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House of Commons

Friday 28 January 2022

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163) and negatived.

Cultural Objects (Protection from Seizure) Bill

Mr Speaker: Before we get on to our proceedings, it might be useful for hon. Members if I set out the differences between Report and Third Reading. Report stage, also known as consideration, is an opportunity for the whole House to consider what has been done during Committee. Members may table amendments, either as probing amendments to elicit more information or because they want to make changes to the Bill. The scope of the debate is restricted to the amendments that have been selected. Third Reading is the final opportunity for MPs to pass or reject the whole Bill. Members can speak about the Bill as a whole and the debate is much wider.

Members may wish to consider those points and then decide at which stage or stages they want to try to catch my eye. If they are on the list and do not want to speak to the amendments, it would be helpful if they could let me know.

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

Clause 1

Protection of cultural objects on loan

9.36 am

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): I beg to move amendment 1, page 1, line 6, at end insert

"in relation to an object that is in—

(a) the United Kingdom for the purpose of public display in a temporary exhibition at a museum or gallery in England or Scotland, or

(b) England or Scotland for any of the purposes listed in subsection (7)(b) to (e)."

This amendment provides for the extension of the maximum protection period to apply only in relation to objects that are in the United Kingdom for the purpose of an exhibition in England or Scotland, or otherwise in England or Scotland for certain purposes.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss amendments 2 to 6.

Mel Stride: Perhaps I should begin with a brief declaration of interest, Mr Speaker, in that as a hobby, I am a qualified Blue Badge guide—qualified to guide in such wonderful places as the British Museum, Westminster Abbey and others. I pay tribute to all those Blue Badge guides who work so hard to promote our country and our culture.

Amendment 1 provides for the extension of the maximum protection period to apply in relation only to objects that are in the United Kingdom for the purpose of an exhibition in England or Scotland or otherwise in England or Scotland for certain purposes. That follows a decision by the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland not to prioritise the legislative consent motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly, which would have allowed the powers to apply to Northern Ireland. Similarly, and following discussions between the UK and Welsh Governments, it has not been possible to reach agreement on how the power to extend the current 12-month period of protection will apply across the two nations. The Welsh Government have therefore declined to table a legislative consent motion for the Bill as it stands.

Amendment 1 and the other amendments, which are consequential on it, will ensure that the Bill addresses that situation while introducing the Bill's important measures for application in England and Scotland.

Amendment 1 agreed to.

Amendments made: 2, page 1, line 14, leave out paragraph (b).

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 3, page 1, line 26, leave out paragraph (d).

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 4, page 2, line 10, leave out "two or more" and insert "both".

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 5, page 2, line 21, at end insert—

"(4E) In relation to an object the maximum protection period for which is the period mentioned in subsection (4D)(c), references to the United Kingdom in subsections (4)(a), (5) and (8) are to be read as references to England or Scotland."

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Amendment 6, page 2, line 23, at end insert—

"(4) In section 137 (interpretation), in subsection (10)—

(a) For "'United Kingdom'" substitute "A reference to the United Kingdom or any part of the United Kingdom";

(b) after "adjacent to the United Kingdom" insert "or that part of the United Kingdom".—*(Mel Stride.)*

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 1.

Third Reading

9.38 am

Mel Stride: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

This is a short, two-clause Bill that extends the period of protection against court-ordered seizure for cultural objects on loan from abroad. The Bill amends part 6 of the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007, which provides immunity from seizure for cultural objects on loan from abroad in temporary exhibitions in public museums and galleries in the United Kingdom. Under section 134 of the Act, cultural objects that are on loan from abroad to feature in exhibitions held in UK museums and galleries approved under the Act are protected from court-ordered seizure for a period of 12 months from the date when the object enters the United Kingdom.

The legislation was prompted by events in 2005, when 54 paintings, including works by Picasso, Matisse and Cézanne, were seized by customs officers in Switzerland. The paintings, from the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Russia, were impounded after they had left the

[Mel Stride]

town of Martigny in Switzerland. The Swiss authorities acted on a court order obtained by a Swiss import-export firm, Noga SA, which claimed that the Russian Government owed it several million dollars in unpaid debts relating to an oil-for-food deal signed in the early 1990s and which sought to enforce a Stockholm arbitration award in its favour.

The impounding of the paintings was just one of several attempts by Noga to recover its purported debt by seizing assets abroad. In 2000, Noga instituted proceedings to seize a Russian sailing ship that was due to take part in a regatta in France; it then sought to freeze the accounts of the Russian embassy in Paris. Both actions were dismissed by court rulings in favour of Russia. In 2001, it tried to appropriate two Russian military jets during the prestigious Le Bourget air show in France; that attempt also failed.

But it was Noga's seizure of the Pushkin paintings that sparked the most outrage of all. The director of the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg said that

"works of art are now being used as hostages in trade disputes".

Although the seizure order was quickly cancelled by Switzerland's Federal Council, the Hermitage warned that no Russian museum would be able to send objects on loan to any overseas venue unless it received concrete legal guarantees that its artworks would not be seized during the loan period.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his Bill. Does he agree that the relatively minor change in it will give great reassurance to overseas lenders about their capacity and confidence to lend assets to the United Kingdom? In the Scottish Borders, across Scotland and across the UK, all our constituents will now benefit from being able to enjoy those assets, and the lenders will have the comfort of knowing that they are safe here.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend precisely pinpoints the advantage of the Bill, which is very narrowly defined but will provide extra certainty to those who lend artworks to England and Scotland and the museums therein that those artworks will be returned in due course. That comfort will drive further loans in future, which will be to the benefit of the people in this country, our tourism industry and our cultural offering in general.

The measures in the 2007 Act enable the UK Government, the Governments of Scotland and Wales and the Northern Ireland Executive to give guarantees for such loans in the United Kingdom. Since the Act's introduction, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has been responsible for approving institutions in England for immunity from seizure, and the devolved Administrations have similar powers for other parts of the United Kingdom. To gain approval under the Act, institutions must demonstrate that their procedures for establishing the provenance and ownership of objects are of a high standard.

In 2007, it was considered that 12 months was an adequate period to allow objects to arrive in the UK and to be returned following their inclusion in a temporary exhibition. Section 134(4) of the Act therefore provides:

"The protection continues…for not more than 12 months beginning with the day when the object enters the United Kingdom."

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on getting this far with his Bill. Has he received any letters of objection from anyone, anywhere, to what he proposes?

Mel Stride: The Bill has widely been received very positively. There have been very positive discussions with the devolved Governments, as I outlined in the debate on amendment 1 and my other amendments. There have been some changes in relation to Wales and Scotland, but the Bill has received support across the House; it went through Committee without Division, and my amendments on Report have been agreed to without Division. It is an important and widely supported set of measures.

The only exception in which the 12-month period can be extended is where an object suffers damage and repair work is needed. The legislation has been effective over the years and has enabled many exhibitions to be enriched by loans that the public might not otherwise have been able to see. There are now 38 institutions across the United Kingdom that have been approved for immunity from seizure and where objects have benefited from protection. Those 38 institutions are in England and Scotland; there are currently no approved museums in Wales and Northern Ireland.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): For many of our regional museums, galleries and historic houses, temporary exhibitions are made up with a relatively small number of items from abroad. Does the right hon. Gentleman think we will expand on that number of 38 institutions, to allow many more of our regional museums and galleries to have immunity from seizure?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. My understanding is that the application process to become an approved institution or museum is relatively straightforward. It is rigorous in the sense that, clearly, a number of important aspects have to be met. I would defer to the Minister, who might tell us a little more in his concluding remarks about the guidance that is appropriate and how it operates in those circumstances.

As I was saying, my Bill was drafted to allow the period of protection to be extended beyond 12 months, at the discretion of the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for institutions in England or the relevant approving authority in the devolved nations. That was to ensure that the protection remains fit for purpose and can adequately respond to unforeseen circumstances, and to provide increased confidence in the UK system for those who generously share their cultural objects with UK audiences. The new power to extend would apply following an application from an approved museum or gallery, and extensions would be granted for a further three months initially, with a possibility of a further extension if that is considered necessary. The circumstances in which an extension may be considered will be set out in guidance.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for getting the Bill before the House. It is clearly an important measure and it is important to support the tourism industry, which generates so many jobs. In what sort of circumstances might an institution want to apply for the extension?

Have those circumstances happened in the past or is this just a precaution to deal with situations that might arise in the future?

Mel Stride: I will come on to these points imminently, but let me immediately address the question my hon. Friend has posed. The circumstances have not arisen in the past in the UK, and the 12-month period has always been adequate. However, things such as the covid problems and the grounding of air flights—a volcanic eruption happened in Iceland some years ago and grounded flights—are causes for concern. The most important thing is that although we have not had a situation where we would have needed an extension in the past, there is no doubt that this comfort is required for those lenders who generously lend their cultural artefacts to our museums and galleries.

The devolved Administrations have all shown strong support for the purpose of the Bill. However, the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland has decided at this time that it is unable to prioritise a legislative consent motion in the Northern Ireland Assembly and that Northern Ireland must, regrettably, be removed from the Bill. That is unfortunate, although in practical terms it has little impact at present, as there are currently no approved museums in Northern Ireland, as I have said. Furthermore, following discussions between the UK and Welsh Governments it has not been possible to reach agreement on how the concurrent power to extend the 12-month period of protection will apply across the two nations, the Welsh Government have declined to table a legislative consent motion for the Bill as it stands. Therefore, the Bill has been amended to remove its application in Wales. As with Northern Ireland, there are currently no Welsh institutions approved for immunity from seizure, so in practical terms that has no direct impact at the moment. I am informed that a legislative consent motion has been successfully lodged in the Scottish Parliament so that the measures in the Bill can and will have effect in Scotland. Given the decisions taken in relation to Wales and Northern Ireland, the Bill has been amended so that the power in proposed new subsection (4A) to extend the protection period for three months applies only in relation to objects that are either in the UK for the purpose of a temporary exhibition in England or Scotland, or in England or Scotland for one

"of the purposes mentioned in subsection 7(b) to (e)".

I know all hon. Members will be very familiar with them. That will limit the effect of any extension of the maximum protection period to England and Scotland. I emphasise that the 12-month protection period under the 2007 Act will continue to apply across the United Kingdom as it currently does.

Our museums have shown, particularly during the anxious times of the past two years, that they are incredibly good at managing unforeseen events. Where it has been possible, exhibitions have gone ahead and works returned to lenders on time. However, that has not always been the case and the restrictions and difficulties with international travel that we have all faced mean it has not always been possible to return loaned items as rapidly as desired once exhibitions have concluded.

As restrictions in the UK continue to be eased, museums will be able to plan with greater confidence. A number of exciting exhibitions are already planned for this year, including the Raphael exhibition at the National Gallery, Van Gogh's self-portraits at the Courtauld Gallery and "Surrealism Beyond Borders" at Tate Modern. We can expect all those exhibitions to be popular with the public.

We may feel safer in going about our daily lives, but we should not forget mother nature's ability to surprise us. On Second Reading, I raised the disruption to air travel caused by the Icelandic volcano that erupted in 2010; the eruption earlier this month of the Tongan volcano, which threw out a huge cloud of volcanic ash, is further evidence that we can be taken unawares and forced to change our plans, sometimes at very short notice.

Anthony Browne: I thank my right hon. Friend for his detailed exposition of the legislation, which I strongly support. He mentioned in his introduction the various circumstances in which it is deemed necessary for there to be protection against action taken overseas—in Switzerland, France and so on; is he aware of any UK cases of the court-ordered seizure of artworks that have come here for exhibitions? In what sort of circumstances might that happen in future? Would it be when law enforcement authorities are worried about, for example, the breaking of anti-money laundering rules, which we have talked about? Or would it be families trying to get back goods that they think belong to them rather than to foreign galleries?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is, of course, very familiar with the issue of economic crime as he serves with me on the Treasury Committee and we are currently looking into these very matters in great detail. I believe there probably have been instances in which there has been a need within our country's borders to seize objects and cultural artefacts. I cannot give my hon. Friend specific examples, but there will have been such seizures and the capacity for them will remain—for example, under proceeds of crime legislation if artefacts are used to conceal drugs or similar or for something associated with money laundering. Seizures could still occur under certain circumstances, but those circumstances are narrowly defined and will not be changed in any way by this legislation.

I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will agree that the Bill is an important and worthy measure that will give our museums and galleries, and those who lend to them, greater comfort in knowing that the protection afforded under the 2007 Act can be extended if travel plans are disrupted and it is not possible to return loaned objects within the current 12-month period.

Sir Greg Knight: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way again; he is being generous. I notice that the power to extend by three months can be repeated again and again—there is no limit on how many times the relevant authority can extend the period for three months. Why has my right hon. Friend phrased the legislation in that way? Would it not have been better to give the relevant authority the power to extend for a longer period?

Mel Stride: I believe the three-month period came out of the consultation process. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has been conducting an informal consultation with museums and the rest of the sector and it was felt that, in the context of the existing 12-month protection, three months was a reasonable and proportionate further extension. It is relatively straightforward for the Secretary of State, or for Scottish

[Mel Stride]

Ministers when the question relates to Scotland, to bring forward further extensions—it is not a lengthy or onerous process—so three months seemed a reasonable period of time. We have to put forward some kind of period for extension because that has to be addressed.

The Bill will ensure that our national museums and galleries can continue to host major exhibitions, which provide so much enjoyment for the many millions of people who visit them every year and which are vital as we continue to rebuild our economy. I commend the Bill to the House.

9.54 am

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) on bringing forward this important Bill. My constituents care passionately about our arts sector, as do I, and I am enormously proud to represent Caterham, which is home to the world-famous East Surrey Museum.

The pandemic has been extremely hard on our cultural sector, but it has made me and my constituents realise how lucky we are that this country is home to some of the finest museums, galleries and exhibitions in the world. Thanks to the Prime Minister's world-leading booster programme, our country was spared another lockdown and our cultural organisations were spared having to close their doors once more.

Some challenges remain, however, which is why I am delighted to support this iconic sector in any way I can, including through this Bill. Many objects have benefited from existing legislative protections, such as the baby mummified mammoth Lyuba, which was borrowed by the Natural History Museum from Russia in 2014; the terracotta warriors loaned from China to the National Museums Liverpool in 2018; and the Tutankhamun treasures loaned to the Saatchi Gallery in 2019.

Without protection from seizure, the loan of such objects would never have been granted; world-famous exhibitions and galleries may never have come to fruition; and the opportunity of blockbuster success for our museums and cultural sector would have been squandered. Although the risk of seizure in Britain is, of course, very low, legislative protection none the less ensures that our museums and galleries can reassure their lenders and retain their status as some of the most enviable across the globe.

We have heard about some of the exhibitions this year, such as at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, which will host several self-portraits of Van Gogh, three of which will be loaned from the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and the Art Institute of Chicago; the Tate Modern, which will host pieces from Vancouver, Berlin and New York; and the Victoria and Albert Museum, which will host a piece from Princeton University library. That gives a sense of how difficult it can be to weave together the wonderful exhibitions that we can all enjoy so much.

The prudent three-month extension that we are discussing will further boost Britain's exhibition sector by increasing the confidence of international owners to lend to British institutions and will make the exhibition planning of our museums and galleries easier. Although the 12-month period of protection has generally provided a sufficient length of time for museum exhibitions to take place and for objects on loan to be returned in line with agreed schedules, on occasion, we can see how that would leave us vulnerable. We have heard a bit about international travel; we all remember the 2010 volcano eruption in Iceland; and we have debated in the House some of the real difficulties that we see in Tonga this year as well.

Supporting our cultural sector is about not just the arts but our economic strength. Over the years, I have witnessed many attempts by other countries to lure our brightest and best—our top talent—to other areas. It is our rich cultural fabric that acts as a magnet to this country. The museum sector alone also generates £2.64 billion of income and £1.4 billion of economic output to the national economy, which inputs to our £75 billion tourist economy. We know that several countries would almost certainly be unlikely to loan us objects if the protection was not in place.

As I have said, the risk of seizure in Britain is low, but I wholeheartedly support the Bill to ensure that all our opportunities in museums, galleries and exhibitions remain open. It will reassure those who lend to British institutions, secure our ability to host some of the finest cultural objects across the globe, and retain Britain's status as a cultural superpower.

9.59 am

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) on bringing forward the Bill. It is not just a London issue; many hon. Members who represent constituencies with historical links are appreciative of what we have in this country. For Hertford and Stortford—this is a link with covid—during the reign of Elizabeth I, this Parliament sat in Hertford castle. It moved there to escape the plague, so there is a link there, and we also have the amazing Great Bed of Ware, which resides in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is one of its prime objects. Our cultural heritage is important to all of us, and all the people, and the constituencies that we represent.

I had no idea that my right hon. Friend was a Blue Badge guide. It is something I have always intended to do. I was honoured in 2018 to be one of the volunteers lighting candles in the moat of the Tower of London to commemorate the end of the first world war, and many of my fellow volunteers were Blue Badge guides, and it was very inspirational. I commend him on doing that; perhaps one day in the future I will join him.

I commend the importance of cultural objects, museums and galleries in this country. There are about 2,500 museums in the UK, and the UK's tourist industry is worth about £75 billion. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) said, it makes a hugely important financial and economic contribution to our economy. The ability to put on exhibitions with new material from overseas is an important way for museums and galleries not only to survive—we have seen how important that is over the past couple of years—but to thrive and continue to attract a wide range of audiences, including tourists, and from all across the country, too. The purpose is to educate, to inform and to widen people's knowledge of history and culture.

Anthony Browne: My hon. Friend raised the importance of tourism to the economy, which is right. As she said, it is about £75 billion, and the measures in the Bill will clearly help promote tourism. As fellow members of the

Treasury Committee, she and I have been looking at the economic progress over the past two years since the pandemic, and clearly the economy has done a lot better than most people predicted at the beginning. We have had progressive easing of travel restrictions—now there are virtually none. Does she agree that that, along with the measures in the Bill, will help promote tourism in the UK and help it bounce back from a difficult time?

Julie Marson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is amazing how we are coming out of this pandemic with a lot of support from the Government to the cultural sector, but as we come out of this pandemic, galleries and museums will effectively be competing for business with all sorts of other attractions. The certainty offered by the Bill will enable museums across the world to lend to each other with confidence, and that can only help with the important task of getting our cultural sector back up and running and making that economic contribution to the country that it always has made, and we hope it will continue to grow.

I remember—vaguely—one of the first major cultural exhibitions, which was the Tutankhamun exhibition in 1972. It began the phenomenon of great big blockbuster exhibitions, and from then they have gone from strength to strength. I think there were 1.6 million visitors to that exhibition. There were pictures of people queueing around the corner of the British Museum. That was what sparked this whole thing, and it is a vital part of the business model of museums and galleries. Exhibitions attract tourists and visitors, increase the cultural importance of institutions, attract sales in gift shops and so on—an important part of the business model—and they attract sponsors.

The impact of large exhibitions should not be underestimated, and their contribution goes beyond money: they are extremely important to inclusivity in the cultural sector. Many people in this country cannot afford to go abroad to see important artefacts, so to bring them to this country could and should be seen as part of the Government's levelling-up agenda, by enabling everybody to see them. Many museums and galleries are free; sometimes people have to pay for the exhibitions, but it is about the accessibility to things that people, particularly young people, could not otherwise see.

