with steep rises to energy prices, falling low wages and Tory tax rises. Labour's fully funded measures would save households £200 a year from their energy bills, with an extra £400 for families and pensioners who need it most. The Government chose not to support that plan. Can we have a statement on why the Government are choosing to look the other way and ignore the cost of living crisis faced by millions of people?

An estimated £4.3 billion of fraudulent loans will not be recovered, and yesterday, during an urgent question, a Government Minister refused to commit to bring forward a long-overdue economic crime Bill to tackle fraud and corruption. Given that a different Government Minister resigned on Monday in protest at the Government's failure on this, can the Leader of the House confirm when it became Government policy to waste billions of pounds of taxpayers' money and hand it to fraudsters?

As the Leader of the House will be aware, four disabled people took the Government to court this week on the national disability strategy consultation process. In a ruling that will come as a surprise to absolutely no one, the High Court found that the strategy is unlawful. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has not made a statement to the House following this ruling, so will the Leader of the House provide Government time to debate this critically important strategy?

Last year, in December, the Prime Minister said that it was "complete nonsense" that he personally intervened in decision making over whether to evacuate Nowzad staff and animals from Afghanistan. However, emails released yesterday appear to suggest that the Prime Minister did intervene and overruled the Defence Secretary, so can the Leader of the House explain what happened?

This Government put their own self-interest above the national interest. They have completely lost any grip, and working people are paying the price.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I welcome the hon. Lady to business questions and give my thanks to the usual shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), for letting me know that she was unable to be here today.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight Holocaust Memorial Day. I thank the Opposition Front-Bench team for not putting in any urgent questions today, and I am glad that there are no statements either so that we can devote the whole time to debating Holocaust Memorial Day, which is, I think, what the whole House wanted.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab) *indicated assent*.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am glad to see the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee nodding. It is a truly important day. I agree entirely with the hon. Lady that education is so important. The more people know and understand the horrors that went before, the more likely it is that such horrors will be avoided in future.

The hon. Lady then asked a wide range of questions about Government policy. May I say how pleased I am that she has finally moved off cake? It has seemed to me over the past few weeks that all the Opposition could

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

ever talk about was cake—whether we have had our cake and eaten it, whether there has been no cake, whether there never was any cake, or what cake there may have been; how it was baked, how many eggs there were in it, whether it was made with margarine or butter, or what type of cake it was: did it have sponge or was it chocolate? All these issues about cake have been an obsession of the Opposition, so I am glad that we are now getting on to some more serious subjects.

The hon. Lady referred to the cost of living issue, and here the Government have been extremely active in helping people, including families. The national living wage will rise to £9.50 from April, which will mean an extra £1,000 a year for full-time workers. Nearly 2 million families will receive an extra £1,000 a year through our cut in the universal credit taper and increased work allowances. There is also a £140 rebate on the energy bills of 2.2 million low-income households this winter, and there are seasonal cold weather payments of an extra £25 a week for up to 4 million people during sustained colder periods.

However, the key to ensuring that the economy works lies in the steps taken by the Government during the pandemic, when they introduced the furlough scheme and bounce back business loans to ensure that the structures of the economy survived it. That is fundamental to why we now have the highest payroll employment in our history, the lowest recorded youth unemployment in our history, and the economy back to where it was before the pandemic. So the real question on the cost of living is whether the economy is being managed well, and the answer to that is “Yes, it is, because of the decisions that this Government made.”

The hon. Lady then raised the issue of fraud, and the £4.3 billion that has come out of the covid supplies. That is about 1% of the amount of money that British taxpayers provided. However, the Government have already stopped or recovered £743 million in overclaimed furlough grants. We have prevented £2.2 billion in fraud from our bounce back loan scheme, and our Taxpayer Protection Taskforce is set to recover an additional £1 billion; its investigations are under way. The Government take this seriously, but if we want to know who the real experts are in wasting taxpayers’ money, it is the socialists. When they were in opposition, what happened to the NHS computer system? How many billions were frittered away through their irresponsible approach to taxpayers’ money?

The hon. Lady raised the national disability strategy and yesterday’s court judgment. The DWP has sought permission to appeal against that judgment, which is solely about technicalities and the requirements to consult. The DWP has engaged with disabled people, disabled people’s organisations, carers and others as part of the national disability strategy, which is one of the broadest packages of real, practical action put together so far to improve the lives of disabled people in relation to jobs, housing, transport, education, shopping, culture, justice, public services, data and evidence. There is a real push to help disabled people.

Then we come on to the Afghanistan animals. The Ministry of Defence got 15,000 people out of Afghanistan in an extraordinary and amazingly successful operation,

but again the Opposition are dealing with the fripperies and the trivia, not with the really big picture. All they care about are cake and animals, whereas we are getting on with the important business of government.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): Families in west Berkshire have told me about waits of up to two years to receive diagnoses of either autism or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder for their children, often at a catastrophic cost to their educational and social development. However, I understand that the problem extends much more widely than west Berkshire. May I invite my right hon. Friend to make Government time available for a debate to discuss the provision of child and adolescent mental health services?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend both for her question and for her campaigning on children’s mental health issues, which are of great importance and, I think, recognised as such across the House.

The Government have announced that £17 million of extra spending to build on the existing mental health support will be available in education settings, including £7 million for the wellbeing for education recovery programme and £9.5 million to fund training for mental health leaders in about a third of all state schools and colleges. That is on top of the £79 million to boost mental health support for children and young people that was announced in March. NHS England has consulted on the potential to introduce five new waiting time standards, and a response will be published in due course. I think it is accepted that there is a problem, and steps are being taken to tackle it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesman.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Let me first echo and support the comments of the hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) about Holocaust Memorial Day. I think we are all looking forward to this afternoon’s debate.

May we have a debate about the constitution, just to ascertain whether we are on our way to becoming a republic? This view has a rather odd new supporter and champion in the guise of the Leader of the House himself. In another disastrous performance on Newsnight, he claimed that a change of leader requires a general election because the UK is now effectively a “presidential system”. Well, somebody should notify Her Majesty the Queen—but perhaps not the right hon. Gentleman himself, after that disastrous Prorogation business.

Most of us suspect that this was just some sort of clumsy attempt to get recalcitrant Tory Back Benchers on board—the threat of a general election in which large swathes of them would lose their seats—rather than a real attempt to redefine the constitution of the UK, but could we please have a statement from the Leader of the House, just for the comedy value? Last week, he was flattering the precious Union; this week he is reinventing the republic of the UK. He must be President Johnson’s most inept spokesperson when it comes to these matters.

I am beginning to think it would be a matter of duty and mercy for the House services to provide some sort of counselling services for Tory Back Benchers. What they have been through is almost unendurable. There

has been Owen Paterson, cash for access, cash for honours, partygate, cakegate, Operation Big Dog and Operation Put Big Dog Down. Now they are biting their nails to the stumps waiting for the report so that they can at least make up their minds about the Prime Minister. It is like some sort of dysfunctional “Waiting for Godot”. But we are here to help: if confessional is required, Tory Members should come and speak to some of us in the Opposition. We are here to help out; we could help them fix some of their woes. Who would be a Tory Back Bencher just now? But help is out there.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am so grateful that the hon. Gentleman is his normal cheerful self. He raised the interesting constitutional point of the dissolution of Parliament under a new leader. I actually raised that point on Second Reading of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 on 13 September 2010 because, prior to the Act coming in, it was becoming apparent that an election did need to follow from a new leader and that what had happened to Gordon Brown when he was Prime Minister was illustrative of that. Our constitution evolves and moves, not necessarily by legislation but by the way conventions develop, and it was clearly developing before the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. I thought at the time that the Act would prevent such an election, but in fact it had the reverse effect—it accelerated it. When we changed Prime Minister in 2016, an election followed within a few months; when we changed Prime Minister in 2019, once again an election followed within a few months. That is important to an understanding of the constitution: norms arise that become accepted and understood, without any need for a formal legislative process. That has been the way that our written but uncodified constitution has developed and evolved.

Then the question is raised as to whether we have become a more presidential system. Being a more presidential system does not override the need—the essential need—for a constitutional monarchy. It means that the power of the monarchy has evolved and been devolved to the Prime Minister, and we have seen this happen over centuries. The exercise of the prerogative, now done on the formal advice of the Prime Minister, shows that most of the powers that would be vested in a President are vested *de facto* if not *de jure* in the Prime Minister. So if we are looking at how the constitution has evolved, it is clear that a Prime Minister has a personal mandate much more than a party mandate and that that mandate comes from voters, who would expect to renew it in the event of a change of Prime Minister. That is why I think we have evolved to the situation where a new Prime Minister would want a new election.

I am delighted that the SNP wishes to discuss my favourite pet subject, which is the evolution of the constitution, and it is something we should debate more and more, but I look to the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee for his kindness.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): One of the Government’s levelling-up initiatives has been the establishment of freeports. The Humber ports have been granted freeport status, but we really need to get motoring. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a debate or a statement so that we can see how the Government’s initiative is evolving?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because I agree with him. I think that freeports are going to be one of the real advantages and benefits of having left the European Union. The National Insurance Contributions Bill, which is passing through Parliament at the moment, is the main Act of Parliament that will facilitate an ambitious programme of freeports, so I am glad to say that it is going ahead and legislative action is taking place.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns: I reassure the Leader of the House that, if at some time in the future he should be on the Back Benches, I would very much welcome an application from him for a debate on the evolution of the constitution—but I am sure that will not be for some time.

Can I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the business managers in the House for helping us by devoting the remainder of today to the important debate on and commemoration of Holocaust Memorial Day? It is so important to so many of our constituents, and to mine in particular in the constituency of Gateshead, which has a very large Haredi Jewish community.

On 10 February, we are hoping to put on two debates—on friendship and co-operation with Taiwan, which would be rather timely given the current circumstances, and on dementia research in the United Kingdom, which is also extremely timely given what we have been going through for the last couple of years.

On advance notice of applications already received for particular debates, I have already mentioned an application for a Welsh affairs debate to commemorate St David’s Day on 1 March, which would be on 3 March if we can get the time, and we already have on the stocks an application for a debate on International Women’s Day, which falls on 8 March, so Thursday 10 March would be appropriate if we could get that.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I am glad I am storing up credit for applications for future debates when it is not necessarily as easy as it may be now for me to see what the business of the House is going to be.

I completely understand the importance of the debates the hon. Gentleman raises, especially in relation to Taiwan, St David’s Day, dementia research and International Women’s Day. It is extremely helpful of him to give me advance notice, as it is of course for Members to give him advance notice of particular dates that are coming up. However, I am sorry that nobody, as far as I am aware, has asked for a debate on 30 January to commemorate, of course, the execution—the murder—of Charles, King and Martyr.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): On 5 January, former Labour councillor Lord Ahmed of Rotherham was found guilty of serious sexual assault against a young boy and guilty of twice attempting to rape a girl. Although he is no longer a member of the other place, he still maintains and uses his title of peer of the realm, and only an Act of Parliament can strip him of his letters patent. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me, and the 2,000 people from Rother Valley who have

[*Alexander Stafford*]

signed my petition, that we should have a debate in Government time on a Bill to strip him of his title, and to send a clear message that we will never tolerate any vile monsters who are guilty of such heinous crimes against children? They should never have such prestigious titles.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The last Bill of attainder, as far as I am aware, was in 1798, although there was the Titles Deprivation Act 1917 to strip royal dukes of their titles when they were traitors. My hon. Friend is right to say that it requires legislation to take away a peerage, although I do slightly wonder what satisfaction it will give to the person to whom he refers to be called “My Lord” while he is serving time at Her Majesty’s expense. The disgrace he has felt means that his title has become, I hope, wormwood.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I know the Leader of the House loves patronising Opposition MPs, but to be honest I have been patronised by much more illustrious people than him.

Can we have a debate, because the Leader of the House did not take this question seriously earlier, about the evacuation from Afghanistan? Many of us still have constituents and friends of constituents who are stuck in Afghanistan in very dangerous and frightening situations, and some of us are concerned that the process of deciding the priorities last summer was not as it should have been. In fact, it was so chaotic—perhaps for good reasons, but perhaps for bad reasons as well—that bad decisions were made.

If we had such a debate, we would also have the opportunity to clear up the fact that the Prime Minister has repeatedly said that he took absolutely no role in the decision to evacuate Pen Farthing and Nowzad, whereas the Prime Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary wrote a letter in which she made it clear that she was involved as his PPS. We now have in the Foreign Affairs Committee an email from one of Lord Goldsmith’s officials, so a member of the Foreign Office team, saying that the Prime Minister had authorised this. We need to get to the bottom of this. There may be a perfectly innocent explanation. But it may be guilty as charged.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Under Operation Pitting, our armed forces and civil service worked around the clock to evacuate 15,000 people, including around 8,300 British nationals and 5,000 people through the Afghan relocations policy. This was an incredibly successful and pressurised operation, and our armed forces, once again, showed what amazing things they can do when called upon to do them. The hon. Gentleman is fussing about a few animals. I think that shows the level of seriousness that he characteristically brings to today’s debate.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Government’s excellent vaccination roll-out programme in my constituency, with a vaccination centre in Medway, which all three Medway MPs campaigned for. Linked to that, my constituents very much welcome the £12 billion extra NHS investment year on year. May we have a debate on the Floor of the House about support for hospitals? My hospital in Medway serves half a million people. It needs extra resources in the

short term and in the long term in Medway we need a full brand new hospital to serve the needs of our constituents. I know that the Government are committed to supporting the national health service.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and commend him for his brilliant campaigning work locally in his constituency, and for the remarkable work he has done to protect freedom of religion around the world. The Government have used, and are using, taxpayers’ money to support the health service. In September, we announced an additional £36 billion for health and social care over the next three years, which interestingly was opposed by the party opposite. We are doing things to catch up with the backlog that has come through covid. For example, there will be 9 million extra scans and an extra £8 billion to tackle the elective backlog. He lobbies for a new hospital. I will pass on his lobbying to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Given the views that the Leader of the House has just expressed about the need for a snap general election following a change of Prime Minister, can he confirm that the Government are seriously intending to bring forward such a Bill to make that change?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. What I was saying was that the constitution evolves, and the norms and conventions of the constitution are not normally set down in legislation, although some of them are.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May we have a debate on the wonderful sport of rugby league?

Mr Speaker: Hear, hear.

Jason McCartney: It is the rugby league world cup this autumn, and the new Super League season kicks off in a fortnight, with some of the games for the first time on free-to-air television—they will be on Channel 4—which will be great for widening the notoriety of the sport. Such a debate would also give me an opportunity to express my deep disappointment that Labour-run Kirklees has reneged on an agreement to host the National Rugby League Museum in the birthplace of rugby league, the George Hotel in Huddersfield.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we should have a special debate every week on the failures of socialist councils, to which Conservative Members would massively subscribe. Labour Members would probably decide to work from home that day, which is something they enjoy. I cannot claim to be an expert on rugby league. The only sport I know anything much about is cricket, which may be rather embarrassing, under current circumstances, to confess to. But I thought I heard—whether the stenographers of *Hansard* did, I do not know—a modest “Hear, hear” emanate from the Chair during my hon. Friend’s question. Assuming that it did not come from the Clerks, who tend not to comment on our business, I think that an application for an Adjournment debate may be very favourably looked upon.

Mr Speaker: That is good news. It is Stefan Ratchford’s testimonial on Saturday, when Warrington play Wigan, and I will be there.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Further to Mr Speaker's announcement that there will be no statements today, that does rather leave unanswered the question that many members of the public want to know the answer to: the whereabouts of Sue Gray's urgent and very important report into the numerous reported events and parties that No. 10 took part in during lockdown. The Prime Minister has been known to hide in a fridge to avoid questions, so can the Leader of the House confirm that there will be no hiding from the outcome of this report—that it will be published in full, and that we will be granted time in this House to scrutinise its findings in full?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, it is wrong of Members of this House to pressurise the independent investigator over the speed of her report. It would be wrong for the Government to put pressure on her, and it is wrong of the Opposition to do so. Sue Gray is doing it independently, and she must be given the time that she needs to do it. However, of course, as the Prime Minister has said, when the report is released, he will come to the House and make a statement, and will be open to questions. That is the proper parliamentary procedure.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Several of my constituents have made applications for the protective security grant and were successful, but as a result of the pandemic, some of those works have not been completed and the funding has lapsed. Can a Home Office Minister come before the House to explain to my constituents how they can revive those applications and ensure that their synagogues, churches and other places of worship and religion are adequately protected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for this question, because it is very important to provide the necessary protections for places of worship that may need some level of protection. Work is continuing to safeguard places of worship, including synagogues and mosques, with £3.5 million allocated for the places of worship security grant this year. Of course, if there are specific issues with grants that have lapsed because of covid, if he will give me the details, I will happily take them up with the Home Secretary.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the cost of living continues to spiral, it is ever more important that retired miners receive all of the money in their pension scheme, and that the Government stop profiting from 50% of the surplus, which totals £4.4 billion to date. Can I ask the Leader of the House to facilitate a meeting between the scheme's trustees and the new Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Minister?

Mr Rees-Mogg: As I have said before in this House, I very much view it as my role to facilitate meetings between hon. Members and Ministers, so I will obviously take up the request that the hon. Lady has made.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House agrees with me and the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) that Parliament should be showcasing the best of British food and drink to the world. In Rushcliffe, we have the brilliant, award-winning Ruddy Fine gin, which uses local ingredients from the village of Ruddington. I want all colleagues to have the

opportunity to enjoy a Ruddy Fine gin and tonic, and to have the chance to get their local producers stocked here on the estate, but unfortunately at the moment, the House authorities will only consider guest beers. Will the Leader of the House work with me to find a solution to this issue, and see if we can get Ruddy Fine gin and other best of British producers on the menus here in the weeks ahead? Can we also have a debate in Government time to discuss what more this House can do to promote British producers?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is on to something here. It is a pity that the House does not have guest gins as well, but why leave it at a gin and tonic? Why not have a gin martini, a gin and it, a pink gin, or a whole variety of gin cocktails? We could even put gin into sweets and have a gin Opal Fruit or something like that, to give people a little taster—a little sampler—of gin. I am all in favour of Ruddy Fine gin: perhaps I should provide a tincture to visitors to my office in future. If it is not in the bars of the House of Commons, perhaps the Leader of the opposition should get a small supply for people who need to see him on important business.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Yesterday, a colliery in south Wales was given permission to mine a further 40 million tonnes of coal. The Government appear to have abdicated responsibility for the decision, although in reply to my written questions I have learned of discussions and correspondence between the Secretary of State and the Welsh Government about the licence. A promised copy of that correspondence has still not found its way into the Library nine days after it was promised. Real climate leaders do not issue new fossil fuel licences, nor do they pass the buck if someone else is trying to do that on their watch. Will the Leader of the House use his best offices to ensure a copy of that correspondence is put into the Library as soon as possible, and can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of leaving new fossil fuels in the ground, as the science demands?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Of course, the Government will follow the normal requirements of business, and if a document has been referred to at the Dispatch Box by a Minister it will be put in the Library in due course—that is routine—but I do not know the status of the document she refers to. Net zero is by 2050. We are not at 2050 yet. We are going to need to have fossil fuels for the interim period and we are going to need coal for things like heritage railways and so on. Therefore, it is perfectly reasonable that we take some coal out of the ground. I cannot see why it is better to import it from abroad, rather than to get it from our own green and pleasant land.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday, British Indians celebrated Republic Day, a very joyous occasion. I am sure my right hon. Friend, as a keen monarchist, would not necessarily celebrate Republic Day. Equally, last week we commemorated a forgotten genocide, namely the exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir valley. People were forced out of what had been their ancestral homes for thousands of years at the point of a gun, with the cry, "Leave, die or convert." May we have a debate in Government time to commemorate that terrible act, which is now being recognised in India as a genocide?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is right about my queasiness about celebrating republic days as a general rule. I note how many countries around the world celebrate their annual day when they get out of the grasp of our great country, and there is a certain poignancy to it. However, I wish India well in this its 75th year of independence. It is a crucial and growingly important ally for the United Kingdom. We agreed a comprehensive strategic partnership in May 2021 and a 2030 road map, which will benefit people across both countries and support regional and global security and prosperity. Obviously, Her Majesty's Government condemn any instances of discrimination or violence because of religion or belief. We continue to encourage dialogue between India and Pakistan to find a lasting diplomatic solution on Kashmir to maintain regional stability, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): High streets in constituencies like mine are being broken up by an ever-increasing number of gambling venues. Yet another bank branch on Hertford Road, which closed only 12 months ago, has now been replaced by a gambling venue. Residents and local councils are powerless to stop this happening. Will the Leader of the House tell us when the Government's review of the Gambling Act 2005, which was due in October last year, will be published? Will he allow a debate in Government time on the findings of that review?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Government are committed to supporting high streets and have provided £2.4 billion of taxpayers' money for 101 towns deals. It is obviously important that there is a variety of activity going on along high streets to ensure that people wish to go there and that commerce takes place. I am glad to tell the hon. Lady that a key part of the levelling up White Paper will be about how we encourage levelling up, which will inevitably boost high streets. The White Paper will be coming forward in due course.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Approximately three years after submitting the Greater Manchester clean air plan outline business case, the Mayor of Greater Manchester has called for changes to his own plan. However, the only change needed is to scrap the scheme in its entirety. Based on flawed analysis and data, we are in the ludicrous position that the most up-to-date air monitoring data for the borough of Bury show no breaches of legal air quality limits anywhere, yet this draconian scheme is still scheduled to begin in May. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate to allow for much-needed scrutiny of this tax on jobs?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very concerned about the Labour Mayor's tax on jobs, which my hon. Friend raised with me last week. As I said earlier, we could have a session every week discussing how the Labour party attacks local businesses and, particularly, wages war against the motorist. The motorist always seems to be in the crosshairs of the socialist, because they do not like the independence that motoring brings and the freedom and liberty that we get by being able to drive. My hon. Friend raises an important point and the Mayor of Manchester would be well advised to listen to him.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): The illegal use of off-road motorbikes is becoming an ever-increasing problem on the streets in my constituency, with more and more constituents contacting me about the matter. Residents tell me that they feel intimidated, threatened and fearful for their safety, while the police say that they face huge difficulties when trying to pursue and identify suspects and seize off-road motorbikes that are being used illegally. Can we therefore have a debate or statement on what steps the Government are taking to tackle this increasing blight on our communities?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for bringing this issue to the attention of the House, because it is clearly a serious problem. The police saying that policing is difficult is not a very satisfactory answer from them. Of course policing is difficult; that is why we have a police force, and we have taken on an extra 11,000 police officers. I encourage her, though I doubt she needs much encouragement, to pressurise her local police force to actually get on and do its job and enforce the law.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): On Holocaust Memorial Day, we think about some of the groups that continue to be persecuted across the world. Last weekend, I had the great pleasure of visiting the Cox's Bazar Rohingya Muslim refugee camp; it was an incredibly emotional experience. I spoke to two child refugees and said to them, "What's your wish? What's your dream?" It was very simple—they simply wanted to return home. They did not want to go anywhere else. They just wanted to go home and they wanted to live free from persecution. I know that the Government have taken steps to aid the Bangladeshi Government, but could we have a debate in Government time about what further steps this country can take to aid and facilitate the safe return of Rohingya Muslims to their homeland?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The Government very much share his view and have great concern about the increasing violence across Burma. As the first anniversary of the coup approaches, Her Majesty's Government are working with partners to push for an end to violence, unhindered humanitarian access and the importance of respect for human rights and the protection of civilians. In Burma's Rakhine state, we have provided over £44 million to all communities since 2017, including over £25 million for the Rohingya. Since 2017, we have committed over £320 million and supported about 1 million refugees in Bangladesh. Any Rohingya returns to Rakhine must be voluntary, safe, dignified and in line with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees principles, but I can assure my hon. Friend that the Government are working on this and will continue to do so.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Yesterday, the Leader of the House said that, in his experience, "very few people do lie in public life".

Very few people indulge in burglary, but the law is there to deal with them. My party has long-standing proposals to strengthen Parliament's ability to hold politicians to account when they deliberately lie, so can we have an early debate on lying in politics?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What people say politically is a matter of continual political debate; it is what we do in this Chamber. People have different opinions one way or another and when they disagree, they often make accusations that are more aggressive than the facts bear out.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): In recent years, clinical services have been reconfigured across my hospital trust, from Eastbourne and Bexhill to Hastings, but one in four households in Eastbourne do not have a car and public transport options are poor. There is no direct bus service; the journey can mean two buses and take two hours, and funding—financial support for some—is very narrowly defined. I have secured a meeting with the Minister for Health, who has responsibility for hospitals, but may we have a wider debate about access to hospitals? Although I am working with local stakeholders who are engaged in this to improve the situation, the lines of responsibility are not clear.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she says about access to hospitals; the issue of ensuring good hospital services and good transport to them has arisen for many of us in our constituencies. I assure my hon. Friend that the aim of the Government to improve bus services is very strong. More than £5 billion of taxpayers' money will be spent on buses and cycling during the course of this Parliament. Local authorities have published bus improvement plans, which provide an assessment of existing services in their area, including details of current provision for rural and coastal communities. Action is being taken, but my hon. Friend is right to raise the question about integrating services so that people can get to their hospital appointments.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Family homes are being converted into houses in multiple occupation, and HMOs are increasingly becoming the new homes for many vulnerable people and families. That is a growing concern for my constituents and for other communities across our country. May we have a debate on the issue in Government time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises an issue that will be of importance across the country. It is obviously important that there should be a range of residential accommodation; what is suitable for some individuals will not be so for others, and it is important that there should be a plurality of provision. But HMOs are regulated by law, primarily by local authorities, to ensure that basic standards are maintained. As regards a debate, I point the hon. Lady in the direction of the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House a question that is actually about the business of the House? Both sides of the House have regularly said that they want there to be statements in this House before things are debated in the media. I understand that the Government do not control when Sue Gray delivers her report, but if she happens to deliver it today I hope the Government will request a statement tomorrow, so that we can discuss the issue in this House before the weekend press do. It seems to me that if we believe in this House having the first say, that is what should happen. Can the Leader of the House advise that if there is a statement to be made tomorrow, it will be announced today?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, I thank my hon. Friend for the very novel approach of actually asking a question about the business of the House during business questions; it is the first time that has happened in a long time.

My view is that every sitting day is a proper sitting day; there are not greater or lesser days of business in this House. The House of Commons sitting is an important constitutional activity and statements made on a Friday are as valid as those made on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday. I do not know when the report will be published or when it will be possible to announce a statement, but I am certainly of the view—and I know that you share this view, Mr Speaker—that this House has the right to know first. We should certainly know before our friend Brendan Carlin at the *Mail on Sunday* gets the information.

Mr Speaker: I should add that I expect all Members to know about the statement with very good time in hand.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I think I owe the Leader of the House an apology. Last week, I was critical of the fact that the former Tory MP, the noble Lord McLoughlin, had been appointed to chair Transport for the North but in his first utterances as chair, he has made it clear that he thinks that the Government's integrated rail plan is not in the best interests of the north. To quote something that the Leader of the House might enjoy,

"there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth".

May we have a debate about Transport for the North, whether the Government plan to listen to what the new chair says and the cut of a third to Transport for the North's budget?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful for the right hon. Lady's charming apology. I refer her back to what I said last week about what a great man my noble Friend Lord McLoughlin is. I think particularly highly of him because—I shall let the House in on a not-particularly-secret secret—it is thanks to the noble Lord that I ever got on to the candidates list for the Conservative party in the first place. He interviewed me during the candidate selection process. When I then arrived in Parliament and kept on voting against the Government while he was Chief Whip, I think he sometimes had reason to doubt his judgment some years earlier.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the use of military planning expertise in civilian settings? Last Friday was the first anniversary of Storm Christoph and the sad destruction of Llanerch bridge in my constituency. This historic, grade 2 listed bridge spanned the River Clwyd, connecting the communities of Tremeirchion and Trefnant. Although Denbighshire County Council is considering options to replace the bridge, the process is complex and time consuming. Meanwhile, local people are left without a key travel route, so military planners could, I am sure, be used to advise on the possibility of a temporary solution.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The provision of defence support to civil authorities in the UK is governed by a robust and well-defined set of principles, set out in a publicly available joint doctrine publication. Those principles ensure that defence assistance is the last rather than first

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

resort when responding to operational challenges. That is essential in order to preserve defence capabilities for defence outputs wherever possible and to reduce the risk of legal challenge from commercial providers, which may otherwise have reasonably expected to tender for contracts from the requesting authority. Defence maintains a standing network of joint regional liaison officers across the country to maintain relationships with civil authorities, provide potential advice on defence assistance, and facilitate requests when they meet the required principles. Any request for defence assistance should be referred to the joint regional liaison office.

I fear that that is not an enormously helpful answer, because the issue is that defence assistance is a last resort. However, I hope that raising the issue in the House will put a little bit of extra pressure on Denbighshire County Council to get on with what it should be doing in relation to the bridge.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): Last week I raised with the Leader of the House issues relating to war pensions and the armed forces compensation scheme, and I thank him for his actions in support of the points I made. Since then I have been contacted by dozens of other veterans who find themselves in similar situations. In the past week I have also received from the Ministry of Defence an answer to my written question asking how many veterans are giving up on the process because of the situation in which they find themselves. Unfortunately, the answer was:

“This information is not held in the format requested”,

so the MOD does not even know how many veterans are giving up on the process of trying to get compensation or uplifts to their war pensions as a result of injuries or traumatic experiences from their time serving in the forces. May we have a statement on that and on how we can make sure that the MOD does in fact have accurate records of the situation of all veterans?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. It is important that written answers are as helpful as possible. It is always possible to seek the advice of the Table Office—it is exceptionally good at this—to work out how to rephrase a question in order to get around an initially unhelpful answer so as to get the information requested. If the hon. Gentleman is not able to do that, or is not successful in doing so, my office will be more than happy to seek fuller answers than he has got so far.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): On this Holocaust Memorial Day, I would like to pay tribute to my constituent Marika Henriques. Marika was born in Hungary. At the age of nine, she got separated from her family and she became a hidden child during the war. Mercifully, she survived and now she is resident in my constituency. I would like to thank my Front Bench colleagues, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, for making so much time available for today's debate. May I ask that this also happens in subsequent years?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The individual stories of those now in very old age are of the greatest importance and are incredibly moving, whenever Members come across them,

and it is so important that they are recorded and restored for posterity. I am glad to say that both last year and this year we were able to avoid any urgent questions or statements on Holocaust Memorial Day. It would be wrong of me to promise that that can be guaranteed in future, but I can assure the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee that as long as I am the Leader of the House, that will certainly be my aim.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This is the first time I have been here on a Thursday for some time, Mr Speaker, and I have not had a chance to speak of a colleague and friend, Jack Dromey. Like so many of us, he was always here on a Thursday, and we miss him dreadfully. I hope you do not mind me mentioning that.

I ask the Leader of the House to secure a debate quite soon about what sort of democracy we live in. I fear that we are steadily moving towards an Administration that would love to have a presidential system of Government based in No. 10, rather than a parliamentary system, where the power and sovereignty lie in this House. What he has said, as reported in the press, is very worrying indeed.

I must also tell the Leader of the House that, with 12 grandchildren, I get a lot of cake, but I have a secret passion for Eton mess. One of the messes I want cleared up is that, while my constituents think they have an inalienable right to breathe fresh, clean air, increasingly what is emitted from the back end of vehicles is poisoning our children, pregnant women and the elderly. When can we get a real step? Will he support and give time to my Bill, which would force every local authority to audit the air cleanliness in its area every year and report back to this Parliament?

Mr Rees-Mogg: On clean air, one of the real problems has been the scandal of diesel engines, promoted by the last socialist Government, in cahoots with the European Union and the German car manufacturers. That is one of the biggest scandals of this political generation, and extraordinarily little commented on. Nitrous oxides were spewed out, rather than the cleaner and less health-damaging emissions from petrol engines. That was a political decision taken by the last socialist Government, as I say, in cahoots with the European Union. I will take the hon. Gentleman's statement as an apology for the last socialist Government on that.