We have seen some fascinating exhibitions focusing on LGBT history and culture, and they are not exclusive. We had an amazing David Bowie exhibition a few years ago, which was hugely popular—I think one of the most popular in the past 20 years. Exhibitions are not exclusive; they are very inclusive. If people want to see indigenous Australian art or African art, those are important things that can be achieved only with the security this Bill helps to provide.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about this being part of the levelling-up agenda. Does she also agree that it is a pretty powerful symbol of global Britain?

Mr Speaker: Order. I have been quite lenient, but this should not become a political broadcast for what the Government are doing. We have to be careful. I know it is Friday and we are a bit more relaxed, but we must try. This is about seizure of objects, and I have allowed all the exhibitions and everything, but we must be a bit careful that we do not totally make this about patting the Government on the back for everything they are doing.

Julie Marson: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I will say briefly to my hon. Friend that I agree, and move quickly on. In fact I will close here, because I am aware that others want to speak, but I emphasise that in so many different areas—financial, cultural and practical—this Bill goes a long way towards helping to secure all those benefits with more certainty than in the past.

10.7 am

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I will try not to make this a political broadcast, Mr Speaker, but stick to the subject matter.

I rise to support this Bill, which I know will be of great reassurance to museums and galleries in the Black Country and the wider west midlands, particularly because I spent much of my youth and adult life in museums and galleries. They are a joy. That is what I used to do: we did not have the internet or those exciting things that absorb us now, attached to a phone. We used to get out there and see incredible exhibitions. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) mentioned the Blue Badge, and I may look into that myself—it sounds very interesting.

The coronavirus pandemic underscores why this legislation is needed. Back in March 2020, no one could have foreseen the disruption to international travel that would occur. With nearly all overseas flights suspended, objects on loan to British museums could not be returned to their country of origin. As a result, the artefacts were at risk of being left unprotected by the current 12-month period of protection from seizure. By changing existing legislation, this Bill will help to mitigate those unforeseen disruptions to the timely return of artefacts on loan from lenders abroad.

However, the Bill is more than a contingency for unforeseen events: it strengthens the partnerships between our museums and international institutions by providing a greater degree of certainty and building trust. Many foreign lenders insist on immunity from seizure when lending artefacts, so the Bill is crucial to ensuring that international owners have the confidence to lend culturally significant objects to British institutions, in the knowledge that they will not be at risk of inadvertently being left unprotected.

Museums and galleries across the country and in the west midlands stage incredible exhibitions, many of them only made possible by the borrowing of objects from international lenders. These international exhibitions are vital to both enhancing their existing collections, and attracting new audiences. Other hon. Members have stolen my thunder, because I was going to mention Tutankhamun myself. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) mentioned the 2019 exhibition, which I believe marked the 100-year anniversary and was the last visit. Some of us remember the 1972 exhibition, which I remember as a child of the time—my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) mentioned that, and I think it quite unbelievable that she can remember it. It was absolutely thrilling, the excitement of it all, and there were record crowds of 1.7 million people. I remember the black and white pictures of the queues going round—I think we used the word Egytpomania at the time—and it was so exciting. It was an exhibition of the beautiful painted wood torso of the young king, exquisite domestic objects, and the glint of gold everywhere. I seem to remember

[Suzanne Webb]

that exhibition coming to Birmingham, which is where I was born and bred, but when I did a bit of research I could not find it. Nevertheless, I believe it moved around slightly. Imagine if that incredible exhibition had been blighted by a pandemic.

The Bill provides a greater degree of certainty, and makes it easier for British museums and galleries to plan their exhibitions. It will help to ensure that the UK continues to be able stage international exhibitions, with the finest artefacts from around the globe. Many such exhibitions are made possible only through the borrowing of objects from international lenders.

I now want to tell the tale of an artefact of great distinction and notoriety that resided in the midlands: an 8 foot tall, 890 kg fibreglass statue commissioned for display in Birmingham in 1972, as part of the sculpture for public places scheme in partnership with the Arts Council of Great Britain. It was commissioned to make something city-oriented, and the sculptor chose King Kong—I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) remembers the King Kong that resided in Birmingham. I do not want hon. Members to do a quick Google now, as I will be told off by Mr Speaker, but when they leave the Chamber, they can see the incredible artefact that was in Birmingham and supposed to represent it. It was down to the sculptor's association with New York City, and he created it for their own petty reasons. It was displayed in the heart of the city for many years—imagine if it was actually seized! It was something of a notoriety, and I loved it as a child growing up. We used to drive round to look at it. Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that King Kong lives on, and is now retired in Penrith.

I welcome the Bill for non-UK artefacts, because the ability for museums and galleries to stage international exhibitions is vital for the tourism sector in the UK. Tourism is a vital part of the local economy in Stourbridge, and in the wider Borough of Dudley. More than £534 million was spent by visitors to the area over 7 million trips, supporting more than 8,000 jobs. The west midlands is home to plenty of fantastic museums and galleries, such as the Glasshouse Heritage Centre in Stourbridge's historic glass quarter. That heritage attraction is a real gem in my constituency. It is run by a dedicated team of staff and volunteers, and it hosts a wide array of artefacts that tell the incredible 400-year story of glassmaking in Stourbridge. I know that the Bill will be welcome by institutions such as the Glasshouse Heritage Centre, as the arts sector makes a strong recovery after the pandemic. The Bill will be of great reassurance to museums and galleries in my region, and the wider west midlands. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) for introducing the Bill, and long live King Kong.

10.13 am

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): As I said in my earlier intervention, I strongly welcome the Bill. That is not because any of the 38 institutions that might take advantage of it are in my constituency—I have not checked the full list of institutions, but I am pretty sure none of them is there. However, I know that a lot of my constituents enjoy these big exhibitions, as some of my hon. Friends have said, and I declare an interest because I also went to the 1972 Tutankhamun exhibition at the British Museum. I remember being part of the big queues outside it with my parents, and I have very vivid memories of seeing those Egyptian artefacts. It is incredibly important that we carry on having these big blockbuster exhibitions, by giving foreign galleries and institutions the reassurance they need when lending to the UK. I have seen other international blockbuster exhibitions. My right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) mentioned thetTerracotta army. That has also been to the UK and I went to see it.

The Bill is especially important because of the disruptions we have seen to international air travel. Indeed, I have personal experience of that. When the Icelandic volcano erupted I was in Malta, on a little holiday with my family in a nice hotel by a swimming pool. Then the airspace closed and I was condemned to stay in Malta at this lovely hotel for another week before a hole emerged in the volcanic ash cloud and we managed to escape to Toulouse and drive back to the UK. So clearly disruption to international travel does happen—I have experienced that myself.

The other thing that no one has mentioned yet is that we are in a period of rising international tensions. We have had debates here about possible events in Ukraine. Clearly tensions are mounting between the west and China. Many of the blockbuster exhibitions that we have and want to attract come from those two countries—for example, the terracotta army from China. Other hon. Members have mentioned the Hermitage Museum, which is one of the world's biggest museums, with an incredible wealth of exhibits that we may want to bring to the UK. In a time of rising international tension, we want to be able to give reassurance to galleries and museums in other countries that they can lend to us in full safety.

I want to give one little anecdote about the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. If people have never visited it, I strongly recommend it if they can ever get there. It is one of the most extraordinary buildings on the planet and a real tribute to the—I am not quite sure how to put this—wealth of the Tsarist regime, which built the winter palace. It has rooms that are made out of gold, malachite and everything else. The building itself is as astonishing as any of the exhibits in there, and it is vast. It has such a wealth of art that the Russian empire and then the Soviets built up and put in there. A lot of that art—there are Picassos and so on—is stuff that we would want to see in the UK.

There are also a lot of Russian icons, and this is relevant to today's debate. It is illegal in Russia to export any of the icons, but there is a really busy industry in making replica icons that people might want to exhibit at home. The gift shop of the Hermitage Museum sells replicas of the icons that are on display there. As it is not allowed to export real icons, you get a certificate of fakeness when you buy a replica—a very nicely done certificate saying, "We confirm this is a fake"—and you can then export it. I bought a little icon which is proudly in my sitting room now. When I went out through Moscow airport—I went back to Moscow—the customs official uncovered it, and I said, "Ah, but it is fake, look I've got a certificate of fakeness." The official said, "But this certificate of fakeness, it could be fake." [*Laughter.*] Clearly there are big concerns about exporting and expropriating different bits of cultural heritage.

The Bill is important because of concerns about air travel and rising international tensions. It is important to continue blockbuster exhibitions, for all the economic reasons that various hon. Friends have mentioned. Tourism is a £75 billion industry, and blockbuster exhibitions are important for that. People come from other countries to the UK to see those exhibitions. One reason why the Bill is important is that if the Hermitage Museum or the Chinese Government are thinking about where their exhibits might go, they will go to only one or two places in the world. They want to lend them to the place that can give the greatest reassurance. The fact that we can provide this extra reassurance makes it more likely that they will agree to UK institutions as opposed to institutions elsewhere.

I want to end on one little note that is not totally relevant to this debate, but almost is. There is a reciprocal debate about what we do with the Elgin marbles; the Minister may or may not want to comment on this later. We have the Elgin marbles here in the UK, and there is obviously a big debate about whether they should or should not go back to Greece. I do not want to reopen that whole debate, but there is an issue about whether we could lend them to Greece for an exhibition and what sort of reassurance we could get that we would get them back. That is a mirror image of the legislation that we are talking about today. I put that there; maybe we could encourage other countries to give similar legal reassurances.

I fully support the Bill and the amendments that my right hon. Friend tabled. I think we should all say Aye to it.

10.19 am

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): It is a privilege, as always, to follow the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne). I congratulate the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) on his hard work on the Bill. In September, I was pleased to speak on Second Reading in support of the Bill and its sensible and straightforward changes, and I warmly welcome the opportunity to briefly do so again on Third Reading.

The enforced closure of cultural venues during the pandemic emphasised to people across the country, including—as we have heard—many in this House, the true value that those venues and the exhibitions and pieces in them can provide our society. While restrictions were in place over some of the last couple of years, the learning opportunities and inspiration provided by those venues were well and truly missed. Thanks to our apparent recovery from the pandemic—we all hope that is the case—I believe 2022 can be the year that the people of this country rediscover our world-leading museums and exhibitions, and the venues can make a strong recovery.

As we are aware, under section 134 of the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007, cultural objects from abroad on loan to UK museums and galleries approved under that Act are protected from seizure or forfeiture for 12 months from the date that the object enters the UK. That provides international lenders with reassurance they may consider vital, even though the risk of seizure and forfeiture in this country would be incredibly small.

The disruption caused by the pandemic, especially to international transport, has highlighted concern about unforeseen delays to the return of loaned objects to their country of origin. Under the current rules they would, in theory, be at risk of being unprotected should the 12-month limit expire before the borrowing institutions can arrange their return. I am sure many of us feel the pain of those cultural objects, having been denied family trips abroad, as I have been now for 27 months.

At present, the only way the 12-month period can be extended is when an object suffers damage and subsequent repair work is required. It is right to allow the relevant Minister the discretion to extend the standard protection period by up to three months, where necessary. That will provide the owners of those loaned objects a greater degree of confidence and certainty that their objects are protected, and thereby boost the UK's reputation as a cultural magnet.

I have listened with interest to hon. Members' references to museums in their areas around the country. We heard, for instance, about the terracotta warriors, which were on display four years ago in the National Museums in Liverpool, an important city for my constituents, being not far from north Wales. Such exhibitions provide vital income, as we have heard, for the centres. They also educate and inspire many of those who come to see them.

At a personal level, as a Welsh MP, I am disappointed that the Welsh Government have been unable to come to an agreement on the matter with DCMS, even though the Scottish Government have apparently done so. I worry that that will mean that, in future, international artefacts will be less likely to be displayed in Wales. However, the priority must be to progress the Bill to ensure that objects in the principal museums in the United Kingdom—in reality, in the major cities of England and Scotland—are protected.

The steps set out in the Bill are as important as they are reasonable. As the impact of the 2007 Act showed, the improvement of legislation on the seizure of cultural objects has a practical, real-world effect on our cultural venues and the exhibitions they can host. The Bill will help ensure that the UK continues to attract some of the most significant cultural pieces from across the world. For that and all the other reasons I have mentioned, I support the Bill and wish it success in its passage through the other place.

10.24 am

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and to speak about this straightforward and reasonable Bill, which has been designed in a specific and targeted way, and will only help to support a sector that, like so many others, has been affected during the pandemic.

Our museums and cultural institutions in the United Kingdom do an incredible job. They have the power to transcend barriers, to preserve and to educate. Our museums, galleries and cultural institutions teach us about the past—the good, the bad and the ugly. By learning about the past, we can be inspired for the future to do better or learn from past mistakes. They stimulate our brains and make us smarter.

[Marco Longhi]

My Dudley North constituents are lucky that we have many rich cultural institutions on our doorstep: the Black Country Living Museum, Dudley zoo and castle, the Wren's Nest site of special scientific interest, the Dudley canal tunnel trust, nature reserves, our microbreweries and pubs, and our bowling greens and parks. The list really does go on.

Suzanne Webb: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think I might have to intervene first. We are stretching it to mention pubs and zoos; the Bill is about museums. I know Members want to get it all on the record, but I would be more than happy if the hon. Lady intervened to say something that might get us back on track.

Suzanne Webb: I was not going to mention pubs, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Bill is about museums. It does not say that we can advertise things. I could say that Astley Hall in Chorley is beautiful and my constituency has good gin, but I would be totally out of order, because the Bill is nothing to do with pubs. I would not expect Members to follow that example.

Marco Longhi: The past year has undoubtedly had a huge impact on this sector in many ways, but with resilience and Government support such as the culture recovery fund and the zoo animals fund, our museums, zoos and entertainment venues will once again see us all flocking back to them.

Across the country, and indeed internationally, our museums and galleries loan artefacts and exhibitions to each other, which makes exploring culture far more accessible than it has ever been before, and I want to see more of that. I am not just the Member of Parliament for Dudley North—the heart of the Black Country and birthplace of the industrial revolution—but the trade envoy to Brazil. I would love to see more British exhibitions taking place in Brazil and vice versa. How cool would it be, ahead of the 200-year anniversary of Brazil's independence this September, to have even more access, in the UK—with nearly 200,000 Brazilians living here—to learn about Brazil's rich cultural history?

Under section 134 of the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007, cultural objects that are on loan to UK museums and galleries from abroad are protected from seizure and/or forfeiture for a period of 12 months from the date that the object enters the UK. The Bill will go further and offer yet more invaluable support in the cultural sector.

Our cultural sector has been hard hit by the pandemic in more ways than simply not being allowed visitors. Disruptions to international travel during the coronavirus pandemic created problems beyond limiting tourists. They meant that loaned objects due to be returned to their country of origin were unexpectedly delayed in the UK. Those objects, unable to travel out of the UK, were left at risk of being unprotected should the 12-month limit expire before the borrowing institutions could arrange their return. Yet it is not just a global pandemic that can create such issues. As we have heard, environmental factors such as smoke clouds from volcanic eruptions have also proven to be problems.

Although the risk of seizure and forfeiture is extremely small, several countries place great importance on having those protections. Providing greater certainty about protection, and the knowledge that it can be extended at the discretion of the relevant authorities, will increase the confidence of owners of loaned objects, and will provide a boost to the UK's exhibition sector.

We all deserve the security of protecting our institutions for generations to come. We have a hunger for cultural appreciation, and we should be doing whatever we can to ensure that it continues. On that note, Mr Speaker, I would love to invite you to a pub in my constituency—*[Laughter]*—to appreciate the cultural impacts that it has on my local area.

10.30 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) on inviting you to his local hostelry, Mr Speaker—but I also greatly, and gratefully, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride). He is the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, and today he has told us about his cultural skills. He is clearly a man who uses both sides of his brain.

The UK has some of the finest museums in the world, which play a significant role in educating and inspiring people of all ages. They are also critical to our £75 billion tourism industry, which supports 4 million jobs. In Leicester, we are proud to have the Richard III Museum. Another museum, in Charnwood, features a wide range of exhibits reflecting the history, geology, archaeology and industries of our area. Of course, our museums also have great relationships with other institutions around the world, allowing for the import and export of cultural objects for temporary exhibition to help broaden our understanding of different cultures, as well as other countries' understanding of ours. That, I think, is vitally important. We have talked about the Tutankhamun exhibition of the 1970s. The recent Treasures of the Golden Pharoah exhibition featured 150 authentic pieces from the tomb of King Tutankhamun, 60 of which travelled outside Egypt for the first time. Such exhibitions are also an important source of revenue for museums, and help to ensure that visitors come back.

We must do everything we can to support museums, especially given the impact that the pandemic has had on them. I welcomed the nearly £2 billion that the Government provided over the course of the pandemic to support our cultural sector, along with the original £1.57 billion that the cultural recovery fund announced in July 2020. I want to record my thanks for the funds that came to my constituency, including funding for Great Central Railway and the Loughborough Bellfoundry, the only working bell-foundry and bell-foundry museum in the country.

I am pleased that the Bill will support the sector by addressing another issue that has arisen from the pandemic, that of culturally significant objects being left at risk of seizure or forfeiture owing to the major unforeseen disruption to international travel. As has been pointed out, that also happened in 2010 as a result of the volcanic eruption. Although the risk of seizure or forfeiture is extremely small, we know that a number of countries ascribe great importance to having adequate protection

in place—and, I imagine, their insurance would be affected. By giving the Secretary of State power to extend the period of protection from seizure and forfeiture for a further period of up to three months, we will ensure that international owners retain confidence in the system and continue to lend to our great institutions.

May I ask the Minister to clarify two points? First, might one reason for that extension be the popularity of a touring exhibition and the need for it to spend more time in the United Kingdom? Secondly, is the agreement of both parties necessary for the extension to be validated?

10.33 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I congratulate, in particular, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride). In a sense the Bill is very technical, simply extending a law that is already in force, but it is seems significant at a time when our country is going through a period of great change.

Earlier, Mr Speaker objected to a reference to global Britain, suggesting that that was some sort of party political point. I do not think it is. Surely, even Opposition Members believe in the UK playing a successful role in the world, and I think it matters enormously that we are doing this; it is an important signal of our commitment to global exchange.

I hope that it is not just because he is the Chair of the Treasury Committee that my right hon. Friend is promoting the Bill. There have been lots of references to the boost to GDP from our role as a place of cultural exchange; my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) also made the pounds, shillings and pence argument, rather depressingly. It is a fair point—£75 billion is not to be sneezed at—but surely, the real value of what we are proposing and, I hope, voting through today is the value of cultural exchange. It is a great thing. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who is also on the Treasury Committee, made the point that at a time of tension with Russia and China, increasing the opportunities for exchange of cultural objects with those countries matters enormously.

While I enthuse about the role of the UK, and particularly of the London museums, as a meeting place for the world's artefacts, surely the real value of the United Kingdom in the cultural sphere lies in our local museums. I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) about the importance of regional museums. My hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) and for East Surrey made the same point about their local museums. Those were good efforts, but surely the Wiltshire Museum is the one to mention. We have in Devizes the museum that houses the oldest artefacts in the United Kingdom. We talk about the terracotta soldiers and Tutankhamun's tomb and the Elgin marbles, but those are flashily new objects—box fresh—by comparison with the Neolithic artefacts that were dug out of the long barrow at East Kennett and, of course, our great stone circles at Stonehenge and Avebury, which are 5,000 years old.

I welcome the renewed focus on the United Kingdom as a place of cultural exchange, and I hope to welcome the terracotta army to Devizes at some point.

10.36 am

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I will be brief; we have had an extensive debate this morning, ranging from Tutankhamun and Richard III to pubs and zoos, so I do not intend to detain the House much longer.

On Second Reading, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) set out our support for the Bill. We think it is a sensible and proportionate measure that will provide useful safeguards for the ability of our cultural institutions—the British Museum and galleries, museums and libraries up and down the country—to stage the kinds of exhibitions that add so much to our cultural and tourism offer. We reaffirmed our support in Committee, and the Opposition support the measures before us today. It therefore remains only for me to congratulate the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) on bringing the Bill to this stage and to wish him success as it moves forward.

10.37 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): Many thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) for introducing the Bill and for speaking so eloquently about it today. Indeed, I thank all those who have contributed to today's debate.

The Bill will provide an important improvement to an already worthy tool, which is used by many of our fantastic cultural institutions across England and Scotland. The useful recap that my right hon. Friend provided, setting out the history of how immunity from seizure legislation was first arrived at in the UK, was very important. It emphasised the confidence that such measures have built, and the willingness and trust that our international partners now have when they lend their objects for temporary exhibitions in our approved museums and galleries.

Many international lenders require immunity from seizure protection when they loan cultural objects to other countries as a matter of course, and it is often an uncompromisable condition of their loan that the object is protected in that way during its stay. If that condition were not met, we would risk not having those very objects that we want to come here. The protection provides a legal assurance that a lender's objects will be protected from court-ordered seizure for a limited period while in the UK. Many countries have their own similar version of immunity from seizure, for the same reasons, enabling us to lend abroad.

The process that sits behind immunity from seizure protection is necessarily robust. To use the protection, museums and galleries must go through a rigorous application process to attain approved status. That involves demonstrating that they are an ethical organisation, that they follow proper due diligence processes for examining the history of loans in, and that they will not borrow items if there is any suspicion that they were stolen, looted or illegally obtained. For the protection to apply to objects they are borrowing, approved institutions must also publish detailed information about such objects at least four weeks before the objects enter the UK. That diligent work is all part of the high standard of professional practice that our museums carry out as part of their loan procedures. It is fantastic that 38 museums

[Nigel Huddleston]

and counting have achieved immunity from seizure approved status. That is a testament to their excellent track records and their continued commitment to upholding the highest standards of due diligence.

Many Members highlighted the very important fact that this is not a London issue. Many museums that provide the service are outside London, including Manchester Art Gallery, the National Museums of Scotland, Wolverhampton's museums and museums in Liverpool, Norfolk and elsewhere around the country. Therefore, the important points made by my hon. Friends the Members for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson), for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and others about this not being a London issue are very well taken and noted. My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) highlighted that fact by giving specific examples of where the protection has already meant we have had loans from incredible institutions around the world, with many more coming this year.

Many Members also mentioned, rather interestingly, the issue with the Icelandic volcano. I did note, however—maybe you can help, Mr Deputy Speaker—that none of us were actually brave enough to name the volcano.

Chris Clarkson: May I just check? Is the Minister referring to Eyjafjallajökull?

Nigel Huddleston: There's always somebody, isn't there, Mr Deputy Speaker? *[Laughter.]* I was just about to say that, but there is no point anymore.

Several Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) and for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) and others, mentioned their memories, decades later, of visiting the Tutankhamun exhibition or even just watching the news coverage of some incredible exhibitions. That shows the importance and embeddedness of these events and the impact they can have on us, in particular when very young.

The 12-month limit of protection was an issue raised specifically by approved museums and galleries during the more restricted periods we all faced during the pandemic. What would happen to loans approaching 12 months if coronavirus measures and global travel delays meant the borrower could not return them in time, despite all their efforts to comply with regulations and to satisfy the owner's conditions of the loan? The issue is most relevant to our approved museums and galleries in England and Scotland, as the current users of immunity from seizure protection. As the world begins to feel a little more certain again, I am sure that the recent experiences have taught us to expect the unexpected. As we continue to support the sector's recovery, it is important that we consider measures such as this. An option to extend the length of time that objects can be covered by immunity from seizure is a sensible contingency to have, especially in uncertain times.

The proposal for such extensions to be considered on a case-by-case basis where needs arise is welcomed, as it will allow for some flexibility. Assessing scenarios in that way will also help to ensure that the extensions are used only where absolutely necessary, and that in the majority of cases objects on loan to approved museums in England or Scotland are returned in a timely manner and within the standard 12 months.

Several Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), raised questions about guidance and when that would be implemented. Policy guidance for museums on how they should apply for extensions and in what circumstances is in development at an official level and will be a collaborative effort with officials in the Scottish Government to ensure they provide succinct practical steps for approved museums to follow in the event that they cannot return objects in time. It will set out broad examples of acceptable circumstances where an extension protection may be justified, for example where long-term national or international travel disruption is expected to last beyond the expiration of the 12-month loan period.

As I have said, it is regrettable that the Bill will not have effect in Northern Ireland and Wales. There are currently no museums in Wales and Northern Ireland approved under the 2007 Act, but the Bill does not change their ability to apply for approved status in the future, and of course any objects loaned by approved museums in Northern Ireland and Wales will be covered by the standard 12-month period available to all approved museums.

The Government are content that the drafting of the Bill offers the best protection to cultural objects. I am pleased, therefore, to confirm once again that the Government welcome and support this private Member's Bill, and I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon for introducing it.

10.44 am

Mel Stride: With the leave of the House, I would like to express my gratitude to various individuals who have assisted me in bringing in this Bill. First, I thank the officials at DCMS for their advice and, in particular, Mark Caldon. I thank the Clerks who assisted me with process and particularly Adam Mellows-Facer, who is no longer at the Table so I am sparing his blushes. I thank the Members who helped to take the Bill through the Bill Committee. I thank the Minister and the Opposition, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Jeff Smith), for his very generous words a moment ago. I thank all those who spoke on Third Reading and crammed in so many other Government policies; this is a narrow Bill, but it seems to me that it promises a very great deal beyond its intention. I also thank in advance Lord Vaizey, who will sponsor the Bill, and all those who work in our museums and galleries and who enrich the lives of so many of us.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Congratulations, Mel.

Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) Bill

Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee, considered

Third Reading

Queen's consent signified.

10.46 am

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) for giving the Queen's consent. I thank all those who have supported the Bill, particularly those were selected for and attended the Bill Committee without whom it could not have progressed. I was thinking that to speed things up, I could just say, "This Bill is going to save the average motorist 50 quid a year and is one in the eye for the European Court of Justice", but we probably need to do a bit more than that. The expressions of Opposition Members tell me that I better press on.

My Bill, which received Second Reading on 29 October last year and passed Committee stage on 5 January this year, deals with an issue that was considered in detail during a Westminster Hall debate entitled "Motor Insurance: Court Judgments" on 22 September 2021. That debate was led expertly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who cannot be here today, but I thank her for all her continued support for the Bill.

As an aside, when we have presentation Bills, it is a very good idea, if there is not time in this Chamber for us to debate Second Reading for as long as we would like, to obtain a Westminster Hall debate so that we can get the issue discussed at length before coming to this Chamber. That is a very good example of what happened.

The Bill's purpose is to remove the requirement for compulsory motor insurance for vehicles used exclusively on private land and for a wide range of vehicles not constructed for road use. People might say, "You don't have to have motor insurance for vehicles used on private land or for vehicles that are not a motor vehicle." They would be right that that is the interpretation of the Road Traffic Act 1998 that has stood since its inception. That interpretation was held to be correct by the Government, motor insurance and motorists alike, but then along came the ECJ and the Vnuk case.

In 2014, the ECJ made a decision that confounded the European Union and the British Government. The case of Vnuk extended the requirement for compulsory third-party motor insurance far beyond the scope of the Road Traffic Act. If the ruling is allowed to be enforced in our courts, it will put ordinary people in breach of the law for not having motor insurance for their vehicles used exclusively on private land. To give just a few examples, motor insurance will become compulsory for a golf cart that never leaves the golf course, a ride-on lawnmower that someone uses in their back garden and a tractor-trailer that is never designed to leave the farm. It would also extend compulsory motor insurance to machines that were never intended to be used on any road.

The Road Traffic Act 1988 requires that motor vehicles intended for use on roads and other public land must be insured. It does not require compulsory insurance for vehicles on private land, nor does it require compulsory insurance for vehicles not intended to be used on roads. The whole purpose of this Bill is to return the law of this land to that envisaged in the 1988 Act.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting so far with his Bill. I chair the all-party parliamentary historic vehicles group and meet many motorists and motoring organisations, including those connected with motorsport, and I have yet to hear a single objection to the measure he proposes. Is he aware how much widespread support he has?

Mr Bone: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has been a staunch supporter of this Bill. To his point, there has been no objection; in fact, there has been tremendous support. I am afraid that in the whole process, the only person who has bowled a bouncer is him—but I will come to that later.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Can the hon. Gentleman clarify what would happen? We know that many accidents take place on farmland. Does public liability insurance apply? Could he confirm what would happen to somebody who was the victim of an awful accident on that farmland, for example?

Mr Bone: The hon. Lady goes to the crux of the matter. That question was brought up in Committee by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), and I will discuss it in some detail later on; if I may, I will deal with it when I get to it.

This Bill will restore the interpretation to British statute that this sovereign Parliament always intended. Most importantly, it will end any associated liability for insurance claims against the Motor Insurers' Bureau for the cost of accidents on private land when motor insurance was not held. Importantly, the Bill does not seek to invent new policy, nor, to the point the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) raised, would it limit the Government or Parliament in changing insurance regulations for motor vehicles in the future, if that is what Parliament decides to do.

How did we get into this mess? Under the European Union withdrawal agreement, the Vnuk decision has become retained EU case law. In other words, it is the law of the land unless we change it. We cannot just ignore it, because it is an EU Court decision and has now become the law of the land. Therefore, it is essential that we act to prevent this European Court of Justice decision from punishing motorists through higher premiums. At a time when the cost of living is at the forefront of all our minds, this is an opportunity to save ordinary people from an unnecessary burden.

I will explain further: if the status quo is allowed to continue, to account for its liability for accidents on private land, the Motor Insurers' Bureau will have to increase its charging levy. That levy is paid by the motor insurers, which in turn will pass on the cost to the motorist.

That is all well and good, but how much will the extra cost be reflected in the average motorist's insurance premium? The Government actuaries have got out their bean counters, pressed a few buttons on the computer and estimated the cost. By removing the Vnuk judgment, the average motorist will be saved from a £50 price hike

[Mr Bone]

to their insurance premiums. Let me say that again: the Government experts say the Bill will save the average motorist £50 each and every year.

Clearly, there are huge benefits to motorists, so it is no surprise that the Bill enjoys support from both sides of the House. I thank hon. Members on the Opposition Benches for supporting something that will benefit all motorists. On Fridays, as we know, it is good when both sides of the House work together to achieve something that helps our constituents.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend mentions that motorists might benefit from reduced insurance by getting rid of the clause. Will those of us who have just renewed our car insurance, including me, get some sort of discount as a result?

Mr Bone: Nice try! It is important that the motor insurance industry knows that the Bill is making progress, so it has not put the £50 on. If we do not do it, that will happen. It is not that people will see their motor insurance go down by £50 per year, but that they will not see it go up by £50 a year. My hon. Friend can go ahead and renew his motor insurance.

I believe that I am correct in saying that, if passed, the Bill will be the first Act of Parliament to remove retained EU law. It will certainly be the first to remove retained EU case law, so it will be a landmark step in taking back control of our own laws. It is just one of the clear advantages of leaving the European Union that we can now alter our laws to ensure that they are interpreted the way that this sovereign Parliament intends.

The Bill will be the first of many post-Brexit dividends to be established in primary legislation. We will deliver the independence that the British people voted for and put pounds back into their pockets. In fact, it would not be a bad idea for the Government to have a Brexit Minister whose sole responsibility it was to root out such savings across the whole of Whitehall—and for that person to be a Brexiteer who had consistently supported that point of view, maybe even a Spartan, and clearly not someone who is a member of the current Government. Does that give the Minister any clues?

The Vnuk judgment has also led the European Union to revise its European directive, because it was as surprised by the decision as we were, although, as with many decisions taken at EU level, the interest of the ordinary motorist has been sacrificed in the name of greater harmonisation between states. The revisions it has made will fail to protect motorists in the EU from the associated costs of the compulsory insurance requirement on private land. Because of Brexit, this Parliament has the opportunity to do better, and that is just what we are doing with the Bill.

I will briefly mention the case of Colley *v* Shuker, which is being considered by the Court of Appeal next week, as I know the implications of the Bill have been questioned in relation to it. It is clear, however, that the case bears no connection to the Bill that we are considering today, as it involves an accident where an insurance policy was in place. The effect of the Bill is only to restore the statute book to the position that everyone understood it to be before the Vnuk decision.

I mentioned earlier my gratitude to Committee members and I am thankful for their excellent contributions. In Committee, the right hon. Member for Warley raised an important point, which the hon. Member for Cardiff North made today, that the obligation that we have discussed arises in cases where there has been an accident and possibly an injury. It is certainly true that protecting genuine victims and general safety is of the utmost importance when considering insurance requirements but, in most cases, for accidents involving motor vehicles on private land, a different type of insurance policy will already be in place. In many cases, there is even an existing compulsory insurance requirement, such as public liability insurance, employers liability insurance or events insurance.

As previously stated, the Bill does not seek to create new law or to tie the hands of Parliament in making changes to the requirements for motor insurance in the future. What it does is restore the interpretations of the Road Traffic Act 1988, which stood for almost 30 years. In that time, copious case law in British courts shaped the interpretation of that Act and established through precedent recourse to the Motor Insurers' Bureau in certain circumstances. To give the House an example, although my local Waitrose car park might technically be on private land, were I to have an accident with an uninsured driver, the Motor Insurers' Bureau would have liability, as established through existing case law. It is impossible to anticipate every possible accident scenario, although the Road Traffic Act has historically proved very adaptable. If, out of the blue, an incident highlighted a deficiency in protection for injured parties, I have every confidence this Parliament would act to rectify that.

I would also like to address the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who bowled the Minister quite the bouncer during the Committee. I must add my thanks to the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for stepping in at the very last minute to deal with the Bill in Committee, as the responsible Minister was unfortunately ill on that day.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire raised a concern about how electric scooters will fall under the Road Traffic Act. It is my understanding that electric scooters would be classified as motor vehicles under the Road Traffic Act and would therefore require compulsory insurance. However, electric scooters are not allowed to be used on the roads, so Parliament will have to clarify that situation. That is not relevant to this Bill, because all we are doing is restoring the law to what it was before the Vnuk judgment.

Sir Greg Knight: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Bone: I feel another bouncer coming.

Sir Greg Knight: I am trying to be helpful, actually. Although it is, as my hon. Friend says, not a debate for today, does he agree that there is a good case that if electric scooters are allowed on the public highway, they should be insured?

Mr Bone: I think the law as it stands requires them to be compulsorily insured, even though they are not allowed on the road. That is a dilemma for the Government to sort out, but it is not, happily, for this debate.

I will move on to a second similar thing. I understand that there is a bespoke arrangement in place for electric bikes, whereby insurance is not compulsory. Although these bikes are used on public roads, they do not have to be compulsorily insured. It is also true that given how expensive the equipment is, many electric bike owners still opt to take out an insurance policy. It may be possible to look at expanding the arrangement to electric scooters, but again that will be a matter for Parliament to consider, and it is not relevant to what the Bill does. My right hon. Friend has brought it up, and it needs to be looked at by the Government.

Finally, clause 2(2) sets out the jurisdictions of the Bill. The provisions in the Bill extend and apply to England, Wales and Scotland only. The exclusion of Northern Ireland is consistent with the convention that Westminster will not normally legislate for matters that are within the legislative competency of any of the devolved Administrations. The Bill therefore does not legislate for Northern Ireland, as the matters to which the provisions of the Bill relate are within the legislative competency of the Northern Ireland Assembly. I understand, however, that the Northern Ireland Assembly is closely following the passage of this Bill, which will set an example that it might want to follow.

I am thrilled that leaving the European Union has given us this opportunity to deliver a clear Brexit dividend and to finally take back control of our laws. I hope this Bill will be the first of many over the course of this Government to deliver on our key post-Brexit objective.

11.4 am

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I rise to support the Bill from my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I thank him for such a detailed speech that made me fully understand exactly the content of the Bill.

I was reading up on this, and the ECJ ruling and the subsequent rulings that upheld the Vnuk ruling are simply impractical. The ECJ's ruling was based on the Vnuk case of 2007, whereby the eponymous farm worker from Slovenia was injured because of being knocked off a ladder by a trailer that was attached to a reversing tractor. The incident occurred on private property, and compulsory motor insurance was already purchased to comply with Slovenian law. Mr Vnuk's claim for damages against the insurance company that provided the tractor's compulsory motor insurance policy was initially rejected by the Slovenian courts. However, the European Court of Justice, in its infinite wisdom, overturned the decision of the Slovenian courts, and ruled in favour of Mr Vnuk—quite unbelievable. Now that we are out of the European Union, as my hon. Friend mentioned many times in his speech, we can pass this important Bill, so that we will have a common-sense approach to motor insurance claims—indeed, a common-sense approach to much of everything, now that we have left the European Union.

The Vnuk case led to the extension of the 2009 EU motor insurance directive on compulsory motor insurance for vehicles used on private land. In addition, the definition of a motor vehicle, as defined in the Road Traffic Act 1988, was widened to include vehicles that were not adapted for use on the roads. Were it not for the introduction of the Bill, motor vehicles would now include agricultural machinery such as tractors, motorsports vehicles, and light electric vehicles, all of which are not commonly used on public roads. The European Court of Justice's broad interpretation of the 2009 EU directive has led to excessive liabilities, and the implementation of the Vnuk decision would have had a hugely detrimental impact on insurance providers and motorists, as my hon. Friend clearly said.

The Government Actuary's Department has analysed the financial impact of the Vnuk ruling, and the figures do not make good reading for insurance providers and motorists. Based on an increased frequency of claims due to an increased number of both legitimate and fraudulent claims relating to incidents on private land, the insurance industry would have faced costs in the region of £2 billion. Those costs would have been passed on to motorists who were facing an approximate additional cost of more than £1.2 billion. That would have translated into a £50 increase in insurance premiums for the average car user. At a time when motorists are feeling the pinch with rising prices at the pumps, the removal of the European Court of Justice ruling on the Vnuk case from British law by the Bill will be welcomed by my constituents. More than 64% of voters in Stourbridge voted leave, and this Bill will be welcomed by them as a prime example of the UK, and this Government, taking back control of our laws.