As regards a debate on the increasing presidential power of the Prime Minister, that is something we can take back to the time of Gladstone, who was accused of riding roughshod over his Cabinet. Certainly, in the period of Lloyd George, it was thought that the centralisation of power was going too far. It is almost a reverse of the debates that took place in the 18th century about the power of the Crown, when this House debated that:

“The power of the Crown has increased, is increasing,”

and should be decreased. We now have much the same discussion going on, but the reality is that the British elector looks to a leader, and is very pleased with the leader they have.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Doncaster Sheffield airport has played a huge part in Doncaster's history—I am sure my right hon. Friend will know it was once home to our nuclear deterrent, in the form of the

Vulcan bomber—but, although it has a distinguished past, I am more interested in its future. The airport is currently working with both the University of Sheffield Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre and a company that produces the Airlander. Both will help hugely towards our net zero goal and employ and train many local people. With support through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, they would truly start the levelling-up agenda. Will my right hon. Friend therefore speak with Government Ministers to help to secure that funding, so that Doncaster's future is as exciting as its past?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for his constituency, as he shows once again. He is right to take pride in the history of a place, but to look forward to how that will become a future of prosperity and growth. I can tell him that BEIS has committed to co-funding a new zero carbon UK aircraft technology through the Aerospace Technology Institute programme to 2031, which will help to reach net zero aviation emissions by 2050. That is a commitment from both industry and the Government and builds on the commitment to provide joint funding of £3.9 billion for aerospace research and development between 2013 and 2026. The same programme has supported 343 aerospace technology projects, with total Government and industry funding of £3.2 billion across the UK, including the emerging green aerospace cluster in South Yorkshire. Officials will consider any business case presented for support, so I will ensure his comments and his request are passed on to the Secretary of State.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): We have a national crisis in the dentistry sector. Most people cannot find a dental practice that will accept new NHS patients, and it is compounded by the fact that dentists are leaving the sector in droves. The reality is that many people are facing hardship and simply cannot afford the cost of private dental treatment. The Government must therefore work with the British Dental Association to tackle the crisis. Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on the NHS dental sector?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am well aware of the concern, because it has been raised with me in my constituency and there was an Adjournment debate on Monday on access to NHS dentistry services in Bristol and the south-west. The Government have provided extra funding to dentists, who are doing a remarkable job of catching up with the backlog created because of the procedures and precautions required around covid.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): Last weekend, a terrible fire ripped through the Leopard pub in the mother town of Burslem, which resulted in the local community collectively grieving. On behalf of residents across Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, I thank Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service firefighters for their bravery in tackling the blaze. I am proud of Stoke's unrivalled kindness: people have been bringing chocolates, mugs of tea and even drawings from local children such as Izzy to thank firefighters for their hard work in challenging conditions. The Leopard sits on Burslem's high street and is a key part of not just Stoke-on-Trent's history, but that of the United Kingdom: during the industrial revolution, Josiah Wedgwood and James Brindley met there to discuss building the Trent and Mersey canal.

Will my right hon. Friend add his thanks to Staffordshire Fire and Rescue? Will he commit to a debate in Government time on what more can be done to help to protect and regenerate heritage buildings, particularly on our high streets?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Once again, my hon. Friend stands up for Stoke with aplomb and vigour. I understand the sadness that there will be about the fire at the Leopard; I am tempted to say that the Leopard has compulsorily had to change its spots. I definitely add my thanks to Staffordshire Fire and Rescue. How charming that people like Izzy gave pictures that they had drawn to thank Staffordshire's noble fire brigade for its work!

The Government provide heritage support through the taxpayer-funded £150 million community ownership fund, which allows communities to take control of vital local assets, and councils may use compulsory purchase orders for long-term empty properties. I hope that the Leopard was properly insured and that it will soon bounce back in all its glory.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Leader of the House was asked a specific question about an urgent debate on the Government's national strategy for disabled people. The DWP lost a court case and its actions were found to be unlawful. Belittling the need to consult with disabled people is quite frankly disgraceful. The voices of disabled people are key to getting the strategy right.

We have never had a debate on the strategy. I think a debate would ensure that the strategy benefits from the experience of all Members, many of whom would consult disabled people and disabled people's organisations.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I would simply say that the Government are making an application to appeal the case and that the disabled strategy is a fundamentally important strategy brought forward by the Government to ensure the best possible support for disabled people. That is exactly what the Government are doing. The Government lost on a technicality, as I said earlier; that does not undermine our fundamental drive to help disabled people.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Today's papers are full of briefings blaming the staff at No. 10 for the Prime Minister's predicament. Is passing the buck to staff not the most irresponsible of defences?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We are waiting for the report from Sue Gray. The Opposition still seem obsessed with these issues; I am still surprised that they are not using business questions to ask more about the really serious issues of the day, such as Ukraine and the build-up of Russian troops on the Ukrainian border. As far as I can tell, they are interested in cake rather than in Russia.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): At last week's Health and Social Care oral questions, I raised the importance of improving diagnosis of, and care for, people living with pulmonary fibrosis and supporting research into a cure. I was pleased that the Secretary of State confirmed that he would bring the matter to the attention of his officials and see what more they could do, but can the Leader of the House advise how I can secure a debate in Government time on pulmonary fibrosis to raise awareness and press the Government to improve support and research?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady knows how the parliamentary system works extremely well. It seems to me that she is doing exactly the right thing in terms of raising this issue. She has raised it directly with the Secretary of State and she has now raised it with me. I have a feeling that she might be bobbing at Prime Minister's questions in the not-too-distant future. There are also Adjournment debates, urgent questions and the Backbench Business Committee. I encourage her in that, because one of the real glories of our democracy is that, through using this Chamber, we can get policy changed. I know my role is to defend Government policy whatever it happens to be, but that vibrant democracy that gets things done, because MPs are standing up seeking redress of grievance for their constituents, is, I think, the life blood of how our constitution works.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Research from consumer champion Which? shows that an estimated 2.5 million households missed or defaulted on at least one mortgage, rent, loan or credit card bill this month, marking a significant increase from last year, with missed payments highest among those on lower incomes. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on what his Government will do to make sure that there is sufficient support for those in financial distress, and will he set out what urgent measures he will put in place to help prevent spiralling household debt?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady raises something of great and widespread importance, as she so often does. There are two things to say. One is about the general approach of the Government to try to improve people's standard of living, and some of those that I have mentioned before, such as raising the national living wage and cutting the universal credit taper, so that people have more money in their pockets to better afford their bills. Having a record level of payroll employment is also a crucial part of it. So, there is the broad economic argument, but then there are the individuals who face a bill that they cannot pay. They probably need support immediately and urgently. There are a number of people who give that support in each of our constituencies. Sometimes it is simply about getting that support to reschedule payments to avoid massive interest payments that ratchet up and up. Therefore, it is the broad, top-down economic policymaking, which the Government are doing, and then there is the support that we, as individual MPs with the services available in our constituencies, can give to individuals when they have specific problems.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I was surprised to hear yesterday that the Chancellor had not consulted with the Prime Minister on writing off £4.3 billion of public money. It rather undermines what the Leader of the House has been saying today about the presidential style of Government. It also raises questions about whether we have effective Cabinet governance at the moment. This £4.3 billion is a huge sum of money, a fraction of which would transform the lives of my constituents. Does he not agree that that kind of money, if it is being written off, should be a matter for Cabinet discussion and for agreement by this House as well?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have already mentioned that we have stopped and recovered £743 million in overclaimed furlough grants and prevented £2.2 billion in fraud from our bounce back loan scheme, as well as the taxpayer protection taskforce being set to recover, in addition, £1 billion. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that Her Majesty's Government, in all their parts, take fraud extraordinarily seriously and try to recoup money as fast as they possibly can. The package was slightly over £400 billion, and 1% of fraud is, of course, 1% too much. The Government obviously take it seriously, but when fraud has taken place, it is not always possible to recoup the money, because the fraudsters have spent it, and there may be no money to recover. One cannot get blood from a stone.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Will the Leader of the House update this House on the likely timetable of the Building Safety Bill? It is having its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 2 February, but the Secretary of State will be working with developers until March, and there is concern in this House that there may not be sufficient time to scrutinise any statutory protections that might be brought forward. Related to that, the Government indicated to me earlier this week that they are looking at bringing forward protections for innocent leaseholders from enforcement action before the Bill is concluded. Has the Leader of the House received any indication as to when the Government may make a statement on that particular issue?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It would be wrong of me to pre-empt Second Reading in the House of Lords. The Bill has obviously completed its passage in this House in time to pass through the Lords in the course of a normal Session. Obviously, any amendments made in the House of Lords will come back to this House for confirmation when we get to the Lords amendments stages, which is the routine way in which Bills pass. I reassure the hon. Lady that the House will have a chance to discuss those matters when they come back and that any amendments will be announced in the normal way.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Monday will be a very sad day with the funeral of our dear friend Jack. He was a great champion for the people of Erdington but also, if I may say, for the manufacturing sector and the car industry in particular. He had GKN—now Melrose—in his constituency, and of course Jaguar Land Rover. Today's report from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders shows that last year there was a 34% reduction in production compared with 2019, which is significantly worse than in European competitor nations. I am sure that Jack would ask this question, were he here. Can we have a debate in Government time on the Government's mismanagement of the pandemic and its impact on our economy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, if I may, I think it is fair to say that there will be tributes to Jack Dromey on Wednesday, when I know that many Members from all sides of the House will want to pay a tribute to him.

On the economy, I think the hon. Gentleman is simply wrong. The policy adopted during the pandemic has saved the UK economy—that is why it has already got back to its pre-pandemic level. The £400 billion of taxpayer support for individuals and industry meant

that people did not lose their jobs and that businesses survived the pandemic. If we had not provided what was probably the greatest level of support of any country in the world, we would have reduced the supply available when the economy came back, and that would have been inflationary. It would also have had the effect of putting many tens or hundreds of thousands—possibly even millions—into unemployment; in fact, we have the lowest youth unemployment on record. I think the attack on economic management is simply misplaced and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Government got the big decisions right. That has been so fundamentally important during the whole of the covid pandemic.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Swansea, 62% of waste is recycled compared with about 30% in north London. In Wales, we have a moratorium on incineration, but the Government's plan in England is to double incineration by 2030. Indeed, the latest incinerator in north London will generate 700,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide. Can we have an urgent debate on incineration and fiscal measures to reduce it so that we can have cleaner air locally, protected from the ultra-fine particulates that incinerators emit, and contain our climate change discharges in a sensible way?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thought that the hon. Gentleman might make a pun about hot air and the ability of this House sometimes to produce it. Obviously, there are mixed ways of waste disposal, and producing energy from waste is not a bad thing to do. We need a mixed and diverse energy strategy. However, I am fascinated about the concern that the socialists always have for north London.

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): Ploughing matches and tractor runs are really important parts of rural life in the north-east of Scotland and far beyond, bringing the community together and allowing for the transfer of skills in the agricultural community. However, they are being put at risk by a rule change introduced by the Treasury from 1 April that will forbid the use of red diesel in vehicles for such purposes. Could we have a debate in Government time to discuss the deleterious impact of that rule change? Farmers, rather than flushing their tanks, may simply not take part, to the detriment of all. Can we have that debate to discuss how we might perhaps flush this unnecessary rule change instead of asking farmers to do the same with their tanks?

Mr Rees-Mogg: In Somerset, they have ploughing matches, which are, as the hon. Gentleman says, things that people enjoy. Actually, a late cousin of mine was exceptionally good at winning those ploughing competitions, so I have a great deal of sympathy with what he is saying. Of course, taxation is a matter for the Chancellor, but I will ensure that his point is passed on to the Treasury.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Assuming that levelling up is still the Government's policy and that the Leader of the House thinks it is unacceptable for children to be taught in what the national media has called

"Britain's worst built school where pupils paddle in sewage and get sick from toxic fumes,"

may I ask him to use his good offices to get the Department for Education to look again at the problems at Russell Scott primary school, caused by a botched £2.7 million refurbishment by Carillion, which has required a further three quarters of a million pounds just to patch up and needs a further £5 million to put right the structural deficits? I received yesterday an appalling response from Baroness Barran saying that she recognises the condition needs at Russell Scott but there are no capital funding routes available at this time to support the school. That is not on, is it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Hon. Members and right hon. Members will have heard me say before that I view it very much as my role as Leader of the House, when Members seek redress of grievance, to help them in that process. I do not know about this specific school and I would not wish to comment on it in detail. However, if the hon. Gentleman provides me with the details I will take the matter up with the Department and see whether I can get him a better answer, but I cannot promise to be able to do so.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Dickson chemist in Rutherglen, in my constituency, has become the first Scottish pharmacy to have a hyperbaric chamber available for customers. Hyperbaric chambers can have huge health benefits for tissue damage repair or chronic illness, such as multiple sclerosis. While recognising that health is a devolved matter, will the Leader of the House schedule a debate in Government time on how provision of this equipment can be improved across the UK, both in terms of supply and cost?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is asking a Unionist question, because it is important that all parts of the Union learn from what is going on in other parts of the Union, so that we provide the best services to individuals. Having a hyperbaric chamber in a pharmacy sounds *prima facie* to be a very good idea and I hope it will be something that other people look into. I am grateful to her for raising it.

Mr Speaker: The one and only, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to ask a question of the Leader of the House. Last week, Aneeqa Ateeq was found guilty of blasphemy and given a death sentence by a court in Lahore after sharing a message on social media. Aneeqa is one of 80 people imprisoned in Pakistan under blasphemy charges. Will the Leader of the House provide a statement on Her Majesty's Government's efforts to tackle blasphemy laws in Pakistan, given that that country is the largest beneficiary of UK aid?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am always grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising these important points about freedom of religion, ensuring that the Government are aware of them and that they are raised at the highest levels within Government.

Regrettably, I am not allowed to comment on individual cases. However, the Government remain concerned about the use of blasphemy laws in Pakistan. It is our long-standing policy to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances, as a matter of principle. UK aid in Pakistan targets the most marginalised and vulnerable

[Mr Rees-Mogg]

communities, and the Government fund programmes that work to address discrimination against minorities and gender-based violence, but of course Her Majesty's Government should use all the influence at their hand to protect freedom of religion.

Point of Order

11.48 am

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, in Prime Minister's questions, the Prime Minister made some statements that are incorrect. He said that there are

"more people in our NHS now than in 2020".—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 997.]

However, there are 73,626 fewer full-time staff now than in January 2020. He said that Labour will abolish universal credit—we will not, and we voted to stop the cut in the £20 a week uplift. He said that

"we have the fastest-growing economy in the G7".—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2022; Vol. 707, c. 995.]

Looking at the last quarter, we are the fifth in the G7. And, he said that we would still be in lockdown if Labour were in power—we would not, and there are no policies to back up that assertion.

I am concerned about the amount of times this is happening in Prime Minister's questions and I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how to set the record straight.

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Member has certainly put this agenda on the record and I thank her for giving notice of the point of order.

I appreciate that the hon. Member regards the answers from the Prime Minister as unsatisfactory. Unfortunately, the content of the answers to parliamentary questions is not a matter for the Chair. I remind the House that the Government's own ministerial code requires Ministers to correct inadvertent errors in answers to parliamentary questions at the earliest opportunity. If errors have been made in this instance, I am sure the Prime Minister will seek to correct them as quickly as possible. The hon. Member will also be aware that she may wish to write to the Procedure Committee in order to take this up with it.

Draft Online Safety Bill

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Select Committee statement. Julian Knight will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Julian Knight to respond to those questions in turn. Members can expect to be called only once. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part, but I remind everybody that we have a very important debate to follow and I hope that people will try to ensure that we get on to that debate as early as possible. I now call the Chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee—Julian Knight.

11.50 am

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. With your words of endorsement ringing in my ears, I will ensure that I am as brief as the subject can allow.

I am grateful to have been granted this statement to discuss the DCMS Committee's report on the draft online safety Bill. This is an important piece of legislation that, if done right, will prevent a tremendous amount of harm to so many in our society. The ultimate aim for all of us involved in the production of the Bill is to make user-to-user and search service providers more accountable for decisions they make when designing their platforms and the systems and processes that govern them. The Committee I chair has a crucial role in ensuring that that is the ultimate outcome of this work. While I welcome large parts of the Bill's content in draft form, there are some elements that do need work so that we do not miss the opportunity to make the internet a safer space for all, while protecting freedom of expression.

One such area of particular concern to the Committee is that the Bill in its current form lacks clarity on what falls within the parameters of illegal content and in its treatment of legal but nevertheless terribly harmful content. For example, the Committee was alarmed to hear in evidence so many examples of online abuse towards women and girls that would not be adequately covered by the Bill in its current form. We are all aware of frankly appalling images being shared online without the consent of those pictured, some of whom are underage. Many of these would be covered by the Bill, but not all.

Furthermore, the internet is awash with images that are often edited to cause harm and are clearly not within the scope of the Bill. My Committee's report seeks to tackle this. We also have concerns about the less immediately obvious examples of abuse such as breadcrumbing—leading someone on virtually with a series of digital breadcrumbs on the way to illegal and harmful material. In such instances, the context of these communications is key. Some examples of online abuse that we have heard in our investigations are insidious—inch by inch, step by step, allowing people, often children and teenagers, to be lured in. In such instances, no one message, picture or like is technically illegal, but they none the less form part of a sequence of

online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The Bill can and must stop this. For this reason, we propose reframing the definition of “illegal content” to include context.

The Committee was truly shocked by the repeated examples of cyber-flashing and deliberate manipulation of images such as tech-enabled nudifying of women and deepfake pornography, which currently go unchecked. The deliberate manipulation of images to circumnavigate content moderators is egregious in its own right. It is also a key hallmark of potential child exploitation. This Bill, if crafted correctly, can and must protect children from such acts and such tactics. In its current form, it does not adequately cover these examples of truly harmful content. As such, we propose that they should be included in the Bill and covered by the duties of care in it.

Another area that many Members are rightly deeply concerned by is the many examples of inherently harmful activity that are not illegal. We support the Joint Committee in its view about harmful actions such as cyber-flashing, and people with photosensitive epilepsy being targeted by trolls sending malicious flashing images with a deliberate intent to trigger a seizure: these offences, in all the senses that we would understand, must be included in the Bill.

Finally, I come to the issue of scrutiny. The current provisions in the Bill to provide Ofcom with a suite of powers to address such actions are unclear and impractical. We urge the Government to bake in best practice by providing greater clarity in the Bill on when and how these powers should be used to ensure that they are both practical and proportionate. We recommend that there should be compliance officers in the social media companies, paid for by those companies, baking in that best practice. That will, hopefully, also lead to the ending, or at least reduction, of unwarranted take-downs.

The present situation is deeply unsatisfactory. Effectively, social media companies are editors-in-chief of the content on their sites. There is no say, and no transparency. They act according to their terms and conditions, which they decide. That can lead—and has led in the past—to unwarranted take-downs, and the people who suffer those take-downs then have to appeal to the social media companies. This is not right. It is against freedom of speech. We need proper systems so that transparency and know-how on the ground can ensure that any such issues of take-down are set against clear parameters. That can, I believe, be regulated in the same way as financial services are effectively regulated—through a strong compliance regime.

We specifically recommend that the Government reframe the language relating to freedom-of-expression considerations to incorporate a “must balance” test, to enable Ofcom, and the compliance officers whose introduction we propose, to assess whether providers have duly balanced their freedom-of-expression obligations with their decision making, thereby preventing unjustified take-downs of material.

Our Committee has made clear that it strongly disagrees with the recommendation of the now defunct Joint Committee—which did amazing work in this area—that a permanent Joint Committee be established as

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

We disagree with that proposal for a range of reasons, but not least because it would set a precedent which could be written into any other Bill and could then

[*Julian Knight*]

effectively circumnavigate the Select Committee system. I think the Select Committee system is the jewel in the crown of this House, and I say that not just because I have a personal interest in it. This, I think, is something we can do ourselves. If there is a need for pre-legislative scrutiny, Select Committees should be able to deal with it, but in any event the Government are free to set up a framework of pre-legislative scrutiny which may be on a one-off or ad hoc basis. That has happened before after a period of time in the case of other Acts that have passed through this place.

I welcome wholeheartedly the aims of this Bill and much of its content. I hope and expect the Department to be in listening mode—I know that the Minister personally is absolutely committed to that—so that we can all work together to ensure that the aim and the reality of the Bill are aligned, and we can make the internet a safer and a better place that is more in tune with what I would describe as the health of our society.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) and the other members of the Committee for their hard work in delivering this important report. Having previously been a member of the Committee, I am all too well aware of the challenges to online safety, particularly in the context of defining or contextualising what constitutes a “harm”. The Labour party has long called for tougher penalties for tech companies which fail to comply with their responsibilities to users; a change in culture is clearly urgently required for those companies, which have been left unaccountable for far too long.

The report has also highlighted a number of issues, or omissions, in the Government’s current draft bill, and I am keen to hear the hon. Gentleman’s thoughts on those. First, the report recommends that providers should have designated compliance officers to ensure good governance. This is not the first time that that recommendation has been made, but the proposal has been discounted until now. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government have been too slow in pushing social media companies to act?

Secondly, the Secretary of State, in her evidence to the Joint Committee assessing the draft online safety bill, referred to legal advice that she had received, including advice on a foundational duty of care. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is vital for the Government to publish that legal advice ahead of the response to the DCMS Committee’s report, so that their reply can be understood in the context of the advice that they have received? I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree—especially given events that have unfolded in relation to other matters this week—that it is simply not acceptable for the Government to conceal important advice from the public domain.

Julian Knight: I thank the hon. Member for her kind question, but also for her acknowledgment of the ongoing work of the Select Committee, on which she played a fantastic role during her time with us.

The hon. Member references compliance officers, and the key, of course, is to make the regime pre-emptive rather than reactive. I think that actually helps freedom

of expression, basically because if we in effect have this baked into the system, there is less chance of take-downs as a result.

When it comes to social media companies and the Government’s interaction with them, there is an idea that the Government have in effect run scared of social media and the huge lobby. These are the new masters of the universe—the new oil companies, the new banking institutions—and they have huge and enormous powers. I think it is therefore beholden on the Government to draw from every part of this House in order to come up with a framework that can best bring them in to be good citizens in our society. I am hopeful of the time when Nick Clegg is not perhaps as welcome in putting his views, but is in that regard perhaps the same as Members in this place. I do concur to some degree with the hon. Member, but every Government in the world is also facing this huge issue.

On publishing legal advice, I do believe wholeheartedly in complete transparency. I think that part of the process of being cross-party and getting this Bill right actually should be absolute transparency when it comes to such matters.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his entire Committee on this report into what he correctly describes in the report as a very “complex” Bill. Given its complexity, does he agree with me that it is very important that the Government response both to his Committee’s report and, indeed, to the report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill is not just substantive, but timely and reaches all of us well in advance of Second Reading of the Bill, so that we can all consider properly the Government’s responses?

Julian Knight: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend, and I do concur in that respect. We have waited a very long time for this Bill, and we have to get it right. I think we have waited too long for the Bill, but that is the past—that is done. What we cannot do now is rush things to such an extent that we cannot take everyone’s views on board, and therefore I would concur. Basically, this has to be a structure that survives, potentially for decades to come, and is built on as we see challenges going forward, so I concur with my right hon. and learned Friend.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his statement. I am very glad to hear him acknowledge the importance of protecting freedom of expression, but there is also the issue of anti-discrimination law. On a number of occasions in this Chamber, I have raised the problem that Twitter’s hateful conduct policy and its moderation policy often discriminate against women by taking down women’s tweets when they state biological facts and failing to take down abusive and violent tweets directed at women. The reason for that is that Twitter does not have sex as a protected characteristic in its hateful conduct policy. This was raised by the Joint Committee on Human Rights in a report a couple of years ago, in which we recommended that Twitter should include sex as a protected characteristic in its hateful conduct policy.

From my inquiries, it seems that Twitter thinks it is above the domestic law of the United Kingdom when it comes to anti-discrimination law, and it seems to be

praying in aid a loophole in the Equality Act 2010. I am not sure it is right about that legally, but does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that, if there is a loophole in the Equality Act that is letting Twitter off the hook when it comes to our anti-discrimination law, the Online Safety Bill would be a good opportunity to close that loophole, so that Twitter and other service providers are all subject to the anti-discrimination law of the United Kingdom?

Julian Knight: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her comments, and I have a great deal of sympathy for what she says. I am well aware that she receives unwarranted and vile abuse at times for expressing her views, and I think that is abhorrent in many respects. It highlights in many regards the point I made earlier about the social media companies being their own editors-in-chief and effectively having their own content policies. That will be the case going forward, but there needs to be oversight of those so that they are compliant with the new law as it stands. One of our recommendations is:

“We have proposed several amendments to the definition and scope of harms covered by the regime that would bring the Bill into line with the UK’s obligations to freedom of expression under international human rights law.”

I hope that that recommendation would cover many of the aspects to which the hon. and learned Lady is referring.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A few years ago, on social media, there was a picture of my young son being beheaded in an ISIS-type scenario. It was not really my son in the picture, but the image represented my son. The excellent Chairman of the Select Committee is right to say how powerful Select Committees are. Would anything that the Government are doing in the Bill have prevented that picture from being put online, or have helped us find out who did that?

Julian Knight: I have heard of this before from my hon. Friend. I am grateful for the opportunity to express my deepest sympathy, shock and anger at the vile, disgusting behaviour that he and his family faced. The short answer to his question is: yes, if the Bill is got right. That picture is a type of deepfake. The harassment aspect is illegal; a case would have to be built around the harassment aspect, so he would almost have to take this offline, rather than deal with it as an online matter. The way to deal with it online would be by baking in resources such as compliance officers, and by writing it into the Bill that posting and manipulating an image that is meant to do harm should be considered an online harm, and therefore something for which social media companies could be called to account. If the Bill is crafted correctly, the egregious and disgusting use of vile images of that kind would, I hope, be curtailed.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee. I confirm that all Members across the Committee are in firm agreement with the recommendations in the report. Does he believe that the Government should take particular note of recommendation 19 on designated compliance officers, and recommendation 28, which says that the Government should scrap plans to introduce a permanent joint committee to oversee online safety and digital regulation? The latter idea seems to have come out of nowhere; perhaps it was written on the back of a fag

packet or came from a weekend tweet—I do not know. Should the Government not abandon that daft idea, and recognise that it is the proper duty of the Select Committee to undertake that scrutiny?

Julian Knight: For me, one of the attractions of compliance officers is that the idea is based on the regime we have for financial services, which has been one of the most successfully regulated industries, certainly over the past 15 years since the financial crash. The role of the compliance officer has been key to that. One good thing about the proposal is that it is the social media companies that would pay. Whenever social media companies see any form of potential illegality, they push it to arm’s length; they push it to the police, and expect the police to pick up the pieces. The police do not have the resources to chase these things down, so only exemplars get pulled up by the police. The companies should be responsible, and should pay for their own policing.

Of course I agree with the point about recommendation 28. I would like to think that the debate on that has shifted over time. The Secretary of State was obviously expressing a genuine view. I completely understand that view, and why it was expressed at that juncture. However, the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill has perhaps run away with the suggestion a little bit, and in so doing, has perhaps encroached on the good governance of this place.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his answers. Recent reports have stated that the Draft Online Safety Bill is neither clear enough nor robust enough to tackle some forms of illegal and harmful content. Responsibility for some of the most serious forms of child sexual exploitation may be evaded. Will the Chair of the Committee provide reassurances that tackling all forms of illegal, harmful and exploitative content will be prioritised in the Bill, so that we can protect young children, and many others who are vulnerable?

Julian Knight: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to highlight that point. There is an issue about content that is deliberately manipulated in order to avoid moderation. Effectively, it is content that just manages to evade the algorithms, but is there as a signpost to abuse, or is a means of taking people off one platform and on to another that is not a tier-1 platform and that may be less regulated. It is crucial that that is clamped down on as soon as possible, so that we can protect children in the way that he and I—and, I am sure, all Members of the House—wish to do.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): Let me start by putting on record my thanks and the Government’s thanks for the work that the Select Committee has done. We are grateful for the time and attention that its members have given to this important issue.

There is no question but that large social media firms have not been prioritising safety and preventing harm, even in relation to children. They have been prioritising profit instead of people, and the time has come for Parliament to act. The legislation we have tabled is groundbreaking; we will be one of the first countries, if not the first country, in the world to take such a step.

[Chris Philp]

The measures in the Bill, even as drafted, are very strong, with fines of up to 10% of global revenue capable of being levied, and personal liability for some senior executives in certain circumstances.

I thank the Select Committee Chairman for his comments about freedom of expression, which are of course important. There are duties in the Bill as drafted requiring social media firms to have regard to freedom of expression and, particularly, to protect journalistic and democratic content. We are interested in exploring with the Select Committee how we can go further in those areas, and I look forward to appearing before it in a week or two.

Let me finish by saying that we are very much in listening mode; we have been digesting the reports of the Select Committee and the Joint Committee very carefully. It is our intention to bring forward an updated Bill in this Session so that it can have its Second Reading. In preparing that updated Bill, we will continue to work closely with the Committees and to listen carefully to the views of Members of this House, including those expressed in the session today and in the debate we had a week or two ago. There is a great deal of wisdom on both sides of the House that we can learn from, and it is our intention to do that as we bring forward this groundbreaking piece of legislation designed to protect our fellow citizens but particularly children.

Julian Knight: I thank the Minister for his comments. He is very engaged in the process and shows due respect to the Joint Committee and the Select Committee both in terms of our work and through his engagement. That is very welcome and is a reminder of times past.

I welcome the Government's listening mode. The message from both sides of the House must be that we can all contribute as much as possible and that this should not be about party lines. This legislation is too important to get bogged down in issues such as that, because it is about the protection of our society, our democracy, our children and our mental health.

Backbench Business

Holocaust Memorial Day

12.13 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2022.

I would like to thank the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for co-sponsoring today's debate. I am only sorry that the right hon. Member for Barking could not be with us because she is recovering from covid. As Margaret is not here, and therefore cannot be embarrassed, I thought I would say a few words about her. She has championed holocaust remembrance throughout her 28 years in the House and has proven to be one of our most courageous warriors against antisemitism and racism of all kinds. I will miss her enormously when she steps down at the next general election, but I feel fortunate to have served alongside her and to be able to do so for some time yet. I am sure we all wish her a speedy recovery.

Holocaust Memorial Day has been a national day of commemoration for over 20 years and our debates have become a regular fixture in the parliamentary calendar. We use this day to fulfil a solemn obligation, an obligation of remembrance: to never allow the memory of those who died in the holocaust to be forgotten by anyone anywhere in the world. This year's theme, "One Day", encourages us to put aside our differences for just one day, to come together to understand more about our past, and to resolve to act for a better future. I hope that Members from across the House will join me at 8 pm this evening and light candles in our windows as a mark of remembrance.

Today, the 77th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, we remember a dark stain on human history, the greatest evil perpetrated by man against man in the long catalogue of human crimes. Today, we mourn with those who mourn, and grieve with those who grieve. We remember the names, the faces and the promise of the 6 million Jews who were murdered. Today, we pay tribute to those who survived and, for all these years, have borne witness to that evil and have served humankind in doing so. Today, we honour and remember the memory of the allied forces, including the 3.3 million British servicemen who left hearth and home, suffered appalling casualties and freed a continent from the grip of tyranny. We pay tribute to the memory of those non-Jewish heroes and heroines who saved countless lives—those people who the people of Israel call the righteous among the nations. In an age of indifference, they acted. In an age of fear, they showed courage and their memory is an example to us all.

As time passes, the importance of this day grows. In 2020, 147 survivors of the holocaust passed away in this country. In 2021, 134 died. The youngest survivor of the camps is currently 77. As the survivors die, the holocaust is moving from living memory to vital history, which is why we must keep their experiences alive. It is why I pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, run by the brilliant Olivia Marks-Woldman; the Holocaust Education Trust, led by the indefatigable Karen Pollock;

the Wiener Holocaust Library; the Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre, which is in my own constituency in Nottinghamshire; and many other organisations and charities for the work they do to document, record and educate.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and thanking the Prince of Wales for his initiative in having the portraits of seven holocaust survivors painted? This is one way of ensuring a lasting legacy, and of Holocaust Memorial Day remaining in the public's consciousness.

Robert Jenrick: I will, and I thought the images of those survivors and their families with the Prince of Wales—just yesterday, I believe—seeing the unveiling of their portraits at the Royal Gallery was extremely moving.

Those are some of the reasons why, as Secretary of State, I worked to gain approval for the National Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre, so that, when the time when the last living survivors leave us does come, there will be another permanent centre to reflect, honour and remember those who suffered and died, and to educate future generations. I am grateful to Members on all sides of this House who continue to support that initiative.

Our debate in Parliament also matters. I have come year after year to share my own or my constituents' experiences of the holocaust. I have talked about my own family, many of whom perished in death camps in what today is Ukraine, but two of whom miraculously survived—my children are their great-grandchildren. Had the right hon. Member for Barking been present, she would have shared with us the experience of her brother-in-law, who is gravely ill.

Herbert was born in Germany in 1930 into a successful middle-class Jewish family. One of his earliest memories is Kristallnacht in November 1938, when his grandfather was assaulted and had all his teeth knocked out. His father had already lost his job as a judge because he was a Jew. Herbert and his little sister were among the very few children who escaped on the Kindertransport. He still has the passport with the Nazi swastika imprinted on it. He remembers little of the journey he took to Liverpool Street—he was only eight. From London he went to Wales, where the children were joined by their mother, who managed to escape. His father did get to Switzerland, but the family were never reunited. Although a refugee, Herbert served in the RAF and has enjoyed a full and fulfilling life in Britain.

The right hon. Lady and I both know how powerful it is to have heard these stories from our own family members, to feel their impact and to have had a personal relationship with those who were victims of the holocaust. It is—I think I speak for all of us in this House who have met them—one of the greatest privileges to meet survivors. It was a huge privilege for me to meet Sir Ben Helfgott, Lily Ebert and Susan Pollack in July, when together we marked the granting of planning permission for the memorial in Victoria Gardens. All were very emotional that day. One said to me, as we walked away, that she could die easier knowing that they had contributed to that project and to educating future generations.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a very important and powerful speech. I had the privilege of meeting Gena Turgel, the

bride of Belsen, when she spoke to schoolchildren in my constituency. Does he welcome the work of the trust, which is propagating those memories to the next generation and how important it is that that continuous word-of-mouth is passed on?