The 2014 ruling by the European Court of Justice undermined the Road Traffic Act passed by the House in 1988, whereby compulsory motor insurance was limited to accidents on roads and public places. Some 94% of respondents to the Department of Transport's consultation, which sought the views on the ECJ's position from insurance providers and policy holders, opposed the ruling and supported the original Act passed by this House. Now that the UK has left the European Union and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, we are free to make our own laws in the interests of the British people. This Bill takes advantage of our freedom from the European Court of Justice to remove an impractical ECJ ruling from UK law and deliver lower insurance premiums for motorists. I am therefore delighted to support the Bill, and I know my sentiment will be shared by many people in my constituency.

11.8 am

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on this excellent Bill. I have been in my place for only a couple of years, but in this House it sometimes feels as if the job of Parliament is to add to legislation, and it is also really important that we look at deregulation. When we see regulation that is costly and has no support from industry or consumers, and that does not work practically, it is very much the business of this House to root it out.

We have talked a bit about the Vnuk ruling and how it will apply to the EU 2009 motor insurance directive, which would extend compulsory insurance to vehicles on private land and possibly to vehicles not constructed for road use. My hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wellingborough mentioned golf buggies, tractors and ride-on mowers, but there is also a real possibility that it might affect mobility scooters.

[Claire Coutinho]

I support the Bill because not only would that regulation add huge costs to motor insurance, but it is not wanted in this country and, practically, it does not work. We have heard about some of the costs; I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge that, at this time, adding a motor insurance hike of £2 billion—an average £50 rise for 25 million people—is not something we want to pursue. Although we may have different views across the House, and indeed across our party, on how to address the cost of living issue, we can all agree that it is a real issue this year and we do not want to add to that through unnecessary regulation.

The Department for Transport did run a consultation in 2016-17. There were 902 respondents, 94% of whom rejected the policy. That consultation was not just industry-based but included members of the public. When regulation is not wanted by industry or the consumer, we have to wonder why we feel we can impose that on the British people.

On whether the regulation would work, RSA's consultation response shows that there is no guarantee that private insurance markets would provide competitive policies. It is a very bad idea for Government to intervene on insurance markets and force them to put forward products that they would not necessarily do themselves. There is no guarantee that the products work and that they would be at a decent cost to consumers. Looking at some of the vehicles that the regulation might extend to shows that there is no clear practical way of enforcing the legislation. The sheer volume of claims that might end up coming forward could overwhelm the insurance industry, which would not work for anyone at all.

Finally, to echo the point made by other hon. Members who have spoken, let us look at why we are in this place. The EU has not yet put forward the legislation, but because the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 took a snapshot of EU law on 31 December 2020, we are still having to use some EU law unless we decide to overturn it. The EU courts must have regard to the existing decisions and general principles set out by the European court before 2020. That is a really good example of the real-world effects of a relentless, bureaucratic engine and a one-size-fits-all policy approach on our consumers here, when it is not wanted.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Wellingborough on one of my favourite pieces of legislation, which I am happy to support.

11.13 am

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho). I nearly said right hon. Friend—it is only a matter of time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on an excellent piece of legislation.

Brexit was an historic moment for our country, which brought with it the opportunity to free our businesses from overbearing bureaucracy and reduce costs for consumers in order to boost innovation and growth across the economy.

Anna McMorrin: I just could not let that go, sorry. Notwithstanding this Bill, which does look to streamline certain issues, there are many Brexit-related issues up and down the country, in our businesses and at our borders. I do not think the hon. Member can justify the comments she just made.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): The good news is, this is not a debate about Brexit. I do not mind passing references to it, but let us not turn the debate into something that it is not.

Jane Hunt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

This Bill is another step in the right direction as, by ending the effect of the Vnuk decision, we will remove needless and excessive liabilities that place an unnecessary administrative and financial burden on the Motor Insurers' Bureau, businesses and policy holders. Indeed, I note that the Government Actuary's Department has estimated that Vnuk would lead to an estimated £50 annual increase in insurance premiums for motorists and £2 billion in extra overall costs for the insurance industry. This would be a terrible outcome, given the current issues over the cost of living. I also agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) that, given that £50 is only the average, younger drivers will bear the brunt of the increase as they constitute a higher risk.

We also know that Vnuk would impact significantly on businesses, in particular those in the motor sport industry. Ahead of the debate, I was contacted by one of my constituents, Mr John Kirkpatrick, who is a director of the Motorsport Industry Association. He has informed me that the association has been lobbying the European Commission against the adoption of the Vnuk proposal because, as the UK Government have acknowledged, it could lead to an additional annual cost of £458 million for the UK's motorsports industry. I am told that the industry has a turnover of £10 billion annually and is of huge importance to the midlands, being the centre of motorsport valley and employing 40,000 people. It is also recognised globally as the centre of excellence and the go-to community of knowledge and innovation. So this Bill would go a long way to supporting the midlands economy and helping to level up the country.

Of course, since the ruling the EU has also taken steps to address its impact. This leaves the UK in the perverse situation that it is stuck with a snapshot of EU law at the end of the transition period, all while the EU itself is enacting reforms to address what it has described as absurd over-regulation. Well, amen to that, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Taking all this into account, I will be supporting the Bill today, and I hope that the Government continue to work to remove all unnecessary red tape inherited from our membership of the EU so that we put the success of our businesses and the finances of consumers first.

11.17 am

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): By way of a passing reference to Brexit, I would like to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) that my thinking is very much aligned with his on all matters Brexit, so he should feel a degree of confidence in what I am about to say.

The people in my constituency overwhelmingly voted to leave the European Union—I believe in the region of 72%. The general election in December 2019 proved yet

again at the fourth time of asking that the United Kingdom wanted to leave. So would you not agree, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is right that we should continue to end needless retained EU laws? I am pleased to support the Bill and that the Government also support it.

I echo Mark Shepherd from the Association of British Insurers, who said:

"There would have been no easy way to monitor compliance and enforcement for those using their vehicles on private land. It would also have been difficult to establish the circumstances of any claim, so increased the scope for fraud, that ultimately ends up being paid for by motorists through their insurance premiums."

That is something that any one of us is very familiar with if we own a car.

Following Vnuk and the subsequent case of Lewis *v.* Tindale, the UK motor insurance industry has found itself financially liable, via the MIB levy, for accidents involving uninsured vehicles in circumstances where compulsory insurance is not required. This arises from the decision in Vnuk and Lewis and the imposition of EU law requirements that were retained post Brexit by the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. The Bill will remove the lingering effect of EU law in this area and restate the position under the 1988 Act whereby motor insurance is required only for the use of motor vehicles on a road or other public place. I should perhaps declare a minor interest here: I own one vehicle that is currently off the road.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): SORN.

Marco Longhi: SORN—that is the word.

At a time when everyone is facing increasing household bills, fuel costs and cost of living, we should make it our priority to get rid of any unnecessary financial burdens. The Bill will reduce the cost of insurance for motorists across the UK. As has been said a couple of times already, implementing Vnuk across the UK would have cost something in the region of £2 billion, covering all existing motor cars, motorbikes, business vehicles, motorsports and other businesses.

Sir Greg Knight: I am a car owner too—I think most of us are—but is it not also important that without the Bill, the future of British motorsport could be seriously at risk?

Marco Longhi: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention and I completely agree with his observation.

It has been calculated that insurance policyholders could face an estimated cost of over £1 billion if Vnuk were implemented, expressed as a potential increase in individual insurance premiums of circa £50 for 25 million consumers. An extra £50 a month is a lot of money for many families; it could mean choosing between eating or heating their homes. Our constituents should keep that £50 in their own pockets, and not cover the costs of some idiots who may cause accidents and fail to insure their vehicles while they are at it. To me, the Bill smacks of pure common sense.

11.21 am

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): It is a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on his work on the Bill over a considerable number of weeks, and I am pleased to speak in support of its Third Reading.

The Government's intention to support the objectives of the Bill is clear. Following an incident in 2007, a European Court of Justice ruling in 2014 directed the extension of the provisions requiring motor insurance for those using public roads to a wider range of vehicles on private land, as we have heard. That includes in gardens, on golf courses, at motorsport events and even in museums, and therefore potentially includes lawnmowers, quad bikes, golf buggies, mobility scooters and other light electric vehicles, motorsports vehicles, and agricultural and construction machinery.

In practice, of course, this would be largely unenforceable, and it would quite possibly be an unwelcome duty on the police. The House of Commons Library notes that the EU itself has now reached an agreement

"to reverse some of the impact"

of the decision, so I am glad that Ministers are supportive of efforts to truly tackle the relevant piece of inherited EU law here in Great Britain through this Bill.

For most, of course, the primary benefit of the Bill is that it will overcome a punishing rise in insurance premiums. The average motor insurance premium in the UK is already £436 per year, rising to over £1,000 for higher-risk groups. In the three months to December 2021, there was a further 5% increase in premiums, and as life returns to normal and—we hope—our road miles increase again, that may well increase further. Doing what we can to stop additional price hikes should therefore be a priority, and the Bill will help to achieve that.

The Government Actuary's Department has calculated that implementing the ECJ's ruling would increase motor insurance bills by up to £50 for each of the 25 million motorists in the UK as a result of their subsidising off-road insurance claims. The total cost would amount to £1.2 billion or, on some estimates, up to £2 billion. As we have heard, a Department for Transport consultation on the matter in 2016 found that 94% were against making the changes to compulsory motor insurance that would otherwise arise. Of course, in many cases insurance is already in place to cover accidents, including employers liability insurance and public liability insurance, as the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) pointed out.

At a time when petrol and diesel costs have been rising, a further increase in the cost of running a car would be most unwelcome. That is particularly significant for many people in my north Wales constituency, for whom car ownership is often vital. Local public transport provision is limited in many ways. As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee North Wales, I am working with hon. and right hon. Members and local government representatives and officials to secure improvements in that.

Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review has recognised the significance of upgraded rail connectivity. Even so, the improvement to public transport connections is a slow process. Sir Peter also recognised the need to upgrade road infrastructure, including the A55. The transition to electric vehicles means that cars are here to stay, and my constituents need them to be affordable.

The Bill's explanatory notes acknowledge that its provisions could lead to a loss of tax revenue from insurance premium tax. By pledging their support for the Bill, Ministers are clear that they have the interests of motorists at the forefront of their considerations.

Jane Hunt: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to those tax savings, a number of very large businesses—farms, for example—have numerous vehicles that never go on the public highway, and this would have a greater impact on them?

Dr Davies: Indeed. It is true that those with multiple vehicles stand to be punished even more if the Bill does not pass—my hon. Friend is quite right.

My constituent Andrew Wilde wrote to me earlier this week. His whole family are motorsport enthusiasts—in fact, he is a member of the North Wales Autograss Club—and he believes that the Bill will support the whole industry. He worries that without this Bill, the UK motorsport sector will see insurance costs increase by over £450 million.

Andrew goes on to say:

"I believe motorsport brings a lot to this country - more than simply Lewis Hamilton winning the FI Title. That can be seen when you drive down the M40 & see the high quality companies based in our country. It provides good quality jobs & just as important, hundreds of thousands of the population with enjoyment, either participating or watching."

I very much share my constituent's positivity, and I am pleased to support the Bill.

11.27 am

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on bringing forward this legislation. It is the first to get rid of some inherited EU law, as he said, for many of the reasons that have been highlighted by other Members.

Clearly, anything that reduces costs for motorists is welcome. As many Members have done, I declare an interest as a motorist who pays car insurance, which costs a lot of money. Anything that brings that cost down is very welcome, particularly during a cost of living crisis, and this measure that will help with that.

As my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd and for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) mentioned, the retained law is incredibly impractical in the details. Just how would it work? How would responsibility be assigned? How would pay-outs be made? None of that has been properly sorted out. Practical measures are very important in a farming constituency such as South Cambridgeshire, where there are an awful lot of off-road vehicles—I live in a small farmhouse, and we can drive for quite a long way without going on to a public road.

Just as important is the unpopularity of the retained law not just in the industry, but among the public. Various Members have mentioned the consultation that the Government held, in which 94% of respondents said that they did not want that legislation. It is expensive, impractical and unpopular, yet we still have it in the UK.

My constituency is quite different from many of those that other hon. Members have mentioned because it overwhelmingly—63%— voted remain. I think, however, that even my constituents would have trouble understanding why the European Court of Justice, rather than this Parliament, should be able to decide the policy and laws on insuring golf buggies.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the first positive signs of our new freedom post-Brexit is that we can start to reverse some of the impractical judgments that were made without the UK specifically in mind, which started, for example, with the Factortame case?

Anthony Browne: I completely agree. I declare another interest. I used to be Europe editor of *The Times* and I lived in Brussels for many years. I used to drive around across borders. If you drive for a couple of hours from Brussels you get into Luxembourg. Another half an hour and you are in Germany. Within 10 minutes, you can drive between France, Germany and Luxembourg: you are crossing borders the whole time. From that point of view, one can understand why one would want some co-ordination between insurance policies and so on. In the UK, we are an island. That is a very different position and different motoring rules apply. Often, the EU would have motoring rules, for example regulations on child seats in cars, that might have made sense if one lived in Luxembourg and drove into Germany and France every day and would not want to have the different regulation of child seats. In the UK, however, there is no particular reason why we should have the same regulation for child seats in cars as there is in, say, Poland.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): We drive on the left.

Anthony Browne: We do. Clearly, people do drive from what is now the EU to the UK, but the volume of traffic is very low.

I want to raise a point about why we ended up with this European Court of Justice ruling. As a Europe editor of *The Times*, I wrote various think-tank reports about EU regulations and structure. I advised the Government and was involved with European law making for about 20 years. In the Lisbon treaty, there is the principle of subsidiarity. We do not talk about it much in this place. When Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, she talked about it and everyone scratched their heads saying, "What is subsidiarity?" The basic principle is that one should make laws at a European level only where necessary, for example on cross-border issues such as pollution or trade. I cannot see any argument for why the insurance of golf buggies needs a pan-European law.

Sir Greg Knight: I join my hon. Friend in declaring an interest as the insurer of several vehicles. Is it not the other side-effects of Vnuk that are so offensive and why we are right to support the Bill? Without the Bill, would it not mean that, for example, ride-on lawn mowers would need to have insurance?

Anthony Browne: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That ECJ judgment has incredibly wide-ranging implications across many different sectors. I picked on golf buggies, but it affects lawnmowers, agricultural vehicles and electric scooters, as we heard. It is incredibly wide-ranging. It is baffling and extraordinary how a Slovenian farmer, Mr Vnuk, getting knocked off his ladder—poor guy; I hope he was not too badly injured and I hope he got compensation—can lead to a series of different judgments, amendments and so on that cost the British motor insurance industry £458 million or a

£50 increase in premiums for British drivers, a total of £1 billion a year. It is difficult to explain to voters, even in remain constituencies like mine, what the justification is for that.

Before my right hon. Friend's intervention, I mentioned subsidiarity as a principle enshrined in an EU treaty. There are various mechanisms in the EU to try to ensure subsidiarity. Parliamentary committees of national Parliaments are meant to have votes and give red flag warnings when EU legislation contravenes it. However, this was not EU legislation. It was a judgment from the European Court of Justice and, as case law has the effect of legislation, it was enshrined in UK law after we left the EU. That raises the question of the European Court of Justice.

I reported on the European Court of Justice. I have visited its buildings many times. I will give one little anecdote about a story I once tried to do. The British Government were appointing a judge to the ECJ. I thought that that was quite an important story. The British Government were involved and the ECJ had, when we were in the EU, a constitutional role in the UK. It could make laws that overrode the national Parliament and the national Government, and could change the lives of British citizens. The Vnuk ruling is a clear example of that. At the same time that I was suggesting to the editor of *The Times* that I write a story about the British Government's appointing a judge to the European Court of Justice, there was some controversy over a judge on the United States Supreme Court, as hon. Members may recall—one of them had a nanny they should not have employed, or something. I said, "This is a far more important story. The British Government are involved. This court changes the lives of British citizens. It can overrule the British Government and the British Parliament."

I wrote my story, and the next day the Supreme Court wrangling was front page of *The Times*, the main story, and my story about our appointing a judge to the European Court of Justice was a "News in Brief", a tiny little thing. This is not a pro-remain or pro-Brexit argument, but even when we were members of the EU we had virtually no knowledge or understanding of the workings of the European Court of Justice or its important or significance.

When we were members of the EU, I used to play a little parlour game: "We have the right to appoint a British judge to the European Court of Justice. What is the name of our judge on the European Court of Justice?" I used to ask MPs and so on, and no one had any idea. I searched for his name in newspaper articles and this particular judge was never mentioned—I cannot actually remember his name now. I will save their blushes, but I asked the serving Europe Minister at the time, "What is the name of our judge on the European Court of Justice?" and he had no idea. I thought, "We really do have a problem as a country. We have no understanding or appreciation of the importance of the court, the way it works or the influence it has over our daily lives in this country."

The Vnuk judgment is not only a clear example of the role of that court, overriding the objections of the British Government and of Parliament, but a clear breach of the principle of subsidiarity, which is enshrined in EU treaty law. There will probably be other examples of retained EU legislation; my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough suggested that there will be a whole series of such bits of legislation that we think are inappropriate for the UK. He suggested a new Government position: a Brexit Minister, someone who has had an interest in this issue for the whole time and is not currently serving as a member of the Government. I wonder who he could be thinking about?

Without repeating that suggestion, let me make another one. I keep coming across different bits of legislation in this place that we can only enact as a result of our having left the EU. This Bill is one example, but there are many others. It would be useful for the Government to compile a list across all the different Departments of all the little things we are doing as a result of leaving the EU, as well as the big things such as reforming the common agricultural policy and so on.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): One of the first things we did was to change the taxation on motorhomes, which is very important to my constituents because North West Durham is where we manufacture many of them. Under the EU regulations that came forward, gold-plated by our civil service, we would have seen a 700% tax increase, which we have been able to reverse since leaving the EU. I agree with my hon. Friend's point, but does he think that we need to see all those practical examples laid out by the British Government to show the benefits of our having left the EU?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Before the hon. Gentleman responds to that, is there any possibility of steering his great speech back to Third Reading of the Motor Vehicles (Compulsory Insurance) Bill?

Anthony Browne: I was talking about the underlying legislative process for the Bill. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I agree; there are probably many other bits of legislation such as this, and it would be good to get a holistic view of the impact of all that.

For all the reasons I mentioned at the beginning of my speech, before talking about European jurisprudence, I fully support this Bill. The Vnuk ruling is impractical, it is expensive to motorists, including myself, and it does not serve the deemed objectives. For the reasons mentioned by the Opposition, the Government probably do need to think about whether there are any other bits of legislation needed to ensure that there is no harm done by lack of insurance on private land, but this Bill is incredibly popular and I fully support it.

11.38 am

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I will be quite short, because there is a lot of important business still to come. As a Eurosceptic before Brexiteers were even invented, I completely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and with this Bill.

I am a little sceptical in another way, however, and this is for the Minister's ears. The motor insurance industry is very clever at telling us by how much something would go up if we did something, and often their actuaries very early on write in to the risk that premiums would go up—and premiums are going up in the country today. When I was in the Minister's position on the Treasury Bench as the roads Minister, the industry

[Sir Mike Penning]

came to me and said, "If we have continuous insurance, we will be able to lower premiums, because we are taking the risk away in respect of uninsured motorists"—who are paid for by everybody in the Chamber and around the country who insures their vehicle. Motor insurance sits with our constituents.