Robert Jenrick: I certainly do and the hon. Gentleman makes the point very powerfully. The way we remember is changing. For example, Dov, the great-grandson of Lily, whom I met in Victoria Gardens, is now using his 1.3 million TikTok followers to educate the next generation with her stories. I strongly encourage those who have not seen them to do so. The importance of remembrance remains as strong as ever.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentioned Susan Pollack. Some years ago, I stood with other Conservative Members at the memorial in Kigali, which is probably the largest grave in the world, with more than 250,000 people murdered in the Rwandan genocide. Does he acknowledge that one of the most important points of a debate such as this is to look at where we have failed since the holocaust, and where sometimes the very noble sentiments we express in this House have fallen short?

Robert Jenrick: Absolutely. My right hon. Friend has a long record, of which he should be proud, of drawing the attention of the House to exactly those issues. That is exactly the point I was turning to.

Since the holocaust, human civilisation has advanced by virtually every metric. We live today in the most advanced human civilisation in history, yet we are still capable of such evil. To acknowledge that fallibility and where it can lead is the best corrective to these indescribable tragedies. The genocide committed on the Jews, the Roma, the Gypsies and the disabled in Europe in the 1940s was, as my right hon. Friend says, not an aberration in history. There have been subsequent genocides in our living memory: the millions of victims of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia; the million-plus victims of the Rwandan genocide; and the 8,000 Muslim men and boys who were murdered in Srebrenica.

Today, atrocities continue in Darfur, and last month the Uyghur Tribunal's judgment in London found beyond reasonable doubt that the People's Republic of China is responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and torture in Xinjiang region. Its findings were supported by this House in the debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani). In each of those cases, we see what happens when the powerless cry for help and the powerful fail to answer.

On Holocaust Memorial Day, it is appropriate that we reflect on the atrocities of the past to draw connections with those of the present. While Britain is, as I can attest from my own family, one of the most welcoming places for Jews anywhere in the world, antisemitism is on the rise at home. This year, the Community Security Trust found that anti-Jewish hate incidents rose by 49%.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): On the issue of rising antisemitism, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is very good that there are opportunities for schoolchildren to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, to see personally the horrors that were inflicted on those poor people, and that that is something that should be

[Shailesh Vara]

encouraged, to ensure that more people understand the reality of what happened? May I also just compliment him on managing to secure this debate and on his very powerful speech?

Robert Jenrick: I thank my hon. Friend, and return to my thanks to and support of the Holocaust Educational Trust, which sends hundreds of thousands of our young people to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau. I hope this Government will continue to support the trust, as previous Governments did, enabling those visits to continue.

Social media is fuelled with antisemitic hatred, with conspiracy theorists growing their followers daily. According to research published last year by the Antisemitism Policy Trust, there were up to half a million explicitly antisemitic tweets per year made viewable to UK users. During the pandemic, we have seen the use and abuse of holocaust language and imagery, with anti-lockdown protesters carrying signs reading “Vaccine Holocaust” and wearing the Star of David. In May last year, we saw a convoy of vehicles drive through north London with speakers blasting out antisemitic slurs and threats against Jews. In December, the passengers on a bus in Oxford Street, who had been celebrating Hanukkah, were subjected to vile and frightening abuse, with racists banging shoes against the bus.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I think it was in the dying days of the Obama Administration that Obama told students at a university that “ignorance is not a virtue.”

Do we not need to put that across again and again? Ignorance is not a virtue. It is education and knowledge that lead us to understand and not to commit such atrocities against others.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Lady makes her point eloquently, and of course I agree entirely.

Some of us here have been on the receiving end of antisemitism—I know the right hon. Member for Barking has on many occasions. I recently received a letter telling me to teach my “Jewish Zionist wife” to “put out fires”, as they intended to burn our house down and cremate our children.

As Communities Secretary, I encouraged universities to adopt and use the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, a cause taken up strongly by the current Education Secretary, but despite those entreaties some universities have not done so. Only last year the University of Bristol, one of our most respected universities, acted painfully slowly to discipline Professor David Miller, a purveyor of antisemitic conspiracy theories that went well beyond the bounds of free speech. Such incidents are one of the reasons I champion the brilliant Union of Jewish Students.

I will end my speech today as the right hon. Member for Barking would have done, by quoting a diary extract of her grandfather’s. Old, ill and interned, deemed an enemy alien at the time, in an entry before Christmas, he wrote,

“Is the present time a blip? Is Hitler only an episode? Are these ideas going to disappear and the better side of humanity re-emerge?”

We owe it to her grandfather Wilhelm, and all the survivors of genocides, to do all we can to learn from their experiences.

Today, we remember not simply the liberation of the camps, but the triumph of freedom and the human spirit. We marvel at the strength, the resilience and the faith of those survivors and of Jewish people here in the UK and around the world. We must continue to tell their stories. We must use this day to continue the fight against hatred in all its forms. Then, perhaps, one day we will have a future without genocide.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It may or may not be known to the House—it is known to the Government—that permission has been given to appeal the planning approval for the memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens. I think we need to be careful about how we speak about it. I did not want to interrupt the exceptionally good speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on a very important subject.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which of course is not a point for the Chair, but which might well be important as a point of information for hon. Members participating in the debate. I suppose that, to some extent, planning appeals are sub judice and we must be careful about what we say here in the Chamber.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Although a great many colleagues wish to participate in today’s important debate, I hope that we can manage without a time limit. If everybody, having regard for others’ rights as well as their own, takes eight to nine minutes or less, everyone will be able to get in without a time limit. I do hope that this is one debate in which the Chair can rely on colleagues to think of others, not only of themselves.

12.31 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for his powerful and moving opening speech. May I say how sorry we were to hear of his family’s recent experiences? He has solidarity on the Opposition Benches against those racists.

Every day on my Twitter feed, I see the Auschwitz memorial’s images of people murdered. Those that grab me particularly are the faces of the babes in arms, toddlers, children and teens who were murdered in the gas chambers. Every single day, I wonder how those faces could be treated as the enemy, having their very humanity denied. Every single day, I wonder how it is possible that human beings could do this to such innocents. Every single day, I have genuinely no idea how it happened.

Today, I want to tell the story of Rena Quint, who survived the holocaust at just nine years of age. Rena lived with her mother, father and two brothers. She remembers that across the street was a kiosk that sold ice cream; she remembers her brothers pulling her through the snow on a sledge. She was just three years old when Germany invaded Poland. Her home was in the new ghetto: it took in many sick and hungry strangers, and people died before her eyes.

Then, one day, there was a round-up. All the women and children were brutally forced into the synagogue. Rena, her mum and her brothers were among them. She

describes it as a scene out of hell, but she remembers a man at an outside door who beckoned to her, called her by name and told her to run. She still does not quite understand why she let go of her mum's and her brothers' hands, but she ran. Rena says that maybe the hand of God pushed her, because all those women and children were transported to Treblinka, and they were murdered.

Rena was given a new name. She was dressed as a boy and joined her father's forced labour group. She has no idea how she was able to pretend for so long, but pretending kept her alive. She had to work at a glass factory at just five or six years of age, carrying heavy loads in extreme heat all day long.

In 1944, when it was decided that their slave labour was no longer needed in the factory, Rena and her father were packed into freezing cattle cars to Bergen-Belsen. They had no food, no water and no toilets, and they were locked in for three days with the dead and the dying. When they arrived, her father knew that they would be forced to strip for inspection, so they were forced to separate. Rena never saw her father again. She endured the utter horror of the camp for many months, with nothing to eat but sawdust bread and sometimes thin, greasy soup, with cold and disease all around. Rena never cried in response to any of the thousands of deaths that she would have witnessed. Murder was her every day.

And then, one day, when Rena was sick with typhus, she remembers lying under a tree. She felt that it was impossible to get up and she just wanted to fall asleep forever, but then there was a commotion. British soldiers had arrived and they were liberating the camp. Rena remembers getting some milk and bread and going into a hospital tent and being cared for.

Rena has lived a long and flourishing life to this day, but she was so young when her birth family were murdered that she no longer remembers their faces. Rena's account reminds us of the systemic inhumanity that so many millions of Jews were subjected to during the holocaust, and it speaks of how the innocence of children was so completely disregarded and destroyed by the Nazis.

Rena had to behave as an adult from as young as five years of age while having to deal with things that no adult, still less any child, should experience. We must never forget her story. Her story reminds me of the children growing up today in the Rohingya refugee camps. It makes me think of the children in Bosnia now facing the same rising threat as their parents and grandparents. What are we going to do to stop these young lives being brutalised, too?

This year's theme is "One Day". My hope is that, one day, children will no longer be dehumanised or treated as enemies, targets or soldiers. But even when that day comes, as I pray it does, we must remember Rena's life and her family's lives and all the other millions murdered.

12.38 pm

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) after her excellent speech and my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), whom I congratulate on securing this debate. I join everybody in the Chamber in thanking the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust

and everybody else who works in this area. I particularly pay tribute to the Antisemitism Policy Trust and its chief executive, Danny Stone, who does so much in supporting and providing the secretariat for the all-party group against antisemitism, which I and the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) co-chair.

I will attend the Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony in Brigg in north Lincolnshire this Sunday, which will take place at our new memorial there. It is a town I have spoken about before that has little to zero Jewish population but which, through its town council and particularly Councillor Rob Waltham, decided that it wanted to do its bit and to do more to ensure that the memory of the holocaust is never forgotten. That is why, just a few years ago, following a competition in which local schools took part, a local pupil designed a fantastic new memorial in Brigg, and the town will come together on Sunday to ensure that we never forget.

I thank Demeter House School in Brigg, a special educational needs school that has been working with the University College London Centre for Holocaust Education to build its confidence in teaching its children about the holocaust. It is one of 165 schools across England taking part in that initiative, and I pay tribute to it for that.

Why is this debate so important? Sadly, the scourge of antisemitism continues to plague our society and others around the world. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark said, we have seen that in the past year with the case of Professor Miller at the University of Bristol, which failed to protect its students swiftly. This was a racist, antisemitic professor targeting Jewish students, accusing them of effectively being in the pay of the state of Israel—a classic antisemitic trope. In calling that out, as we did not so long ago in an Adjournment debate, members of the all-party parliamentary group were singled out and attacked as being Zionist agents, agents of the state of Israel or in the pay of Israel.

Why is this debate necessary? As other Members have said, people visiting any social media platform over the past couple of years will have found antisemitic posts linking covid and the development of vaccines to Israel, to Jews, to the classic international conspiracy. We have seen, as has been referenced, the sickening sight of people on anti-lockdown protests wearing yellow stars.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: Of course I give way to the vice-chair of the APPG.

Christian Wakeford: Just last week we saw swastikas on the streets of Bury in protest against covid passes. It is depressing that we even need to say this in this House, but there is no place for antisemitism, these tropes or this hatred on our streets, campuses and society, and it needs a debate such as this to call it out and say, "No more." [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Andrew Percy: Absolutely—I could not agree more. Too many people throughout this coronavirus period have casually linked the necessary measures to Nazi Germany. My constituents are largely very sensible people—they have sent me here four times, which proves

[Andrew Percy]

how sensible they are; and they have done so, I might add, in ever increasing numbers and with a higher percentage of the vote, but I digress—but I am afraid to say that even a small number of my constituents have sent me some of this material. One of them even sent me a photograph of the Nazi health pass, likening it to the vaccine mandate, even though the Nazis and Hitler himself were against vaccine mandates.

That is absolutely why this debate is necessary. We have this debate every year, and each time we can all trot out a whole range of different experiences and examples from the preceding year, as Members have done today—I will not repeat them—which prove the sad necessity for this debate and for the ongoing work we have to do on antisemitism.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Andrew Percy: I will, but I am conscience of your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Bob Blackman: I will be very brief. My hon. Friend is taking an impassioned view of antisemitism. Is he aware that just yesterday Jewish shopkeepers in Stamford Hill were attacked? There is a video of the incident and a police investigation is taking place, but it is clear that antisemitism is rife in our society today.

Andrew Percy: I was not aware of that particular incident, but I am sorry to say that this is happening time and again. Anyone who visits social media or other online platforms, including sales sites such as Amazon, will be able to find books that minimise and question the holocaust. The APPG has raised this many times, in repeated meetings, with the social media platforms and through direct approaches to Amazon and others, but anyone who looks today will be able to find holocaust denial and revisionist material for sale on Amazon.

In the few minutes I have left, I want to talk, in a more positive sense, about some of those heroes who did so much to help save people in the holocaust. This year I came across a book called “The Bravest Voices”, written by Ida Cook. She was one of two sisters, Ida and Louise Cook, who have been described as plain and dowdy English spinsters in the 1930s. They were huge fans of opera, and they took it upon themselves to rescue Jews and non-Jews from Nazi Germany. They did that by flying out on a Friday evening from Croydon airport, and returning overnight on Sunday via train and boat from the Netherlands, so as to be back at work at their desk jobs in the civil service in London on Monday morning. As I said, they fell into that through their love of opera, and they met people who were trying to get out of Germany. They would go through the border on the way into Germany dressed very plainly, and they would come out dressed in the furs—they often sewed new labels into those—jewels and valuables of the people they were rescuing, which would then be sold in the UK to raise the funds required at the time for the sponsorship of Jews who wanted to get out.

They did that in a very matter of fact way, and the book written by Ida Cook is wonderful in its modesty. They do not talk about “rescuing”; they talk simply

about “getting people out”, “pulling people out”, or “dragging people out”—it is well worth a read. They used their English spinster act. Neither of them ever married. The pen name of Ida Cook was Mary Burchell, who was a famous Mills and Boon author. They enlisted church groups, and others, to facilitate their work, and they assisted countless numbers of people, rescuing them from Nazi Germany. We learn some of the names, and others we know simply by their first name, including a lady referred to simply as “Alice”, who refused to sell a hat to von Ribbentrop’s wife, and who they managed to rescue successfully.

The case that most struck me was that of a young Polish Jewish boy who they rescued at the very last minute in 1939. He was expelled from Germany in October 1938 for being a Polish Jew, and was one of those caught up at the Polish border because of the refusal to allow people into Poland at that time—that is not a criticism of Poland, as borders were closing to Jews all across the world at that time. The boy spent the winter in the Zbaszyn improvised prison camp on the Polish border. By some means, which the Cook sisters did not know when they wrote their biography in the 1950s and never learned, he contacted them, and they received a letter asking if they could raise a guarantee to get him out. The tribulations over the next few months as they tried to rescue him are an interesting and emotional read. They had trouble getting money to him and getting the necessary permits. He had a permit number that would have put him 500 above the permits that were allowed in at that time, but a friendly civil servant here in London did the necessary work. At last, two weeks before the outbreak of war, the Cook sisters were out in Germany meeting the next group of people who they wanted to rescue, when they got word that, by assisting one of the last children’s transports out of Poland, this young boy was able to get to a boat. As they described, he was literally:

“The last man to board the last boat that left Gdynia”.

just a couple of days before the outbreak of war.

That is a very moving story, as is my last point, which is that the Cook sisters downplayed their own role in all this, and constantly throughout the biography play up the role of others. That includes the consul general at Frankfurt during Kristallnacht, who opened up the British consulate to Jews, day and night, and provided food, since Jews had been banned from purchasing food in the days running up to Kristallnacht. He even went out on the streets giving food to Jews. Ida Cook describes that at the end:

“It was a piece of Britain”.

I think that is something we should all reflect on today when we think about other refugee crises, including that we have seen in Afghanistan. It was a piece of Britain, Madam Deputy Speaker, and today when we face other crises we should ask ourselves this: what is the piece of Britain that we want to project around the world?

12.50 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): I rise to speak today to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day, which, on the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, commemorates the 6 million Jews murdered during the holocaust, alongside the millions killed under Nazi persecution of other groups, including Roma and

Sinti people, Slavic people, LGBT and disabled people and political and religious minorities. On this day, we also remember the subsequent genocides in Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur and Bosnia.

As the holocaust fades from living memory, I want to put on record my gratitude to all of the survivors whose testimonies are at the heart of holocaust education, but which come at huge personal cost. It is impossible to comprehend the abjectness of the horrors that they experienced, the trauma that follows them through their lives, or the sacrifice that bearing witness entails. Marceline Loridan-Ivens said:

“If you only knew, all of you, how the camp remains permanently within us. It remains in all our minds, and will until we die”

Similarly, Shlomo Venezia, said:

“Everything takes me back to the camp. Whatever I do, whatever I see, my mind keeps harking back to the same place. It’s as if the “work” I was forced to do there had never really left my head...Nobody ever really gets out of the Crematorium”.

Those who survived the camps were greeted with “incredulity, indifference, and even hostility”

upon their return to their communities. Although the allies won the war against Nazism in Europe, antisemitism has never been defeated, and fascism grew rapidly in the UK in the post-war years, contrary to the narrative of triumph over Hitler.

Jewish soldiers such as Morris Beckman and Jules Kanopinski returned to London to find fascists staging outdoor rallies in the east end,

“shouting out the same antagonism and the same filth as before the war, and now even worse—they were saying the gas chambers weren’t enough”.

The anti-fascist 43 Group that they and their comrades established, and the later 62 Group, would be breaking up, on average, 15 fascist meetings a week and engaging in regular physical confrontation with fascists, including in the battle for Ridley Road, which was memorialised this year in a BBC drama. The irony is not lost on me that, in the very week that Ridley Road was released, my synagogue in Manchester, where much of it was filmed, had our Friday night service gate-crashed by the far right. It may be a historical drama, but the hatred in it is very much contemporary.

I have sat in synagogue while fellow Jews have been slaughtered elsewhere in the world for practising their faith, as I am, and so to proclaim our faith proudly, to stand as proud Jews, is itself an act of defiance. As the partisan vow declares, “Mir veln zey iberlebn”, which means, we will outlive them. From generation to generation, the Jewish spirit endures.

In Kveller, Rachel Stomel writes:

“In the context of Jewish law, remembrance is not a reflexive, passive process directed inwards. Our sages teach us that the way we fulfil the Torah’s commandment to remember the Sabbath—‘Zachor et Yom HaShabbat le’kodsho’ (remember the sabbath day to keep it holy)—is by active declaration in the performance of the kiddush, the Shabbat blessing over wine. We are commanded to remember the Amelikites brutal massacre of our people—‘Zachor et Asher asah lecha Amalek’ (remember what the Amalek did to you)—through intentional, public, verbal affirmation, and by ridding the world of the evil that they represent. Neither of these Torah commandments can be fulfilled by quiet contemplation, memorialisation must manifest through specific action.”

The theme for this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “One Day,” both as a call to action for that one day when we have eradicated the hatred that leads to genocide

and because one day, as a snapshot of what happened, can be helpful in seeking to understand and process the enormity of the holocaust. The brutality and the hopelessness of the concentration camps and the lengths to which the Nazis went to extinguish any faint glimmers of hope are summed up in this quote from the survivor Shlomo Venezia, who was forced to work in the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, emptying the gas chambers of bodies, including those of family members, processing their hair and teeth, and loading them into the ovens for cremation. He said:

“One day, while I was presenting my testimony at a school, a young girl asked me if anyone had ever emerged from the gas chamber alive. Her schoolmates laughed at her, as if she hadn’t understood a thing. How could anyone survive in those conditions, when the deadly gas used had been carefully developed to kill everyone? It’s impossible. In spite of everything, however absurd her question may seem, it was quite relevant, since it did indeed happen.

Few people ever saw and can relate this episode, and yet it is true. One day when everyone had started working normally after the arrival of a transport, one of the men involved in removing the bodies from the gas chamber heard a strange noise. It wasn’t so unusual to hear strange noises, since sometimes the victims’ bodies continued to emit gas. But this time he claimed the noise was different. We stopped and pricked up our ears, but nobody could hear anything. We told ourselves that he’d surely been hearing voices. A few minutes later, he again stopped and told us that this time he was certain he’d heard a death rattle. And when we listened closely, we, too, could hear the same noise. It was a sort of wailing. To begin with, the sounds were spaced out, then they came more frequently until they became a continuous crying that we all identified as the crying of a newborn baby. The man who had heard it first went to see where exactly the noise was coming from. Stepping over the bodies, he found the source of those little wailings. It was a baby girl, barely two months old, still clinging to her mother’s breast and vainly trying to suckle. She was crying because she could feel that the milk had stopped flowing. He took the baby and brought it out of the gas chamber. We knew it would be impossible to keep her with us. Impossible to hide her or get her accepted by the Germans. And indeed, as soon as the guard saw the baby, he didn’t seem at all displeased at having a little baby to kill. He fired a shot and that little girl who had miraculously survived the gas was dead. Nobody could survive. Everybody had to die, including us: it was just a matter of time.”

Elie Wiesel speaks of watching Jewish babies thrown alive into the vast ditches where bodies were burned, confirmed by Telford Taylor at the Nuremberg trials. Lily Ebert testifies of witnessing babies torn from their mothers’ arms and dashed against walls. I have seen the piles of teeth, hair and shoes that represent a tiny fraction of those who passed through Auschwitz-Birkenau, and how small those chambers were, with up to 1,200 people piled into a tiny space so that no poison gas would be wasted. This was not, as we might imagine, a quick process, with it taking up to 12 minutes to be poisoned to death, crushed in among hundreds of panicking people, desperately trying to cling to life, trying to break or claw their way out. Seven hundred Jews were murdered in the gas chambers on the very day before they were set to be liberated and many more died by disease or by suicide in the months following liberation. There are some things that a human just cannot endure.

These survivors witnessed day in, day out what no human being should ever be condemned to see: the very depths of man’s cruelty and inhumanity towards his fellow man laid bare. The Hasidic mystic, the Baal Shem Tov, said:

[Charlotte Nichols]

"If a man has beheld evil, he may know that it was shown to him in order that he learn his own guilt and repent; for what is shown to him is also within him."

If man can sink to these depths once, to industrialise the brutalisation and murder of their fellow humans, they can and will do so again. Indeed, "never again" rings hollow with the genocides that have taken place since the holocaust, and our failure as a nation to learn the lessons of the past as this Government turn away refugees from other parts of the world knowing full well the fate of the refugees from the holocaust denied safe passage to Britain and the US, and returned to their deaths.

We allow a minority in public life to degrade and debase the memory of the holocaust—to make inappropriate comparisons with modern day events as though there can be any parallel drawn, rhetorical or otherwise, between, for example, those who choose not to be vaccinated, or a particularly poor performance in the football, and the experience of the victims of Nazi persecution. We still see the cancer of antisemitism in our communities, with the threat of hate crime in person and online a daily reality that we should not have to live alongside.

Today we honour the victims, the survivors, the heroes and the martyrs of the holocaust. We cannot change the past, but by bearing witness we can change the course of the future. Ira Goldfarb said of his father, the survivor Aron Goldfarb, that

"throughout my father's life, survival adopted a new meaning. Survival to my father was carrying the nightmares of his childhood and choosing to find joy, humor, and compassion in life every single day. Survival was seeing the worst of humanity and still offering his last piece of bread to someone who needed it more, still building lifelong friendships, and being a devoted husband and father."

It is hard not to be moved by photos of a beaming Lily Ebert celebrating her 98th birthday in lockdown with thousands of cards sent by well-wishers, or welcoming the birth of her 35th great-grandchild. I can think of few people more deserving of happiness. May we draw strength from their strength, and courage from their courage, as we build a more decent, respectful and inclusive society where all of us can live in peace, harmony and security.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The whole House appreciates the hon. Lady's courage in delivering such a powerful and moving speech, which I hope will be taken note of widely.

1.2 pm

Nicola Richards (West Bromwich East) (Con): I quote:

"I have a request of you: this is the real reason why I write, that my doomed life may attain some meaning, that my hellish days and hopeless tomorrows may find a purpose in the future."

These chilling words are those of Zalman Gradowski, a Polish Jew deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and forced to be a cog in a factory of death. Zalman was forced to be a member of the Sonderkommando, a group of Jewish prisoners forced to perform a variety of duties in the gas chambers and crematoriums. In October 1944, Zalman led this group in revolt and managed to destroy one of the crematoriums. He was murdered during this

revolt. Knowing he would soon be killed, Zalman wrote his first-person account of what he described as the "inferno of death" that he was living in and hid these words in the ashpit of crematorium 3, hoping that one day a citizen of the free world would find them and tell the story of him and his family. Zalman asks in his writings:

"Can the dead mourn the dead? But you, unknown 'free' citizen of the world, I beg you to shed a tear for"

my family

"when you have their pictures before your eyes. I dedicate all my writings to them—this is my tear, my lament for my family and people."

I wish to now grant Zalman's wish and list the names of his murdered family members for all to hear, know and remember in this place: his mother, Sarah; his sister, Libe; his sister, Esther Rokhl; his wife, Sonia; his father-in-law, Raphael; and his brother-in-law, Wolf. They were all killed on 8 December 1942, gassed and incinerated. They have no grave. Zalman also mentions his father, Shmuel, his two brothers, Eber and Moysl, and his sister Feygeleh, who were all taken and never seen again. This was his entire family, and they will never be forgotten.

An estimated 1.3 million Jewish people were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and 1.1 million were murdered. When allied troops liberated the concentration and death camp 77 years ago today, just 9,000 prisoners were found alive. All in all, an estimated 6 million Jewish men, women and children were murdered in the holocaust.

The holocaust was not the birth of antisemitism, and sadly neither was it the end. It is the world's oldest form of hatred and has taken on many forms over the centuries. However, the same themes always seem to prevail: Jews are made scapegoats, forced to answer for the actions of others, and they are depicted as both weak and all powerful.

Just two weeks ago, a British man walked into a synagogue in Texas and took the rabbi and three congregants as hostages. Why? Because he believed that the Jews of that small congregation had the power to grant his demands. I saw the effect that the incident had on my Jewish friends: they stayed glued to their phones and TVs all night praying for a peaceful outcome; they went to sleep not knowing whether they would wake up to yet another massacre of fellow Jews in their sacred house of worship.

It is a sad state of affairs when synagogues all over the world are still forced to be guarded by soldiers, police or security and when Jewish schoolkids in this country must still take part in regular terrorist drills and be prepared for the worst in case it happens. I pay tribute to the incredible work of the Community Security Trust and its volunteers, who work tirelessly to keep the UK Jewish community safe.

The Secretary of State for Education rightly calls antisemitism a virus that continues to mutate. As we know, the best way to deal with a mutating virus is to vaccinate. Education will always be the vaccine against all forms of hatred. For that reason, I commend the work of the amazing charities, organisations and their staff who dedicate their time to ensuring that the next generation are taught about the evils of antisemitism and where that hatred can lead.

The Holocaust Educational Trust is an amazing charity and one I was proud to work for myself. I am glad that two of my staff members, Alex Moore and Bradley Langer, are ambassadors for the trust; Bradley also works for them. Holocaust Memorial Day might just be one day a year, but the staff of the trust work hard all year round, travelling to schools across the country and teaching about the horrors of the holocaust. They have now taken over 41,000 young people to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau through their Lessons from Auschwitz project, giving them the opportunity to see that historical site for themselves. They campaign tirelessly against those who try to deny or distort the holocaust and they help survivors share their testimony with anyone who will listen.

I also commend the innovative work of George Salter Academy, in my own constituency, as part of the University College London Beacon School programme—a flagship initiative led by the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education. They are truly leading the way in holocaust education in West Bromwich East.

I also pay tribute to Freddie Knoller BEM, who very sadly passed away yesterday aged 100. Freddie was an Auschwitz survivor and a resistance fighter, and his work and fight against antisemitism will never be forgotten.

Sadly, one day in the near future, the holocaust will move from being living history to just history. All of us who have had the honour of hearing a survivor share their testimony are now their witness. It is up to us to carry on their legacy, to say to our children, “I met a Holocaust survivor; I listened to their testimony. It happened to them and their family, and it must never be allowed to happen again.”

I would like to end this speech on a positive note by also celebrating the incredible Lily Ebert BEM. At age 20, when she was deported to Auschwitz, she made herself the promise that if she survived she would tell everyone the truth of what happened to her and her family. She has made millions of people around the world her witness and continues to jump at every opportunity to share her story. I wish Lily a huge “Mazal tov” on the arrival of her 35th great-grandchild, and I echo her remark that the Nazis did not win.

1.9 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I start by paying tribute to all those who have secured this debate and those who have already spoken so movingly, thoughtfully and powerfully. I say to the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who opened the debate, how moved I was by what he disclosed about the comments made to him and his family. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) that the solidarity of the House is with the right hon. Gentleman and his family. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for all her work in this area, over so many years.

Today marks the 77th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Today, we remember those 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the holocaust, alongside millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution and in all subsequent genocides. This Holocaust Memorial Day is as important as ever in marking the memory of those terrible events.

I was reflecting that I visited Auschwitz some years ago with the Holocaust Educational Trust. One of my most striking memories is of the huge piles of luggage, dolls and toys, shoes and other ordinary, mundane items, which were probably those that meant the most to the people who were murdered in that camp. I will always remember that about Auschwitz—the ordinary and mundane alongside the most evil.

The holocaust is fading from lived memory, with the gradual passing of those who suffered and survived and of those in the greatest generation, who fought the Nazis and liberated the camps and Europe. It is up to all of us to ensure that this history and its lessons are never forgotten. I, like many others, pay tribute to the Holocaust Educational Trust for the brilliant work that it does, and to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, as well.

After the events of recent years with covid, I look forward to once again meeting Hull’s remaining Jewish ex-servicemen and the community in Hull who gather every Remembrance Sunday to mark these events, and the immense contribution of the Jewish community to our country and to our very survival. As a member of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, I am proud of the work that we do in maintaining the graves of so many Jewish ex-servicemen and women who fell while defending our country.

As we know, we need to be vigilant as there are those who still seek to deny the facts about the holocaust, a form of fake news spread for decades by antisemites, challenging whether the holocaust actually happened or the magnitude of it, and more recently questioning the internationally agreed definition of antisemitism. Remembering what happened in the holocaust is even more important, as we have seen a rise in antisemitism abroad and here in the United Kingdom. The first half of 2021 saw the highest number of antisemitic incidents in a six-month period recorded by the Community Security Trust. It is important that we note the work that trust does, day in, day out, providing security and keeping the people of the Jewish faith safe.

We must ask ourselves, why is that trust still required and why have we failed to combat the pernicious hatred of Jews that lingers, particularly online? Online disinformation often parrots long-standing antisemitic tropes that demonise Jewish people as happened in Germany in the 1930s; now they are spread by digital technology. The right hon. Member for Newark set out some shocking statistics about what can be found on social media platforms. This House must do something about that. Other hon. Members have talked about antisemitic messages around the covid anti-vaxxers, which are sadly too prevalent on social media.

We must be aware of the different forms that antisemitism takes in the United Kingdom. It is no longer just the far right and skinheads trying to sell National Front publications in Brick Lane. Shamefully, in recent years my party allowed the stain of antisemitism to find a home in the party. Under the leadership of the current leader of the Labour party, we are working very hard indeed to combat that.

The horror of the holocaust has reshaped our understanding of international law, human rights and collective security after 1945. We have a responsibility to people throughout the world to protect them from persecution, but I regret to say that we have too often failed. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

human rights, and we are only too well aware of the growing breaches of human rights around the world. We know that too many genocides have been carried out since the holocaust—in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur, to name but a few—and we should also be shamed by the current genocide being carried out against the Uyghurs in China, the plight of Christians in some countries, what happened to the Yazidi women, and what is happening now to the women in Afghanistan. Of course, there is also the stain of Islamophobia, which is still around in our communities and institutions and which needs far more attention. It is the “othering” of groups that we need to be vigilant about and take action to tackle, and we need to recognise where that “othering” can lead.

The theme of this year’s Holocaust Memorial Day is “One Day”, but we must continue the work to eradicate antisemitism and hatred, in this country and throughout the world. Antisemites, of whatever variety, are invariably the enemies of peace, freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Only by defeating them, and all those who peddle hatred and prejudice, can we live in confidence that we will never see another holocaust.

1.16 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Instances of genocide continue, and, very sadly, I have been witness to them—in particular, in Bosnia during 1992-93, when I commanded the battle group of the 1st Battalion, The Cheshire Regiment. Let me give the House an example.

On 22 April 1993, I learnt that women and children had been massacred in a village in the Lašva valley. I did not believe it, so I went there, taking about 30 men and about six vehicles. As I approached the village of Ahmići from the south, I was struck by what a beautiful place it was, or had been. The first building I saw was the mosque, which was new, but wrecked. The minaret had been broken by explosions, and it was pointing at the sky like a pencil. Most of the other buildings in the village—it was a linear village, about a mile in length—had been destroyed by fire. Some had not been destroyed; we later discovered that they belonged to Bosnian Croats, not Bosnian Muslims.

Each building had been destroyed by fire, explosions or shooting. The windows had black marks around them, and the roofs had collapsed. Only later, because we did not see it immediately, we discovered that bodies were underneath the roofs. Outside the houses, the gardens looked kind of normal, except for the detritus of war: downed cables, bricks, burnt-out cars, and dead pets. Everywhere was the disgusting smell which comes from the chemical reactions that accompany death. It was cloying and it was foul.

I went all the way to the far end of the village, the north end. I deployed my men, and we started looking. We did not see bodies initially—until we came to house number seven. The murderers had failed to disguise what had happened there. At an entrance to the house, there was a man and a boy. They were dead. They looked like they had been burnt. They did not seem to have clothing on them. The little boy, or the teenage boy, had his arm upwards in front of his face, and his fist was balled, and the bones had been burnt through.

My soldiers said, “Look behind the house, Sir.” I went into a cellar. The cellar had agricultural tools and strings of onions or vegetables on the walls. In the middle, there was this mass—this greyish, blackish mass. I did not really understand what I was looking at—then I did! The first thing that hit me was the disgusting smell, and then I realised I was looking at bodies—at least two adults, several children. One of the women, and they were women, presumably being protected by the men who were killed at the door, had her back so arched back. Her back was bent—she was lying, and her head was back. God! She was burnt. Everything was burnt, except for her eyes. Her eyes were not burnt. I fell back in horror at what I had found. I rushed outside and was violently sick.

Later, one of my soldiers, and he was a bandsman, because we used the band as stretcher bearers and I asked the band to help clean up, was shovelling the remains—shovelling the remains—of a human being into a bag on a stretcher, and he turned to me and said, “Sir, this is Europe in 1993, not Europe in 1943.” I did not know what to say.

On the memorial in that village, which I am going to visit shortly—at Easter—there are 116 names of everyone killed, as far as can be ascertained. My men and I dug a mass grave and put, as far as we could tell, over 104 bodies into that mass grave. They were Bosnian Muslims; there was not a Bosnian Croat among them.

We did not just discover them, but found families lined up—shot down. One little girl was holding a puppy. The puppy was dead, and so was she, killed presumably by the same bullet. We took that family to the local morgue. Next day, we went back and discovered that the bodies had been put back at the house because it was the wrong morgue. We had taken them to a Croat morgue, not a Muslim morgue.

Within a month, I was in Srebrenica and watched more genocide occurring, this time with Bosnian Serb artillery firing at human beings. There were about 20 people killed around us as we went. Some of my soldiers were slightly wounded, no one killed.

You see, I consider Holocaust Memorial Day to be so incredibly important not just because of the people who were killed in the second world war in the 1930s and the 1940s. It was not just the second world war: the Germans, or the Nazis—forgive me, I am not talking about the Germans; I am talking about the Nazis—managed to start doing it before the second world war. Then we have had instances since, with Darfur, Bosnia that I have witnessed, Rwanda and Cambodia.

My mother visited Belsen in 1945. She was in the Special Operations Executive. I did not know that until a few years before she died. I did not know she was a spy. Women are always much better at keeping secrets than men. I said to her, “Why, mum, have you never told me that you went to Belsen in 1945 looking for SOE officers?” She said, “Robert, I was ashamed.” I said, “Why were you ashamed? You did things like learn to parachute when you were 22 and put yourself in danger. You did everything you could.” Colleagues, she said, “I was ashamed because it happened in my generation.”

The purpose of Holocaust Memorial Day, and the memorial of all those people who died in the second world war and all those who have died in genocides since, is for us to feel collective responsibility for stopping

it from happening again. That is why this day, and this memory of all those innocents who have died, is so incredibly important.

1.25 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): First, I wish to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for having secured this debate. It is a privilege to follow the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whose speech, giving first-hand witness testimony to genocide, is so important in this place. It is always a privilege and an honour to listen to him speak on Holocaust Memorial Day and on other occasions when he recounts his service, not just to our country but to the Bosnian Muslim community. This debate is always a difficult debate for me personally, as a descendant of victims of the holocaust, so I apologise if at any point, I get a little emotional and have to pause for a second or two. I am sure that everybody in the Chamber understands.

As others have done, I thank the Holocaust Educational Trust, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, Yad Vashem, the POLIN Museum—which is actually in the Warsaw ghetto—the Holocaust Exhibition and Learning Centre near me in Huddersfield, and those organisations that fight antisemitism today such as the Antisemitism Policy Trust, HOPE not hate, the Community Security Trust, and others. There are many organisations that both keep the holocaust alive today and fight antisemitism, and we should be grateful to them all.

This year's theme, as we know, is "One Day", and for me, that means that we have hope that there may be one day in the future with no genocide. It is also about one day in the lives of victims of genocide, when they themselves are facing that genocide every day, and know that that day might be the last day they live. They wake with that thought beguiling their senses, and if they are fortunate enough to survive that trauma, the trauma lives with them and becomes intergenerational trauma. I am not sure how many generations that trauma persists for, as two generations separated, I still feel that trauma, especially on days like this. I hope my children do not feel it, and are not driven by some of the same fears that generations of Jewish and other people have felt.

One of my drivers here in Parliament is that genocide must end and that we must strive for human rights for all, so I speak out for the Rohingya and the Uyghurs, and act as the chair of International Parliamentarians for West Papua. A genocide against one people is a genocide against all people, and we must stand together against genocide wherever and whenever it occurs, without any thought of our own interests. Benny Wenda, from the Free West Papua Campaign, gave me this message for Holocaust Memorial Day. He is exactly the same age as me, so in context, this is 30-odd years ago that he is talking about:

"When I was a child, my village was bombed by the military and many of my family members were killed. I have witnessed my own aunts being raped and dying of their injuries and my mother being brutally beaten in front of my eyes.

Although we carry this burden, we also carry great hope. Our hope is for the next generation to be free from persecution, free from violence, and free from oppression. One day. We carry the hope of peace, and we look to the lessons of our shared history to guide the way."

I hope that more Members present might join the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, and find out more about the genocide that is carrying on there to this day.

I want to finish by telling the story of one part of my own family. My paternal great-grandfather was David Laks. He was murdered by the Nazis in the Belzec death camp in 1942. Teresa, my maternal great-grandmother, died of natural causes in 1938 before the start of the war. David and Teresa had five children. Salka and Fanka were the eldest daughters. They lived in central Poland and were murdered, along with their families, in unknown circumstances—I really did not think I would get this emotional; I am sorry—by the Nazis.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We all greatly appreciate the good work that the hon. Gentleman does in this House, but we are also very aware of the good work that he does in Papua New Guinea; I think he has been an inspiration to us all. I hope that that gives him the chance that he needs to continue.

Alex Sobel: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving me that chance to pause and collect myself. It is very useful in debates such as this to have colleagues who will do that.

The middle child was called Zygmunt; I will come back to him later. The fourth child was my grandmother Regina, who survived the war and lived into old age. The youngest sibling was my great-aunt Marisia, whom I have spoken about in a previous Holocaust Memorial Day debate.

I am going to describe one day in the life of Zygmunt Laks and his family—his wife Guta and their son Karol, who was born in 1939. Zygmunt Laks lived in the Łódź ghetto and worked in a garage after the Nazis took away the family restaurant. The situation in the ghetto worsened; Zygmunt stopped work and just sat in the ghetto apartment with a large axe, waiting for the Nazis to come and take them away. There was an easing in the situation in the ghetto, so he decided to go back to work, but the next day he returned from work and his wife and son were gone. On that day, an SS officer shot Karol, who was just two years old, in the head in front of his mother.

Karol was my uncle—a child who never got to see adulthood, an uncle I never met. I often think about how small my family is: I am an only child of only children, with very few relatives. A lot of our family are just ghosts—just ghosts of the past who were taken away from us by the holocaust.

Guta was never seen or heard of again, but it is assumed that she, too, was taken to Belzec death camp and never returned. Belzec is one of the lesser-known death camps, but it is estimated that as many as 800,000 may have perished there in the very short period—just two years—in which it was in operation. Zygmunt eventually escaped the ghetto to Ukraine, but was killed by a bomb as the war was ending and never returned home.

That this part of my family history survives is due to my aunt, Aviva Hay, who compiled her father's memoir into a book, "We Are What We Remember", a holocaust memoir of our family. My father, who I know is watching at home, contributed to this account and very much keeps alive the deep and scarring memories of our family's experience in the Shoah.

[Alex Sobel]

The most tragic thing for me is that the fate of the Laks family is not unique or rare; it is the common story of European Jewry. Today is so important, because we have one day each year that we can share and remember—one day to say that we will not forget—but we have every other day to do all we can to strive for a better world and no more genocide.

1.33 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who shared with the House such powerful and important emotional experiences. We respect him greatly for having had the courage to do that today.

I draw the House's attention to my interests, as set out in the register, and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on launching this important debate for the House of Commons and the country so eloquently today. I echo the comments he made about our very good friend, the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who sadly cannot be with us today but with whom I have worked extremely closely for many years on issues of economic crime and dirty money. Any cause that she supports and to which she brings her formidable powers is one worthy of the House's greatest attention.

Every year, we convene in this Chamber and in venues around the country to proclaim, "Never again"—never again will we stay silent in the face of hatred, never again will we stand by as people are murdered because of who they are, never again will a holocaust be allowed to happen. Yet, around the world, these things are happening again and again. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), with very direct experience, once again impressed the House hugely with his knowledge and understanding of these things, but the words of his mother—that we have a duty in our generation, a duty that cannot be shirked—were particularly powerful.

We have shamefully borne witness to genocides in Bosnia. I have stood among the gravestones at Srebrenica, not many hundreds of miles from here, in Europe, marvelling at what took place there. I have stood in Darfur and heard testimony and witness, particularly from women, about the brutality of what George Bush, the President of the United States, described as a genocide. We have seen these things in Burma too, and in Rwanda, where in 1994 nearly 1 million people, predominantly Tutsis, were murdered by their Hutu neighbours over 90 days.

I would like to focus my comments on Rwanda and the genocide there because the UK now has a connection to it, although it is not widely known. Once the killing stopped, those allegedly responsible for these appalling events fled far and wide, some to neighbouring countries, others to Europe, North America and Canada. I regret to say that, in the UK today, five people suspected of taking part in the genocide are living freely among us.

Over the years, many countries, such as Sweden and Canada, which initially harboured the suspects, went on to extradite them to Rwanda to face trial in the gacaca courts. Other countries, notably Germany, prosecuted the suspects in their own domestic courts.

Britain has done neither, even though, extraordinarily, the arrest warrants were issued as long ago as 2006. In 2015 and 2017, a British district judge and our own High Court ruled that, even though the evidence was compelling, none of the suspects could be sent back to Rwanda, because such action could breach their human rights. While I did not agree with that assessment, given that Rwanda had long abolished the death penalty and constructed a justice system that was considered progressive, I had faith that Britain would none the less deliver justice by placing the suspects on trial here. This country has comprehensive legislation that allows for the prosecution of suspects accused of war crimes, irrespective of their nationality or the countries in which the crimes took place. With no statute of limitations, there is no legitimate reason why justice should not be expedited. I was a Member of this House when that legislation was passed.

Bob Stewart: I thank my right hon. and very good Friend for making that point. I have given evidence in four war crimes trials in the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia. I also formed an organisation in 2000 to chase war criminals—it did not last long, but we tried. May I entirely endorse the last comments my right hon. Friend made, about us in this country chasing war criminals until they die?

Mr Mitchell: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for what he has said.

As to the circumstances I described, we are, alas, still waiting. Last March, a group of senior Members of Parliament and peers, including no fewer than three former distinguished Law Officers, decided it was time to act. Firm in the belief that the UK should be no safe haven for war criminals, we set up the all-party parliamentary group on war crimes, with the sole purpose of seeing what could be done to accelerate the investigations and legal proceedings. I have the honour of co-chairing this group with Lord Jon Mendelsohn, former secretary of the original war crimes group, which was instrumental in passing the legislation to which I referred. That legislation is available, and is relevant to the Rwanda case I mentioned. In the last 10 days, we have sent a letter to the Home Secretary, and copied it to the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Mayor of London, the Attorney General and the Lord Chancellor, because we want a specific, proper response, with dates and details of the legal process that must now take place in respect of the people concerned.

The job of the new war crimes group is not to presuppose the guilt or innocence of the suspects. We simply want to ensure that due process is followed, and that justice, already excessively long delayed, is not denied. After all, it would be wrong to have these serious allegations hanging over the five suspects for 16 years if they turn out to be untrue. The apparent inertia—the lack of grip, concern or urgency—shames us all.

I would like to say that the APPG has made progress in getting answers to the questions that we have posed to the investigating authorities, but alas, the answer is a flat no. One of the problems that we have identified is that the UK's former dedicated war crimes unit, set up in the 1990s to investigate suspected Nazi criminals, no longer exists. In its absence, there is a sub-group operating

under the auspices of SO15, the Met police's counter-terrorism command. That group has neither the budget nor the manpower to bring the matter to a conclusion; and aside from that, terrorism and war crimes are two quite separate things, each requiring its own specialised skillset.

Germany's war crimes unit is able to draw on the full panoply of state support. Only a few weeks ago, we heard that a Syrian war criminal was tried and convicted in a German court under the principle of universal jurisdiction. That arrest took place only in 2019, yet Britain is struggling to complete a process that started 16 years ago. The main problem is that we simply do not have the resolve or the political will demonstrated by other countries to ensure the availability of necessary resources. Denmark does; the Netherlands do; and clearly Germany does. Why are we so far behind?

Britain has the rule of law and accountability—values that we should cherish, uphold and promote at all times. The situation is inexcusable. We must demonstrate the same sense of resolve and urgency when it comes to Rwanda as we rightly did with regard to suspected Nazi war criminals. Failure to do so would send the very dangerous and damaging message that the UK could become a refuge for war criminals. We may not always have the power to prevent atrocities, but if we truly care about the victims of genocide, the least we can do is offer the survivors justice. The souls of those murdered in the Rwandan genocide cry out for justice, but from Britain they hear only a deafening silence.

1.43 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing this debate. I also thank hon. Members who have spoken powerfully this afternoon, particularly the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who told us of their personal experiences. I was horrified to hear of the racist attack experienced by the family of the right hon. Member for Newark. I join colleagues in reaffirming my commitment to working with him on fighting racist hatred.

Holocaust Memorial Day is an opportunity to remember, reflect and reaffirm—remember the atrocities of the past, reflect on their lasting impact around the world, and reaffirm our commitment to ensuring that we never see such atrocities again. As other Members have done, I want to pay tribute to the important work done by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, which plays an important role in amplifying the voice of survivors and ensuring their stories are not forgotten. I attended its virtual events yesterday and was particularly moved by the testimony of holocaust survivor Dr Martin Stern. Stories like Dr Stern's make such a difference. Only by hearing these stories told can future generations learn from the past and continue to work to prevent genocide around the world.

I was born in south-east Turkey and grew up hearing stories about the horrors faced by the Armenian people in that region. Almost 100 years ago, a whole culture and a whole people were systematically destroyed and had their identity erased in an act of appalling violence. Families were torn apart, with children never seeing

their parents again. Some 1.5 million Armenian men, women and children were killed. Vibrant, centuries-old communities were simply wiped off the face of the map.

Now, over a century later, the fight of Armenian communities around the world for justice and recognition goes on. The Armenian community in the UK has been consistently at the forefront of that fight. I praise the work of the Armenian National Committee, which is a fantastic advocate for the UK Armenian diaspora. There are many colleagues across the House who have been passionate friends of the Armenian community in the UK. In particular, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who sits alongside me as a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Armenia, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Warley (John Spellar) for their tireless campaigning on this issue.

Despite their campaigning and that of so many others in the UK, the Government are several steps behind the position of many of our European neighbours. France, Germany, Austria, Poland and Denmark are just some of the countries that have taken the step of acknowledging that the horrendous acts that occurred constitute a genocide. The devolved Administrations in Cardiff and Edinburgh have also taken that important step, yet still our Government refuse to do so. In April last year, we saw the incredibly important moment when President Biden recognised the Armenian genocide, the first time the American Government had officially done so. Why then, are we in the UK so far behind others when it comes to recognition?

It is time that the Government acted to provide Armenian communities in the UK with the recognition they have been fighting for. What happened to Armenian people 100 years ago was a genocide, and it is about time that our Government recognised that.

1.48 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark), who remembered another genocide that took place in the world.

It is fair to say that antisemitism is nothing new. We only have to look back to Shakespeare to see that antisemitism was rife during that period in our history. It has been prevalent in societies across the world for centuries and it is still prevalent today. I recalled earlier the attack on shopkeepers in Stamford Hill only yesterday. What makes the holocaust different is that it shows the ultimate destination of antisemitism: a systematic attempt to wipe out the Jewish race and anyone of Jewish religion—not just people who were openly Jewish, but anyone who had Judaism in their genealogy. I speak as someone in that position. I would not be here today if I had been alive in Germany in those times. That demonstrates the way in which people's backgrounds were traced to see whether any relative or any person of Jewish blood was present. It was systematic, deliberate and intentional.

I was at school with many Jewish children. No one spoke about the holocaust. Half of my class were Jewish, but no one ever spoke about the holocaust during those days. It was ignored, perhaps to be airbrushed from history forever, because it was such a tragedy. The relatives—fathers and mothers—of many of my friends had come from eastern Europe as refugees, but they

[*Bob Blackman*]

never spoke about the holocaust either. When we were at school, we never got the opportunity to learn about its horrors and what people went through at that time.

I remember my first visit to Yad Vashem. It was not the Yad Vashem we see today; it was a much smaller, more intimate formation in its early days, going back to 1992. It was a pivotal moment for me on my first visit to Israel, seeing Jerusalem, seeing Yad Vashem and seeing first-hand what had gone on during the holocaust. It had the first ever recordings of survivors—people who had sadly passed away, but who had recorded their testimony in advance—plus early photographs and other details of what had gone on in Germany and eastern Europe in particular during the holocaust.

That made Yad Vashem more intimate, in many ways, than it is now. It is a much bigger operation now, with much more testimony and evidence of what happened, but when I heard the names of the children who had been murdered by the Nazis being recited, one name after another, it brought home to me how people could commit such systematic murder of children—wipe them off the face of the planet—and what a terrible experience it was.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I have had the privilege of visiting Yad Vashem four or five times now, and I remember on one particular occasion going into the cave the hon. Gentleman describes, where the recordings of children's names and ages just continue. By coincidence, there was a run of names, two boys and a girl, the same age that my two boys and my daughter were at that time. I broke down in tears, because that is where it really hits home: "This could be you. There but for the grace of God go we all. If politics turns nasty and turns against you, this is the end result." That is why Yad Vashem and all holocaust memorials are so important.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I freely admit—I am not ashamed to say it—that I cried. I cried for humanity, I cried for the people who had been lost and I cried for our whole being and how we could ever have allowed such a thing to happen.

I declare my interest as co-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on holocaust memorial. I look forward to the holocaust memorial and learning centre's being built, so we can have our own facility where we can commemorate the lives of those who were lost, and commemorate those who survived. When I was first elected to the House in 2010, the first all-party group I joined was the APPG on combating antisemitism. It is right that, across the House and on both sides of the political divide, we stand against antisemitism.

I have visited Auschwitz-Birkenau, and I believe I share the view of most students who have seen Auschwitz for only one day that it would be better if people could stay a little longer, just to appreciate even further the terrible crimes that were committed. The problem with that, of course, is funding, and the fact that lengthening the amount of time spent away might reduce the numbers who could go on such visits.

The problem I see with the programme of Auschwitz-Birkenau visits is that students learn about what went on there and think that that was it. We must remember

that it was not just Auschwitz-Birkenau: there was a network of death camps and forced labour camps right across eastern Europe and Germany, where Jews and others were forced into slave labour and then systematically exterminated.

I have often wondered how a civilised nation such as Germany could get into a position to commit such inhumane acts. When we talk about 6 million Jews being killed, it is a number; it is hard to personalise that down to individual circumstances. It is hard to visualise the horror of the attempt to wipe out the Jewish race. We should remember that it did not take place over one or two years. It was a deliberate, long-term attempt by the Nazis to eliminate the Jewish race.

We should also remember that the roots of the holocaust go back to the end of the great war. Germany was subjected to severe reparations. That led to incredible poverty in Germany, which then gave rise to the Nazis, who could say, "It's the Jews' fault you haven't got any money. Let's take it out on the Jews. If we take Jews out of their position, we can spread the wealth." It was a deliberate policy of the Nazi party to spread this hatred and it should never, ever be allowed to be repeated. There needs to be a greater understanding and appreciation that, from the early 1930s onwards, this systematic approach led to the Shoah. We have to remember that.

We must also remember that antisemitism was rife in this country at that time, and we should not think that it was not going on elsewhere either. That thought process and the demeaning of Jewish people was going on, and that is one reason why few people were allowed to escape from Germany and come here. Had they been allowed to do so, many people who lost their lives in the camps would have survived.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute once again to Karen Pollock and her brilliant team at the Holocaust Educational Trust, who do such wonderful work to educate people—young and old—about the horrors of the holocaust. Not everyone can go to Auschwitz-Birkenau and witness the crimes that took place. We talk, as other Members have, about the shoes, the spectacles and the clothing at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but the memory that I have above all else is walking across the park with the lakes. There is an eerie silence. There is no wildlife. No birds tweet, no animals cry and the reason why the wildlife know is that that is where the Nazis emptied the ashes from the crematorium. The wildlife know what happened there and so should we.

One aspect of the Holocaust Educational Trust's work that has become more important is the outreach programme. Last year, more than 600 schools partnered with the trust to enhance educational provision. That is important because it allows holocaust survivors to give their first-hand testimony, lead workshops and ensure that young people understand what happened and learn lessons.

One of the most famous survivors was Gena Turgel, who lived in Stanmore in my constituency. In many ways, she was a pioneer of holocaust education, as she was going into schools and colleges way before any of the current structures were set up. She was born in Krakow and had eight brothers and sisters. She was only 16 when her home city was bombed on 1 September 1939.

Here is the part of Gena Turgel's story that I think is most pertinent. Her family had relatives in Chicago and they planned to leave for the United States, but they made their decision too late, as the Nazis had already invaded and closed all the entry and exit points, so her family had to move to just outside Krakow. In autumn 1941, she moved into the ghetto, and then moved after some of her family were shot by the SS in the ghetto. She was then forced into a labour camp, and in 1945 to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was sent with her mother on the death march from Auschwitz, leaving behind her sister, who they never saw again. They then arrived in a further labour camp, were forced on to trucks, and travelled under terrible conditions to Bergen-Belsen, where they arrived in February 1945. On 15 April 1945, the British Army liberated Bergen-Belsen and among the liberators was Norman Turgel, who became Gena's husband. Gena passed away in 2018, but her record is in a book called, "I Light a Candle", so her legacy lives on.

Hermann Hirschberger was born in 1926 in Germany. He lived with his mother, father and older brother. He attended a local non-Jewish school, but when the Nazis said that Jewish children could not go to school any more, he was forced not to go. He was beaten up going from home to school and back again by people who were his friends when he was in school, because the Nazis had said that Jews were not allowed to exist. At 9 pm on 9 November 1938, the synagogues were burnt and businesses, homes and shops were smashed. Windows were smashed and homes and buildings were burnt to the ground. This is known as Kristallnacht, the night of broken glass.

After that, Hermann's parents realised that they had to escape, but they could not—they were not allowed to. However, Hermann was one of the first to come on the Kindertransport to this country, where he built his family. He never saw his parents again. Hermann and his brother had a long journey to get to the UK. They were taken to a hostel in Margate, where Hermann had his bar mitzvah, and remained there for about a year. They regularly wrote to their parents. Two days after war broke out, their parents wrote to say that they had received their permits—they would be allowed to leave. However, once war broke out, they were not allowed to leave. They were sent to a camp in the Pyrenees and eventually murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

In this country, Hermann and his brother were separated and then reunited. Hermann went on to marry and live in my constituency. He regularly spoke to schools about his life and what happened to Jewish people when they came to this country as refugees—by the way, it was not a happy experience for those people. We should own up to that and honour that memory.

Of course, we honour Hermann's memory, because sadly he died on 1 January 2020. I had the privilege of meeting him on many occasions and hearing about his experiences both in this country and before he arrived. The reality is that, as time goes on, survivors are, sadly, no longer with us, so it is important that we capture their testimony and every other aspect on video, in audio and in writing.

I have had the unfortunate opportunity to witness at first hand the plight of the Rohingya and see what still happens in this world. We have a duty to ensure that

people who have perpetrated murder are brought to justice and suffer for the war crimes that they have committed, and that we help and assist refugees.

The theme this year is "One Day" when we put aside all our differences to remember what happened not only in the holocaust and in persecution by the Nazis but in the genocides that have followed. We hope that one day there will no longer be any genocide. Today, we learn about the past and empathise with others, but we must take action for a better future.

I end with a quote by Iby Knill, a survivor of the holocaust, who said about the camps:

"You didn't think about yesterday, and tomorrow may not happen, it was only today that you had to cope with and you got through it as best you could."

2.2 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real privilege to follow all the Members who have spoken so movingly in the debate; I am humbled by their contributions. I thank the right hon. Members for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) for getting the debate organised.

The theme of this year's Holocaust Memorial day is, as we all know, "One Day". When holocaust and genocide survivors are asked to provide testimony, they often start with "one day". One day, Franziska Schwarz Mikus was sterilised by the Nazis because she was deaf, as part of their process of persecuting anyone who did not fit their ideal. In her case, it was because they believed that disabled people were imperfect and worthless. On that one day, the Nazis took control of Franziska's body and her life choices. They wanted to prevent people whom they deemed unfit from being able to procreate.

It is estimated that between 1933 and 1939, 360,000 individuals were subjected to forced sterilisation because they had physical or mental disabilities or were simply perceived to have disabilities. Too much of this hatred and prejudice still exists. We must not forget those who were—and still are—persecuted and denied basic human rights for who they are.

Today, on Holocaust Memorial Day, we remember 6 million Jewish people murdered in the holocaust and millions of lives taken away under Nazi persecution of other groups, including Roma, Sinti, black people, gay people and disabled people. We also commemorate the genocides that took place after the holocaust in places such as Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. Currently, in Afghanistan, minority communities such as the Hazaras and Christians face persecution, too.

Tonight at 8 pm will be a national moment when people across the UK will light candles in their windows to remember those who were murdered for who they were, and stand in solidarity with those living under prejudice and hatred because of who they are in the world today. We must continue to remember, because history has taught us the danger of allowing acts of intolerance and persecution to continue unchallenged.

Unfortunately, as time passes since these events, identity-based persecution has not lessened. To take one example that has already been referred to, the rate of antisemitism in the UK has risen year on year for the past decade.

[Marion Fellows]

According to the UK Jewish Community Security Trust, there was a 49% increase in antisemitic incidents in the first six months of 2021, compared with the previous year. Earlier this month, in another act of antisemitism, this time in Colleyville, Texas, a Jewish community was left terrified after hostages were taken by an armed man besieging a synagogue. Continual acts of vandalism and terror at synagogues, mosques, and other religious places in the UK still take place, far too often by those who wish to foster hatred.

I believe the Government should commit to a joined-up, whole of Government approach to dealing with modern atrocities, and I am heartened by some of the speeches I have heard today about war criminals, and how they are continually hunted so as to be brought to justice. Far from “never again”, we are seeing mass atrocity crimes again and again, and we need the tools to uphold legal obligations and our moral responsibilities abroad.

A broad range of non-governmental organisations and academic institutions have amassed a wealth of experience and credibility around the world, and these can be drawn on to work towards a meaningful and sustainable political dialogue. Let me give two Scottish examples. The University of Edinburgh’s Global Justice Academy has vast experience, which should help to draw attention and find solutions to what is going on across the world. An NGO based in Scotland, Beyond Borders, hosts the Women in Conflict 1325 fellowship. Its programme brings together a range of women from conflict-affected areas, providing expertise and guidance in conflict resolution, mediation and reconciliation. That is such important work.

As we know, lived experience is the most powerful witness, and we are grateful to all who share their experiences, so that we can never forget. In that regard, it is absolutely clear, and has been made clear this afternoon, that there are no “sides” in the Chamber today. I have been moved and humbled by the contributions from my colleagues. I find it hard to single out a single person, so I thank all those who have gone before me.

It seems almost unimportant in the context of what I have listened to today, but I also remember the effect on my father who was one of the armed forces who helped holocaust survivors at Bergen-Belsen and who was forever affected by what he saw. I woke up many nights with my father standing over me; he was suffering from what is now referred to as post-traumatic stress disorder, which was then totally unrecognised. My godmother and aunt told me that he never recovered from what he saw; he was never the same person again. This is why it is so important that we remember. We and our children must never be allowed to forget what happened and what is still happening. We need to make sure that what happened in the holocaust is never forgotten.

In conclusion, I thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for its work to keep remembrance front and centre. I also thank the Holocaust Educational Trust for what it does to help our young people understand the history of the holocaust and genocide today.

2.11 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows). I echo what she said

earlier. Today has been a really moving day. We have had some great contributions. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), and the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), who, unfortunately, is not in her place, on bringing this debate to the Chamber.

I thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for her excellent speech. When I had the opportunity to pop back to my office to grab a bit of lunch, I made sure that I told everyone in the office to listen back to it, because it was probably one of the most moving speeches that I have heard in this place. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whom I have known for many years, speaks from the heart. His own experience brings a wealth to this place.

Today, I join my colleagues and people around the world to commemorate those who were killed in the holocaust. It was 77 years today, on 27 January 1945, when Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated, marking the end of oppression and killing in the largest Nazi concentration camp.

Holocaust Memorial Day is about remembering a genocide that killed 6 million Jewish people, alongside the millions of other people killed under Nazi persecution. In addition, we also remember the people who were killed in the genocides that followed—in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

The holocaust may have ended nearly 80 years ago, but the lessons that we must learn from genocides should remain with us in the generations to come forever. Given that it was such a tragic and disturbing point in our global history, I, like many other colleagues, find it hard to digest that it happened less than 80 years ago. However, there are still Holocaust survivors alive today who share their story so that people can hear at first hand what it was like to live in one of the darkest moments of our global history—what it was actually like for someone to be persecuted because of their ethnicity or their beliefs, and even what it was like to survive being sent to a concentration camp.

I applaud the brave men and women who choose to relive those events time and again, but who do so in the hope that their story will prevent a genocide ever happening again. I also pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for the work that they do to spread awareness and education of the holocaust. Colleagues have already spoken about the excellent work of Karen Pollock, and it is only right that I add my voice to what they have said.

It is unfortunate that we will not be able to hear first-hand accounts from holocaust survivors forever. There is a real worry that, because of that, our ability to connect with personal stories from survivors will reduce. This is something that we need to be conscious of, and I know that some excellent work is going on—colleagues have already spoken about this—to ensure that lived experience is retained for future generations. One of the ways that HET does so is via its excellent ambassador programme, ensuring that we do not forget the lessons of the holocaust. More than 40,000 ambassadors commit to educating themselves about the holocaust, speaking to holocaust survivors and visiting Auschwitz. This year, in the run-up to Holocaust Memorial Day, I contacted HET to arrange to speak to some ambassadors in my constituency to understand the work that ambassadors

do and how they are helping to educate others about the holocaust. I had a really interesting conversation with a constituent of mine, Adam Bowers of Croxley Green, who is in year 13. Adam was able to educate me and discuss what he had learned about the programme, including doing extensive research on political extremism. He actually heard from a holocaust survivor and visited Auschwitz virtually, as unfortunately the ambassadors were unable to go in person this past year. I was incredibly impressed with the work that the ambassadors in my constituency have done in their commitment to sharing what they learned with their school and the wider community of South West Hertfordshire.

The holocausts and genocides that took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur are stark reminders to us all of the darkest times in humanity. It was that humanity that was lost and forgotten when the persecution of millions of innocent people took place. Let us all never forget the atrocities that have taken place before and make sure that we take the lessons from previous genocides to ensure that this never happens again.

2.15 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I am truly humbled to speak in this debate today. I wish to pay tribute to and thank all speakers who have shared their family experiences and, in the case of the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), their own experiences.

Bill, a constituent of mine and fellow parishioner who I went to church with, once asked to have a few words with me. He was one of those that walked into Belsen. He said, "There isn't enough being said about it, Marie. I am worried that people will forget." His wife was with him, with tears flowing down her cheeks. He said he could never, ever forget what they found when they walked into Belsen—the horrors and the inhumanity that the poor people there had been treated with. Bill never slept a single night without remembering horror stories and having nightmares. I said, "Let's have a word with Father Martin", the priest. He said, "Oh, I can't do that." I said, "Come on Bill—you owe it to those people that you found." We had a word with Martin and said, "Can we have a mass and some talk about Belsen? It would perhaps help Bill if he shared some of his experiences." We did that. Bill was so humbled but so thankful that he had done it. Bill is now at peace and resting. His wife said how he had never, ever slept one night in peace.

The holocaust is the greatest evil that mankind has ever inflicted. It was a systematic butchery of Jews, Gypsies, Roma, homosexuals, people with disabilities, and whoever else the Nazis believed were undesirable. In the grand scheme of things, it was not that long ago that this evil occurred. Many people are still alive today who survived the barbaric concentration camps. As someone born just after the war, I am always struck by how recent the holocaust still feels. During my childhood, more and more of the harrowing details and images became public. I can still remember learning about it for the first time and wondering how such evil could ever have existed. That is why it is so important to always remember how recent it was. Today we sometimes question how such evil could have occurred in the past, yet after the war people wondered how this evil could have occurred then. The 1930s and '40s had television,

music on the radio, and free elections with women able to vote. We are not talking about a historical event that occurred in the dark ages; it happened in the modern era. That is why, when we say "Never again," we must mean it, and we must act on it. We have to guard against antisemitism and all forms of hatred that can fester wherever they exist.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge)—one of the bravest women I know, and my very dear friend—for securing this debate. We must never forget the holocaust; it is the starkest, darkest and gravest reminder of what happens when evil, hate and prejudice are allowed to grow, and why we must stop it.

2.20 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and the other Members who secured this debate. Like others, I am shocked to hear of the abuse that he and his family have endured. I extend my sympathies and my solidarity to him and to his family.