I completely agree with the principle that nobody should be on our roads who is not insured. If the vehicle is off the road, we should make a statutory off road notification and register it as off the road, because the law states that it should be insured even if it is on the drive.

I have not seen any proof or example of motor insurance going down since those promises were made. The Minister should keep a close eye on the motor insurance industry. It is a very profitable marketplace. The industry may say the cost will go up by £50 per policy, but that £50 has actually already been written in. The Minister should give the industry a subtle hint and say, "How come it hasn't gone down since we have had continuous insurance?"

11.40 am

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What an excellent finish to the contribution from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). I will get on to the £50 bonus in a few moments.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on securing progress for his Bill and on selflessly putting himself forward to be the Brexit dividend Minister. No wonder he has been mounting a full-throated defence of the Prime Minister on the news channels over the past few days. Those things are possibly connected.

The hon. Gentleman did a good job of explaining the background of the Vnuk case and its consequences for motorists here. I thank him for that good explanation. I did not agree with everything he said but people will look back at the *Hansard* report and say it was a good contribution.

As has been made clear, we have operated under the scheme set out in the Road Traffic Act for many decades. It is proportionate and it works, although that is not to say we should not revisit it from time to time. The Government have intended to overturn Vnuk for quite some time. The cost of uninsured drivers is currently met by the Motor Insurers' Bureau. The Government have estimated that the implementation of the ECJ ruling in the Vnuk case could cost policy holders £1.227 billion, or an average rise of around £50 for 25 million customers. I think that figure is right, but I will come back to it, if I may.

Sir Mike Penning: I say respectfully to the shadow Minister that that cost is being met not by the Motor Insurers' Bureau but by motorists in this country. That is probably very important.

Mike Kane: It is indeed met by motorists, who are hard pressed in this cost of living crisis.

A few people veered slightly off the highway in the debate. There were terrific contributions from the hon. Members for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne). I would love to talk about subsidiarity well into the night and juxtapose it with the principle of solidarity that the European Union was founded on—that is not a remainer case; it is just a great debate—but that is not for this place today.

Churchill said that a fanatic is someone who will not change their mind and cannot change the subject. We have seen a bit of that today. From some Government Members we have seen what I would call hubris—they are glad after the fact. Ask Odysseus how that worked out; I would be careful with it. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead hit the nail on the head: there will be no £50 dividend. I shall say why—and I am going to veer off course.

There is an £11 billion pothole-repair backlog in this country. That is what is driving up motor insurance, because most damage is done by potholes. The Secretary of State for Transport has cut pothole-repair funding in Hertfordshire by 23%. The area represented by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) in Cumbria has the most reported potholes in the land. For the last 40 years—during which the seatbelt rules have applied—the number of fatalities on our roads has gone down and down and down. In 2020, the number rose by 5%: we have reversed a 40-year trend. That is what will have an impact on people's motor insurance, for sure. The £50 deficit—the "Brexit deficit"—is a complete misnomer. It will not affect motor insurance one bit. I think that that is what the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead was referring to, but let us see the insurers put that £50 in their policies! I doubt we will see that happen any time soon.

I could carry on, and name other factors that will have an impact on motor insurance—*[Interruption.]* It seems that Members do not want me to do that, but let me briefly talk about the highway code that we are implementing next week. There has been no promotion of it—absolutely nothing. The Government's transport team are saying that they will get round to that in February, way after it has happened. We have major changes coming. What will that do to the accident ratio in the next few months, and what will it do to motor insurance payments? The cost of living crisis has been mentioned a great deal. How will the hike in national insurance payments affect the crisis that our people face? How will the depletion of our gas storage affect it?

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to veer off track ever so slightly. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wellingborough on the Bill, but it is clear that there is much more work to do. We need to ensure that people who have to drive can afford their motor insurance and can afford to drive safely, and we need to look at the whole picture, in the round, of the damage being done to road maintenance and road safety. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about that.

11.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) on his expertise, his dedication, his hard work and, of course, his success in promoting his Bill and securing its passage as far as

Report. I also congratulate him on his success in having secured what has become, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) told us today, her favourite piece of legislation. Sadly, she is not in her place to hear of that success.

May I say what an honour it is—and a pleasure, as always—to follow the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane)? I thank and pay tribute to my right hon. Friends the Members for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) and for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), my hon. Friends the Members for East Surrey, for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb), for Loughborough (Jane Hunt), for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), as well as others who have spoken today or during the Bill's earlier stages.

As all those right hon. and hon. Members, and my ministerial colleagues, have made clear, this is an important issue. The Government have made it plain since 2014 that they do not agree with the European Court of Justice's ruling in the Vnuk case, and that view was shared by 94% of the 92 respondents to the Department for Transport's consultation. The Vnuk decision created the unnecessary extension of motor insurance to private land, as well as, potentially, a greater range of vehicles. That is why we have announced that we will remove the effects of Vnuk from British law in February 2021. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough said, it will be a landmark moment when we remove law that does not work for the United Kingdom. That will include removing the associated financial liability imposed on the Motor Insurers' Bureau via the courts' decision in MIB *v.* Lewis.

The Bill represents the best possible opportunity to address this issue at the earliest possible opportunity. It will clarify the way in which the compulsory insurance obligation operates in Great Britain, and will make it clear that there is no obligation to extend insurance to private land and vehicles not constructed for road use. It removes any retained EU law rights to compensation from the Motor Insurers' Bureau, and it provides that retained EU case law that is inconsistent with the position that it sets out will cease to have effect. That effectively removes the Vnuk decision from the law, and that is why the Government support it.

11.49 am

Mr Bone: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank all the people who have assisted with the Bill and particularly those who have spoken today. My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) brought up Brexit, saying that two thirds of her constituents voted for it, and then, blow me down, that was topped by my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi), who said the proportion was 70%—

Marco Longhi: It was 72%.

Mr Bone: Indeed. Then, of course, we moved to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), who said that Vnuk would be very difficult to enforce and just happened to mention that nearly two thirds of people there voted remain. In fact, that was the only place in the United Kingdom that I went to as part of the leave campaign where there were remain posters up in the windows as I knocked on the doors.

I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), not least for his help at the beginning of the debate. He and the excellent shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), also rightly made the point, "Hang on, motor industry, we have done you a pretty good favour today. How about looking after motorists?" Like so many organisations, it is very quick to put things up but not so quick to bring them down, so I hope that that was noted.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) said that if there are regulations that we do not need, let us reduce them. My hon. Friends the Members for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) and for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) mentioned the cost—the £50 hike that would occur—and the consultation in which 94% were against the Vnuk decision. I am not quite sure what the other 6% were thinking about, but that is pretty high. I also thank the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), who made a really important point, which I hope we dealt with in the Bill. At the beginning of the process, I was very concerned about that, too.

Let me turn to some of the people who are not in the Chamber today who have helped with the Bill. In particular, I thank James Langston of the Department for Transport and the team for all their assistance. I thank the excellent Minister at the Dispatch Box and the shadow Minister—without Opposition support, we could not have made progress today, so I am very grateful.

I thank Nick Robbins of the Motor Insurers' Bureau and David Holt of Weightmans for their immensely detailed knowledge and help. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers), who not only led the Westminster Hall debate but attended many stakeholder meetings, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight), who bowled one or two bouncers during the process, and I am very grateful for that scrutiny.

It has been gratifying to see such widespread engagement with and support for the Bill, including from the National Farmers Union and members of the all-party groups on motorsport, farming and historic vehicles, all of whose specialist area of interest will be profoundly impacted by the Vnuk judgment. I also thank, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) did in relation to the previous Bill, Adam Mellows-Facer, the Clerk of Private Members' Bills, who I can embarrass—my right hon. Friend could not because he had left the Chamber, but I will embarrass him and say what a professional and helpful job he has done.

Finally, I thank Isobelle Jackson in my office, who helped in preparing all the work behind the Bill. Just getting a private Member's Bill to this stage takes a lot of work and I have an enormous appreciation for all the work that she has done.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Even though some of the speeches veered all over the motorway, and Mr Browne's hit the barrier several times this morning, congratulations on getting the Bill over the line, Mr Bone.

British Sign Language Bill

Second Reading

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) to move Second Reading of her Bill, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

11.54 am

Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Today is a momentous day for many deaf people, one they thought would never come. I want to begin by acknowledging the people who have been instrumental in getting the Bill to this position—David Buxton, the chair of the British Deaf Association, who has led the "BSL Act Now!" campaign; and Rob Geaney, from the Royal National Institute for Deaf People—and some of the Bill's many supporters, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). So many people have supported the Bill and are willing it through that I do not propose to use this valuable time naming them all. They know who they are and I am grateful for their help.

My sincere thanks go to my friend the Minister of State, who is the Minister for disabled people and has wholeheartedly embraced the campaign and even learnt to sign a bit of BSL. I also commend Deborah Lonnon from the Cabinet Office's disability unit, who worked tirelessly and kept me sane as the fine details were being worked out—I am not famed for my patience. I also wish to thank those in my office, Michael Rout in particular, for the hard work they have done in keeping this all going and making sure that we got to today, when we are actually going to move it forward. Finally, and probably most importantly, I would like to thank the deaf community and, most of all, my brilliant parents, for everything they have given me in life: a family, a culture and a language.

Both my parents were profoundly deaf. My dad was born deaf, as were his two sisters, and my mum went deaf when she was four. BSL was a language created at least 230 years ago—some say it was even longer ago than that. BSL is my first language and, as a child of deaf parents, I have to tell the House that hearing children of deaf parents grow up fast. They have to shoulder a responsibility well beyond their years, and that is not fair. We do it willingly—I never knew any different—but it is not fair and we have a chance to help with it. Growing up, I saw at first hand the difficulties that deaf people face every day: the huge challenges that my parents had to overcome to be heard, to be listened to and, more importantly, to be understood. I am told that I booked my first family holiday when I was four years old—I do not remember that, but I did.

As for the impact of BSL, I am going to tell the House a quick story about my dad, who was a supremely intelligent human being—he was so quick, so fast. He did not have vast books to read, because his language was not great, but he was so intelligent and insightful. He was absolutely my hero. I talked to him about what happened when he was getting a job at 16 and leaving school, and I asked him what he wanted to be. He said that he had wanted to be a joiner, but then he went round looking for a job, as a BSL user. He could read and write, but he was trying to pass O-Level English right up until he was about 70—that language skill was not there. However, he was supremely intelligent and he wanted to be a joiner.

He went to firm after firm, and one said, "Yes, we'll give you an apprenticeship as a joiner, but you have to be a labourer first." My dad said to me, "I knew they were lying. I knew they had no intention of giving me that job, but I laboured away." That was in wartime. One day, the big jobs were all held up because a plastering job could not be done as no plasterers were available. After a few days of the jobs being held up, everyone came into work and the plastering had been done. It had been done really well but nobody knew who had done it—the fairies had been. Everyone was looking and trying to work out how it had been done. It was great but they did not know who had done it. My dad said, "I did it." They looked at him and said, "How?!" My dad told me, "They're daft. I just watched." They then said to him, "You can have the apprenticeship tomorrow, but you will be a plasterer, not a joiner."

My dad became known as the best in the north-west. As I grew up, on a Friday night, directors of different plastering firms—the big ones such as Unit Construction and Pollock Brothers—would sit round the table in our living room, with me interpreting while my dad went, "More money" and "No, not doing that." He was seeing them all off, and they would come and compete for him. Just think about that. In the scheme of things, they would not have given him that job. He would have been written off. It is important that we do not undervalue deaf people because their ears do not work. It is only that their ears do not work. Mine do not, either.

Growing up, I saw what a wonderful language sign language is, and how incredible the deaf community is. I often joke that I was kidnapped at birth, not just by my parents but by the whole wider deaf community in Liverpool. It is an understatement to say that deaf culture and values have shaped the person I am today. I would not be here now or be the person I am without those influences. The Bill is my way of paying it forward, because of the kindness and the care the wider deaf community have shown me. Today I am talking about the life lessons they taught me.

Sadly, I need to bring the Bill to the House because, despite the incredible progress, so many of the unbelievable obstacles I saw my parents face throughout their lives are still a problem for deaf people. People like my dad were campaigning for subtitles in the 70s—pressuring the BBC and TV companies to get subtitles. We have them today, although, if Ofcom is listening, the quality is atrocious.

Since introducing the Bill, I have been asked repeatedly, "Wasn't BSL recognised in 2003? How is this different?" On 18 March 2003, BSL was recognised as a language—an essential and important step in this journey. But in the intervening years, deaf people have been forced to rely on inadequate provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and little progress has been made.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for telling her story; a story that often is not heard. She is making a great speech.

I was the Minister for disabled people at the time when BSL was recognised as a language in a written ministerial statement. There was much debate then that

it did not even count as a language. That line in the sand was important, but I am so pleased that my hon. Friend is now bringing forward legislation to take a further step, which has been too long coming, to promote the use of the language. It will enable it to flourish in a way that other languages that have been recognised in statute have flourished thereafter. I congratulate my hon. Friend and I wish her and the Minister all the very best getting the legislation through.

Rosie Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for those remarks. It is true that we have made progress. The deaf part of me is standing here thinking that deaf people are saying, "Very good—let's not wait 19 years more." We need to make some rapid progress.

In bringing forward the Bill, I want to finally recognise BSL in statute—not just a gesture but a law that requires positive action from the Government, with real progress to put deaf people on an equal footing with those of us who hear. For every deaf person, like my parents, who has been ignored, misunderstood, or even treated as unintelligent simply for relying on BSL, this recognition will be clear and a message that their language is equal and should be treated as equal.

When I was pre-school and at home, we used to have lessons every day. I could not say exactly when they started, but probably when I was about two. We would learn numbers, sums and English and to read a bit. I remember saying to my mum and dad, "Other children don't have to do this. It's not fair." I can well remember their reply, which was repeated right through my growing up: "You have to. Because we're deaf, they'll think you're daft." Only as an adult can I appreciate how much that said about how they—intelligent people—had been treated just because their ears did not work.

Throughout this campaign, and from my own life experiences, I have seen the shocking inequality in access that deaf people have to public services. The reason I got involved in local politics is that I was at school and my father wanted to complain to the local councillor. Guess who did the complaining? It was me. That inequality in access goes across all aspects of life: healthcare, social care, education, jobs and benefits, to name but a few. The Royal National Institute for Deaf People estimates that 151,000 people in the UK use British Sign Language and, of those, at least 87,000 are deaf. A huge number of people rely on BSL, yet we constantly let them down and fail to see the challenges they face.

This Bill requires the Secretary of State to produce guidance, which will be issued across Government, about how they should be promoting, facilitating and protecting the use of BSL in their Departments. I am sure the Minister will set out in her speech how the Government intend to ensure the guidance will reflect the needs of the deaf community.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on bringing forward this legislation to the House of Commons. It is long overdue and builds on the work that she mentioned earlier. The fact is that there are 90,000 primary users of British Sign Language in the United Kingdom today, and probably another 60,000 on top of that who use it as a means of communication as well. This is not a minority thing; this Bill is a social justice measure for those for whom BSL is the primary form of communication. I congratulate my hon. Friend, because it is long overdue.

Rosie Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend, and I absolutely agree; this Bill is long overdue, but we are dealing with it today, and we are going to make progress. [Hon. Members: "Yes."] God is good.

I very much welcome the plans the Minister has to work directly with deaf BSL users on the creation of guidance. Using that guidance, we aim to right the wrongs that happen on a day-to-day basis. Much of that comes down to the need for interpreters. There simply are not enough interpreters in the workforce right now, and there is a clear lack of understanding and forward planning when an interpreter is needed—it is really not that hard.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech, and I thank her for raising this issue and making all these important points. Does she agree that in Wales we have a Welsh Government who have put BSL at the centre of the new curriculum in Wales, putting it on a statutory footing to ensure that the language is there and prominent?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Can I remind everyone to please face forward when speaking so that the microphones can pick you up and everyone can hear?

Rosie Cooper: I do indeed agree with my hon. Friend, and I am sure that we will encourage BSL to be used in schools, and I think BSL is a GCSE subject. When I was Lord Mayor of Liverpool, many aeons ago in 1992, the deaf community relied on minicoms before mobile phones. We got the children in Liverpool to learn to finger spell the alphabet and be sponsored for it. The money that they raised in learning their secret language, which they loved, meant that all deaf people in Liverpool and any organisation that needed it got a minicom. So yes, we will all be in it together and make it work.

The need for an interpreter should be obvious, but it is repeatedly overlooked. It shocks people to know that the only place where someone is guaranteed a qualified interpreter is in the courts. As a result, it seems that every deaf person has their own awful account of being failed, such as the NHS failing to provide qualified interpreters for a medical appointment. It is unthinkable that we live in a world where a person can go to a pre-arranged medical appointment and the doctor has no way of clearly and understandably communicating a diagnosis or giving medical advice.

It can be even worse emotionally—I have done this—when a hearing family member, sometimes a child, is left to interpret medical information. How can we expect a non-medically trained family member to listen to and translate complex medical information? I do not think my parents ever went to anything important, even my school days, where I did not do the interpreting. I always told the truth, but I often wonder, if I had ever been in trouble, would I have told the whole truth? I do not know, but it was not an issue, so we were okay.

In the run-up to my O-levels, my mum had a problem and she potentially had breast cancer. She went into hospital for an operation and biopsy. Can hon. Members imagine what it was like for me as a 15-year-old trying to phone the hospital between my morning and afternoon exams to get them to talk to me, who was not her next of kin—that was my dad, but he could not do it—to find out whether she was going to be okay? That pressure was unbelievable and wrong.

[Rosie Cooper]

I have even heard heart-wrenching accounts of a son having to convey a terminal cancer diagnosis to his father, because no one thought to book an interpreter. That is outrageous and unbelievable, yet it still happens. We need a much deeper understanding of the needs of deaf people and BSL users. I hear of deaf students complaining that interpreters and support workers are not interpreting all the information that is being given, but when they complain, they are told that, "That isn't important information." Proper interpretation matters.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I, too, commend my hon. Friend for bringing forward this important Bill. Does she agree that sign language is vital to the wellbeing of many, as it allows them to take part in activities that we know and love, such as celebrating mass?

Rosie Cooper: I absolutely agree. I have often joined in masses where signing is really good. When my father died, we had BSL at his funeral, the priest was able to do BSL and we had a deaf choir. It was a very sad but very joyous occasion, and one that I will never forget. It was made all the better by those people in the congregation being able to communicate properly with the priest and each other. That is really important.

I could refer to thousands of examples, across all aspects of life, that the Bill aims to improve. If we can create this guidance with deaf people, not just for deaf people, there will be such an increase in understanding of BSL and we will become acclimatised to it. We will actually start to accommodate deaf people rather than sidelining them and pushing them aside. Let it become the norm that they count.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I pay warm tribute to the hon. Lady's excellent personal testimony, which is so powerful. Does she agree that, now for the first time, deaf jurors will be able to have the benefit of interpretive services as a result of legislation that I helped introduce? The crucial point that she makes about interpretation has never been more important, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will work closely with her.

We talk about the deaf community, and the hon. Lady is right, but let us not forget the thousands of people with learning difficulties who use BSL, including a member of my family. On her behalf, may I thank the hon. Lady from the bottom of my heart. *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you."]*

Rosie Cooper: I thank you too. *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you."]* BSL really is important. It is not just for the deaf community. It is for the hard of hearing. Frankly, it is for all of us, because we will let loose all the talent and ability that is locked in deaf people because we ignore it. I am delighted that we are expanding the boundaries to make sure that interpretation is really available. Thank you so much.