I put on the record my particular thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and the many other hon. Members across the House who have made passionate and heart-wrenching speeches about stories of the holocaust. I also thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for all their work each and every day to ensure that we understand what happened, and the Community Security Trust, which works hard to continue to protect the Jewish community against rising threats of antisemitism.

My visit to Yad Vashem will stay with me for all my days. Hearing colleagues mention their experiences is heartening but very saddening. Six million Jews were tragically murdered in the holocaust, millions of others were murdered and many became displaced. To truly say "Never again," we must remember these events every year, if not every single day.

I am grateful to hon. Members who have reminded us of those genocides that have happened since and are indeed happening in our lifetime. We cannot say that we did not know in this House. The suffering of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the genocide of the Uyghurs in China have been highlighted, but I also want to share my increasing concern about the open calls for the killing of Muslims in India.

It should worry us all in this House that the president of Genocide Watch, Dr Gregory Stanton, has reminded the world that he predicted the Rwanda genocide and is predicting that genocide could happen in India following an event at Haridwar. Indeed, a senior member of the Bharatiya Janata party, Ashwini Upadhyay, attended that Hindutva Haridwar event at which an open call to kill Muslims was made.

Some commentators have suggested that such views come from fringe groups such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, whose ideology is inspired by the Nazis, but such a view was taken before the holocaust happened. Muslims are also a minority community in India. It is incumbent on us not just as Members of this House, but as fellow human beings, not only never to allow the world to forget, but to ensure that it never happens again.

[Naz Shah]

I want to put on the record the contribution of one person who is no longer with us: a special gentleman, a friend and a true hero to Bradford, whom we sadly lost last year to covid. Rudi Leavor came to Bradford with his parents and his younger sister Winnie as a refugee from Nazi Germany in 1937, aged 11, having been raised in Berlin. Rudi wrote about his journey in his memoir "Berlin to Bradford". He said that it was a blessing in disguise when his parents were first arrested by the Gestapo:

"Had they not been arrested, we might not have escaped the fate of millions of Jews in the gas chambers of Auschwitz."

When Rudi came to Bradford, he trained as a dentist, and in later life he gave service as the chair of a local synagogue. His lifelong service to Bradford is one that will forever remain with all Bradfordians. The cross-faith and multi-faith work that he was involved in has left a legacy, and he has left very big shoes to fill. His story, like those of so many others, needs to be heard on Holocaust Memorial Day to highlight the reality of Nazi Germany and the huge contributions that British Jews made to the UK after arriving here.

When we speak about the holocaust and look back at how the world let such things take place, we cannot ignore the scourge of everyday antisemitism, which is very real here in Britain, too—the shameful, shameful antisemitism that exists and the rise of the far right. We have seen synagogues attacked, the attack yesterday that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) referred to, the attack in Oxford Street and the driving of the cars through north London. These are all shameful acts by individuals who are clearly filled with hatred.

From January to June 2021, the Community Security Trust recorded 1,308 anti-Jewish hate incidents nationwide. That is a 49% increase from the 875 incidents recorded in the first six months of 2020. The rise of antisemitism across our society and in the online world must be challenged by individuals, but there is also a huge onus on the Government. The online harms Bill is a once-in-a-generation piece of legislation and it must be able to combat the online racism and antisemitism that is so prevalent.

Holocaust Memorial Day is a day to reflect on other genocides that have incurred huge losses of life. We remember their victims and commit to not letting atrocities, such as wars, happen again. It is also an occasion to remember Cambodia, Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia and China, as I have mentioned. Similarly, it should remind us all of the importance of standing up to all types of hate, racism and prejudice by being upstanders and not leaving communities to suffer in silence.

2.26 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is an honour and privilege to follow so many moving speeches. I have been to many holocaust memorials across Germany and eastern Europe throughout my life: Bergen-Belsen, close to my home town of Hanover; Dachau; Auschwitz-Birkenau; the row of two or three houses that is all that is left of the Warsaw ghetto; and, most hauntingly, the Ponary massacre memorial outside Vilnius.

Whenever I am directly confronted with the stories of unspeakable atrocities committed by the German state during the 1930s and 1940s on the Jewish people, I feel a

crushing sense of horror and shame. I was born in 1960; it was not my generation that was directly responsible for the terror. However, I feel acutely a collective responsibility for what happened in my country of origin, and that we should never forget and should work towards a world in which such awful suffering never happens again. If we want to be serious, we cannot just let the holocaust disappear into the history books—another time, another people, another place—but keep it alive and learn from it.

My grandmother was half Jewish. Her first husband was Jewish. My uncle was in Dachau in 1936, but got out with the help of Scandinavian friends. All my mother's half brothers and sisters had to leave Germany and, except one, never returned. My grandmother's anguish about her children and their families hung over my mother, who was the youngest, every day of her childhood. While my mother, who was only a quarter Jewish, survived Nazi Germany, her life was marred daily by exclusion, discrimination and fear. I would not be here if the war had not ended the way it did, because my mother would never have been allowed to meet my father, who was not Jewish.

My grandmother's second husband, my grandfather, was not Jewish. He was a judge and was appointed to the Court of Appeal in Leipzig in 1927. In 1933, only months after he came to power, Hitler installed the *Volksgericht*, or people's court, which was a political court to deal with anybody who was seen as an enemy of the state and which signalled the end of the rule of law. My grandfather resigned.

My grandfather's youngest brother was schizophrenic and was murdered by the Nazis through one of the programmes of euthanasia. Although that is not directly related to the holocaust, it is worth remembering that there were German victims too, like my great-uncle, for whom there is no grave either.

My grandfather died before I was born, but I know through my mother that he never forgave himself for not becoming politically active to stop the rise of Hitler.

There are volumes and volumes of history books analysing the rise of the Nazis, citing the political instability after the first world war, the loss of national pride in being a great nation, and the Russian revolution leading to the fear of communism which drove many Germans into the arms of the fascists. It was the extremes of left and right that destroyed the moderate political centre. With that came illiberal and intolerant attitudes towards anyone who could be painted as the enemy. From there it was only a small step towards viewing people from a different race or culture as not being worthy of our human compassion and protection. The Nazis deliberately stoked irrational fear to win elections. Once Germans had elected, in a democratic vote, a barbaric leader, they could not free themselves from the monster they had helped to create. Only a world war did that.

"Wehret den Anfängen"—resist the beginnings—is what I learned from my German history lessons. The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust has published "The ten stages of genocide" so that people and communities can recognise the warning signs. Discrimination, dehumanisation and polarisation are among those warning signs, and sadly they are part of our political reality today, under our own eyes.

The fight against intolerance, exclusion and inhumanity is ongoing. I owe it to the memory of the millions of Jews who perished in the holocaust at the hands of the country where I was born to convert the shame that I will always feel into political activism. I will stand up and speak out about the need for us to keep our eyes wide open to where barbarism begins.

2.31 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) for securing this very important debate. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), and the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), for their incredibly moving and powerful speeches.

As has been said several times during the debate, when people think of the holocaust—the Shoah—we instantly go to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We instantly think of Bergen-Belsen. Earlier this week I was in Kyiv, in Ukraine, on a European Jewish Association delegation to Babi Yar, which was the location for the largest mass grave of 100,000 Jews who were killed one by one. There was no gas chamber; they were all shot. Their only crime was being Jewish.

While I was at that delegation, I took part in a symposium to discuss holocaust education, and the rise of antisemitism in football and on our streets across Europe. This is something that we all need to take extremely seriously. We need only consider the instances of last year, when there were not only antisemitic tropes such as blood libel on the streets of London, but convoys being driven throughout the country. It was not right then, and it is not right now.

I have spoken many times in the House about how proud I am to represent the constituency of Bury South, which is home to an extremely large and thriving Jewish community. Within that community there are a number of holocaust survivors, some of whom I have been privileged to speak with personally. I will never forget the way I was addressed by a Kindertransport survivor at a Jewish communal meeting before my election. In the United Kingdom, in 2019, he spoke about the fears for his family caused by the rise in antisemitic hate crime. To be approached in this manner and experience the dawning realisation that the lessons of the holocaust have not been learnt is something that should shock us all.

As the number of holocaust survivors tragically continues to dwindle, I also pay tribute to the second and third generations who are the children and grandchildren of the survivors. They work so hard to preserve the memory of their loved ones and ensure that future generations are aware of the holocaust, the worst crime ever committed. Let me specifically mention the work of Noemie Lopian. She has published the memoirs of her father, a holocaust survivor, Dr Israel Bornstein. Alongside the grandson of a high-ranking SS Officer, Derek Niemann, they tour the country speaking about their families' stories and instilling the importance of tolerance and fighting prejudice.

As has been mentioned throughout the debate, the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day this year is "One Day". This is extremely powerful, and manages to

encompass the whole lives of those poor victims and the survivors. It was inconceivable to someone having a happy childhood and growing up with a loving family that "One Day", within a relatively short period, they would be facing the most unimaginable horrors. I read the words of a survivor, Iby Knill, who stated that from one day to the next, everything could change. She said that one day, she was greeted with an embrace; the very next day, people ran across the road to avoid being seen with her. I read the words of my constituent, Ike Alterman, someone who is rightly revered across the entire Jewish community and by royalty following his recent meetings with the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. I will read the following section from his memoirs word for word:

"One day in 1942, they said that all Jewish people must congregate in the town square. You could only bring with you what you could carry in your hands and everything else you had to leave...So we were all lined up in the square, standing there for hours and hours and nothing was happening...Each line was about five deep and they started counting the people. I was standing behind my father and he told me to stay on my tiptoes to make me look taller than I was. So there was my dad, my mother, my sister and my little brother. And they came and they counted and just between my father and my mother they stopped, their hand gesture divided us. So my father and I were saved and the rest were marched out through the square...My little brother with his hands above his head. Rifles on them. Never to be seen again."

For Ike and millions of others, the following years led them to suffer and witness abhorrent and unspeakable crimes. However, those incarcerated in the most appalling, brutal conditions dreamed that one day, they would be free. How the survivors managed this, I will never know, but they built new lives for themselves and thrived; they started businesses and had families, and now have countless numbers of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It is therefore imperative to tell the whole story of a survivor's life, and I therefore commend the My Voice project, which is co-ordinated by The Fed in my constituency. That project documents the life stories of holocaust survivors living in Greater Manchester, and is unique in being located in the main Jewish social care provider in Greater Manchester, which enables it to provide holistic wrap-around care to the survivors as their testimony is recounted. The concept was provided by Margit Cohen, who came to the UK on the Kindertransport in 1938. She stated,

"I have to tell you my life story, my whole life story before I die."

My Voice captures survivors' stories in their own voices by sound recording and transcribing the storyteller's words into individual books. These are more than just artifacts of oral history: they are records of each person's experience and heritage, encompassing their entire life before, during and after the war years. The project intends the completed books to be used as groundbreaking educational resources to further understanding of the persecution of Jews and other minorities by the Nazi regime; to counter prejudice and revisionism; and to give courage and hope to other survivors of tyranny and oppression. To date, 30 life story books have been produced, and a further 12 are in various stages of production. The project works closely with Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, which houses the books in its museum, and the team of volunteers who work on the project also received a Queen's award for voluntary service. I conclude by thanking those brave survivors for telling their stories.

2.38 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) and his passionate and moving speech. I thank the right hon. and hon. Members who secured this important debate, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge): I wish her well in her recovery, and thank her for all she does. I also thank the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for its vital work each and every day, and thanks must also go to the Holocaust Educational Trust for everything it does to teach future generations about the holocaust and subsequent genocides.

I will make just two brief points. The first is that when remembering and reflecting, it is crucial that we do not picture the atrocities perpetrated during the holocaust as purely historical events. The seeds of antisemitic prejudice, distrust and hatred first took root many years prior to the ghettos being built, Jewish businesses being destroyed or the trains being loaded, and despite the horrors of the holocaust, antisemitism remains with us to this day. Antisemitism is felt all too keenly by Jewish communities in this country and across the world. That is exactly why today's debate and the events taking place across the country today are so important. We must never cease trying to understand and comprehend the pernicious antisemitism that led to the holocaust and still exists today—only then can we seek to defeat it.

Secondly, today is an opportunity to celebrate and defend the daily reminders of the Nazi defeat. Each synagogue and celebration of Jewish life in this country serves as a powerful reminder of the Jewish people's strength in the face of unspeakable horrors. My own city of Coventry is no stranger to resilience when confronted with disaster and destruction. During the second world war, the blitz levelled Coventry's streets, buildings and many houses of worship. However, in the over 75 years since the war, Coventry has never stopped rebuilding, rebounding and remembering its history. There is no better example of this resilience over the past year than the restoration of a previously abandoned synagogue in the heart of my constituency of Coventry North West. Today, after decades of non-use, I am proud that we now have a place for Judaism to thrive in my city once again—a place for people to gather and learn about Jewish history, culture and faith, and a home for communities to come together and support one another.

This is what defeating fascism and overcoming one of the darkest chapters of our history looks like. We must always treasure these symbols of resilience and defiance. It is just one of the many ways that we can stand together, in this Chamber and across the country, to say never again.

2.41 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): First, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and others on securing this important debate, and I join my colleagues in saying that there is absolutely no place for the vile antisemitic abuse that he and his family have faced.

I want to thank the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for his really moving account of the horrors he witnessed while serving in Bosnia. I also

thank the hon. Members for West Bromwich East (Nicola Richards) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and of course my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) for sharing the stories of others, which I think is very important if we are going along with the message of never again. It is a particular honour and privilege to participate in such an important debate, and to follow the moving speeches of my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel).

Holocaust Memorial Day is a time for us to remember and reflect on some of the most horrendous and atrocious acts committed by mankind. We reflect on the harsh conditions forced upon those who, under Nazi ideology and eugenics, were deemed secondary beings or subhuman. We remember the 6 million Jews who were targeted and murdered by a fascist regime that used vile antisemitism to justify and legitimise its cruel treatment of millions of innocents. We must not forget the millions of others who were murdered under this regime—millions of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, Roma and Sinti people, Polish, Serbian and Slovenian citizens, LGBT people, the disabled and so many more.

It is important for us to reflect on the antisemitic propaganda and lies that were peddled to justify what was one of the biggest atrocities in our modern history, because we are currently seeing a situation where antisemitism, hate speech and hate crimes continue to rise internationally, in particular across Europe. In Europe, more than one in four Jewish people has experienced antisemitic harassment at least once, and almost half have expressed that they are worried about being subjected to antisemitic verbal insults or harassment.

Not so long ago, in June 2019, Vivienne Walt pointed out that for each of the previous three years, the UK had reported the highest number of antisemitic incidents ever recorded. In France, with the world's third biggest Jewish population, records showed a 74% spike in antisemitic acts between 2017 and 2018, and in Germany antisemitic incidents had risen by more than 19% on the previous year. We cannot kid ourselves into believing that antisemitism was just a problem of the early 20th century; it is very much present in today's society, it is on the rise and it must be stamped out. As a holocaust survivor, Primo Levi, wrote:

"If understanding is impossible, knowing is imperative, because what happened could happen again."

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and Holocaust Educational Trust do such great work and make many efforts to ensure that we also use this day to remember the other atrocities that occurred in the 20th century—in Cambodia, Rwanda, Darfur and so many other places. The importance of remembering those tragedies and recognising the vile ideology that sought to justify them cannot be understated. Failure to remember risks that these tragedies will occur again.

Unfortunately, it seems that we are failing to learn the lessons of those past atrocities; as we sit here today, millions of people across the globe are still subjected to targeted campaigns of persecution, violence and genocide. Uyghur Muslims are being systematically targeted and Rohingya Muslims are persecuted in Myanmar in what has led to the creation of the world's largest refugee camp. There is the Saudi coalition against Yemen, which has led to widespread famine and was just last year

described as the world's biggest humanitarian crisis. In Ethiopia, we are seeing the warning signs of genocide as Tigrayans are being murdered, raped, tortured and displaced by ongoing conflicts.

Time and again, we have seen what happens when prejudice, bigotry, xenophobia and racism are left unchecked, allowed to fester and—worse—installed in power. We cannot be complacent, given the ever-rising levels of bigotry and all forms of racism that we are seeing closer to home. It is crucial that we should proactively condemn the far-right ideologies that are rearing their heads in the UK and across Europe, peddled by regimes that seek to legitimise the heinous acts that we have seen in the past and are still witnessing today.

When we see far-right extremism being peddled on our own shores and antisemitic and racist hate crimes increasing, we must recognise that for what it is. We must stamp it out immediately. We must address it and always recommit ourselves to saying, “Never again.”

2.47 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy), who has a long track record of standing up to racism and antisemitism. I add my thanks to my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who both spoke so powerfully about their own family situations.

My constituent John Hajdu MBE brings a teddy bear into local London schools when he speaks as an ambassador for the Holocaust Educational Trust. He will be leading us this Sunday at the Tottenham Hotspur stadium. As an Arsenal supporter, I will have my fingers crossed behind my back when I enter the stadium, but I look forward to a day of contemplation with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and others, led by our mayor, the young Councillor Jogee, and the veteran Jewish Councillor Sheila Peacock, who has worked tirelessly on standing up to antisemitism since she was a schoolteacher in the 1980s.

Sheila has now reached her 90th birthday and is still leading the community in Haringey to talk about the issues raised at this time of the year. She has also commemorated the peace garden outside the Bruce Castle Museum, where local rabbis come to bless and conduct prayers. That is always a moving occasion in Haringey, which is home to a community of 180 languages and, in its diversity, probably represents all the different tragic genocidal incidents that Members have mentioned today.

I also put on the record my heartfelt thanks to the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who described his own experience when in the armed forces of seeing people being murdered in a genocide. We are so lucky to have debates such as this—how serious they are and how the emotion gets to us. What a nice antidote to the week we have had. We play our roles in the Opposition and the Government, but it is so important that, as a Parliament, we have these moments that bring us together around the things that matter.

I want to reach out to the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). If he needs any support, as somebody who has personally experienced antisemitism, those of us on the Labour Benches here today would want to offer that support, and to remember the Jewish

communities still terrified as a result of the recent Beth Israel attack in Texas and the traumatising effect it had not only on Jewish people in the United States, but across my community. That attack happened in a synagogue and I will link that with what we are being encouraged to do tonight: to light a candle to represent hope.

What do we do when we have these terrible situations, such as the one described by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West, who explained why he now has such a small family—so many of them were killed? What do we do when we hear about attacks on a faith community, such as the casual attack overnight on two of the Haredi community in Stamford Hill? We try to do as the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) said, not shying away from the pain but welcoming it, so that it makes us remember and do things differently.

That reinforces our energy to take on, for example, what the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) talked about: perpetrators who are still living here in the UK and have not been brought to justice. Is there more we could do as a Parliament as a result of today's debate, not to allow that just to drop in the air it was spoken into, but to pursue it, particularly given that we now see some dangerous trends in the Bosnia and Herzegovina situation, for example? I know my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who will speak next, has long experience of living in Banja Luka and understanding the community there, and has spoken of it in this House. What can we do as a result of today's debate to prevent another possible genocide from happening in that region?

The legacy we are talking about happens not only in this House, in our debates and our foreign policy, but in our communities. I know all hon. Members here will know people doing similar work. When we were talking with the Minister for Afghan Resettlement, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who is leading the Afghanistan welcome programme, I was struck that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West talked about visiting refugees in his locality within weeks of their arrival in the UK. That practical action plays an important role.

A local rabbi in Muswell Hill, David Mason, has joined the Methodist Church, the Quakers and a number of other faith communities to provide a warm welcome for refugees, who are housed in very low-quality accommodation in quite an affluent part of London. We see that inequality, with people who have very little and others who have quite a lot; we walk the same streets, but we have different lives.

Much that is happening at local level is because of the experience that survivors have put into practice. It is the women from the synagogue who prepare meals once a month on a Sunday, bring toys and games for children to play with, have helped children to register at school and assisted refugees to register with a GP, get into college or find a job as a bicycle mechanic—all those basics of the journey one makes in a new community.

I was honoured to go to Auschwitz with a number of schoolchildren, some from Hornsey School for Girls, a number of years ago. I got to see first-hand the dreadful situation there—my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North mentioned it in her speech, so I will not repeat it—but also the importance of experiencing how bleak that place is. At sundown, when the tour is over and we feel the freezing Polish weather and the

[*Catherine West*]

grey sky, it makes one think of the suffering but also gives one that sense of, “What can we do differently? How do we light the candle? How do we give people hope?”

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—I wanted to speak in the debate but I was in a Bill Committee, which is why I have come in late. I am a trustee of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, and I want to mention all the work it does in remembering people’s lives, including the visits to Auschwitz that she is talking about. It also works to make sure that these things never happen again and to raise awareness about subsequent genocides, including in Rwanda and Cambodia. Will she join me in paying tribute to the staff, to the trustees, to Laura and Olivia and to everyone else at the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust? They do such a fantastic job.

Catherine West: Indeed, I will. My hon. Friend has a long record of promoting the values of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and has done an enormous amount to emphasise their work not just nationally but locally in the Hampstead area, where so many survivors made their home when they first came here following the second world war and where they have made a strong contribution. Indeed, many Jewish members of our communities are active in organisations such as CARIS—Christian Action and Response in Society—in Haringey, which provides food, clothing, education and legal advice to newly arrived communities. We also have the remarkable Haringey Welcome, which promotes dignity and respect for migrants and refugees in our borough.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know you agree with this being a day when we try to reflect on the words we use in Parliament. Some of my Jewish constituents have written to me when we have had debates about immigration in the House and asked that we always try to have those debates in a respectful way. They have asked that, when we talk about groups such as the Gypsy and Traveller community, we try to understand other perspectives and not just use language that may denigrate groups that are already experiencing a lot of discrimination.

Wera Hobhouse: We all need to recognise the feeling of marginalisation and exclusion: it is not one of extinction, but they are also destroying lives. Does the hon. Member agree that we need to recognise that?

Catherine West: Indeed. One of the other local groups in my constituency, the Sir Martin Gilbert Learning Centre, which brings history to life, is another way of not forgetting and of informing a future approach that holds the light—that light that we all want to put in our windows tonight so that we never forget, but also so that we can go forward in a positive way, always trying to prevent violence from happening again and to remember the lesson about how discrimination begins. That reflects the important point that the hon. Member for Bath made about rooting out the beginnings of discrimination and negativity and trying to address them.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for presiding over today’s excellent debate; it is one of the best I have been in since I was elected in 2015. I look forward very

much to what the Minister and the shadow spokespersons have to say and also to lighting a candle this evening so that we may never forget.

2.57 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) and all the other speakers in this powerful and moving debate. As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity, I am very pleased that we are having this debate, with so much time set aside for it.

I thank Mr Speaker for organising the event in Parliament later this afternoon. It is so important that we as parliamentarians come together to remember, to mourn, to say, “Never again,” and to ask what we can do. I also thank and congratulate the sponsors of the debate—the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge), the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols)—on securing the debate and on their speeches.

I am very conscious of the fact that we are in the Chamber speaking for so many others. I am thinking of some of them as we sit and stand here today. I am thinking about my constituent who lives in Roehampton, having fled the genocide in Rwanda. Since then, she has been unable to see the rest of her family or to go back to Rwanda. That is a pain that she takes with her every day. She has rebuilt her life and she now has children, who have never been to Rwanda. She will probably never go there again or see the rest of her family, who are scattered around the world. It is that shockwave of pain that is behind all the stories and all the numbers we are talking about today.

I am thinking about the young woman I met who came from Srebrenica. When I was working near there, she told me that she had lost her brothers and her father one day in July 1995. They left the town and they were never seen again. She was not able to bury them. She was not able to go and mourn them. She felt like they could still be alive—that speck of hope was there and it was absolutely heartbreaking.

I am also thinking of Dr Martin Stern, who yesterday spoke to the all-party parliamentary group on prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity. He told us the powerful story of how, when he was five, he was taken out of school and sent to camps, and then escaped from them. To his great cost and credit, he tells that story again and again. I pay tribute to all the Holocaust survivors who tell their story and have kept the light alive; and to those in later generations, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who continue to tell survivors’ stories.

Catherine West: I cannot allow this moment to pass without mentioning Lord Dubs. We cannot have this debate without mentioning his amazing contribution, first to this House, and then to the other place.

Fleur Anderson: I absolutely echo those thanks to Lord Dubs. I was going to say the same thing. As for all those Holocaust survivors listening to the debate who have not been able to tell their story, I am sure other

Members will join me in saying: “We understand that. You survived. Not everyone has been able to tell their story.” I thank Lord Dubs—a Member of the other place, and a former Member of Parliament for Battersea, which is near my constituency. He has been inspirational when we have worked together to support refugees.

I would like to underscore why this debate is so important, and highlight ways in which we parliamentarians could do better. We cannot say in this debate that mourning and remembering is doing enough. We say “never again”; there are things that we can do, and we on the all-party parliamentary group have been learning that. First, we must remember and mourn the 8 million Jews who died in camps. Every single one of them is a story that echoes through the generations.

“Never again” has become “time and again”. Dr Martin Stern, the holocaust survivor, said in our meeting yesterday that he wants to remember, but he also wants to make sure that we look at genocides that are happening now, and at potential genocides, and take action on them. Genocide remains an ever-present reality in Rakhine state, in Xinjiang, in Tigray—I could go on. The Early Warning Project reports that today, in 15 countries, there are ongoing mass killings, and Yemen, Pakistan and India are at high risk of having new mass killing incidents break out. In Bosnia, we see a slide into increasing nationalism, anti-secession rhetoric and holocaust denial—denial that Srebrenica took place. These are all harbingers of what can come next. Now is the time when we can stop that.

Another reason why the debate is important is that holocaust denial is shockingly prevalent in the UK, as Members have rightly mentioned. A November 2021 survey led by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany found that 9% of respondents believed that the holocaust was myth, or that the number of Jews killed in the holocaust had been greatly exaggerated. A third of respondents reported seeing fake news—holocaust denial or distortion—online. Popular social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were most frequently cited as the locations where that material had been seen.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): The hon. Lady makes the important point that particularly on big social media platforms, online spaces are being created where people can target others with abuse, and where hate speech, religious hate, antisemitism and Islamophobia are normalised. Those are really serious issues that need to be addressed when the House considers the online safety Bill.

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Member for that point. I wholeheartedly agree. If we really mean it when we say “never again”, we should accept that this is where “never again” starts. Hate speech is where it starts, and where it has to be stopped.

Andrew Percy: The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. On a point made by my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), we are used to the holocaust denial rhetoric that comes from the far right, but it increasingly also comes from the far left. Does the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) agree that it is important that all of us, when we speak on these matters and fight antisemitism, do so with equal weight

and force whether it comes from the far right or the far left, as the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North pointed out?

Fleur Anderson: The whole process of othering a group of people because of their identity must be stopped at every opportunity. Online hate speech, wherever it comes from, is linked to rising antisemitism, which Members have mentioned. It is no surprise that between January and June 2021, 1,308 antisemitic events were recorded—the highest number in any recorded year, and an increase of 49% since 2020. I know that we stand together in the House today to oppose this.

I thank, as others have done, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, the Holocaust Educational Trust and the Aegis Trust for their work. I, too, have visited Yad Vashem. I did so as a teenager and will never, ever forget it. That is testament to the power of education.

I worked in Bosnia and Serbia during the war, and four years later I returned to run the Christian Aid Bosnia office, rebuilding villages in north-west Bosnia and supporting the return of refugees. I saw how a country that seems to be peaceful, and communities that seem to be ethnically diverse and happily co-existent, can slip into conflict and genocide. I have seen the necessity of building peace every single day. That is what we are doing in this debate, and that is what this afternoon’s event here in Parliament will be doing: it will be building peace.

I am pleased that Roehampton library has organised a Holocaust Memorial Day event involving local councillors and local people. The librarian staff should be thanked. St Mary’s church in Putney organised prayers for Holocaust Memorial Day. There are 17,000 events taking place across the country, and that is so important to building peace.

Tulip Siddiq: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about all the different communities that are coming together to support Holocaust Memorial Day and to remember all the people who lost their lives. I want to take this opportunity to be a bit cheeky and mention JW3, the Jewish community centre in my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn. It does so much work to build peace and bring together communities. It hosts events for Holocaust Memorial Day, including for other religious communities. It welcomes everyone. It is a model of peace, and I pay tribute to it and to the chief executive, Raymond, who does so much work in bringing together communities.

Fleur Anderson: I thank my hon. Friend for her praise for peacebuilders. Peacebuilding is not easy. It sounds like it is a nice, cuddly thing to do, but it is actually very difficult, especially in areas of conflict. I have seen how hard it is in different areas of Africa in which I have worked. It is hard here, it is hard anywhere, so we must thank, praise and support peacebuilders around the world,

There were clear risk factors in Srebrenica leading up to the day when 8,372 men and boys were taken out in July 1995 and killed. That was one day of horror, but many days led up to that event. Right now in Tigray, thousands have been killed and rape is being used as a systematic weapon of war, and people from Tigray are being taken off the streets of Addis Ababa and detained. It is all based on ethnicity, and it is happening right

[Fleur Anderson]

now. These things are preventable. The holocaust was preventable, and these disasters and crimes against humanity are preventable.

I want to highlight four things that we can do. First, we must fulfil existing obligations in the United Nations genocide convention and the International Criminal Court Act 2001. I remind the House that the UN genocide convention places on the UK these responsibilities: an obligation not to commit genocide; an obligation to prevent genocide, which, according to the International Court of Justice, has an extraterritorial scope, so it is not just about what happens here in the UK; and an obligation to punish genocide. We have been hearing that there are war criminals in the UK who are not being taken to justice—that must end. The UK also has an obligation to enact the necessary legislation to give effect to the provisions of the convention.

That is a profound and wide-ranging set of obligations. Can the UK honestly say that it is living up to them? Have we had a review of our obligations under the convention? Can we look at what we are doing and take action to increase our efforts?

Secondly, we need to approach genocide and crimes against humanity as actionable events, not just consequences of existing conflict and warfare. The action we can take includes establishing the means to identify risk factors and assess threat levels posed by genocide and crimes against humanity. We can monitor at-risk countries, acting swiftly when risk factors are identified, be that through trade, defence, foreign or domestic policies. We can also resource and take seriously our responsibility to investigate, arrest and try or extradite genocide suspects living at large in the UK.

Thirdly—this is what we have been learning about most in the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of genocide and crimes against humanity—there is the need for a national atrocity prevention strategy, a national Government-wide strategy on the prevention of genocide that includes domestic and foreign policy, putting in place institutional infrastructure to prevent genocide happening in the future. America, for example, has the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act of 2018. It set up a mass atrocities taskforce, with mandates for an annual report to the President. We do not have an equivalent of that, but we should. Without such a strategy and without political leadership in the face of today's genocides and campaigns of atrocity crimes, opportunities for the UK to influence, mitigate, prevent and protect will continue to be missed and Britain's promises of "never again" remain unfulfilled. Fourthly, we need to support holocaust education and wider education about other crimes against humanity and genocides.

Finally, we need to equip the next generation to address the genocides of the future, but we also need to take action now. I have to believe that one day there will be no more genocide, but that means that this day we have to take more action.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Lady mentioned the ceremony which starts at, I think, just after 4 o'clock. I have warned the Front Benchers that it might be appropriate for us to all be able to go to that, so perhaps just bear that in mind.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), as it always is. I have followed her on two or three occasions now. I particularly enjoy following her for a number of reasons, but first because her contributions are always ones I can adhere to and support. Her contribution today was exactly along those lines.

Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for permitting me to speak on this subject, which is close to my heart. Today, it has been close to everybody's heart. The contributions from right hon. and hon. Members, whether in speeches or interventions, have been incredibly important. The world is fast approaching the first 100 years since it all happened—that is how fast time is going. We in this Chamber must never take for granted the freedom to debate, disagree and legislate, so it is an honour to be here today to remember the millions of lives lost at a time when democracy for so many broke down. That is what happened: democracy broke down and evil took over.

The holocaust is the most abominable and systematic act of genocide in history and, for some, it happened in living memory. I want to speak today in remembrance of the 6 million Jews who lost their lives. Every single life has a name, and behind every one of those 6 million names is a story. Others have told those stories today, and we thank them for their personal contributions. The hon. Member for Putney and the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) both mentioned Lord Dubs—I have written down here, "mention Lord Dubs"—who came to this country on a Kindertransport. We owe thanks to him for his contribution. Refugees from the Kindertransport came to a small refugee farm in Millisle in my constituency.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am stimulated to intervene on the hon. Gentleman because this very morning I was listening to BBC radio. A holocaust survivor was taken to Belfast following the war—not, I think, in the period that he describes—and she described the welcome she received and the support she had. Holocaust survivors are becoming fewer. They visit as many schools and educate as many young people as they can. Their testimony can be made available to all schools. I wonder if we should all, as Members of Parliament, ask the schools in our localities to use that testimony as part of their curriculum work to remind people why this must never happen again.

Jim Shannon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The person that he referred to who came to Belfast then came to Millisle, which is where the Kindertransport children came who were fortunate enough to get out of Germany. It became home for many of them and that is important. Although Millisle is only on the edge of my constituency, the farm is in my constituency. It played an important role in the Kindertransport operation, giving refuge to Jewish children.

A local businessman, Lawrence Gorman, leased his derelict farmhouse to the Belfast Refugee Aid, which is the point that the right hon. Gentleman made. Ballyrolly House, where the children were, has grown greatly. There is now a housing estate there with private housing, as well as Ballyrolly. This small village in County Down

became known as a haven from Nazi terror. Years later, many of those children returned as adults to Millisle to thank the people who helped them, including Lawrence Gorman and the residents and people of Millisle who saved lives.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for his constant dedication in his role as the chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief; he is an example to us all. Will he join me in welcoming plans for the UK-hosted ministerial meeting on freedom of religion or belief in July this year, an international conference that will bring together Government Ministers, faith leaders and civil society representatives from around the world, giving us an important opportunity together to review lessons learned from previous atrocities and to ensure that they do not happen again?

Jim Shannon: I appreciate that intervention and, in return, thank the hon. Lady for all she does as the envoy to the middle east on behalf of Christians and other ethnic minorities. I declare an interest as the chair of the APPG and I am glad that the hon. Lady made that point.

We talk about genocide and today is about the holocaust, but it is also a day, as the hon. Member for Putney said, to remember those who have been subject to persecution, such as Christians across the world and in the middle east, China and North Korea; the Uyghurs in China; the Baha'is in Iran; the Shias in Iran and Iraq; the Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia; the Muslims in India; the Hindus in Pakistan; the Yazidis in Iraq; and the Hazaras in Afghanistan. All those are being tortured and murdered because of their beliefs, and that is the issue. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) gently reminded us all of the seminar that is happening this year. It is great to know that the Government will be central in highlighting the genocide that is taking place against many people of different religious groups across the world—it is a salient reminder.

I also want to tell the House about an Austrian refugee, Alfred Neumann, who arranged visas and brought Jewish refugees from Vienna to Newtownards—I suspect that he may be the very guy that brought that young person to Belfast. He came and contributed to life in Newtownards, helped to train people in crafts and to make belts and handbags and create home industries. It has been said that no one in Northern Ireland saved more lives from the holocaust than Alfred Neumann; he was from Cookstown in County Tyrone and he came the whole way to County Down. We are very pleased he did and many people are alive because of it. These efforts, during a period of persecution and loss are worthy of the deepest respect, and I am immensely proud to recognise the contribution of the people of Northern Ireland in providing sanctuary to those who fled such horror.

Some Members in the Chamber may have visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. I am afraid I have not, although it has always been my intention to do so. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) referred to education, the importance of which has been illustrated by every speaker today, and I want to talk about what we have done back home. Many younger people in my constituency have recognised the moral responsibility to go to the

concentration camps and to experience what took place. My youngest staff member made the pilgrimage at the age of 18 and that part of history has become one of interest and significance to young people.

In our schools in Northern Ireland the curriculum covers the two world wars. It is imperative that remembrance of the holocaust remains a vital element of our curriculum, so I thank my friend and colleague Peter Weir MLA, who as the then Northern Ireland Education Minister allocated funding of £160,000 to support the Holocaust Educational Trust to deliver the Lessons from Auschwitz project to Northern Ireland schools and colleges as part of our education programme. That is what we all want to see, and I am sure that the Minister and the House are united today on how important it is to have that in place. The project ensures that young people learn from that dark chapter of human history, remember it and understand that it must never happen again.

Although the motion relates to Holocaust Memorial Day, I would like to take a minute to highlight the fact, which many hon. Members have referred to, that antisemitism still pervades our society. It is an evil stain on mankind, and for that reason we must continue to support lessons about the holocaust, listen to those remaining few who bore witness, and remember. We must be clear that antisemitism was the foundation on which the genocidal plan was built. The personal narratives of those who survived to bear witness must never be diluted or diminished.

The holocaust remains on the conscience of humanity because in the middle of the 20th century—the most progressive century in human history—humanity experienced its greatest failure. It failed to do what was right; indeed, it did what was wrong, with a vengeance.

Triumph can come from failure, and it must provide hope. I end with a sentence from Magda Herzberger, who was in the concentration camps and prayed to God that she would make it out alive:

“You have to also carry in your heart forgiveness...If you do that, people live in harmony.”

3.21 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I congratulate the Members who secured the debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) and the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for their powerful and moving contributions.

I thank South Lanarkshire Council's instrumental music service, which worked with schools across South Lanarkshire, including in my constituency, to create a virtual commemorative event through moving spoken word and musical performances. Education is key; like other hon. Members, I want to mention the Holocaust Educational Trust, whose aim is

“to educate young people from every background about the Holocaust and the important lessons to be learned for today.”

It is incredibly humbling to stand in the Palace of Westminster, a globally recognised symbol of democracy, and speak on Holocaust Memorial Day 2022. It reminds me, as I am sure it reminds us all, of our great privilege to live in such freedom and the great responsibility that comes with it. This year's theme, “One Day”, is poignant.

[Margaret Ferrier]

To look at one day almost does not seem enough. The atrocities of the holocaust and many other campaigns of persecution spanned years. How can we compact the detail and express the horrors fully based on any one day from the period? That, though, is exactly the point: a snapshot in time, a single day. Each day is as meaningful as another, but perhaps for different reasons. It reminds us that that one day is a day in the life of those who survived and of those who did not; it is not a day consigned only to the history books.

The one day that I would like to tell the House about is one of courage, honour and a lasting promise. The exact date is unknown; it is a memory of a father retold by his son. Enver Alia Sheqer recalls the bravery of his father, Ali Sheqer Pashkaj, who ran a small convenience store in Pukë, Albania. One day, German Nazis stopped by in a van filled with Albanians sentenced to hard labour and a Jewish man due to be shot.

The story goes that Ali, who spoke German, invited the Nazis in and plied them with drink. Once they were adequately distracted, he slipped the Jewish man a note hidden in a melon, instructing him how to escape and where to hide until Ali could retrieve him. When the Nazis realised what had happened, they threatened Ali's life. They held a gun to his head as they interrogated him, but he did not give up his secret. Eventually, the Nazis moved on. Ali went back for the Jewish man and sheltered him for the rest of the war. That man survived the war, moved to Mexico and became a dentist.

I chose that day because it is a story of besa, the Albanian code of honour. It is often reported that Albania ended the war with a larger Jewish population than it started with. Many Jews found sanctuary in Albania, and even after the German occupation the Albanian people refused to break besa. They would not turn over the Jews to whom they provided shelter; they would continue to hide and protect them.

The word “besa” means, quite literally, “to keep the promise”, and someone who acts according to besa is someone to whom a person can trust their life and the life of their family. It is an ethical code by which I hope all of us would act if—God forbid—we ever found ourselves in a position such as the one those brave Albanian men and women faced then. The concept of besa is something we can still apply today, while horrors and crimes against humanity unfortunately still persist. Only last week, a number of us stood in the Chamber to urge the Government to act in support of the Uyghur people, who are facing the horrors of a genocide from the Chinese state.

We might take for granted the privilege of freedom that I mentioned earlier if we cannot imagine a genocide on British soil. We promised to learn from history—after all, we were on the right side of it, and on the right side of history we must remain. We can maintain the moral high ground only if we are supporting the world in learning those same lessons, and actively protecting the persecuted. There must be a political appetite to do that, and I know that all Members in the Chamber today have that appetite.

When we see international conflicts, and how minorities are terrorised and abused, we are quick to stand up and condemn it, but we must also be quick to prevent it. One day could be any day—yesterday, today, tomorrow—

but there is a lesson to be learned, and wisdom to be gained from every single day. This evening I will be lighting a candle in remembrance of the millions of lives lost in the holocaust and the genocides that followed. It is a symbol of hope that there will come a time when there are no more mass atrocities and no more genocides—one day.

3.26 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a privilege to speak on behalf of the Scottish National party in this important debate which, for good reason, is one of the key dates in the parliamentary calendar. Some of the speeches we have heard have been utterly harrowing, but that is all the more reason for people to listen to them. Colleagues may have heard me mention, more than a few times, how fortunate I feel to represent East Renfrewshire, which is home to the majority of Scotland's Jewish population. We are a diverse, vibrant community, and we are so very much the better for it.

Last week I joined children from Calderwood Lodge Primary School for an excellent online lesson about the realities of the holocaust. We heard from Hedi Argent, whose very ordinary childhood in Vienna was turned upside down one day, just because she and her family were Jewish. She spoke so powerfully to the children about her own childhood, and about how as things changed, she was ostracised and bullied at school, by the teachers as well as the students, before her family had to flee. One thing she still remembered vividly was the personal impact on her of one friend—just one—who stood with her against the tide of hate, demonstrating, as Hedi says, that the right thing is not always the easiest.

Last night I was fortunate to attend an excellent event organised by East Renfrewshire Council, where we heard from the family of the late Reverend and Eva Zoltan. It must have been very difficult for them but they told, very bravely, a chilling story of their parents' experience during the holocaust, made all the more chilling because clearly life had moved quite quickly from just day to day, to terrible, unimaginable horror. We need to carry that thought with us, and increasingly so.

Holocausts do not just happen overnight; they creep up on us gradually, with intolerance, hatred, and the othering of minority groups being allowed to happen, little by little, because nobody is brave enough to do what that wee girl Hedi's friend did, and say “No, that's not right. We don't treat people badly just because of their identity or just because they are different to us.”

I have spoken in this debate every year since I was elected, and it grieves me to say that I feel a bit less positive than I have done in previous debates. I am concerned about rising intolerance, hatred, and a populist divisiveness, which is fanned online but absolutely exists in real life too across the world, near and far. Nowhere is immune. We in this place need to be outspoken because, whether we look to the disgraceful treatment of the Uyghur Muslims in China, or much closer to home—I, too, saw that horrific video from Stamford Hill last night—we should be concerned. We need to be really aware that this is not some dim and distant historic issue. We have heard about genocides since, and now should concern us, too. We have to be willing to speak out positively and publicly about antisemitism, hatred and prejudice.

I am fortunate because where I live that happens in the most powerful way. I have seen Henry Wuga and his late wife Ingrid speaking to young people about their experience so that generations of the future can learn from the past. Henry is an amazing man. This morning, he was on Radio Scotland encouraging young people to be aware of fake news and emphasising that we must always remember to learn—wise words, as ever. Just like Ingrid Wuga, Judith Rosenberg is very much missed in my community because of the enormous contribution that they both made to Holocaust education and ensuring that the voices of survivors are heard and preserved. Such conversations, hearing directly from people who have experienced the Holocaust or more recent genocides, are one of the most powerful ways of ensuring that the lessons that we must heed are heard. I am glad to join those who have already praised the excellent work of the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust and the Holocaust Educational Trust for all they do in that regard.

The Holocaust Educational Trust supports initiatives such as the vision schools programme, where Mearns Castle and Barrhead high schools have achieved awards for their work in Holocaust education. That is important and very welcome. The importance of proactive work that supports communities to come together against antisemitism, Islamophobia, hatred and prejudice has never been more important, and communal organisations such as the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities and the Glasgow Jewish Representative Council are often at the forefront of making that happen.

The Glasgow Jewish Representative Council recently hosted an excellent interfaith event where there was an unplanned but profoundly moving moment: the first ever Muslim student at Scotland's only Jewish primary school was overjoyed to meet his Jewish headteacher again after many intervening years—they were both overjoyed, actually. That reinforced the importance of standing together to appreciate differences and calling out hate. That was one day, as today's theme would have it, which will remain in my mind.

Another one day that I will remember for the rest of my life was a very different kind of day: the day when I visited Yad Vashem and saw the reality of the Holocaust writ large. I saw the magnitude of this stain on humanity, with the cold-blooded murder of men, women and children—so many of them—because they were Jewish, black gay, disabled, Roma or Sinti. Their photographs are there—so many photographs have been carefully collected in the time since—which is deeply upsetting to see. They bring home to you how, one day, everyday people living everyday lives—they were just people—were ripped away and killed in unimaginable horror and unimaginable numbers. Such photos are also posted on the Auschwitz Memorial Museum Twitter account, where, day and daily, we see photographs of men, women and children—often the kind of lovely photos people have on their mantlepiece of beautiful babies or chubby toddlers—who were all killed.

It is really important to have that personal connection to the people who were murdered and look at their faces and into their eyes. Unfathomable numbers of people were murdered in the Holocaust, but we must never forget that each one was an individual person—a loved and missed mum or dad, son or daughter—and not just a number to be tallied up. One of them is the only Scot named as righteous among the nations at Yad Vashem, Jane Haining. I have previously called for a more lasting

memorial to her, and I applaud everyone involved in the current work on a heritage trail and a school essay competition in her name.

Jane Haining grew up in Dunscore in the Scottish Borders and later travelled to Budapest to take up the post of matron in a Church of Scotland missionary school where many Jewish students were educated. She resisted calls from the Church to come home when it became clear that the situation was becoming very dangerous. Because she refused to leave her students alone to face their fate, she paid for her compassion and solidarity with her life. She was transported to Auschwitz along with them, and she died.

Jane had said of her students:

"If these children need me in days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in days of darkness?"

That is the thing to take away from the debate. It is easy and unchallenging to speak out in the good times, but we really need to be committed to raising our voice and standing up when things are harder, and we all need to do that every day.

3.34 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a real honour to be able to contribute to this debate today. It is not only an essential time for remembrance and learning but an important time of reflection on the current shape of our society and the direction the world is taking.

We have heard some incredibly powerful and emotive speeches from hon. Members of all parties. Many others have shared their thoughts, as I did, when we signed the Holocaust Education Trust's book of commitment this week. I pay tribute to its, and others', vital work to ensure that the atrocities that took place are never forgotten and that the horrors of the Holocaust that we saw in Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, which was liberated 77 years ago to this very day, are never repeated.

It was a true privilege to hear from all those who spoke today. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for his incredibly powerful speech. To speak from personal experience is never easy, especially in this place, but I know his words will have had a powerful impact far beyond this House. I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for speaking out about the shameful rise in antisemitism in this country and for sharing his own personal experience of antisemitism that no one should be on the receiving end of. My thoughts and solidarity are with him and his family. We have heard many powerful accounts. My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) shared Rena's testimony, which was one of courage beyond her young years. We could all learn from that and renew our efforts to stop more children experiencing the horror that Rena did.

I am especially thankful to my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) for highlighting that alongside the 6 million Jews that were killed, Roma and Gypsy people, Slavic people, LGBT communities, the disabled and religious and political minorities were also targeted by this fascist regime. I will not forget the words that she shared with us. They were so incredibly powerful and I am so proud to call her my friend. She is absolutely right when she says that memorialisation must lead to action. My right hon. Friend the Member

[Sarah Owen]

for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) laid out some of the actions that we could be taking, particularly in challenging fake news and online hate on social media. That is key to fighting the abhorrent rise of antisemitism, but also Islamophobia. Genocide, as we have heard so many times today, starts with the othering of people that she spoke of. It is that othering of people that leads to the horrors experienced by the Bosnian Muslim families that the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) so eloquently spoke of.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I want to offer my wholehearted support to my hon. Friend and to say how moving I have found her speech and indeed the other speeches that I have been here for today. I also wholeheartedly support the work of the Holocaust Educational Trust and the work of the local Jewish community in Reading and Woodley. I am afraid that, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq), I have had to be in a Committee today. I apologise for that, but I would like to offer my support, once again, for this debate and say how moving it has been. I am sure that colleagues across the House feel the same way.

Sarah Owen: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and echo his sentiments. We heard some really impassioned and powerful speeches today, but I know that many other Members across the House would have wished to be here to speak.

I am sure we all join my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) in her commitment to remember the 1.5 million Armenian people killed and to recognise that atrocity and evil act. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) said, these evil acts impact people like Bill for many, many years to come. The impact of the holocaust is felt through generations, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West said, so we must protect future generations from this horror.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) is absolutely right that we must be vigilant and act at the first signs of any potential genocide. We must also remember the atrocities that have taken place across the world, including the murder of 100,000 people in Babi Yar, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) spoke about so eloquently. I thank him for sharing the powerful lessons from the Kindertransport children.

As my wonderful friends, the hon. Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) said, antisemitism is not an historic problem, but, sadly, a scourge in our modern-day society that we can only beat together. As we have heard in so many speeches, memorials often bring people together. My hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) spoke from the heart when she talked about the peace garden in her constituency. As my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West said, these memorials exist not just to remember the dead, but as a sign of resilience.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) was absolutely right to talk from her considerable experience about the shock waves of pain caused by

genocide, particularly the shock waves felt by children, so it was very fitting that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) paid such a lovely tribute to the inspirational Lord Dubs from whom we have much to learn.

I know that the original sponsor of today's debate could not join us, so let me take this moment to pay tribute also to my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and thank her for her years of dedication in fighting the far right—the same extremism and fascism that committed the atrocities some 80 years ago, but just under a different guise.

I echo the pledge that others have made today to fight racism and prejudice wherever they are found. I stand in solidarity with Members on both sides of the House in that commitment, as does the Labour party. Wherever and whenever we see the poison of division and hatred raise its ugly head, we must address it, even when it is uncomfortably close to home, which is why our party's move to a new independent complaints process has been welcomed by many. It involved extensive engagement with the Jewish Labour movement and the Jewish community, and it is an important step in showing that Labour is, and always will be, the party of equality.

Just as they did then, many decades ago, people, sadly, still need a voice of equality and diversity in the face of tyranny and fascism. Tragically, world leaders are not learning the lessons of the past fast enough. We see that, as we stare at the horror of genocide currently taking place in Xinjiang against the Uyghur Muslims and the more recent genocides that have taken place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur and against the Yazidi and Rohingya, which we are all remembering here today. It is why the theme of Holocaust Memorial Day 2022—One Day—is so sadly fitting. It brings us together not only to remember the 6 million Jews who were killed, but to look forward to a future when, one day, there will be no more genocides and no more war.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust sums it up best when it says:

“We learn more about the past, we empathise with others today, and we take action for a better future.”

I believe that we can have a better future, but it will not come without courage—the courage to stand up to tyranny and oppression wherever we see it, whether that be through diplomacy, through trade measures such as the genocide amendment, or by standing shoulder to shoulder with those who are oppressed simply because of who they are—because that one day, when there is no longer war or genocide, will always be worth striving for.

3.43 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): I shall try to ensure that my comments are suitably timed so that we can get to the event at 4 o'clock.

In her absence, I would like to begin by conveying my thanks to the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) whose personal bravery and conviction in combating antisemitism continues to inspire us all, and to the many Members who secured this afternoon's debate, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), and the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols). This consensual

debate shows the House at its very best, and I am grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members for their powerful contributions.

The experience and testimony of several Members moved me particularly, including those of the hon. Members for Warrington North, for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I say to the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) that I was gripped by every single word of his speech and incredibly moved. To my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark, I say that, one day, we must surely live in a world where his wife and family are not subjected to the type of threats he described in his contribution. To my hon. Friend—and I do say hon. Friend—the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), I say that, whichever side of the House he sits on, we will be united in our efforts to tackle antisemitism.

Eighty years ago, on a January day not unlike this one, senior Government officials of Nazi Germany met at Wannsee on the outskirts of Berlin to discuss the implementation of the final solution to the Jewish question. Almost 60 years later, world leaders came together in Stockholm and declared this one day to be Holocaust Memorial Day. Two decisions—one that saw the destruction of the European Jewish community and a second that ensures they are never forgotten.

Holocaust Memorial Day is a day when we remember the 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the unique evil of the holocaust. It is a day when we remember the Roma, people with disabilities, political prisoners and gay men—all victims of the Nazi regime—and it is a day when we remember those murdered in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

We know that, far too often in far too many places, people have failed to support Jewish communities under threat. In Nazi-occupied Europe, not only were synagogues destroyed, but millions of Jewish people had their property stolen by the Nazis and their state-sponsored cohorts. In the aftermath of the holocaust, returning victims were forced to navigate a frequently unclear and difficult legal path to recover their property from Governments and neighbours who had failed to protect them and were often complicit in their persecution.

For my part, I have visited Israel three times. On the last visit, courtesy of James Gurd and Elkie Clark from the Conservative Friends of Israel, I had the opportunity to visit Yad Vashem. I have seen for myself the members of the thriving and vibrant Jewish community going about their daily lives in a safer environment that they can now call home, but with echoes of communities previously extinguished across Europe. In July this year, I will be in Poland for my brother's wedding, and I will take the opportunity to visit Auschwitz-Birkenau, hear these stories myself and bear witness to the terrible events that took place there.

Today, we also consider the plight of the many survivors who have persevered for years in attempting to recover their family's property, with little hope that they would succeed. They are men such as Leo Wiener who still face an upward battle to get reparation for homes and properties stolen by the Nazis and their collaborators. While some countries have made some effort to pay contributions, many have not. Leo came to London with his parents before the war from what was then Czechoslovakia. The family ran several businesses across

Ostrava that were confiscated by the Nazis. Leo's grandparents, aunts and uncles were all murdered in Treblinka. After the war, Leo's father returned to Czechoslovakia to try to retrieve the family's possessions. The family home was still standing, but had been looted. He tried over many years to get his property returned, first under the communists and later when the Berlin wall fell, but to no avail. Leo took on his father's quest, but despite years of effort, he was told he was not a close enough relative to his grandparents to claim compensation.

Leo is not the only one. In Poland, despite years of campaigning, there is still no compensation scheme for private property. In November this year, the Czech Government will host a conference to see how countries have lived up to the Terezin declaration—a legally non-binding document outlining several measures towards the restitution of property belonging to the victims of Nazi persecution. I would urge all countries that have yet to pay restitution or that have outstanding cases to ensure that holocaust survivors and their families finally see justice.

Sadly, across the globe there are still malicious people who actively deny the reality of the holocaust and seek to minimise the extent of the atrocities committed against the Jewish people. They try to cast doubt on the use of gas chambers, mass shootings, deliberate starvation and the intended genocide of the whole Jewish people. Of equal and growing concern is holocaust distortion, which is more mainstream, but just as pernicious. It is a subtle and sinister approach that questions numbers and assigns different descriptions to places. Death camps are redesignated as "transit camps". We have seen lockdown restrictions likened to the Nazi persecution of Jews; we have witnessed anti-vaxxers and others pinning yellow stars to their chests across Europe, and even in some parts of the United States.

However, we do holocaust remembrance a disservice if we remember the dead and forget the present persecution of Jewish people across the world. In December we witnessed a despicable act of antisemitism on the streets of London when a hate-filled group of men targeted a bus in Oxford Street, performing Nazi salutes and spitting at Jewish families celebrating Hannukah, and just over a week ago we saw terrifying events unfold at a synagogue in Texas, where the perpetrator was one of our own citizens. The impact of this attack on the Jewish community must not be understated. It underscores the need for the Government to continue working hand in hand with the Jewish community to ensure that synagogues, Jewish schools and communal buildings are protected. We have already provided £14 million of Government support this financial year. I am proud that my Department and many others in Government are helping the Holocaust Educational Trust to work with universities across the country in challenging the scourge of antisemitism.

Like a number of the previous speakers, I pay tribute to the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, to its chief executive, Olivia Marks-Woldman OBE, and to her team, who deliver the annual Holocaust Memorial Day ceremony and thousands of local activities across the country. I also thank the chief executive of the Holocaust Educational Trust, Karen Pollock CBE, who works tirelessly to ensure that the next generation learn about the holocaust through the "Lessons from Auschwitz" programme.

Bob Stewart: I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. May I just mention the extremely good work done by Remembering Srebrenica, which we have not mentioned today? It takes children to Srebrenica to help them understand what happened in Bosnia. I did not want to miss the opportunity of mentioning Remembering Srebrenica, whose activities are often sponsored by the Government. I say thank you to the Government, and thank you to Remembering Srebrenica.

Eddie Hughes: I thank my right hon. and gallant Friend for that powerful intervention.

Teaching the next generation about the history of the holocaust is paramount when it comes to ensuring that our values of pluralism, democracy and tolerance will never be taken for granted. That is why building the new national holocaust memorial and learning centre next to the Houses of Parliament is so important. The centre will let people view Britain's story in the 1930s and 1940s in its entirety. It will shine a light on the positive contribution that we made to ridding the world of Nazism, but it will also tell the stories of internment, of professional, well-qualified Jewish women forced into domestic service as the price of security, and the activities of home-grown fascists. We will recognise the 10,000 children saved through the Kindertransport initiative, but also acknowledge that their parents were not welcome, and many of the children never saw their parents again.

Andrew Percy: I thank my hon. Friend for his warm words about the new centre, which is very important to me, as someone who used to teach secondary school pupils about the holocaust. Does he agree that when the centre is up and running, we must find a way to ensure that students all over the United Kingdom can have access to it? When I was teaching, I found that it was often difficult for young people to understand that they had a direct link to these events. It is really important for them to be able to make use of this facility. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government must do everything possible to support that at the appropriate time in the future?

Eddie Hughes: My hon. Friend is completely right. It is not just a question of reading about these things in textbooks; it is a question of the opportunity to have the story brought to life, and I strongly believe that the centre will do exactly that.

Wera Hobhouse: In my speech I briefly mentioned my uncle, who got out of Dachau and was then interned on the Isle of Man for the whole of the war and could never really integrate. It is so important for people who come here as refugees to be properly integrated and to become part of our communities.

Eddie Hughes: Again, I completely agree. This handing down and sharing of stories and information, person to person, from one generation to another is vital.

While we will recall 6 million Jewish men, women and children murdered during the holocaust, there will also be many deeds of singular courage and resistance, such as those of our own Frank Foley, who was based in the British Embassy in Berlin and bent the rules to help thousands of Jewish families escape Nazi Germany before the outbreak of the second world war. One of them was the father-in-law of my right hon. Friend the late James Brokenshire, and James considered it a privilege

to lead on the Government's plans for the national holocaust memorial in his time as Housing, Communities and Local Government Secretary. Sadly, in the not-too-distant future the holocaust will pass from living memory to history. The new holocaust memorial and learning centre will keep alive the memory of those who were murdered during the holocaust and subsequent genocides.

Despite our failure to learn the lessons of the past, we must not give up hope that one day we can imagine a world free of genocide, a world that fully grasps what happens when hatred, intolerance, prejudice and antisemitism are left unchallenged. That very hope was echoed during last year's Holocaust Memorial Day debate, when our hon. Friend the late Sir David Amess said:

"I simply do not understand and have never understood antisemitism. The most important lesson from the holocaust is that although we cannot police the world, it is simply not acceptable to stand by and do and say nothing when genocide happens."—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2021; Vol. 688, c. 624.]

At 7 pm this evening, there will be a short online ceremony to mark Holocaust Memorial Day. I hope hon. Members across the House will take this opportunity for a period of quiet reflection. At 8 pm, as people light a candle in their window, we will think of the millions of victims whose time on this earth was senselessly and brutally cut short; but I will also be holding out hope for a brighter future and a day when the enduring values of care, compassion and kindness triumph over the dark forces of hate, intolerance and prejudice.

3.56 pm

Robert Jenrick: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in the debate. I have attended these debates on almost every occasion since I was elected eight years ago, and to me this was the most personal and powerful set of contributions I can remember. The contributions also continue to be prescient, with antisemitism on the rise at home and genocide and violence abroad.

When I attend these debates, I often think of the debate that took place in this House before the second world war, on 21 November 1938, which ultimately led to the Kindertransport. That debate was opened by the then Member for Derby South, Philip Noel-Baker, who said:

"Dr. Goebbels said the other day that he hoped the outside world would soon forget the German Jews. He hopes in vain. His campaign against them will go down in history",

as one of the greatest stains on humanity.

He added:

"Let there go with it another memory, the memory of what the other nations did to wipe the shame away."—[*Official Report*, 21 November 1938; Vol. 341, c. 1440.]

I often wonder whether I would have attended that debate and been one of the 40 Members of Parliament who spoke. I hope I would have done so, and that I would have acted. We are, after all, the legislators of this country, the leaders of our communities, and the responsibility to act today is ours.

I close with a prayer in honour of the 6 million souls who perished in the holocaust:

Oseh shalom bimromav
Hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu
V'al kol Yisrael.
V'imru Amen.

May he who creates peace in the heavens create peace for us, and for all the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): We will never forget the inhumanity or the cruelty of the atrocities, or the unconscionable pain that millions suffered. Not in our name. Nor should we ever forget the bravery of so many people who fought against this evil.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Holocaust Memorial Day 2022.

3.59 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 January 2022

[DR RUPA HUQ IN THE CHAIR]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Humanist Marriages

1.30 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Before we begin, I remind Members to observe social distancing and wear masks. I think that officially went overnight; nevertheless, the advice is still to wear masks. I call Crispin Blunt to move the motion.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered humanist marriages in England and Wales.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate in response to my application just last week. I appreciate the Committee's immediate response to the application, but inevitably, many of the supporters I named have been unable to rearrange their diaries to speak this afternoon. However, there is support on this issue from a broad section of the political spectrum, and I hope the quality of the debate will do justice to that support.

From my own party, we have support from my hon. Friends the Members for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), for Wycombe (Mr Baker) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), from my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies), who I see is in his place, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Mark Eastwood).

Today, 53 members of both Houses have written to the Lord Chancellor urging immediate legal recognition of humanist marriages, in the light of the recent move to recognise outdoor civil and religious marriages, which, as I will explain, has removed the last vestige of the arguments put forward by the Government for not getting on with what would be a welcome reform for so many people in our country.

Humanist weddings are non-religious wedding ceremonies that are conducted by humanist celebrants. Humanists UK defines a humanist as a non-religious person who trusts

“the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works”

and does not rely on

“the idea of the supernatural...makes their ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals”

and

“believes that, in the absence of”

evidence for

“an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same.”

Humanist ceremonies are a manifestation of what gives our lives meaning—the meaning we create for ourselves and the happiness we bring about in others. Ceremonies, then, are a reflection of what will be most meaningful to the participants. They are built around the idea that the best ceremonies are all about the participants—their beliefs, their values, their family, their friends and their wider place in the world—and they recognise the need to be inclusive of all those attending and their diverse religions and beliefs.

I chair the all-party parliamentary humanist group with the noble Baroness Bakewell, and the secretariat is provided by Humanists UK. Humanists UK trains and accredits celebrants, particularly in conducting weddings. Such celebrants are trained specifically in how to make ceremonies as meaningful as possible for the participants, and their expertise and experience contributes to making these important moments in our journey through life of the greatest relevance and meaning to those who choose them.

The process of creating a thoughtful, meaningful and personal wedding ceremony for a couple is extensive. It is not unusual for a humanist celebrant to spend 35 to 40 hours—often even more—working closely with the couple. That is quite a lot longer than the average for most people who preside over weddings, who, in many cases, may turn up only for the marriage itself. That is because the process the humanist celebrant is engaged in is lengthy and is focused on getting to know the couple well, finding out what matters to them collectively, and helping them explore what most matters to them about each other, so that the ceremony can be as meaningful, and have as strong and lasting an impact as possible. The impact of the ceremony is reinforced by the ceremony's being in the location most meaningful to the couple. That often means the kinds of places that already get approved as premises for civil marriages; it could be the family's back garden, or their local beach or park. I have even heard of couples choosing to have their wedding in the very spot they met or got engaged.

The consequence of this process is that humanist marriages are more likely to last. All parties recognise the public policy benefits of stable relationships, which ought to make the legal recognition of humanist marriages an uncontroversial public good. I understand that many couples, if not most, stay in touch with the humanist celebrant who conducted their wedding for years afterwards. They highly value the process in which they engaged in getting to the wedding day and the relationship that they built with the celebrant. I rather doubt that most participants in civil marriages are still in touch with the registrar who conducted their marriage or, frankly, can remember their name.

The training to become a humanist celebrant provided by Humanists UK is an extensive process, and those who embark on it do so with no guarantee of success. Humanists UK courses run for several months and include an induction day, residential training sessions, coursework and a mentor to support the training from the outset. Once accredited—many who start the programme are not—celebrants become part of a growing national network. They are quality assured and regulated by a code of conduct, and they have a transparent complaints procedure and mandatory ongoing professional development. A former Registrar General for England and Wales, Paul Pugh, has trained to be a humanist

[Crispin Blunt]

celebrant with Humanists UK in order to conduct funerals. He certainly believes that the training provided is rigorous enough to merit legal recognition for Humanists UK celebrants, as do the Northern Ireland Executive, who also deal with Humanists UK.

Given all this, it can hardly be a surprise that humanist marriages have taken off in jurisdictions where they have been legally recognised. In Scotland, they gained recognition as long ago as 2005. In 2019, they made up some 23% of all marriages—a truly impressive figure that I understand even includes some Members of this House. In 2012, such marriages gained recognition in the Republic of Ireland, where they now account for 10% of all marriages. Since 2018, they have gained legal recognition in Northern Ireland, Jersey and Guernsey. It is early days, but I understand that the number of humanist marriages in Northern Ireland—regardless of one's impression of religious adherence and people's enthusiasm for it in the Province—is following precisely the same trajectory as in Scotland and Ireland.

That brings me to England and Wales, where, at present, there is no legal recognition of humanist marriages. That means that couples who have a humanist wedding—around 1,400 do so with Humanists UK every year—must also have a civil marriage separately in order to gain legal recognition. That can be a big financial burden; if the couple wish to have their wedding and marriage at the weekend, many local authorities will charge upwards of £500 for a civil marriage. That is a burden that religious couples do not face.

In addition, many local authorities are making it increasingly difficult for people to access a cheaper ceremony. There is a statutory option of around £50 that local authorities must offer, but many have taken such options off their websites. Some restrict marriages to just one registry office—for example, North Yorkshire, which is the biggest authority in the country, restricts them to just Harrogate—and many severely limit what such ceremonies can entail. Humanists UK tells of local authorities restricting attendance to the couple and their two adult witnesses, meaning that if they have children, they cannot attend. Some have banned having flowers or even exchanging rings.