Most importantly, working with the Minister, these improvements will be in services that people rely on. Deaf people looking for employment need equal access to advice and support at the jobcentre. None of us would go to a meeting with a benefits adviser and find that they cannot communicate with us so why should a deaf person?

We have already seen how much difference a Bill like this can make. Similar legislation passed in Scotland in 2015 has already made a huge difference to deaf people's lives. There has to be—I make a plea—a BSL interpreter for all Government briefings. The deaf community should be able to watch those important updates in the same way as everyone else.

I have gone on at length, but in closing I would like to say how important it is that we seize the moment and capitalise on the interest that the country at large has in BSL. I would never have guessed—I would still have done it, but I would never have guessed—that we would make such incredible progress between introducing the Bill last June and now, seven months later. Clearly, much of the awareness is due to Rose Ayling-Ellis in "Strictly". She proved what my dad always said, "Deaf people can do anything"—even the impossible, such as winning "Strictly" when you can't hear the music. That 10-second glimpse she gave the hearing world into deafness when the music stopped was truly momentous. People became aware and interested in BSL like never before. I know that we have much support across the House, so let me say that the Bill is not about politics. After more than 230 years, the Bill is about doing the right thing.

In closing I would like to thank the Minister. *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you for supporting this Bill."]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): May I say what a privilege and honour it was to be in the Chair to listen to that powerful speech?

12.18 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): What an honour and privilege it is to follow my friend the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). We have talked on the phone in the last couple of days. I agree completely with everything that she said. Like me, she is deeply religious and her mum and dad will be so proud. They are looking down on her now and they are chuffed. I would be very chuffed if I was them. No one can understand her loss in losing her mum and dad, but what a project they have left for us.

I declare an interest. I am a patron of Hertfordshire Hearing Advisory Service, which does massive work in my part of the world. When I was a signatory to this Bill, I thought back to when I was the disabilities Minister. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) referred to the fact that she was also disabilities Minister. I pay tribute to the Minister. The write-round letter that she sent out to us is everything that I was trying to do when I was in the Department. I can only imagine the difficulty she had with the write-round. It means she has to write to every Department, and they all put in their thoughts. They all come back and say, "This is going to cost loads of money; this will do this, this will do that". The difficulty will be getting it through the Department for Work and Pensions. I understand why Ministers will be concerned, and the DWP in particular, but to get to a position where I know the Minister will support the Bill—we have all had letters from her—is a massive move forward for this House and this country, and for people who use BSL now and in the future.

What the Bill will do, and what was attempted in 2003—I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood—is open the public's awareness to the needs of people who are deaf or have learning difficulties, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) alluded to a moment ago. It will break out the capability, skills and frustrations of people who want to be heard in their first language. Many people around the country might not understand that BSL is their first language. Someone said to me, "Why are you supporting the Bill? Surely they can all lipread". That is naivety, and when I explained it to them, they were perfectly understanding. Of course lipreading plays a part. Technology is also playing a part, and it will continue to play a part in different Departments as we try to develop the Government's approach, and the country's approach, to BSL.

This issue is massively important for the younger generation, who I think get it much better than the older generation. The young children in Liverpool that the hon. Member for West Lancashire alluded to get this. The problem is that sometimes there are complications about what sign language is being used in schools, but I will not get into that debate today. The Bill has the backing of the Government, the country, and Members across this House. I am sure that when it goes to the other place it will also receive full support. It means that people have to adjust the way they think about people who are deaf or have hearing difficulties.

As the Member for West Lancashire said, some people are born deaf and have had to adapt to that from birth, and some people have lost or partially lost their hearing during their lifetime. No one will be surprised if I now allude to our veterans. I am lucky. My hearing is impaired because I did not wear hearing protection when I was in the armed forces. Frankly no one did. We were all macho, and no one ever thought about it in those days, but—quite rightly—we do now address that. Tens of thousands, if not even more of our veterans out there have had their hearing affected, sometimes in situations that mean they are legally deaf. BSL was not their first language to start with, but it has become their first language going forward.

The biggest thing that has made me so proud is where we have come in such a short space of time. There was a long time between 2003, and even before that, up to now. The Bill has only just been published, but to get from when we announced what it would do, to where we are now—like the hon. Lady and other hon. Members, I am quite shocked. Government grinds on and on, but if a Minister is in the right spot, they can take the issue out of certain Departments and bring it forward, so that people do not have to worry about their silos, and the Minister can champion the Bill. Some colleagues said to me, "Shouldn't this have been a Government Bill?" Well, there is an argument for that, but actually this is the best way. That is because people who really care are involved in the Bill. We are not being whipped or told what to do. We are not given advisory notes. The only advisory notes are from people out there who are experts.

I say to the Minister, and other Ministers, that as we go forward and she has the advisory group around her, those who best know what is going on out there are people who need and use BSL. It is not just the big charities—now I will get told off by a charity—but there are myriad different charities with huge amounts of expertise. In my constituency I have great advocates for the deaf community in my patch, and they do fantastic work. I am sure they will write to me, and I will submit certain names. If there were a spare place, and the Minister wanted an old politician, I would be more than happy to assist as well—as, I am sure, would the hon. Lady.

I think we can go further. When I was the Minister for Disabled People, I insisted that my departmental business cards should have braille on them. A huge proportion of our community cannot read because of visual impairment. I was absolutely chuffed when I raised this with the Minister and said, "This is what we should have," and, quite rightly, it was done. That did not happen across Government. There was shock in the Department when I asked for that as disabilities Minister. I know this has absolutely nothing to do with the Bill, but if we really want to reach out to people with disabilities, that is another little step that would mean so much to so many people. I commend the Bill to the House.

12.26 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am here to support the Bill, but I am also here to support my friend. My hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and I came into Parliament together in 2005. She has been open and generous in talking to us about her life and her life experiences—sometimes funny, often sad—and I know that her mum and dad will be so massively proud. God is indeed good. I know how personal the Bill is to her, and I was surprised that she managed to get through the entire speech without having us all in tears. I am really grateful to the Minister for enabling the Bill to come to the House today, and with such a good wind.

I will not speak for long because I have seen the number of hon. Members who are present, and I am always worried that just a little bit too much enthusiasm for a Bill can cause it not to succeed. As a former Whip, I have used those tricks in the past, but I am sure that the Whips Office will be as good as gold today.

I think we in the UK should be very proud that our sign language has developed in the way it has over hundreds of years, through constant use and refinement by the deaf community. It is only right that British Sign Language be legally recognised, so that its tens of thousands of regular users are afforded the legal protections and equal respect that they are absolutely due. It is important that we all remember that for many people across this country, English is their second language and is used for writing and lipreading, while British Sign Language is their first language and primary language.

When public services and others do not recognise those facts and do not work together effectively to ensure that their communications and services are equally accessible to British Sign Language users, that is a major form of discrimination.

Andrew Gwynne: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case in support of this excellent Bill. Our hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) gave her really personal experience of how, as a very young child, she had to communicate with adults and the adult world on behalf of her parents. That is a social justice issue for her parents and people like them, who have no

[Andrew Gwynne]

other form of communication if British Sign Language is not provided by public services. The Bill recognises British Sign Language as an official language. Does that not push this agenda forward to ensure that public services serve all the public?

Ms Brown: I absolutely agree. The story about a child of a parent—we are all children of our parents—having to tell the parent about a terminal diagnosis when they are obviously coming to terms with it themselves, having heard it for the first time, is just so devastating. I genuinely do not think I would have been able to sit with my mum or dad and explain what a doctor had said, and tell them that their life was about to close. I just do not think I could have done it. To think that that is something that those in the deaf community have to experience often is tragic. It is unfair and it is discriminatory.

Discrimination in all its forms has to be tackled, because it harms us all. What my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire talked about most eloquently was the fact that there is so much talent in the deaf community that is simply not allowed to be unlocked.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I am enjoying listening to the hon. Member's speech. I was first made aware of the issue of British Sign Language not being an official language by one of my constituents, Feras al-Moubayed. He came to see me because he was really keen to impress upon me, as his local MP, the barriers that he is experiencing in getting work, keeping work and engaging as a full member of society. He is a very talented tailor. He has worked in the past for Harrods and other high-end manufacturers of clothing. He has so much to offer, yet he faces barriers daily. He faces barriers when dealing with local government and with the banks. He frequently finds himself in positions of great stress and anxiety because of the situations that he routinely finds himself in, but he has so much to offer. I am here today because I really want to support this Bill—I am so glad that the Government are supporting it—on behalf of Feras and so many other people like him who have so much to offer.

Ms Brown: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She reminds me to name-check Lister Community School. The pupils of the deaf community from that school spoke to me earlier this year and requested that I come here today to support the Bill. I am glad that the hon. Lady reminded me to name-check them, and she is absolutely right: frankly, if we are not allowing parts of our community to participate fully in culture and the economy, the whole of our community and all of us are the lesser for it.

I am really grateful that this Bill will allow some very basic and practical steps to be taken to right this wrong. I want to enable it to proceed today, so I am going to sit down now and hope that it passes as quickly as possible.

12.33 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): Please be assured, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am going to take my lead from the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown), but first I must pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), who has done such incredible work getting the Bill to this point, and to my hon. Friend the Minister. She may have been pleased to send the letter yesterday informing us all that the Government were going to support the Bill, but that is nothing compared with the relief with which we all received it. Perhaps that means we are making much jollier and friendlier contributions than might otherwise have been the case.

As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, through the course of 2020 I listened to a great deal of evidence from people with disabilities about their access to services during the pandemic. I pay huge tribute to those people who came forward with their stories of the challenges that they had had receiving information as BSL users. We got testimony from the RNID, among others, about whole families who had not been able to understand the rules of lockdown and how they impacted them. It is critical that, moving forward, we make sure that access to Government information is available for all those with disabilities, but on this occasion I want particularly to focus on those with a reliance on BSL as their first language.

It was not until a constituent of mine came to see me in 2019 to talk about an app he had developed that translated websites into BSL, which was being used by Lloyds Bank, among others, that it dawned on me that in many cases BSL users were not able to read written English to the same standard that we in this House might be able to. He was brilliant at explaining to me that perhaps their access to medical information was restricted and, as the hon. Member for West Lancashire explained, their ability to communicate with their children's schools or interact with services such as the Department for Work and Pensions was limited because they could not read as well as they needed to in order to understand.

I made a plea to the Minister's predecessor that a similar system could be considered for gov.uk, with BSL overlaid on its many hundreds of thousands of pages to make the information there more accessible to BSL users. I do not intend to detain the House for long today, but I want to thank my right hon. Friend the Minister and all those who have supported the Bill—all those charities that have come forward to us with information—and to say, "Please, let us not impede it any further. As we heard earlier, we have waited too long. Let's crack on now."

12.35 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on deafness, it is a great privilege to speak in this debate and to support the British Sign Language Bill. It has been a long road to get to this point, and the success of this Bill comes down, as has already been said, to some tireless campaigners.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on her work to bring forward the Bill and to win such wide cross-party support for it, and on her wonderful speech. Her contributions to the all-party parliamentary group have always been informed by her experience as a child of deaf adults. She has made no secret of how she was captured by the deaf community, as hon. Members have heard today. Her passion, knowledge and determination have underpinned the Bill and the negotiations to secure Government support for it. As the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) have said, she has

done her parents and the deaf community proud; I am sure many of my constituents who are members of Nottinghamshire Deaf Society will have been cheering her on.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire, I pay tribute to the British Deaf Association, particularly its chair David Buxton. The BDA has campaigned for decades in support of sign language legislation. Its work is a major reason not only that we are discussing the Bill but that the Scottish Parliament has already legislated in favour of British Sign Language. Similar proposals are at different stages in the Welsh Senedd and Stormont.

I also thank Rob Geaney and RNID for their support for the APPG and the campaign, which of course is supported by many other organisations and charities that support the deaf community and advocate for better communication, including SignHealth, the Royal Association for Deaf People, Black Deaf UK, the Institute of British Sign Language, the National Deaf Children's Society, Signature and the National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I add my wholehearted support to this Bill and the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). Like many hon. Members, I have campaigners in my own constituency, such as Stuart Parkinson, an activist for the deaf community with Cardiff Deaf Centre, but I also pay tribute to the work of the Association of British Sign Language Teachers and Assessors, which I have been honoured to be a patron of for some time. Interpreters such as Julie Doyle and Tony Evans can be seen on Welsh Government broadcasts, live with the First Minister and the Health Minister, interpreting in BSL in real time—in the room, crucially—and I pay tribute to them for all the work they have done for the deaf community and in supporting this Bill.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. I am sure many of us want to thank people who got us to this stage.

Through my time as chair of the all-party group I have heard numerous and devastating examples of the barriers that we place in front of deaf BSL users. We have heard about the failure to think about accessibility in the design of public policy and public services, and how that limits the opportunities and life chances of BSL users. That is why I am pleased to support the Bill. I do so not just because it gives the deaf community and their language the status and recognition they deserve, although that is vital, but because the Bill provides sensible mechanisms to help Departments and public service providers overcome the barriers they create.

I wish to give a couple of examples that relate to accessing healthcare, the first of which is the refusal to provide a video relay service to contact the NHS. A VRS would have allowed BSL users to speak to health professionals remotely through a videocall with a registered BSL interpreter. But rather than commissioning a national service, the NHS failed to make provision, leaving many BSL users without access to their GP during the pandemic, when remote appointments became the default. At best, deaf BSL users were reliant on charitable support, provided by organisations such as SignHealth. Access to core NHS services should not be left to charities; those services should be provided as a right. My hope is that the guidance required by clause 3, designed and informed by lived experience through the non-statutory board mentioned in the explanatory notes, will provide both NHS England and local health commissioners and providers with the obligation they need to provide such a service, as well as the support and information on how to make it work for deaf people. The guidance across the NHS can help empower deaf people to manage their own health and improve the way they do so.

I also hope that the guidance supports the delivery of specialist mental health services. Through the all-party group, we know that too many commissioners think that providing interpretation for mainstream mental health services is sufficient. This guidance can make commissioners aware of the evidence showing that specialist services, delivered by those who understand deaf culture and the impact that being cut off from the hearing world has, are best for outcomes. There are countless examples of these barriers and how we fail the deaf community. The guidance should help us to remove the barriers we create across society, particularly in health and education services, and in the support we provide to deaf BSL users through jobcentres. That will really make a difference to their life chances and to outcomes.

I also hope the transparency and accountability created on accessible communications by clause 2 can drive a huge increase in the volume of accessible information in BSL, as that is another area where the deaf community are being let down. The high-profile failure to provide BSL interpretation at the initial covid press conferences is just one example, but there are many others. Deaf BSL users are forced to navigate complex information in their second language. How many of us who speak a second language would want to use it to apply for a passport, check our entitlement to benefits or arrange childcare vouchers on a site such as gov.uk? Why do we demand that nearly 90,000 of our citizens deal with these routine interactions with government based on an ability to use their second language? This needs to change, and information in BSL can empower deaf people to manage their own affairs and lead confident, independent lives. I hope that the required BSL report set out in clause 2 spurs on all Departments to meet the basic need to provide accessible information to the deaf community. Ministers can certainly expect to be held to account for their performance.

Today will be a momentous day for the deaf community when this Bill passes, as it is a really important step forward in the equality and equity that deaf citizens should be entitled to expect from their Government. Many people are out there in Parliament Square following this debate and waiting for news. I know that Members across the House will support the Bill, which will give the deaf community the recognition they deserve and the Government the tools—through the BSL report and the guidance—to improve the services provided to them. I hope the Minister and her Department will commit to a genuine process of co-production in how she works with the advisory body announced in the explanatory notes, empowering the deaf community to lead the change and create the society they deserve. As Craig Crowley, the chief executive officer of Action Deafness, commented this morning, "The principle of 'nothing about us without us' is the right one."

[Lilian Greenwood]

The Bill should matter not just to the deaf community —we all benefit from creating a more inclusive and accessible society where everyone can fulfil their potential. I was reminded of that recently on a visit to Mellers primary school in my constituency, which, since September, has been home to Nottingham city's focus provision for deaf pupils. It has benefited from having deaf students and ensuring that BSL is an integral part of school life. It was a real pleasure to hear that the whole staff team are learning BSL and that hearing pupils are becoming fluent in BSL, and to see the school choir singing and signing together. That inclusion should be the norm. The World Federation of the Deaf tells us that legal recognition of sign language promotes understanding in society and, in turn, better promotion of human rights for the deaf community. Today is a really important step on a journey towards a better and more equal society.

12.45 pm

Marco Longhi (Dudley North) (Con): *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker."]*

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for bringing forward the Bill and for presenting it in such a powerful, if not emotional, way. It certainly touched me when she was speaking. I also pay tribute to the Minister, who I feel quite certain has not taken "No" for an answer in getting to this point, probably on multiple occasions.

The people who know me are probably fed up with my antics at pretending to be a bit of a linguist. I try to speak English to the best of my abilities, but I do know a little Italian and Portuguese. I hope, soon, that I might be able to learn a bit more British Sign Language, and to a much better standard than I have just demonstrated, for the benefit of my deaf constituents. I only wish that I had the ability and knowledge to give my entire speech today in British Sign Language. Several former Members have dabbled as contestants on "Strictly Come Dancing"—I stress that this is not an invitation to producers to invite me on the show—and the most recent series saw deaf actress Rose Ayling-Ellis raise the winner's glitter ball. If her dancing skills alone did not inspire us to try harder, her awareness in raising the importance of access to BSL certainly did.

On 18 March 2003, the then Labour Government formally recognised British Sign Language as a language in its own right. They also promised to investigate conferring legal status on BSL. Nearly 19 years on, we are still waiting and the deaf community are still waiting, but, as the saying goes, better late than never. This country has a proud history of leading and improving accessibility for those with disabilities, and it is so important that we create public policy mechanisms that will remove the countless barriers that society places in front of deaf BSL users in their daily lives.

Sara Britcliffe (Hyndburn) (Con): I want to thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). I am proud to be part of the county of Lancashire and fully support what she is doing.

On the point about daily lives, the fundamental point is that we all get on every day doing what we do very easily, but that is difficult for many of our constituents, and the Bill is about making everyday life that bit easier for BSL users.

Marco Longhi: I could not agree more. Those of us who do not have this particular disability, or other disabilities, we take ordinary life for granted.

As Members of Parliament on all sides of the House, we have a duty and a responsibility to transform the lives of our disabled constituents. That includes supporting and empowering the deaf community, and improving communication between deaf and hearing people. In 2022, deaf people in the UK still do not have access to the same public information and services that are easily available to the hearing population. As we have heard, they are forced to rely on disability discrimination legislation, the Equality Act 2010, to fight for access in their own language to vital information about covid and healthcare, for example, and education and justice. We are talking about an indigenous language of the UK, BSL. I am told that this situation has proved to be inadequate, and it is right that this Government are supporting the hon. Member for West Lancashire in righting it, by seeking to recognise BSL legally as an official language within the UK.