Either way, such couples face distressing questions from their loved ones about which is their real marriage or when their wedding anniversary is. It is very sad that the wedding that they wish to see as their real act of commitment is not the one that the state enables—and for what purpose? Why do we not have legal recognition here? I think there are two ways of answering that question. One is to reflect on what has happened over the last decade and the justifications that the Government have given at each point in time for their behaviour, and the other is to think about what might have been going through the Government's mind but has not been made a matter of record.

The Government gained the power to extend legal recognition of humanist marriages all the way back in 2013. The power was given to them by Parliament through the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, and it was clear at the time that there was a majority in both Houses in favour of using that power. Indeed, what the Government said at the time suggested that they intended to do so. All that stood in the way was

that the relevant part of the 2013 Act mandated that the Government must consult on the matter first. Indeed, it was proper that the Government did so to determine how best to use that order-making power. The Government duly consulted in 2014, and the consultation found over 95% of people in favour of a change in the law.

What happened next was where things went off script for people who were anticipating the opportunity to have their marriage and wedding in the way that they wanted. Instead of proceeding to draft the required statutory instrument, the Minister responsible for marriage at the time, Simon Hughes, decided to refer the matter to the Law Commission for further investigation. The Government's response to the consultation gave the following justification for that decision:

“One key difficulty concerns where belief marriages would take place... allowing belief marriages to take place at unrestricted locations would create a further difference in treatment in our marriage law”

and

“would create an inequality for the majority of religious groups and couples who are restricted to their registered place of worship. Registration services report a growing demand for outdoor marriages, and the Government is aware that allowing belief marriages in unrestricted locations may also be seen as unfair by couples who are neither religious nor humanist but who also may want a greater choice of marriage venues.”

Marriage law at that time allowed for marriages to happen outdoors if they were conducted by Quakers, Jewish groups, the Church of England or the Church in Wales. Forms of marriage other than deathbed marriages were restricted to either registered places of worship in the case of religious marriages, or register offices and other indoor approved premises in the case of civil marriages. Relatedly, it was said that the kind of piecemeal legislation being sought, and the added complexity that it would bring, was undesirable given the apparent inconsistency in existing marriage law.

The inconsistency in marriage law is clearly problematic, but I hope that colleagues will see from what I have said why outdoor weddings are particularly important in the humanist tradition. At any rate, the inconsistency does not seem to me a good justification for blocking recognition of humanist marriages as a whole. None the less, that key difficulty was used as justification to refer the whole question to the Law Commission to examine further. The Government stated:

“We wish to avoid any negative consequences that may result from undertaking further piecemeal legislation... The Government will therefore ask the Law Commission if it will begin as soon as possible a broader review of the law concerning marriage ceremonies.”

That is where the issue got firmly stuck in the long grass. In 2015, the Law Commission produced its report. It did not conduct the broader review it had been tasked with; instead, it simply concluded that, although the fact that humanist marriages were not legally recognised was unfair, the inconsistency around outdoor marriages and concerns about piecemeal reform justified its asking to do a second and even more thorough review of marriage law as a whole.

Now, the Government did not appear to have an immediate appetite for that, as they did not respond to the Law Commission proposals for some two years. When they did finally respond, in 2017, they said no to taking things further. That was the end of the road until 2018, when a humanist couple threatened litigation over the

failure to extend legal recognition to humanist marriages. It is a pretty sad state of affairs that a stated Government intention to move in this area in 2013 had, by 2018, resulted in the human rights courts having to be engaged in trying to establish this right for humanists in England and Wales. Shortly after that, the Government announced they would, after all, be commissioning the larger Law Commission review. There was then a further year's delay while the Government and the Law Commission worked to agree the terms of reference for that review.

Perhaps, if my hon. Friend the Minister is familiar with "Yes Minister"—I appreciate that that was my generation's early-evening television rather than his—he will see that there is a certain pattern emerging. The review was meant to conclude last year, but it has been delayed further by the pandemic, and it is now expected to conclude in July.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is making some excellent points. I am here having met my constituent Dawn Davies, who is a celebrant; I know that she has been frustrated by the timescales that my hon. Friend has just outlined. Assuming that the Law Commission report does come forward in July this year, when does he anticipate that there might be legislation forthcoming for England and Wales?

Crispin Blunt: Well, here, of course, we are in the hands of the Minister and his colleagues in Government. I am afraid that I have lost count of the number of Ministers—Ministers of State, Under-Secretaries of State and Justice Secretaries—I have engaged with on this issue over the last few years, but it is really quite a lot. I hope that I can convince the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), that he is going to be the one to finally get this done.

The case that I seek to make is that delay is no longer tolerable, fair or reasonable. In the end, the law will take its course in the courts if people are forced to go to the European Court of Human Rights to achieve their convention rights, when it is so evident what is happening in the rest of the country. I am absolutely confident that the Minister and the Justice Secretary will clearly understand the arguments and the situation, and will finally get on and deliver this long-overdue reform.

Not all the delays are the fault of the present Government, which came to power only after the second Law Commission review got under way. One can speculate as to why the previous two Governments did not bring about legal recognition. Prime Minister David Cameron acted bravely in grasping the nettle and bringing in same-sex marriages long before many other similar jurisdictions did. However, there may have been some feeling about religious groups' displeasure with that measure, and that may have had some influence on the appetite within Government to bring about further reforms of marriage law. Of course, those reactions are now quite unjustifiable.

That is ironic, because the Second Church Estates Commissioner, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), said in his reply to me at oral questions this morning that the Church of England is not aware of any religious groups that oppose legal recognition of humanist marriages, and that in principle the Church of England is in favour of humanists

having this power. It would have been better if my hon. Friend's answer had been clearer and less equivocal—he referred back to all the practical difficulties for the Government that have been observed over the years since 2013—but it was useful to get it on the record that the Church of England is, in principle, in favour.

This Government are a strong champion of freedom, for both individuals and in terms of freedom of choice. As long as nothing moves on this issue, Her Majesty's Government are continuing to obstruct this freedom for humanists, and for a growing share of the population who belong to no religion. Her Majesty's Government have at the forefront of their agenda the need to level up different regions of the United Kingdom to provide equal opportunities for all. This situation is a plain example of where England and Wales need levelling up so that their citizens can enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities already enjoyed by the citizens of Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Finally, I turn my attention to what has happened under this Government, which inherited a court case from the previous Administration. Six couples were taking the matter before the High Court. They claimed discrimination, given that religious couples can have legally recognised marriages in line with their beliefs. The judge in that case agreed, ruling that

"the present law gives rise to...discrimination."

She wrote that

"the discrimination suffered by the Claimants is real: the difference of treatment they experience in seeking to manifest their humanist beliefs through the ceremony of marriage is a matter of substance, not merely one of form."

She also ruled that the Secretary of State for Justice could not

"simply sit on his hands"

and do nothing. However, given the ongoing Law Commission review, she also said that the Government's refusal to act immediately could be justified at this time. She did so because she considered that the desire of the defendant—the Justice Secretary—

"to consider any reform on a wholesale, rather than piecemeal, basis"

was a legitimate aim. She wrote:

"In the present case, the Government has identified concerns as to the potential consequences of addressing one area of unequal treatment without doing so as part of a more general reform. Specifically, in relation to the treatment of humanist and other non-religious belief marriages, particular issues were identified relating to the location where the ceremony might take place...these were matters seen to potentially give rise to new species of discrimination if reform was only undertaken on a piecemeal basis."

From that, she concluded:

"Although I may deprecate the delay that has occurred since 2015, I cannot ignore the fact that there is currently an on-going review of the law of marriage in this country".

That brings us to what then happened last year. In June, the Government extended legal recognition to outdoor civil marriages on an interim basis. In December, they launched a consultation on making that move permanent, making the same move for religious marriages. Both can be done by statutory instrument. The moves limit marriages to outdoor parts of approved premises, but I understand that such a limitation is something that humanist celebrants would be happy with, on an initial basis, as a way to get things going for them.

[Crispin Blunt]

These moves by the Government tear up the objection to piecemeal reform in general terms that the Government and their predecessors have given for not wanting to enact legal recognition of humanist marriages before the Law Commission completes its review this July. They can only maintain an objection to piecemeal reform if they do not undertake such piecemeal reform. These moves are the very piecemeal reform that the Government said was the reason why they could not enact legal recognition of humanist marriages.

Now that outdoor marriages are under way for others, what possible reason is left not to lay the statutory instrument bringing about recognition for marriages conducted by Humanists UK celebrants? Such a reform need only be interim. The law could be drafted explicitly with the intention that it is superseded by whatever follows the Law Commission review, if anything does. Legal recognition must follow that review, as I have explained. That is what the High Court ruled in 2020.

Making that change would remove an unnecessary burden for the 1,400 couples a year who have a humanist wedding at present, despite the fact that they have to have a double ceremony, with a civil marriage administered separately. For those couples, it would be particularly welcome.

During the pandemic—we do not know where the rules on that will take us; we are on a positive trend at the minute, but we have had some disagreeable surprises over the last two years—we have seen the whole problem for the wedding industry play out. Giving couples the opportunity to make their marriages really meaningful, by committing their resources to a ceremony that really means something for them, would be of obvious economic benefit for an important part of our hospitality sector. That change would greatly enhance the freedom of choice for the hundreds—if not thousands—of other couples who want a humanist wedding but decide that they simply cannot afford one because of the lack of legal recognition. Evidence from Scotland points to the legal recognition of humanist marriages coinciding with the end of the long-term decline in marriage numbers. Surely, more people getting married is something that this Government should strongly support. Indeed, I would imagine that every political party would want to support that. We ought to be trying to get that done now, as soon as possible, given the delays we have suffered.

Legal recognition would also help to deal with the current backlog and demand for civil registrars caused by the pandemic delaying many marriages. There simply are not enough registrars to go around, so many couples are reporting difficulties in being able to get married when they want. Expanding the range of people who can conduct legally recognised marriages would definitely assist in that.

All of that, as I have said before, will be a welcome boost to the wider wedding industry: the venues, the florists, the caterers, the photographers, the cake-makers, and so on—the cake-makers are very much at the forefront of our minds at the moment. Many of those are small, local businesses. Having more marriages is good for the economy and for families, and is clearly a matter of public policy when the public benefit is clear in every sense.

A possible statutory instrument to enact legal recognition has already been drafted. A previous Lord Chancellor suggested that I arrange for that to happen, so it was prepared in consultation with the counsel for domestic legislation. We have done it. The Government do not even need to do it themselves; they just have to check our work.

The measure is modelled on the existing provisions for the Society of Friends. It applies specifically to Humanists UK, as the only organisation providing humanist weddings in England and Wales, and one that undoubtedly has the processes in place, and the good reputé, to guarantee that ceremonies will be solemn and dignified, with no risk of sham weddings. That is not to say, however, that if another organisation was to emerge, with the sufficient standing and good reputé to also merit it, it could not also gain legal recognition through another order—nor that a different system might come into place after the Law Commission review.

There is no good reason for further delays. The Government's own actions have now removed whatever vestige of the thinnest of arguments that remained standing in the way of this reform, which would mean so much to so many who get married in the future. To what purpose are we adding to the now nine years' worth of couples who have not enjoyed that freedom since Parliament gave the Government the power to deliver it?

1.58 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on securing this important debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on granting it.

I declare that I am a humanist, and a member of Humanists UK. I believe that people have one life, and that they shape it in the here and now. As we strive for a tolerant world, where rational thinking and kindness prevail, we must stand together against all forms of discrimination. In that vein, it is discriminatory that humanist weddings are still not legally recognised in England and Wales.

As we have heard, humanist marriages gained legal recognition in Scotland in 2005, the Republic of Ireland in 2012 and in Northern Ireland in 2018 following a Court of Appeal ruling concluded that a failure to do so would breach human rights. The popularity of humanist marriages speaks for itself. It is the most popular form of belief-based wedding in Scotland, the second most popular in the Republic of Ireland, and the fastest-growing type in Northern Ireland.

We heard much from the hon. Member for Reigate as he outlined what humanist weddings are in broad terms. I want to focus on the experience of couples who have had humanist weddings in order to illustrate what they are, build greater understanding and highlight the injustices caused by the present law. I am grateful to Humanists UK for providing me with examples that illustrate the range of people's experiences. Some of the examples come from the recently published "The Little Book of Humanist Weddings", of which I have a copy, and I can talk about the examples today with kind permission from the authors.

I very much agree with the point made by the hon. Member for Reigate about ceremonies and the importance that they have at significant points in our lives. Every couple is different, so what is meaningful to them is unique, and that is why every humanist wedding is unique. As humanist celebrant Laura Gimson has said,

“I used to think we all loved in roughly the same way, but actually the specificity of love is what keeps my job as a celebrant so interesting. It’s such a joy to uncover the many and varied ways that we humans show our fondness for one another.”

As celebrant Zena Birch has said, the preparations that go into a humanist wedding are just as important for the couples as the wedding itself. She says:

“A humanist marriage does start off with a celebration and a party, just like all weddings. But the preparation that goes in beforehand enhances the intentions of the celebration and focuses both the couple and their guests on what is important and at the heart of this rite of passage.”

As has been pointed out, it is no wonder humanist marriages are so successful in producing sustained relationships.

One important aspect is picking the right location. To quote Zena again:

“With all of this forethought something that very rarely gets chosen offhandedly is where my couples wish to hold their ceremony. Over the years I have had the privilege to be welcomed into some extraordinary spaces and what most of them have in common is that the locations themselves hold meaning and relevance to the couple. Be it from a charmingly romantic perspective... where my couple shared their first kiss... To locations which hold an emotional poignancy... a beach where the bride had previously scattered her dad’s ashes... In lieu of a place of worship, these locations hold an equal import to my couples.”

Then there is the question of who attends. In the words of celebrant Ewan Main:

“No one human being is an island. We are all, as individuals, connected to others, and community with others is one of the most important things in leading a happy life. What is true of us as individuals is also true of us as couples. The community that surrounds you is one of the things that sustains your relationship. Guests at a wedding—if they’re really valued, trusted guests—really do care about what’s happening at the front, because it’s a little bit about them too. I like to comment in weddings, sometimes, on the fact that everyone sitting in this room together now has one thing in common that they didn’t before. A marriage grows from and reflects connections, and it makes new ones too.”

Weddings often commence with the journey down the aisle. As Zena Birch says:

“As with all traditions, it is possible to bring this one up to date. By using this moment to ask whoever has accompanied the walk down the aisle ‘do you affirm x and x’s choice to get married’ as opposed to ‘who brings this woman to wed this man’ you are honouring a tradition and making it relevant all at the same time. You are also showing, right from the outset, that every word spoken, in this case the question posed and the answer received, has been thought through, is appropriate, relevant and honest. There are no echoes, empty words for the sake of it in a humanist ceremony script. There is no reason why you can’t pose this same question to all sets of parents, setting the tone right from the very start: that words matter and that equality is acknowledged.”

Then there is the script. As celebrant Janette Smith said:

“At the heart of a humanist wedding ceremony is not a sermon, but a sharing of your story, the unique retelling of what drew you together, told to those who genuinely care—because you as a couple are the thing every single guest has in common. By interweaving the story of your relationship origin and development, the highs and the lows... the moments guests themselves will recognise being part of, everyone in the gathering will be invested in the outcome.”

In the words of celebrant Hester Brown:

“I ask couples to think, ‘What do I really want to promise to my partner? And what would I like to be promised? Which of these are essential?’ and to discuss it with each other. It provides a valuable opportunity to find out whether your partner’s hopes and needs are compatible with yours. And, perhaps, to be inspired by the potential and new horizons they open to you. At the heart of humanism is the knowledge that we are deeply dependent on other people for our happiness and, at the same time, we need to be free. The songbird comes and sings beautifully to the princess, but when she puts it in a cage, it falls silent.

I think the most important thing I tell my couples is that equality and kindness are at the heart of the humanist vision of marriage. Respecting the other’s space to learn and grow. Two independent people choosing to spend their lives together because their love gives them courage and hope, gives them a home. Not facing in on each other but walking along life’s path together, hand in hand.”

The ceremony can contain various symbolic actions intended to bind the couple together, including hand-fasting, which is the tying together of couples’ hands with ribbons or cords, with different threads symbolising different things. The family can be involved in the untying. The ceremony can include some traditionally religious or cultural rituals that stop short of acts of worship and are not included for religious reasons but pay tribute to a certain heritage none the less.

Ceremonies can also include the blending of sands. Two of the claimants in the 2020 court case were Jennifer McCalmont and Finbar Graham from Carrickfergus in Northern Ireland, where, as we have heard, humanist marriages are legally recognised. Even so, they chose to have their humanist wedding on the beach in Devon, where they first went on holiday together, and near where Jenny’s parents live. For them, that was the most meaningful location to get married. They could think of no location where they would rather wed than Northam beach, and they felt so strongly about the matter that they decided to launch a legal case to change the law in a jurisdiction where they do not reside to match the law in the jurisdiction where they do. Unfortunately, the case did not succeed, so they had to go ahead with their wedding without legal recognition, but as part of their ceremony, they took sand from their beach in Carrickfergus and blended it with the sand from the beach in Northam, symbolically blending the two locations that were of most significance to them.

It is possible to give the exchange of rings extra significance, as Laura Gimson recounts:

“S and J’s ceremony took place in the centre of a circle of poplar trees in the garden of their family home. J had managed to fell a branch from one of the trees a few months earlier, and had tiny pieces of poplar wood inlaid into their wedding rings. As they exchanged them, they shared vows about how their wedding bands weren’t about status—they weren’t meant to be shiny and perfect and they weren’t a symbol of ownership. Instead, their rings would serve as a reminder of the exact place and time that they made the choice to live their lives side by side.”

Why have a humanist wedding? Laura Lacole was the claimant in the court case that led to legally recognised humanist marriages in Northern Ireland, and as a result she had the first one there with her husband Eunan O’Kane. She explained to the court:

“I am a person that acts on my beliefs and values. It is only natural then, for me to seek to have those beliefs and values expressed through my marriage ceremony... My desire to have a legally valid humanist marriage is central to my own humanist identity. The act of getting married is, of course, deeply personal and is bound up with my humanist beliefs, values, and aspirations.

[Rachel Hopkins]

Humanists do not, in general, have weekly communal gatherings (like a church might) and so my marriage ceremony provides me with a rare, communal, event at which I can express and celebrate my humanism with my husband to be and our family and friends.”

What of the problem of having to have two ceremonies, which was set out earlier? In 2018, the all-party parliamentary humanist group surveyed local authority websites to see what they were offering, and consulted humanist celebrants for their experiences. The results were published in the APPG’s “Any lawful impediment?” report. The issues identified in the report included difficulties booking same-day ceremonies, and many local authorities charging £500 or more for a weekend ceremony. There were difficulties with same-building ceremonies, or with the presence of the humanist celebrant at the legal ceremony. Both situations should be allowed, but there were reports of registrars objecting to them, and claiming sometimes that they might invalidate the legality of the civil marriage.

There were tales of registrars threatening approved premises’ licences because of the number of humanist ceremonies being performed, and of registrars more generally trying to warn couples off having humanist ceremonies. There was widespread evidence of registrars not offering cheap, no-frills ceremonies on their websites. Many of them restricted the times and locations at which such ceremonies were available, or how quickly they were available. For example, such ceremonies were restricted to one room in one council building, or to just Tuesday mornings once a month. A staggering 90% of registrars did not offer such ceremonies at the weekend.

Many registrars restrict what can happen at no-frills ceremonies, for example limiting the number of guests to just the two required witnesses, which is particularly challenging if the couple has young children, or disallowing the presence of flowers or even the exchange of rings. So, can the Minister say what conversations they may have had with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities with regard to those actions by local authorities?

Finally, it seems plain to me that the only way really to fix these problems is to change the law on humanist marriages and I hope that the Minister is convinced that that change cannot come soon enough.

2.10 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on securing this debate and thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The hon. Member explained very clearly what humanist beliefs are, and also talked about the care taken and the research conducted by a humanist celebrant in working with a couple to prepare for a marriage ceremony. He also set out the history of such marriages very clearly.

The most important point to make is that it is clear that the Government have undermined their own argument that all changes should wait until some sort of wholesale reform of marriage legislation. They have done so by making the temporary provisions for outdoor weddings into permanent ones. Therefore, that sets a precedent and blows out of the water the idea that everything has to wait for something that may never actually happen.

Of course, where there is a will, there is a way. The hon. Member mentioned the use of statutory instruments; indeed, in good “Blue Peter” fashion, he has one that he had prepared earlier all ready for the Minister. However, there are of course many precedents of the Government including a specific section on one topic in a Bill that mainly deals with rather different subject matter. Some Bills are the classic Christmas tree, with provisions to deal with all sorts of different matters included in them. I feel sure that the necessary will to make this change is what is needed and then an appropriate vehicle can be found, and that the skills of those drafting the Bill would prevent any problems with unintended consequences, which again has been given as an excuse for not making this change now but instead leaving it for some larger reform of marriage law.

Crispin Blunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her support on this issue. The statutory instrument or the powers are already there under the Act I referred to; we do not need another Bill. The Government can proceed at a time of their choosing.

Nia Griffith: Indeed—again, that was very well put.

We know that in Scotland, of course, under a Labour Scottish Government legal recognition was given to humanist marriages back in 2005; in the Republic of Ireland, it was given in 2012; and in Northern Ireland, it was given in 2018. In Wales, we do not have the devolved power to legislate for humanist marriages, but the Welsh Government are very supportive of the legal recognition of humanist marriages and would very much—

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Does the hon. Lady share my frustration that in Wales—the country of both Nye Bevan, who was a committed humanist, and of course the late First Minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan, who I believe was among the first to be given a state humanist funeral in the Senedd—we have not seen progress sooner, especially given that, as she has just pointed out, the Welsh Government are also supportive of the change that is being sought?

Nia Griffith: Indeed—that was very well outlined by the hon. Member. The support is there from the Welsh Government and the humanist tradition is also there in Wales. So this change is something we would very much welcome and want to see.

Of course, people may say, “Oh well, a couple can go and have their civil marriage and then they can have the celebration of their choosing afterwards”. But I would argue that that does not really give the humanist viewpoint and ceremonies the same status as that given to the religious viewpoint and ceremonies. Indeed, the High Court has ruled that that lack of legal recognition is, in fact, discrimination.

Why should humanists have to feel that they are second-class citizens and that their celebration does not count? Why should they have to wonder, as the hon. Member for Reigate pointed out, which is the date of their wedding anniversary if the civil ceremony took place on one day and their own celebration took place on another day?

As has also been noted, the legal recognition of humanist marriages in Scotland resulted in the number of couples opting for a humanist wedding increasing to over 6,000 in 2019—more than 20% of the total—and

there are now more humanist marriages than Christian marriages in Scotland. Legal recognition gives humanist weddings a status, and more people then feel confident about seeking out the humanist option for a wedding, because they believe it is real and do not feel that it is somehow not good enough, does not really count or is second-class. It has the genuine status that obviously everybody would wish their wedding and marriage to have.

Our laws in respect of religion are very outdated and do not reflect the current beliefs of the population. Here in Parliament, both with the Church of England bishops in the House of Lords and the format of Prayers in the Commons, we are made very conscious on a daily basis that we still have an established church: the Church of England. However, the British Social Attitudes Survey of 2018 shows that only 12% of the population are Anglican, with some 52% of the population describing themselves as non-religious. Of course, the Church in Wales was disestablished over 100 years ago, back in 1920.

Our legislation has a lot of catching up to do in order to reflect the society we live in. We now have a majority of the population—some 52%—who have to make do with second best for what is one of the most important moments in their lives. What happens is that many people who have no religious belief end up in religious settings because of the convenience, which should not have to be the case. It should not have to be that because they cannot get themselves halfway across North Yorkshire, they opt for something local instead, or for something that does not reflect their background and beliefs.

I have attended humanist funerals that were planned by families and that respected the fact that the deceased did not have a belief in the afterlife. Those are recognised as legitimate funerals. I have attended humanist civic ceremonies for incoming mayors or chairs of local councils. Those are recognised as appropriate ceremonies and, again, reflect the beliefs of the people taking part. My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) has described the preparation that can be made for a humanist wedding, the thought that goes into it, and the beliefs that the people have—all those make it a very special moment. To deny people the idea that it is the genuine ceremony, the genuine act and the marriage itself, is an insult to the work and preparation and the feelings that they have.

Let us get on with it now and have legal recognition for humanist marriages. We recognise that we are in a particularly difficult situation at the moment, post covid, with so many having had to put off the opportunity to have weddings—sometimes once, twice or even three times. As has been mentioned already, having celebrants who are able to deliver a legal marriage would mean less pressure on registrars, and it would help to clear the backlog. On that note, I say once again to the Minister that this matter is something that could be resolved very quickly and easily and be well supported by Members across the House.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Because I am nice, I call the last of the Back Benchers—Jeff Smith.

2.18 pm

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): Thank you, Dr Huq; it is really good to see you in the Chair. I apologise for my late arrival—I had another commitment

—and thank you for your indulgence in allowing me to speak. I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on securing the debate, and I am sorry that I missed most of his speech.

Rachel Hopkins: It was very good.

Jeff Smith: I do not doubt it.

I declare an interest as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary humanist group and a member of Humanists UK.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, recently conducted a survey of marriage laws around the world. He found that, broadly speaking, there are four approaches. The first, which is the most common, is for the state to legally recognise only civil marriages, or perhaps to not even recognise any ceremony at all and simply have the state involved in signing the paperwork entirely separately from any ceremonial aspects. That is seen in most European countries, including—most famously—France but also Germany; across much of Asia, with China, Korea and Japan taking the non-ceremonial approach; in most of Latin America; and across much of Africa.

The second approach is to recognise only religious marriages. That is the case across much of the middle east, north Africa, Iran, Indonesia and Malaysia. In Dr Shaheed's view, that is not human rights-compliant because it denies couples the chance to have a marriage at all unless it is religious, and in some cases only of a certain religion. The third approach is for the state to recognise religious and civil marriages but not humanist marriages. As we have heard, that is the approach in England and Wales. It is easy to assume that, because that is the situation here, it is quite typical of the situation everywhere else, but that is not the case. In fact, it is seen only in a few European countries, with the nearest to us probably being Denmark, and—possibly due to the colonial inheritance—in a number of Commonwealth countries in Africa, the Caribbean and in parts of Canada.

Finally, the fourth approach is to also legally recognise humanist marriages. That is now the situation in the large majority of our neighbours, namely Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, the Channel Islands, Norway and Iceland, and also the US, Australia, New Zealand and other parts of Canada. Common to all the countries in the latter section is that they started off recognising only religious and civil marriages but moved to recognising humanist marriages either because of political will and political pressure or following court cases, as was the situation in Northern Ireland and parts of the US. That demonstrates that we are perhaps more isolated than we might realise.

It is also worth knowing what Dr Shaheed thinks of each approach, in terms of human rights. Recognising only civil marriages may not be as flexible in giving people what they want. Famously, in France, it is common for Catholic churches to be situated opposite town halls, so that a wedding party can easily transition from the civil marriage to the religious ceremony. None the less, that is seen by Dr Shaheed as lawful, because it treats everyone equally, regardless of their religion or belief; he does not believe that approach violates international human rights treaties. As already mentioned,

[Jeff Smith]

recognising only religious ceremonies is wrong, compelling people to take part in religious acts or denying them the right to marry at all.

However, in Dr Shaheed's view, recognising only civil and religious marriages also represents discrimination on the basis of religion or belief. It treats religious people more favourably than humanists, offering the former a privilege that is denied to the latter. That privilege does not have to be offered to any religious or humanist group, but where it is, it should be offered to all. That is the case in the US and Ireland. It can also be seen in the universal periodic review of the UK conducted by Dr Shaheed's predecessor Asma Jahangir as long ago as 2008. In that review, she wrote that

"humanists made the criticism that in practice there are institutional and legal examples of discrimination against non-religious believers...while humanist weddings are legal in Scotland since June 2005, marriages conducted by humanist celebrants are not recognized in the law of England and Wales."

That was in 2005—17 years ago—and nothing has changed since.

The correctness of Dr Shaheed's assessment can be seen in the judgment of the High Court in the 2008 case, *R (Harrison and others) v. Secretary of State for Justice*, in which the judge found that

"there is a continuing discriminatory impact upon those who seek to manifest their humanist beliefs through marriage...the discrimination suffered by the Claimants is real: the difference of treatment they experience in seeking to manifest their humanist beliefs through the ceremony of marriage is a matter of substance, not merely one of form...I have found that—subject only to the question of justification—the present law gives rise to article 14 discrimination in the Claimants enjoyment of their article 9 rights."

She rules that the Secretary of State for Justice cannot "simply sit on his hands"

and do nothing. The judge also said that she had given the Government the benefit of the doubt that they would reform marriage law after the Law Commission review. She wrote:

"Although I may deprecate the delay that has occurred since 2015, I cannot ignore the fact that there is currently an on-going review of the law of marriage in this country that will necessarily engage with the wider concerns that have been raised."

She found that,

"the Defendant's stated desire to consider any reform on a wholesale, rather than piecemeal, basis"

was a legitimate aim, because,

"the Government has identified concerns as to the potential consequences of addressing one area of unequal treatment without doing so as part of a more general reform. Specifically, in relation to the treatment of humanist and other non-religious belief marriages, particular issues were identified relating to the location where the ceremony might take place...these were matters seen to potentially give rise to new species of discrimination if reform was only undertaken on a piecemeal basis."

That was the Government's defence, but they have undermined that legitimate aim through their action on outdoor civil and religious marriages. That is not to say that I do not welcome the reforms to enable outdoor marriages—I do—but merely to say that it leaves the Government with no excuse to not also legally recognise humanist marriages.

What I find most difficult to understand about the Government's position is that the judgment in that case is legally binding case law that the Government must follow. Even before the outdoor marriage reforms, it was the case that the Government must extend legal recognition to humanist marriages after the Law Commission review is over. Yet the Government's repeated position, in response to all letters, parliamentary questions and other approaches since the 2020 judgment, has been to simply say:

"The Government will decide on provision for non-religious belief marriage in light of the Law Commission's recommendations."

Even in the light of the judgment, the Government have not committed to acting at the end of the review, only saying that they will decide whether to act once the review is over. How can that position possibly be tenable, given the very clear judgment from the High Court?

I have three questions for the Minister. Will the Government today commit to legally recognising humanist marriages at the earliest opportunity? Failing that, will they commit to doing so after the current review? If so, how soon do they intend to bring that legislation into force? These are really important questions about ending discrimination in this country, to give everybody a fair chance.

2.27 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): What a pleasure to speak in a debate chaired by my constituency neighbour, Dr Huq, I think for the first time. I congratulate the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on bringing this important debate forward. I was intending to speak in it, before I was elevated—if that is the right word—to the spokesperson position. He has championed this issue, and others. Only this week, I was lobbied by the National Secular Society on his Education (Assemblies) Bill. He is the apostle of the secular, but never of the mundane.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), who have all spoken eloquently, with examples of how humanist marriage works and their own testimony as humanists. They have also, which has been a common theme in the debate, emphasised the logic of where the issue is going and the unfairness of the current situation.

There is really only one point for the Minister to address, which is to explain the puzzle of why the Government are dragging their feet. I hope we will hear a clear exposition on that. In the words of the letter from 53 MPs—including myself—that we have heard referred to, humanist couples in England and Wales simply ask to have the same freedom of choice to marry in line with their beliefs as their religious counterparts. I hope the Minister does not disagree with that.

I have another quote, this time from my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), about putting right

"a long-standing injustice in a simple and uncontroversial way."—[*Official Report*, 21 May 2013; Vol. 563, c. 1074.]

The door is open, more than ajar, and the Government have only a small step to take through it. My hon. Friend said those words in a debate on the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, to which she, from the Labour Front Bench, was proposing an amendment that would have extended legal recognition to humanist

marriages. That is now nine years ago. As has been the case throughout, she was supported by colleagues from across the House.

Labour supported similar amendments during the passage of the Bill through the House of Lords. Its efforts led to section 14 of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013, which gives the Government the power to enact legal recognition of humanist marriages by order. In other words, most of the groundwork has been done. Looking back at *Hansard*, I am struck by the fact that during an earlier debate, when the late Lord Eden of Winton was objecting to the attempt to get humanist marriage into the Bill, my noble Friend Baroness Thornton, speaking for the Labour Front Bench, intervened on him to ask:

“Does the noble Lord think that the humanists need to wait another 19 years for another Bill to come passing by?”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 19 June 2013; Vol. 746, c. 303.]

Well, we are nine years later already, so nearly half of that time has elapsed, and humanists are still waiting.

The Government have been reviewing the matter ever since, with several more years anticipated before they are prepared to legislate. They have not even committed to do so all this time later—the Minister could put that right today. In the face of the High Court decision in *Harrison*, which now looks a little disingenuous, given the position the Government took in that case, it looks as if Baroness Thornton’s question will sadly prove prescient.

In November last year, I spoke for the Labour Front Bench in the main Chamber on the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill. There has been a piecemeal approach to marriage reform over the last few years. I mentioned in that speech that there had been good movement and progressive legislation on civil partnerships and same-sex marriage.

One Bill that I was involved in was a private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and, indeed, enacted. It permitted opposite-sex couples to have civil partnerships. That was a peculiarity in the law and perhaps something that needed addressing. Again, it was a long struggle. My constituents Charles Keidan and Rebecca Steinfeld fought a four-year battle, going as far as the Supreme Court, for their right to have a civil partnership. The Government do not move easily on these matters, but they move in the end, and I wonder why they have to make it so difficult. With that in mind, my advice would be to learn from their past mistakes and stop dragging their feet by giving legal recognition to humanist marriage, instead of there being further delay.

To answer my question as to why humanists have been made to wait, in 2014 the Government conducted a consultation exercise about extending legal recognition in that way. The result was 95% in favour, but again the Government kicked it into the long grass. At that time, an article in *The Sunday Times* on the matter quoted a senior Government source as saying:

“Lynton Crosby and the Tories have basically said ‘no way’. They think this is a fringe issue and are saying, ‘why would we do this?’”

If that was an accurate report, Mr Crosby and his colleagues were wrong both to be so dismissive of the fundamental rights and freedoms of humanists and to think it was a fringe matter, given that humanist marriages

have proven, even without legal status, to be hugely popular and have grown greatly in popularity in those jurisdictions where they are legally recognised.

As I mentioned, Labour has pledged to give legal recognition to humanist marriage, and that has been its consistent position for many years now. The Government have undermined their own position by introducing outdoor civil and religious marriages, as we have heard. Why are they okay? Why was that change made just a few weeks ago, but humanist marriage reform is not seen to be a priority? Why have humanists been at the back of the queue for so long, and what reason is there for making them wait any longer?

It is not only Labour that supports humanists and humanist marriages. As I said, colleagues from across the House support legal recognition of them—not just the Members who signed the letter that was published today but those who subscribed to speak in the debate, even if some of them have been unable to attend. The hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), who was for quite a period the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, introduced a Bill to bring about the legal recognition of humanist marriage in 2020. He said:

“The lack of legal recognition of humanist marriages in England and Wales is discrimination, pure and simple.”

Crispin Blunt: I am grateful to the hon. Member for reminding me that I had forgotten the request from my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) to make that precise point about how much he supports the Government moving on the issue.

Andy Slaughter: I am glad to have jogged the hon. Gentleman’s memory. To continue with the quotation, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham went on to say:

“This matter has been under review for some seven years now”—this was two years ago—

“and that’s more than long enough. My Bill would bring about legal recognition of humanist marriages within three months of its passage, thus enabling the many who want a legally recognised humanist marriage to be able to have one now. It would not prevent further changes to the law, after the completion of the present Law Commission review, but would remedy the present discrimination.”

It seems certain that there would have been majority support for such a move, were the Government to have given it sufficient parliamentary time two years ago.

That support can be seen around the rest of the UK. We have heard that humanist marriages were introduced in Scotland in 2005—under a Labour Government, I might add—when the Registrar General identified that he could bring them about by reinterpreting existing legislation that applied to religious marriages. Sadly, the wording of the law in England and Wales renders such an approach here impossible.

Support can also be seen in Northern Ireland, where humanist marriages have been legally recognised since 2018. That was initially brought about by a court case that was necessary as a result of Government inertia during the lengthy collapse of the Executive. However, I understand from Northern Ireland humanists that since the resumption of power sharing they have had nothing but friendly and supportive meetings with Members of the Legislative Assembly and Ministers from all parties.

[*Andy Slaughter*]

It is worth noting that the Northern Ireland Executive is currently consulting on introducing legislation to put humanist marriages on a firmer statutory footing, rather than relying on the court decision, as at present. That strikes me as a sensible way to go about things: fix the fundamental discrimination of the lack of legal recognition of humanist marriages as early as possible, get such marriages going, and then look to develop legislation to put them on the firmest possible footing. Such an approach avoids nine years and counting of consultation, and of disappointment for couples such as Kate Harrison and Christopher Sanderson—Kate being the lead claimant in the 2020 court case. They are waiting for a change in the law before getting married, mirroring the example of my constituents in the civil partnership case, who had to wait years simply to get something that most people regard as a basic human right. They have been waiting for far too long.

We have heard about Wales. Unfortunately for the Welsh, marriage law is not a devolved matter. Last year, the Labour Government in Wales wrote to the UK Government demanding immediate legal recognition of humanist marriages or, failing that, for marriage law to be devolved so that the Welsh Government could act where the UK Government have not. It is manifestly past time for the UK Government to act. I hope that they will now do so.

The law is discriminatory. It treats humanists as second-class citizens. It imposes additional financial burdens on them. The excuse that the Government wish to comprehensively address the issue is clearly wrong because they are approaching matters in a piecemeal way. It would be extremely simple to make the change. On that basis, I simply ask the Minister whether he can confirm what the Government will do—not waiting for the Law Commission initially—to bring humanist marriages into legal effect as quickly as possible. I have received numerous letters from constituents this week and last week—like many Members present, I am sure—in anticipation of the debate, all asking those questions and others.

This is not the only issue outstanding; I also mentioned, the last time we debated marriage, the issue of common-law marriage. I am not suggesting that we wait until we sort that problem out, because that is a problem that affects 3 million couples—6 million people. It has quite significant, and in some cases devastating, financial effects on people who believe they have security but find out upon the death of a partner, or after separation, that they simply do not. There are a lot of further steps that the Government need to take, but that is not a reason for holding up the simple, straightforward and uncontroversial step of giving legal status to humanist marriages. I hope we will hear from the Minister today that that is about to be done with great speed and enthusiasm.

2.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Tom Pursglove): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) for securing this debate, and for the way he has gone about representing his strongly held convictions on this issue. He is a tireless campaigner on the matter. I am grateful to colleagues from across the House who have attended

the debate this afternoon to make the case for humanist marriage. I know that many right hon. and hon. Members who hold very strong views on this are not here this afternoon but regularly make the arguments for humanist marriage. I have no doubt that they will speak to me about it in the weeks and months ahead.

Marriage will always be one of our most important institutions, and the Government want to encourage the stability and commitment in family life that marriage and civil partnership provides. A wedding day is one of the most important days of a couple's lives, and I understand that they want it to be personal and to reflect their beliefs and preferences—that will make their day all the more memorable. I have heard, and I recognise, the depth of feeling on the issue.

I personally see huge benefits to marriage: the commitment that marriage brings—that people are making that commitment to one another—and all the positive benefits that there are for children in a committed, loving family environment. That is very important and something that I am incredibly mindful of. I say that as someone who is not married, and has not been married—who knows what will happen in that regard in the future.

Crispin Blunt: I thank the Minister for his generous remarks about me and others, and also for what he has just said in a personal capacity. I cannot quite see any reason why he cannot say that as a member of Her Majesty's Government. Surely, that must reflect our Government policy as well.

Tom Pursglove: It is fair to say that the Government certainly support the institution and the principle of marriage. I wanted to reflect my own personal sentiments in that regard, and to pick up on the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), about there being a perception in some quarters that the issue of humanist marriage is a fringe issue. I want to provide my hon. Friend with reassurance that, as the Minister responsible for marriage, I do not see this issue through that lens—that would not be right. There are many people in this country who feel very passionately about this and who want to see reform. It is fair to say that I am mindful of their views and of the strength of feeling with which they express them. I will set out in further remarks what the Government's intentions are.

We must consider very carefully the implications of any changes to the law in this area. Currently, couples can marry in England and Wales through a civil ceremony conducted by a superintendent registrar or a registrar, or through a religious ceremony conducted by authorised members of that religion. Humanists have asked for provision that would not be available to all groups. It would allow them to marry in a place meaningful to them, without restriction on the location of the ceremony. Other groups would not have the same choice, as the law on marriage solemnization is generally based largely on the building in which the relevant marriage takes place. We therefore need to consider the implications very carefully.

Jeff Smith: The Minister makes the point about approved premises. What if we only have approved premises, but humanist marriages were allowed in those premises? That is something that Humanists UK is prepared to accept. Surely that would be a solution?

Tom Pursglove: I hear what the hon. Gentleman suggests. If I may, I will continue to make my argument and pick up on some of those points as I progress.

According to Humanists UK, 1,050 ceremonies are conducted by its celebrants in England and Wales each year. By comparison, according to the most recent Office for National Statistics publication on the topic, 186,614 civil marriages and 48,181 religious weddings took place in 2018.

Rachel Hopkins: I thank the Minister for citing those statistics, but does he accept that many humanists would have undertaken a civil ceremony as that was the only route open to them to get married, and that their preference would have been for a humanist wedding?

Tom Pursglove: I certainly take on board the hon. Lady's point. Colleagues here this afternoon have made that argument in very strong terms, and it is one that I am mindful of. I also note the individuals who decided not to get married and to wait and see what the Government's next steps will be following publication of the Law Commission's report.

In 2014 the Government published a consultation paper and response assessing the potential merits of provision for non-religious belief marriages. It concluded that the matter was complex, and that by allowing humanists to solemnise marriages in unrestricted locations, the Government would create a provision for humanists that would not be available to all groups. To ensure that we consider the implications of changing the law on marriage for all groups, we invited the Law Commission to undertake a review, which is currently under way and is expected to report in July.

The Government remain committed to considering the case for more comprehensive and enduring reform to marriage law once the Law Commission has completed its fundamental review of the law in this area. Options being explored by the Law Commission include offering couples greater flexibility on the form of their own ceremonies; allowing the ceremony to take place in a much broader range of locations; and providing a framework that could allow non-religious belief organisations, such as humanists, and independent celebrants to conduct legally binding weddings.

As part of the review, the Law Commission will consider how marriage by humanist and other non-religious belief organisations could be incorporated into a revised or new scheme that is simple, fair and consistent for all groups. Legislating to allow humanist marriages now would pre-empt the Law Commission's report, which is expected to provide a framework that could allow for humanist weddings. Although I recognise the frustration that many have felt while waiting for the publication of the Law Commission's report, it is right that we do this properly through a wholesale reform of marriage law, which can provide for humanist marriage while preventing disparity from being created with other groups.

By looking at the law comprehensively, the Law Commission will be able to ensure that, in so far as possible, groups and couples are all subject to the same rules and the same level of regulation. The Law Commission's recommendations are expected to eliminate the current situation where a couple with one set of beliefs is legally permitted to marry in one type of location—for example, in a private garden—but a couple

with another set of beliefs is not. That reform is not possible by only authorising humanist weddings. The Government will carefully consider the Law Commission's recommendations when the final report is published, and it is right for us to await the outcome of that.

Separately, since July 2021, couples have been able to have their civil marriage and civil partnership proceedings in the open air in the grounds of buildings such as stately homes and hotels that are approved, or become approved, for civil ceremonies. Outdoor ceremonies were made possible because the Government laid a statutory instrument at significant pace when covid was at a peak in order to give couples more choice of settings, and to support the wedding and civil partnership sector. I think all of us would recognise that that was an important step to take in the context of the pandemic when individuals did of course still want to get married and when there were important considerations for businesses up and down the country. That was the right thing to do.

I am proud that couples were given a lifeline to enable them to have some semblance of normality on their big day when there were restrictions in place. Some have said that was an example of piecemeal reform, but that is not the case. It was a measured response to the most significant public health crisis this country has faced, allowing couples and their loved ones to celebrate their special days safely.

One of many venues to have benefited from the statutory instrument was Hodsock Priory, which said:

"Guests love it as it feels romantic and is COVID safe. It's a positive experience and asset to our venue."

As the statutory instrument has effect only until 5 April 2022, it is right that we make these changes permanent.

This week, the Government's consultation on outdoor marriages and civil partnerships closed. The Government are fulfilling their commitment to carry out a full public consultation on outdoor weddings and to lay a further instrument to make the current time-limited changes permanent in spring 2022. This will continue to provide flexibility and choice to couples, venues and the wider wedding industry, in a sector in which almost 75% of all weddings are civil ceremonies and more than 85% of those are held on approved premises—a sector that has been hit hard by the pandemic.

When the Government announced the temporary measures for civil ceremonies in June 2021, they also committed to legislate to enable outdoor religious marriage when parliamentary time allowed. The outdoor marriage and civil partnerships consultation also sought views on the proposal. This proposed reform to religious wedding ceremonies is being considered to maintain parity between couples seeking a civil or religious wedding by providing similar choice and flexibility and allowing such ceremonies to take place outdoors.

Andy Slaughter: I think we are all grateful for the Minister's sentiments, but I am not sure that we are persuaded by his arguments. Even if we are moving in the right direction, it is going to be another couple of years if we wait for the Law Commission. There is nothing to stop an interim provision, which—if the Minister is concerned about disparities—could limit humanist weddings to approved premises in the same way as civil or religious ceremonies. That would mean

[*Andy Slaughter*]

that thousands of couples who want to get married and may have been waiting years to do so could go ahead now. It seems unnecessarily harsh to make them wait that length of time, even if the Government do get there in the end.

Tom Pursglove: It is my understanding that humanists can get married by their chosen celebrant on approved premises, but that the superintendent registrar and registrar must be present. To allow that to take place without the superintendent registrar or registrar would require an affirmative statutory instrument, which, by itself, would take around eight months to deliver. It would not be an immediate change.

Andy Slaughter: We have had some experience in the last two years of getting statutory instruments through in rather less than eight months. I am sure it could be rushed through in four.

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Gentleman will know that I always try to set expectations in the House at a reasonable level. I do not think it is right to set unrealistic expectations about such things. That is the situation, as I understand it, were we to go down the route he advocates.

I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate—I know he will continue to engage with me on these matters, and I will certainly welcome such opportunities—for bringing this important issue to the House's attention. I wish to reassure him and other hon. Members present that this issue is very much on my radar. The provision of humanist marriages is something that I will carefully consider. However, it needs to be done when the time is right and through proper consideration of all the issues involved. By waiting until the Law Commission provides its recommendations in July 2022, we will have a clear and comprehensive view of the opportunities associated with comprehensive reform to marriage law and options to address the concerns raised during this debate.

As I said at the outset, I am mindful of the strength of feeling in the House on this issue, as well as the strength of feeling among individuals in all our constituencies. My own constituents have written to me about this issue over the last week or so, in advance of the debate, and I am grateful to them for contacting me as their local MP. I am mindful of their strength of feeling. I give the House the undertaking that when the Law Commission produces its report, as the Minister responsible, I will of course want to take a look at it in very short order, progress with these reforms, see what the commission recommends and make informed decisions about how best to proceed.

2.54 pm

Crispin Blunt: I thank all hon. Friends and colleagues who have taken part in the debate. I listened to my hon. Friend the Minister with great interest. I am obviously pleased with the positivity he expressed personally around marriage. I made the point in an intervention that I am

pretty certain that his is the Government position, as much as it is the position of all the Front Benches in the House.

The statistics the Minister used about what has happened with marriages in England and Wales bear quite interesting analysis if we simply project the Scottish experience on to them. We might need to look at this again, but certainly, about 10,000 couples a year will want to take advantage of the opportunity to have a humanist celebrant conduct the most important service and celebration of the most important legal relationship in their lives. Whereas it might be only 1,400 today, a very large number of people every year are not able to exercise the freedoms that they deserve.

That takes us to the other elements of the Minister's speech. One could hear the legal drafting that had gone on of the pre-emptive defence of the Government's position, piecemeal reform having ripped away the defence that was offered against the judgment in the Harrison case in 2020. As my hon. Friend continues his consideration of this area, let us get immediate relief to all the tens of thousands of people who are potentially engaged in this issue before there is conceivably time for primary legislation to be passed to address marriage reform in substance. There are loads of interesting things we can do. We can do the statutory instrument. We know that we can do these things at pace. I cannot see the public policy concerns that we should not get this done for the next two or three years for all those people who want to take advantage of it. We will certainly focus hard on making those arguments for him and his colleagues to consider.

I know how determined my hon. Friend and his colleagues in the Ministry of Justice will be to get this done in the way that is intended. If we have to wait for the Law Commission response and the Government response, and then for the Government to present primary legislation to Parliament and for Parliament to pass it, an awful lot of people will not be able to exercise the freedoms that he and I should want for them and would support. This really is urgent. It could be done in isolation, before the Law Commission reports, as the hon. Members for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith) and for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) suggested with respect to approved premises.

I hope that the Minister takes ownership of this matter and enables all the people who want to take advantage of humanist weddings to do so. I look forward to continuing to press these arguments, and to his active consideration of the issue. There is widespread interest, as is made clear by the letter to the Lord Chancellor today signed by so many parliamentary colleagues from both Houses, and by the strength of support for the application for this debate. I believe that the tone of the debate has reflected that, too. I look forward to engaging with the Minister and his colleagues further.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered humanist marriages in England and Wales.

2.58 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 27 January 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Sizewell C: Update on Negotiations with EDF

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kwasi Kwarteng): The UK was the first major economy to legislate for a target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. As set out in the net zero strategy and the Prime Minister's 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution, nuclear will continue to be an important and reliable source of clean electricity as we strive to decarbonise the UK economy. By 2050, we expect that the electricity system will be built on a foundation of renewables such as wind and solar, but these will need to be bolstered by reliable low-carbon power. The UK Government recognise that large-scale nuclear is the only proven technology available to provide continuous, low-carbon electricity at scale. Ministers are therefore firmly committed to deploying new nuclear in order to strengthen Britain's energy security and reduce our exposure to volatile global gas prices, provided there is clear value for money for consumers and taxpayers.

In 2016 we took the decision to enter into a contract for difference over Hinkley Point C in Somerset, which is currently under construction and expected to begin generating power by 2026, when it will start providing 3.2 GW of electricity. However, with five of the UK's six nuclear stations scheduled to close by 2028, the Government have made a commitment to bring a further large-scale nuclear project to a final investment decision during this Parliament, subject to value for money and all relevant approvals. To facilitate this, we have introduced legislation for a new financing mechanism, the regulated asset base (RAB) model, through the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill. It is estimated that RAB could lower the cost of each new large-scale nuclear power project by more than £30 billion, compared to the existing contracts for difference model. The RAB model is also expected to reduce Britain's reliance on overseas developers for finance by substantially widening the pool of private investors to include British pension funds, insurers and other institutional investors from like-minded countries.

After Hinkley Point C, the Sizewell C project in Suffolk is the most advanced nuclear project in the UK. As a replica of Hinkley Point, Sizewell offers a high level of design maturity and an identified supply chain. The company developing the project has applied for both a development consent order and nuclear site licence and believes it can begin construction during this Parliament. If built, the new plant could deliver around 7% of the UK's current electricity needs (enough to power the equivalent of around 6 million homes) and create tens of thousands of jobs across the country. New nuclear is not only at the heart of our plans to ensure greater energy independence, but to drive economic growth.

The Government entered into Sizewell C project discussions in January 2021. Following significant investment from EDF, the project requires additional financial support to further mature it to a point where other private investors (and, subject to value for money

considerations and relevant approvals, the Government) could consider a direct investment in the project development company. Sufficient early development funding prior to the construction of major projects is a key determinant of subsequent project performance, and to this end the Prime Minister's 10-point plan committed in 2020 to provide nuclear development funding for this purpose.

I am pleased to announce that I will today enter into an option agreement with EDF Energy Holdings Ltd, which provides Government with an option over the land at Sizewell C and conditionally over the shares in the development company in exchange for an option fee of £100 million. EDF Energy Holdings Ltd will invest that £100 million in further developing the Sizewell C electricity infrastructure project. Should the project reach a successful final investment decision, subject to value for money and all relevant approvals, the Government would recover this funding together with a financing return, either through an equity stake in the project, or in cash.

This agreement represents an important milestone for both the Government's nuclear strategy and the project, which has the potential to significantly contribute to the UK's decarbonisation and security of supply objectives. However, I am clear that this agreement does not represent a Government decision that the Sizewell C project will progress. Neither is it an indication that similar commercial arrangements would necessarily be desirable for other prospective nuclear projects. Decisions on the Sizewell C Project will be dependent on decisions in respect of planning and designation under the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill if passed into law.

Noting that the future of the Sizewell C project is not confirmed, the agreement the Government have reached with EDF provides the taxpayer with downside protection should the project not proceed. In return for the £100 million, the Government will be granted an option on the Sizewell site and conditionally over the shares in certain circumstances of the development company. In the event the negotiations with EDF do not successfully result in a positive investment decision satisfactory to all parties, then subject to certain conditions, taxpayers would be entitled to seek acquisition of either EDF's shares in the Sizewell C development company or the site itself, or if neither can be delivered by EDF, the taxpayer would be entitled to a reimbursement of the £100 million with a financing return. This in turn would provide Government with the possibility of proceeding with alternative nuclear or low-carbon infrastructure, and therefore support the realisation of our net zero objectives.

Today's announcement further demonstrates our commitment to energy security, investing in our thriving nuclear sector and creating thousands of jobs.

[HCWS562]

DEFENCE

Defence Estate: Annington Property Ltd

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin): The Ministry of Defence—MOD—continues to review its estate to ensure value for money.

In 1996, the Ministry of Defence, in what was effectively a sale and leaseback agreement, granted a 999-year lease of over 55,000 service family accommodation homes to Annington Property Ltd and immediately leased the homes back on 200-year underleases. In 2018, the National Audit Office concluded in its review of the arrangements that taxpayers are between £2.2 billion and £4.2 billion worse off as a result of the sale and leaseback arrangements.

Given our obligations to secure value for money, we have reviewed the MOD'S current arrangements with Annington and now set out the steps that the MOD is taking to deliver greater value for money for the taxpayer in relation to service family accommodation.

First, the MOD engaged highly experienced advisers and counsel to deliver a settlement with Annington in the site rent review process. This settlement achieves value for money, and removes ongoing uncertainty for the Department; we believe it to be a good outcome and a fair settlement. The settlement resulted in a change in the overall adjustment to open market rents from 58% to 49.6%.

Secondly, the MOD continues to reduce the number of untenanted properties which it holds since these otherwise represent a liability for the taxpayer, by returning these to Annington under the terms of the lease.

Thirdly, the MOD can confirm that the Department will explore the exercise of its statutory leasehold enfranchisement rights to buy out Annington's interest in the homes and gain full ownership rights. Initially, the MOD has made a single claim for one house, with the intention to submit a further claim in respect of another house in the near future. It is hoped that this test case will establish certain key principles. The cost of enfranchising these houses will be in accordance with the statutory enfranchisement formula, fixed at the date of the notice of claim, and the price will be agreed between the parties or determined by an independent tribunal. If the cost of recovering full ownership of the units from Annington is less than the present value of the MOD's ongoing liabilities, such a transaction is likely to represent good value for money. The MOD would then benefit from any future appreciation in value of the units. Accordingly, the MOD has served notice on Annington under section 5 of the Leasehold Reform Act 1967 of its desire to enfranchise a house currently leased from Annington. Annington, through its lawyers, has notified the MOD that it is considering the impact of the claim and has put the MOD on notice of a potential dispute.

A successful enfranchisement programme would also provide the MOD with more flexibility in the management of its estate to the benefit of defence, tenants, and potentially wider Government objectives.

[HCWS563]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

OSCE: Ministerial Council and Priorities for 2022

The Minister for Europe (Chris Heaton-Harris): 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:

The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) faced a challenging year in 2021, with geopolitical tensions leading to a failure to reach consensus on a range of important issues. Sweden, as 2021 chair-in-office, steered the organisation through this period with a focus on addressing protracted conflicts, strengthening democracy and enhancing gender equality. The UK worked closely with Sweden, including as chair of the OSCE's Security Committee, which we have now concluded after two successful years.

On 2 and 3 December, Swedish Foreign Minister Ann Linde hosted the 28th Ministerial Council meeting of the OSCE in Stockholm. The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), represented the United Kingdom. The Ministerial Council is the key decision-making body of the OSCE and was attended by Ministers and senior officials from across its 57 participating states, including US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

The Council agreed a decision on increasing co-operation to address the challenges of climate change. Due to the positions of certain participating states, there was difficulty in reaching agreement on a number of other valuable decisions, reflecting wider difficulties in reaching consensus. In 2021, the OSCE's Human Dimension Implementation Meeting, Europe's largest annual human rights and democracy conference, did not take place because we were unable to reach agreement on the agenda.

The Foreign Secretary's intervention at the Ministerial Council underlined the need for all participating states to respect OSCE commitments. The Foreign Secretary raised concern over the impact of ongoing conflicts on regional stability and the threats facing freedom and democracy across the region, placing a particular emphasis on the importance of the OSCE's work in election observation.

The Foreign Secretary's statement also emphasised our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, calling on Russia to use OSCE tools to build trust and live up to their commitments on military transparency. The UK and allies made clear to Russia that its military build-up on the border of Ukraine and in illegally annexed Crimea is unacceptable. We reiterated these points in our closing statement and also regretted Russia's decision not to renew the mandate of the Border Observation Mission along the Ukraine-Russia state border.

During the ministerial working dinner, the Foreign Secretary led a discussion on conflict resolution focusing on the importance of finding the political will to implement existing tools. She also co-hosted a side event on the human rights situation in Belarus, alongside Denmark and Germany, with 36 co-sponsors. Her Majesty's ambassador to the OSCE, Neil Bush, represented the UK in a discussion focused on the potential OSCE role in Afghanistan particularly in supporting regional stability.

Poland have taken on the OSCE Chair for 2022 and will face another challenging year, at a particularly tense moment for the region. They plan to prioritise conflict prevention and resolution, with a focus on protection of civilians, and will champion building back better through effective multilateralism.

At the first OSCE Permanent Council in 2022, the UK offered Polish Foreign Minister Rau our full support. Our statement underlined our support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's aggressive acts and urged participating states to robustly defend the principles and commitments we signed up to. We also emphasised the importance of the cross-dimensional approach to security, which includes support for democracy and human rights, and called for adequate financing of the OSCE's autonomous institutions and field missions in the unified budget. As a consensus-based organisation, where all countries in the Euro-Atlantic area are represented and have an equal voice, the OSCE has a unique and valuable role in resolving tensions and avoiding escalation.

In 2022, the UK remains committed to supporting the work of the OSCE. We will focus on conflict prevention and resolution, ensuring in particular that we use the OSCE platform to hold Russia to account for its ongoing aggression in Ukraine. We will continue to work closely with the OSCE chair-in-office, Secretary General Helga Schmid, and other participating states to build an effective organisation which maintains comprehensive security in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian area.

[HCWS565]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Covid-19: Adult Social Care

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Thanks to the success of the vaccination booster roll out, and the reducing level of both infection and hospitalisations across the country, the Government have been able to announce the end of plan B. This means we are now able to take steps towards getting care homes back to normal, easing some of the difficult restrictions that both staff and residents have had in place, which I know have been incredibly challenging for all, while still protecting residents from the continued risk of covid-19.

From 31 January, there will no longer be nationally set direct restrictions on visiting in care homes and there will be no limit on the number of visitors a resident can receive. Residents should be supported to undertake visits out of the care home without the need to isolate on their return, but should continue to take reasonable precautions and undertake testing arrangements for high-risk visits.

As well as removing those additional precautions we put in place in response to the omicron variant, we are now able to reduce isolation periods for residents in care homes so that they are the same as for the general public in most cases.

Residents who need to isolate will now only need to do so for a maximum of 10 days. The 10-day maximum period will apply to those residents who test positive, are identified as a close contact or have had an unplanned stay in hospital. For some residents, the isolation period could be as short as five days subject to the testing regime that will be outlined in guidance.

Today I am also announcing changes to regular testing for staff. For all adult social care staff, we are moving to lateral flow testing every day before work and removing weekly PCR testing. Recent clinical advice is that following the pre-shift testing regime provides better protection than the current regular testing regime of weekly PCR with three lateral flow tests a week in high-risk settings.

As restrictions are relaxed for care home residents and for the general population, testing continues to be essential for providing the protections needed to support this relaxation of restrictions. The introduction of pre-shift rapid lateral flow tests should help identify and isolate positive cases quicker rather than waiting for PCR results to return from the lab.

This change applies only to regular asymptomatic testing for staff meaning PCR tests will remain available for symptomatic staff and residents. Outbreak testing and monthly resident testing will also remain unchanged.

By maintaining a robust regime of testing in adult social care, continuing to press ahead with our vaccination programme and maintaining high standards of infection prevention and control, we are able to support residents of care homes and recipients of care to gradually return to enjoying life as it was before the pandemic.

[HCWS566]

NHS Constitution and Handbook

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar):

Statutory report on the effect of the NHS constitution and updates to the constitution handbook

In accordance with the Health Act 2009, I have laid before Parliament a report on the effect of the NHS constitution. The report has also been published on the gov.uk website, alongside an updated version of the handbook to the NHS constitution.

The NHS constitution, like the NHS, belongs to us all. It empowers patients, public and staff by bringing together in one document the founding principles and values of our NHS. It sets out the legal rights to which patients, the public and staff are entitled and the pledges that the NHS has additionally made towards them. Just as importantly, it makes clear the responsibilities which we all have for supporting the NHS to operate fairly and effectively.

Throughout this extraordinary time where we have seen the huge impact of the pandemic on staff, patients and society as a whole, our NHS workforce have strived tirelessly to protect the people we love. It is therefore more important than ever that patients, public and staff know their rights, responsibilities and what they can expect from their NHS.

The report is based on an independent survey of staff, patients and the public. It describes how they view the impact of the NHS constitution, and its value in promoting and raising standards of care.

While the report shows that public awareness of the constitution is still low, we are pleased to see it has increased since the 2018 report, and staff awareness remains significantly higher than public awareness. We know that those informed about the NHS constitution are more likely to use it and so there is further work to do in improving awareness to ensure we all get the most out of our interactions with the NHS.

Looking forward, a full review of the NHS constitution itself is due in January 2025. The scoping for this review, including a statutory consultation with patients, carers and staff will begin this year. We will use the findings from today's report to shape the consultation and explore how to increase awareness and use of the NHS constitution across all public and staff groups.

Alongside this report we have also published a revised version of the handbook to the constitution. The handbook explains each right, pledge and responsibility in the NHS constitution. It is designed to give the public, patients, their carers and families, and NHS staff fuller information about what the constitution means for them. This revision ensures the information given in the handbook remains accurate and up to date.

[HCWS564]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

UK-Greenland Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The United Kingdom has today launched negotiations with the Government of Greenland on a continuity free trade agreement to reduce the costs of trading and to identify areas of strategic interest for future co-operation. While we introduced temporary measures to secure some continuity of trade with Greenland at the beginning of 2021, we never closed the door to securing a more permanent arrangement at an appropriate time.

These negotiations will seek to ensure that British firms can once again import popular products from Greenland tariff free. This will also support processing industries in Scotland, the north-east and north-west of England. As Greenland is the largest supplier of cold-water prawns in the world, as well as being a leading source of fish, these negotiations will help ensure the stability and resilience of British supply chains for consumers and the hospitality sector. The negotiations will also lay the groundwork for potentially tackling market access barriers for British businesses in Greenland in the longer term, including by liberalising professional business services

trade, facilitating inward investment, and agreeing mutual recognition and double taxation arrangements. These discussions will therefore pave the way to potentially unlocking significant new opportunities for British exporters and investors looking to extend their presence across the Arctic.

Additionally, Greenland is an important partner in the Arctic—an increasingly important geopolitical area. These negotiations provide an opportunity to establish a dialogue through which to broaden our co-operation with Greenland on our priorities, such as climate change, science and research, and potentially the supply of critical minerals.

As the Arctic continues to grow in strategic importance, Greenland will be a key partner in ensuring a secure, stable, and sustainable future for the region.

In parallel, we expect the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to enter into negotiations with Greenland on our access to Greenlandic fishing waters.

This agreement will constitute Greenland's first bilateral agreement with a third partner country, and we look forward to using this opportunity to solidify and strengthen our trading relationship in the future.

We will ensure Parliament is regularly updated on the progress of these negotiations.

[HCWS567]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 27 January 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	1095	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL	
Church Schools.....	1095	AFFAIRS	1077
Christians: Middle East	1093	Bees: Thiamethoxam.....	1082
Churches and Cathedrals: Sustainability	1089	Coastal Communities.....	1085
Freedom of Religion or Belief.....	1090	Flash Flooding: London.....	1077
Gay and Lesbian Relationships.....	1093	Fly-tipping.....	1078
Parenting and Marriage	1091	Food Labelling.....	1084
Tackling Racial Inequalities	1090	Household Budgets: Food Prices	1081
		Nature Recovery Networks	1083
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT		Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme.....	1082
COMMITTEE	1121	Topical Questions	1086
		UK-EU Catch Limits.....	1083
ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE	1094	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	1096
Elections Bill: Costs	1094	House of Commons Catering: British Food.....	1096

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 27 January 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	33WS
STRATEGY	29WS	Covid-19: Adult Social Care	33WS
Sizewell C: Update on Negotiations with EDF	29WS	NHS Constitution and Handbook.....	34WS
DEFENCE	30WS		
Defence Estate: Annington Property Ltd	30WS	INTERNATIONAL TRADE	35WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND		UK-Greenland Free Trade Agreement	
DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	31WS	Negotiations	35WS
OSCE: Ministerial Council and Priorities for			
2022	31WS		

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CONTENTS

Thursday 27 January 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 1077] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission
Speaker's Electoral Commission Committee

Business of the House [Col. 1097]

Statement—(Mr Rees-Mogg)

Draft Online Safety Bill [Col. 1121]

Select Committee Statement—(Julian Knight)

Backbench Business

Holocaust Memorial Day [Col. 1128]

Motion—(Robert Jenrick)—agreed to

Westminster Hall

Humanist Marriages [Col. 419WH]

General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 29WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