What is also important is listening to the lived experience of those who use sign language as their primary language. They are best placed to understand and take decisions about their own needs. When decisions are taken without involving and properly consulting those they affect—in this case, the deaf community—it leads to inappropriate and inadequate services, which also leads to a waste of public money and taxpayers' cash. I know that it is incredibly frustrating when I cannot find accurate and up-to-date information, and I cannot even begin to imagine how frustrating it must be for my deaf constituents to experience that routinely, often with the most basic but essential of information. I welcome, with open arms, this Bill and the duties it is placing on Departments to help us break down barriers and revolutionise and improve people's lives.

12.51 pm

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on using her opportunity to table a private Member's Bill on such an important subject as British Sign Language. I was particularly touched by her speech and her sharing personal experiences. Her family must be incredibly proud, and rightly so. I also wish to thank the Minister, who has worked so hard to make this Bill a success.

As a disabled children's champion, this subject is close to my heart and I am delighted to support this Bill. I am not a natural linguist—I am a scientist—but when the people of Ynys Môn elected me to represent them, I committed to learning Welsh. I have seen at first hand how important it is to communicate with people, and although it has been incredibly challenging, it is one of the most important things I have committed to doing.

Last year, I met the National Deaf Children's Society to discuss the challenges faced by deaf children and, in particular, the use of BSL. I have had subsequent meetings with the charity and discussed the matter with constituents. One constituent, an incredible lady, is a qualified teacher of the deaf who lives on Ynys Môn. She uses BSL and has told me about the 170 children on Ynys Môn who are registered as deaf or hard of hearing

but who struggle to access appropriate education because of the lack of locally qualified teachers. In her annual report for 2016-17, the Children's Commissioner for Wales expressed concerns about access to BSL learning opportunities for deaf children and their families, and the lack of support in mainstream education. Despite that, five years on, there is no school for the deaf in Wales, and the nearest deaf education unit to Ynys Môn is in Wrexham, some 90 miles away. Data shows us that barriers to equality of education have a detrimental impact on employment and wellbeing. There are, for example, a disproportionate number of deaf people in our prison population.

BSL is a unifying language for deaf people. By making BSL a language of Great Britain in its own right, this Bill allows us to take an important step to recognising the rights of deaf people to access the education, support and assistance they need using their own language. Under this Bill, the duty placed on Departments to report on their use of BSL does not extend to the Welsh Government, but I hope that our colleagues in Cardiff will seek to introduce a similar duty. Like the British Deaf Association and the National Deaf Children's Society, I want to see the changes wrought by this Bill level the playing field.

The sense of community is one of the many fantastic things about my constituency and I will do everything and anything I can to encourage that sense of belonging. I want the deaf children in Ynys Môn, right across Wales and throughout Scotland and England to have the full and equal access to education, employment and public services that they deserve. Those young people will then be able to look forward to playing a greater role in their national and local communities. Most important of all, the Bill can give them hope for a better and more equal future.

This Bill is not about politics; it is about doing the right thing. I am proud that today the House is using its collective voice to change lives and work towards a more equal society.

12.55 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on bringing forward this Bill and for her passionate and tireless campaign, over a lifetime, on behalf of the deaf community. I thank my hon. Friend—and near constituency neighbour—the Minister for working collaboratively on the detail of the Bill, which will secure legal status for British Sign Language as the primary language of the deaf community. This is a huge step forward and provides the opportunity to enhance the quality of life for deaf people by improving their inclusion and autonomy in British society, their education and their career opportunities.

The Bill is short but will deliver a great deal for the deaf community: equal and fair access to services; the opportunity to play a leading role in co-designing and co-producing those services; the assurance that both public and private organisations must legally provide qualified and regulated interpreting services; access to video relay service calls of a standard equivalent to audio phone calls; the ability to access services remotely via intermediaries without the need to overcome spurious data protection barriers; full and appropriate access to emergency announcements; increased legal protection against domestic violence and hate crime; protection against discriminatory employment practices; and, finally, parity of access to mainstream television programmes at conventional viewing times. To go back to my childhood, "Vision On", presented by the late Tony Hart, was a pioneering programme, but the deaf community should not have had to wait 50 years for that particular level playing field.

I pay tribute to Ann and Daniel Jillings from Lowestoft, who are in Westminster today. They are passionate campaigners for the deaf community and for deaf children in particular. I commend Daniel's school, Bungay High School, for setting up a deaf resource base.

Along with the National Deaf Children's Society, Ann and Daniel have campaigned tirelessly for a GCSE in British Sign Language. In 2018, following a successful legal challenge, it looked as if they had made a significant breakthrough, in that the Department for Education undertook to start work on the design of the curriculum. I acknowledge that it is important to get it right but, nearly four years on, we are still waiting. It was Daniel's ambition to sit the BSL GCSE alongside his other GCSEs, but it now looks as if he will have left school by the time it is up and running. I would be most grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister could liaise with her counterparts in the Department for Education to ensure that the BSL GCSE is introduced as quickly as possible.

This great Bill will deliver so much for the deaf community. Time is short in this parliamentary Session, so we need to get on with it without procrastination and get it on the statute book as quickly as possible.

12.59 pm

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Once in a while, an individual pops up in this country and stops us in our tracks—someone who really makes us think about, and often makes us rethink, what is important in life: someone like Captain Tom during the pandemic or, of course, Rose Ayling-Ellis and her time on Strictly Come Dancing, one of the most successful programmes on television. She is the most amazing model for the deaf community, and she gave us an important insight into the barrier that deaf people must cross each and every day. Her use of BSL in a prime-time television programme has raised this issue into mainstream consciousness, and has shown us all that BSL should not be a marginalised language. In fact, it is a beautiful, rich language, which has its own structure, its own grammar and its own slang. What Members on both sides of the House have said today has only reaffirmed to me the importance of understanding sign language and its value in society, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for bringing us this brilliant Bill.

The significance of the equality and accessibility that come with British Sign Language is both undeniable and unavoidable. That is exactly what I heard when I spoke to the National Deaf Children's Society, whose members described to me the challenges with which many deaf children have had to deal during the pandemic. In the run-up to this Second Reading debate, I heard

[Nickie Aiken]

from one constituent who said that if ever there was a time when access to information was important, it has been during the pandemic.

One thing that I learnt from visiting Caxton Youth Organisation, a centre in my constituency for young people with autism and learning difficulties, is that recognising visual communication will make even more people feel included. Indeed, I think it important to note that—as was pointed out by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland)—this Bill benefits not only the deaf community, but those with autism and learning difficulties.

Many Members may have noticed that I prefer to wear a see-through mask as much as possible. I do so to convey a message to those who have to lip-read in order to understand what people are saying, because inclusiveness is important. It will probably not surprise Members to learn that I have been subject to some criticism from people on social media who say, "What an awful mask." I say to them, and to anyone else who does not like my see-through mask—well, actually I will not say what I would like to say, but I know from people in my constituency such as Alexandra Morgan Thomas, who was born deaf, why my use of a see-through mask is so important.

Today we have the opportunity to recognise the rich language that is BSL and to recognise its history and culture, and, principally, to ensure that its users feel completely fully included in our society. The Bill contains four main proposals which I welcome: it proposes to make BSL an official language in the UK, to establish a board to promote and facilitate the use of BSL, to state principles to guide the operations of bodies that provide public service, and to require bodies to promote and facilitate the use of BSL.

I am in no doubt that the Government take the principles of the Bill seriously. I thank the Minister, with whom I have had meetings to discuss the Bill; I also thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, whom I met recently to ask him to ensure that BSL was supported throughout the Government, and who was himself very supportive. I am delighted to stand with the Government, with the hon. Member for West Lancashire, with charities working with deaf people, and with BSL users in the Cities of London and Westminster to bring about much-needed change.

I back the Bill, and, as the Chamber will have heard in my recent question on the business statement, I am putting that commitment into action. My new year resolution is to learn British Sign Language, and I am pleased to say that my first lesson will start next week.

1.4 pm

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Nickie Aiken). I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on all her very hard work on the Bill, and I praise her constructive and cross-party efforts, which I recognise well from my time with her on the Health and Social Care Committee.

The Royal National Institute for Deaf People estimates that there are 12 million people with hearing loss in this country, and that is potentially set to rise to 14.2 million adults by 2035. At this point, it is worth acknowledging yet again the role of Rose Ayling-Ellis in representing that community during her time on "Strictly Come Dancing". She is supporting the Bill, which is fantastic.

In Wales, roughly 7,200 people use BSL as a primary form of communication. As we have heard, across the UK that rises to perhaps 87,000. It is important to be aware that the use of BSL goes beyond those with hearing loss to include others, such as those with learning disabilities, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland) mentioned. I support efforts to promote and protect BSL, especially given the likelihood of the number of BSL users increasing further, including through its increased recognition as a language of Great Britain.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on how we communicate. We have adapted to more a virtual way of contact very often and to the widespread use of face masks. As has been highlighted, they obscure our lip movements and that can be difficult for all of us, in fact, in shops and elsewhere, but it has been very difficult for those with hearing loss. That fact has helped to drive society to embrace BSL over the course of the pandemic. Admittedly with some pressure sometimes, most public health information has been available in alternative formats, including BSL, and the Cabinet Office is looking to extend similar BSL provisions for all public broadcasts, including non-covid broadcasts from Downing Street.

In this place, it is important that BSL translation is now available to those in the deaf community wishing to watch Prime Minister's questions every week. More widely, I am encouraged by the work being undertaken by the Department for Education to promote BSL. As my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) said, plans are under way to introduce a GCSE in BSL as soon as possible, and funding from the adult education budget is enabling adult learners aged 19 and over to undertake BSL qualifications. The Government have also funded the development of a family sign language programme, known as the I-Sign programme.

We have made so much progress since BSL was first recognised by Ministers on a non-statutory basis in 2003 and since the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty brought with them an expectation of "reasonable adjustment" on the part of public sector organisations. I have a degree of experience of that as a general practitioner, but I recognise that it is far from acceptable on some occasions. Family members can attend to help to interpret and that may be appropriate in some circumstances, but I have experienced times when the service has not quite been what it should be. The digital opportunities that have arisen from the pandemic will quite possibly assist in that respect, and the Bill will help towards those objectives.

In addition to recognising BSL as a language of Great Britain in its own right, the Bill will require the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to issue guidance to Departments on the promotion and facilitation of BSL in the public sector. It will also place a duty on the Cabinet Office to report on the promotion of BSL in ministerial Departments at least every three years. There is a strong preference for the full engagement of the devolved Administrations to ensure that the practical outcomes of the Bill are enjoyed nationwide, and I hope that the Minister will be able to assure the House that that is the intention.

The intention is that the DWP will establish a non-statutory board, the British Sign Language council, to promote and advise on use of the language. The board would have the remit to issue guidelines via the Secretary of State that public bodies should take account of.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the great successes of the last few years has been helping to encourage people with disabilities into employment? In putting the board through the DWP, there should be an extra driver to help people who are deaf into employment in future.

Dr Davies: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and I was about to acknowledge that in my final comments.

The proposals are reasonable and represent a further step to full recognition and integration of BSL in our diverse society. They could lead to an increase in the number of interpreters and a reduction in the jobs gap with non-disabled people. The Bill has the support of the British Deaf Association, the Royal National Institute for Deaf People, the Government and hon. Members on both sides of the House. I am delighted to add my voice to the support for the Bill, which will help to secure the role and status of BSL in communities across the country.

1.10 pm

Jane Hunt (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies). I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on this phenomenal achievement. I also thank the Minister, whose laser-like focus and winning smile has, I suspect, contributed to getting the Bill to this point.

I understand that 11 million people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing. We know that deaf people are more likely to have poor mental health, with up to 50% of deaf and hard of hearing people suffering from poor mental health compared with 25% of the general population. Sadly, they are also more likely to be unemployed, with only 65% of working-age deaf people in employment.

It is vital that we do everything we can to ensure that neither deafness nor being hard of hearing is a barrier to participating in society, entering and remaining in employment, and accessing services. That is particularly true for the about 87,000 BSL users who are deaf and use BSL as their first primary language. As the hon. Member for West Lancashire has highlighted, they often have to fight hard every day to feel heard and listened to.

I am pleased that action has already been taken to help to improve the experiences of deaf people and the hard of hearing, with the Government formally recognising British Sign Language as a language in its own right in 2003, and making provision for accessing services by users of BSL in equalities legislation and the public sector equality duty. Rightly, employers, service providers and public bodies must provide services in BSL when it is reasonable to do so. I am pleased that the Government led by example by making public health information available in many alternative formats, including BSL, during the covid-19 outbreak.

More broadly, BSL may also be offered in schools as part of the school curriculum. I understand that the Department for Education is working to introduce a GCSE in BSL as soon as possible. I look forward to reading the Government's consultation on the draft subject content when it is published.

Given the ongoing problems that many deaf and hard of hearing people face, however, it is clear that more needs to be done. The Bill is a great step in the right direction. Ensuring that BSL has a legal status and that guidance is issued to all Government Departments on how they should accommodate the use of BSL in each of their responsibilities will not only improve the lives of users, but help to bring awareness to the issues that the community faces and facilitate change across society. Therefore, I will be supporting it today.

I hope that the debate, the Bill and the "BSL Act Now!" campaign will encourage more people to take up BSL in much the same way as Rose Ayling-Ellis's fantastic win on "Strictly Come Dancing", which I watched every single week. I understand that it led to a phenomenal rise in people searching for information about sign language and signing up for free training programmes.

All that being said, I understand from one of my constituents that there is a national shortage of BSL interpreters, which often leads to difficulties for users who rely on them to access legal or medical services. As a result, I have been told that the deaf community have taken it upon themselves to set up community groups and act as interpreters for one another. I understand there is one in the north-west called Signalise. However, if the Bill passes, there will be even greater demand for interpreters. I will be grateful to hear from the Minister about the Government's plans to increase interpreter provision. As the hon. Member for West Lancashire said, let us let loose the talent of deaf people.

I would like to take the opportunity to talk about an issue faced by another constituent, who has suffered substantial hearing loss as an adult but is not a BSL user and instead relies on lip reading and facial expressions. My constituent was recently an in-patient in hospital and, understandably, was concerned that the skills and techniques they had developed to manage their hearing loss frequently could not be used when people wearing face masks approached in groups, stood in difficult-to-see positions and even asked questions in the dark in the middle of the night. That was incredibly distressing and frustrating.

My constituent pointed out that, had serious medical matters needed to be discussed, that could have substantially impacted on their safety and recovery. I therefore urge the Government to look more broadly at the issues faced by those who are not BSL users but who face very similar communication issues. In conclusion, I say to the Minister regarding the Bill: *[In British Sign Language: "Yes, please."]*

1.16 pm

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): I start by thanking the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) for introducing the Bill. It is a remarkable thing for a private Member's Bill to affect so many lives so positively. I echo the comments of some of her colleagues; I think her mum and dad will be incredibly proud of what she is doing. I also thank the Minister. I have had the privilege of being on two of her Bill Committees, and to describe her as just being on top of her brief would be to do her a serious misjustice.

[Chris Clarkson]

I am a linguist. We have had several of them in the Chamber but they all seem to have disappeared just as I started speaking. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Marco Longhi) talked down his inestimable talents, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sara Britcliffe) is, I think, the only Member of Parliament who speaks Catalan. I decided I wanted to do something different in *Hansard* when I first got here, and so far I have managed to include German, French, Japanese, Latin, Arabic, Farsi, Hebrew, Māori, Welsh and, this morning, Icelandic.

Communication is something I am very passionate about, and I want to drill down into that. The Bill is about not just fairness, although fairness is at its very heart, but recognition. It is about how we recognise and understand one another, and understand that some people communicate differently but are no less valuable to our national conversation. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland)—who has also gone—mentioned, the issue does not affect just the hard of hearing community. My mum worked in a special school and some of her greatest joy came when she learnt Makaton, which is another form of sign language used to communicate with profoundly disabled children. For some of those children, it was the only way of getting their message across. It is an awful way of phrasing it, but to be heard in that way is incredibly important.

I want to reflect on a personal musing. There are two best ways to understand people. One is food. As hon. Members can tell from the increasingly structural nature of my suits, I have leant into that one quite severely. The other is language. It informs how people behave in the world and how people view things. I was very lucky to grow up in Germany, so I grew up bilingual. I think in two languages. That has definitely shaped the way I view the world. I assume—I am sure the hon. Member for West Lancashire will correct me if I am wrong—that it must be the same, and it gives us a different perspective on the world. I have to simultaneously think twice, and to understand and reason things. That causes me to see other people's perspectives more clearly.

There are at least 90,000 people in this country who see the world differently and have not been recognised by this Parliament, which is a serious misjustice. We are also addressing the fact that, as a community, we are not looking to our own heritage. As we have heard, British Sign Language is over 200 years old. We have almost disregarded a part of that heritage. That is phenomenal, especially considering some of the ignorant attitudes towards disability in the past: we had this wonderful way of communication that grew naturally, with its own grammar, syntax and community within our community, and we have not been addressing that. As a member of different minority community, I know how badly that hurts. It really does hurt not to be recognised and treated the same just because of who you are and how you choose to live. I will not labour the point because there have been some far more eloquent speeches than mine, but I will add another little language to my list by saying to the hon. Lady, *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you, and well done."]*.

1.20 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson), whose eloquent speech was absolutely joyous. I was touched by the deeply moving speech by the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). I loved her moving stories about her hero dad, the courage of her mother, and her support for her mother.

As the hon. Lady said, today is a momentous day, and I am absolutely delighted to support her Bill, which will have a transformational impact for more than 150,000 deaf people in the UK who use British Sign Language. She should be incredibly proud of having introduced the Bill. I agree with her that we should seize this moment and ensure the Bill's safe passage. I have been contacted by constituents about this issue, and I know that the passage of the Bill is as important to them as it is to me.

By granting BSL the same legal recognition and associated protections as the current six protected languages in the UK, the Bill will ensure that deaf people are afforded equal status with everyone else. That can only be a good thing and it is the right thing. The creation of a British Sign Language council is a vital component of the Bill that will have a significant positive impact in promoting and protecting the use of British Sign Language. It is important that that council is inclusive and representative, which is why I welcome the Bill's proposal that it should be comprised of a majority of deaf signers. It is imperative that any guidance be created in direct consultation with the deaf community.

Many years ago, I did lots of voluntary work with a group called Birmingham PHAB Camps, a charity for both physically handicapped and able-bodied children, and we used to go to a variety of facilities during amazing one-week holidays. I was shocked that at the end of the holidays, I was asked how we should change the facilities so that those with disabilities would have better holidays. They should not have been asking me; they should have asked the people with disabilities. That is why the Bill's proposal for an inclusive and representative British Sign Language council is so important. It is about asking the right people what they want and how we need to deliver it—they are the ones with the right answers.

BSL is the preferred language of more than 87,000 deaf people in the UK, which is why it is so important that it is made an official British language going forward. As others have mentioned, if the amazing Rose Ayling-Ellis of "EastEnders" and "Strictly Come Dancing" has taught us anything, it is that BSL is an expressive and absolutely beautiful language. We have all seen it every Saturday night on "Strictly"—it seems my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Jane Hunt) has seen every show in—I suspect—every single series since its conception. Long may that continue.

BSL is distinctive, and it utilises grammar, handshapes, facial expressions, gestures and body language to convey meaning. To some extent, it is more beautiful than how we speak. That was demonstrated every Saturday when we watched the beautiful Rose do her most amazing dances, and particularly when the music stopped. We did not need music; it was just absolutely compelling.

BSL was recognised as an official language by the UK Government on 18 March 2003, but it does not have the legal status of languages that have been accorded protected language status. That is bizarre, and I do not know why it has taken so long, but I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging that the measures will go forward.

I welcome the Bill's requirement for the Secretary of State to issue guidance to ensure that BSL is accommodated in the responsibilities of Government Departments and public bodies. It is important that they are accountable for the actions they take to promote the use of BSL. That is why the Bill's inclusion of a requirement for Ministers to report on their use and facilitation of BSL is so important.

The Bill builds on the public sector equality duty and existing equalities legislation in establishing a level playing field for the deaf community. I am proud of the progress this country has made. Throughout the pandemic, public health information and Downing Street press briefings have been made available in BSL, and I am pleased that the Cabinet Office is currently working to extend similar provisions to all future broadcasts from No. 10.

There are at least 50,000 deaf children in the UK and there has been tremendous progress in promoting and facilitating the use of BSL in schools. Many schools teach it in their curriculums, and I welcome the Department for Education's work to introduce a GCSE—I was going to say O-level—in BSL as soon as possible. I know the Government aim to consult the public on the draft content of the qualifications this year, and I encourage people in my Stourbridge constituency to take part.

Beyond early education, there has been substantial progress in supporting adult learners after leaving school. The adult education budget and the advanced learner loan provide funding for people aged 19 and over to obtain qualifications in British Sign Language. With Government funding, the National Deaf Children's Society has developed the "I-sign" sign language programme for families to learn BSL. It is an incredible free resource, and I urge people to take full advantage. I note that some of the hon. Members present have probably been using that service to learn some of their signing, and I think we are all keen to follow up on that and do more, so that we can go out to our constituents and use BSL. It is so important.

I welcome the Government's commitment to reviewing the access to work scheme. It is vital that deaf people receive equal education and employment opportunities, which is why the review will ensure that Government-funded workplace adjustments enable BSL users to receive the support they need. My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton mentioned people potentially feeling isolated and that they are in a minority, which is why it is so important that those going into a work situation can feel confident that it is an inclusive environment. I think that is what he was alluding to, and we need that inclusivity.

We are making progress on Government policy. I have mentioned the sign interpretation when we do covid announcements on television and the move on future announcements from Downing Street, but the provision for BSL users to access services is covered by equalities legislation and the public sector equality duty. Employers, service providers and public bodies must provide services in BSL when it is reasonable to do so. I have mentioned the Cabinet Office, but organisations such as the Equality and Human Rights Commission have suggested we should go further, for example by including a live BSL interpreter on set.

Schools can choose to offer sign language in their curriculum, as I have already mentioned, and include it as part of their extracurricular activities programme. I will be going around to my schools and having those conversations to ensure that that does take place. BSL forms part of the non-statutory local flexibility offer and qualifications are either fully funded if the learner is unemployed or participating in the low wage trial, or co-funded depending on the age, prior achievement and employment status of the learner. BSL qualifications at level 3 and above can be funded through an advanced learner loan, which is brilliant to hear, and the Government have funded the development of a family sign language programme. I am told it is freely available at the National Deaf Children's Society family sign language website, for those who are listening.

There have also been recent parliamentary initiatives: the Deaf Awareness Week in 2021 and an early-day motion calling on the Government to introduce legislation giving legal status to British Sign Language, which received about 50 signatures. There is growing momentum behind this issue, which I very much hope will conclude today. Another motion on teaching of BSL in schools was tabled in September 2020 and has gained significant ground. There have been many people supporting this Bill: the British Deaf Association, the Royal Institute for Deaf People and of course Rose Ayling-Ellis, the winner of "Strictly Come Dancing", who commented:

> "BSL is not an official language, legally, in this country. Which is outrageous. Because it is such a beautiful, rich language with its own structure, its own grammar, its own slang. It's even got accents."

I feel that it is important to recognise the role that charities have played in supporting the deaf community. Deafscope in Stourbridge is a fantastic local organisation that provides a directory of deaf-friendly and deaf-owned businesses. It is brilliant. It improves accessibility for deaf people and gives deaf-friendly and deaf-owned businesses a platform to promote their services. That local success story was created by a deaf couple, Kerry and Ishtiaq Hussain, and is shaped by their personal experiences of isolation and loneliness growing up deaf. Their innovative company has had a tremendous impact on the deaf community, helping to combat feelings of exclusion by connecting deaf people to inclusive opportunities.

I know that the Bill will be welcomed by Deafscope, as it has been by other deaf-led organisations. Significant progress has been made in recent years in promoting and facilitating the use of British Sign Language, spurred on by brilliant grassroots organisations such as Deafscope. However, there is still much more for us to do, and the Bill is a big step forward in enabling us to do that.

The Bill will ensure that British Sign Language and its users finally have legal parity. I thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire so much for bringing it to the House—I know that everyone else here does, too—and I thank the Minister for supporting it. My hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) spoke about the importance of inclusivity and accessibility in society. That is so important. I talked about it in my

[Suzanne Webb]

maiden speech, and it is something that I very much want to work on. If there is anything I can do to support work with BSL to improve inclusiveness, I am more than happy to help. *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you."]*

1.31 pm

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): Debates in this place can often be fairly depressing or disappointing. On Wednesday, Mr Speaker had to reprimand the House about the bellowing that went on at Prime Minister's questions. I have no idea how the BSL interpreter is supposed to cope with that. But sometimes it is very different, and on two other occasions this week I have had cause to think what an amazing privilege it is to listen to debates. They can be very different; we hear all sorts of things about each other. Who knew that the Chair of the Treasury Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), is a Blue Badge guide, or that my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Chris Clarkson) speaks Farsi and Māori?

But debates can also be very serious and moving. I want to quickly mention yesterday's debate on Holocaust Memorial Day, which I sat through. There were some incredibly powerful and very personal speeches. I was particularly struck by the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) talking about his family and the effect of the holocaust there. So, sometimes we are human and we behave ourselves and speak very powerfully and well, and we have really seen that today. I pay tribute, as everybody has, to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). She is a tribute to her parents, as everybody has said, and this Bill is a great tribute to her and her life's work. I really congratulate her on it.

The line in the hon. Lady's speech that struck me most powerfully was her point that we should never write people off. That is the essence of a just society—we do not write people off. It strikes me that the value of full participation is twofold. First, from the perspective of rights—particularly, in this case, those of deaf people—it is absolutely right that we make all efforts to ensure that deaf people can participate fully in all the activities of society, whether those are leisure activities, education, opportunities for work or healthcare; we heard a powerful point about the role of communication in access to healthcare and advice. The second value is the benefit to society. The hon. Lady told a powerful story about her father and his work as a plasterer, not a joiner, and the enormous benefit if we properly include all our citizens.

It has been fascinating to hear about BSL today, and to read about it. I did not know about how old it is—it has been developing for centuries—or the enormous range that the language has. Rather like English itself, it has huge flexibility and range. My hon. Friend the Member for Stourbridge (Suzanne Webb) just mentioned the beauty that the language has; we can all see that when we see people signing. I was not aware, either, that there are different accents in BSL. I wonder whether the hon. Member for West Lancashire would like to intervene and demonstrate Merseyside signing. I do not know whether Scouser signing is a thing, but I would be interested to see it. Failing that, I know that the Minister has learned BSL herself, and I look forward to her wind-up in thick Norfolk BSL. I congratulate them both on the Bill.

Rosie Cooper: I think everybody would be so amazed by how many dialects there are and how a single word can be so different just across this small country. As I grew up, I learned sign language as my first language. In my dad's later years, every time I said something, he would go, *[In British Sign Language: "Stop. It has all changed. Now it is this."]* I get to this old age, and I know that even I am not expert at it yet.

Danny Kruger: I think the hon. Lady lost her accent when she came to London. I offer sincere congratulations to her and the Minister. I am delighted to support the Bill.

1.35 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I should say, *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you."]* I start by congratulating the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). We speak a lot in this Chamber in conventional ways and according to protocol, but I would like to show her that this Bill goes above protocol and convention. I say to her, *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you. I am proud"]* to be part of this debate and to be in the Chamber for it.

On a Friday, our proceedings often seem to become about protocol and procedure, but this Bill transcends that kind of debate, because we are in agreement and we are united. It is one of those moments where we can be proud to be doing something that we came into this House to do, which is to make people's lives better than they already are, and I am very proud to be part of that. I also pay tribute to the Minister. When two powerful, formidable women get together, we can relish the results. It is a pleasure to be a small part of that.

The hon. Member for West Lancashire summed it up when she called this a momentous moment. It is momentous, but it is also timely. Many Members have already spoken about Rose Ayling-Ellis and the issues of communication during a pandemic, where we have literally seen people disadvantaged by the means of communication and being unable to fully participate in that.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) mentioned "Vision On", which takes me back, too—I go back a little bit further to that. I will also mention trailblazers such as Evelyn Glennie, who for many years as a percussionist has shown what deaf and partially hearing people can do when they are allowed and have the ability to play a full role in society in all its glory. I learned about Helen Keller at school, who was blind and deaf and was a huge champion of disabled people, of women and of workers' rights. It is a truism, but given the chance, deaf people can play as much of a part—a powerful part—in society as anyone else.

Like many people, I have learned a lot through the process of preparing for this debate and through listening to the debate. I had no idea how old British Sign Language is, but when we start to unpack it and think about it, the desire to communicate is the most basic human need. We are no more and no less of a member of the animal kingdom, and animals communicate in many non-verbal ways, as do we, such as our facial or

physical gestures. I gesticulate a lot when I speak, so we already do it, and while British Sign Language was recognised as a valid means of communication to some extent in 2003, the Bill takes a further step, and that is welcome and logical. It should not surprise anyone; it is part of a progression.

We should acknowledge that more people use BSL than use the languages that are already legally recognised, such as Welsh, Scots, Gaelic, Cornish and the other languages that make up the rich fabric of communication in this country. They are all very valuable, and it is an absolute pleasure that we have another beautiful language to add to that cornucopia of means of communication.

But of course it is about inclusivity. I think it was a week or two ago when we debated a Bill that would enable disabled people to use taxi and cab services. Step by step we are making the right choices and legislation. We are going in the right direction. Of course we can always do more and go quicker, but this is the right direction and the sort of thing we want to see.

Lilian Greenwood: Does the hon. Lady agree that when we provide access for disabled people, we often improve public services for everyone? For example, the provision of audio-visual announcements on buses is helpful for disabled people, but it makes it easier for everyone to use them. That is a good reason for improving inclusivity.

Julie Marson: The hon. Lady pre-empts something I was going to reflect on, because I completely agree. We should not silo people so that we do something just for that group of people. It enriches and helps us all when we do this kind of thing. Twelve million people in this country are hard of hearing in some way, although they might not call themselves disabled. My father is very hard of hearing. He uses subtitles, hearing aids, and he cannot go into restaurants because he cannot distinguish language and conversation. It strikes me that by bringing British Sign Language more into the mainstream and recognising it legally, we promote it and give it more prominence. Perhaps some of those 12 million people who are affected by some kind of hearing loss might think, "Well here's another option. I can communicate in a different way. Just as when I travel abroad I might try and order something in Spain in a different language, perhaps I can progress my communication skills in a different way." The reach and impact of such a measure could be much greater than even we in the Chamber envisage. I am proud to support the Bill, and I again thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire for introducing it.

1.42 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Julie Marson) for her speech, and in particular to the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). I was moved throughout her speech—I think it was the most moving speech I have heard since I came to this place. It was incredibly powerful, and included her background and her parents. She is proud of her parents, and her parents absolutely have a right to be proud of her. While you were making that speech I thought, "This is what politics is about". You are bringing experiences from your life to here—*[Interruption.]* Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a very personal thing and it is difficult not to say "you". The hon. Lady comes here bringing her experience from her life, background and childhood, and turns it into legislation to help people and, as she said, to pay forward the benefits of her upbringing to help other people in the community. I am struck by many of the examples she gave about how her parents dealt with things, the first language she learned, and particularly that she had to be the interpreter for her parents when dealing with the health service. There were also the anecdotes about being a student, studying for exams and having to rush out between exams to be an interpreter for her mother. She said it was not right that that had to happen, and I fully agree.

I agree with several of my colleagues who have said that one of the great things about this debate is that it is cross-party and consensual. It is a positive thing and we can make a real difference to a wide number of different people. That is what the House of Commons should be about. As the hon. Lady said, debates such as the one we had on Wednesday at Prime Minister's questions, when everyone was baying at each other, are a bit depressing. These debates are the diametric opposite of that.

It was not until I became an MP that I realised quite how widely BSL was used. I saw two of my councillors—neither of them deaf or hard of hearing—speaking to each other in BSL, and I was slightly surprised. One of them, like the hon. Member for West Lancashire, grew up with parents who were deaf, and the other worked with deaf people. They used it to communicate comfortably with each other.

As we have heard, 1.2 million people in the UK have quite strong hearing loss, of more than 65 decibels, and there are 50,000 deaf children; 87,000 deaf people have BSL as their preferred language and 151,000 can use it overall. That is not including the various interpreters and so on.

As we have heard—I have really appreciated the contributions today—BSL really is a full language. It is not just something that you can communicate with. It has different accents, it has humour, it has gestures, it has all the richness of any other language. It was recognised officially in 2003, but it is as rich and strong as any other language that is officially recognised. Clearly, public awareness of BSL has grown a lot in recent years and decades, not least due to Rose Ayling-Ellis winning "Strictly Come Dancing". It has been far more widely used. We mentioned PMQs, and the covid briefings from No.10 had sign language interpretation. All that is good. The hon. Member for West Lancashire pointed out how far we have come—that is the positive side—in recent years, but clearly we need to go an awful lot further and recognise it as an official language. As many others have said, I am surprised that it has taken quite so long to do so. I welcome the fact that the Government support the Bill and that the Department for Education is looking at a GCSE in BSL. Maybe I will be tempted to learn it myself; I certainly would have done when I was at that stage.

It is obviously important that legally recognising BSL as an official language is not the end of the matter. We need the council that is in the Bill to help drive it forward. We need to make sure that all public services, as widely as possible, give full access to BSL interpretation so that people in the hon. Lady's position in the future

[Anthony Browne]

do not have the frustrations that she had. We must make sure that people who are hard of hearing or deaf who use BSL have full access to all the services, can lead a full life in terms of employment and do not face any of the barriers that currently exist. The Bill will be a big step towards that full equality and inclusivity of deaf people in the rest of society.

This has been a fantastic debate with very positive and powerful speeches. I have certainly learned a lot. One of the things I have learned today is how to say "thank you" in BSL. [*In British Sign Language*: *"Thank you."*]

1.47 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne) and I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). We all feel that the speeches that people make here when they bring their own personal story are so powerful. Her speech illuminated some of the challenges that the deaf community face, in a way that none of the rest of us who have not personally experienced those challenges could do. So I really thank the hon. Lady for that, and for introducing this important Bill.

I also thank the Minister. As someone who has worked in government in the past, I know that the ambition to do good things often meets the challenge of the immovable force of the machine, and I can only imagine the amount of times that the practicalities, difficulties and cost implementations have been put to her. I welcome both the Minister and the hon. Lady for pushing through and coming to such a quick resolution to get the Bill to this stage.

I was privileged to be offered a course in BSL when I was at school. I am afraid to admit and slightly embarrassed that at the moment my ability is only to sign "rainbow", but it offered me a window into the life of the deaf community and some of the challenges that they face, but also the huge talents that they have to offer this country. We have heard about the 90,000 people in this country who are primary BSL users and the 150,000 people who use the language, as well as a lot of people who have hearing loss. I am not sure if there is an MP who has made a speech in full in BSL in this place, but this is a brilliant moment for all of us to share some of the stories of our constituents who might otherwise not be able to be heard in this place.

My constituent Janet from Caterham, who recently moved to East Surrey from Nottingham to be closer to her children, has struggled to find a job since relocating. She told me she would much rather not be supported by benefits but has found it challenging to find a job due to her communication needs as a deaf BSL user. I therefore very much welcome the Bill in providing a duty to review the access-to-work scheme to ensure that BSL users receive the support they need. Listening to the hon. Member for West Lancashire's story of her own father, and that experience of being locked out of a workplace when he had so much to offer, really resonated with me and will resonate with Janet, too.

My constituent Robyn from Oxted asked me to support the Bill. She told me about her experience of supporting deaf students in school, and how they improved in leaps and bounds when the right support was given. In researching the Bill, I heard of instances where people could not take their preferred exams because the facilities were not there. How opposite that is to our ambition for the education system if we do not allow people to learn the things they want to learn. I also support the duty under the Bill to examine how we increase the number of BSL interpreters and access to BSL interpretation across all our public services.

I very much welcome the thrust of the Bill, which will increase the promotion, protection and facilitation of BSL. Why do we need that step when BSL legislation came in a couple of decades ago? Currently, it is rightly a requirement for institutions to promote BSL where it is reasonable, but under the Bill, across Departments, Government must be not just reactive but proactive about ensuring access. That is so important.

It is also important that we think about each individual's right to have access to essential information across different areas of public services, from employment to education to health. I spoke about the young person not being able to take their preferred GCSEs. I have also heard instances—we have heard very moving stories today—of people not being able to interpret health advice, whether during the pandemic or during a medical interview, and someone with a very close family connection having to interpret medical results for them. As one who comes from a family of doctors, I know how unintelligible medical results can be. I cannot imagine how difficult it is to have to explain a very difficult diagnosis to a family member; that is not something anyone should have to do. If someone has a booked appointment, we should be able to provide support, particularly in those very difficult instances.

I was very touched and moved by the hon. Member for West Lancashire when she talked about her father being written off. Clearly, he was an exceptionally talented man. Watching someone plastering and then understanding how to do it is not something I would be able to achieve, so I can only imagine the depths of his talents. We as a country should not write anyone off. I am passionate about creating a second-chance society. The Bill and some of the contributions today have shown us that some people do not get a first chance in society. This country is in a very challenging time and there is so much that we have to rebuild post-pandemic. We cannot afford to gloss over the talents of any of our people. We need everyone to achieve all they want to if we are to get ourselves back on our feet.

I was very supportive of BSL being added to the six indigenous UK languages. The history and culture of BSL is so important to recognise. It has been around for hundreds of years.

Suzanne Webb: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. What is coming out of the debate is that British Sign Language has the richness of any other language. We are all passionate to understand it and to learn it ourselves.

Claire Coutinho: I agree that hearing about the richness of the language has been a joyous part of today's debate, as well as hearing about the different grammar, accents and slang. I am glad that it will now be added to our list of indigenous languages.

On that note, I conclude by agreeing with all hon. Members who have said that it is important for the deaf community to be listened to and understood. I thank the hon. Member for West Lancashire and I am sure that her work will provide a rainbow to the deaf community. *[In British Sign Language: "Rainbow."]*

1.55 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) on her tenacity and organisation in getting the Bill to where it is. I am delighted to support the Bill to give BSL the legal status and public awareness that it needs to ensure that deaf people have full and equal access to education, employment, public services such as the NHS, information and legal processes, and that they can play a greater role in their communities more widely. I am particularly happy that the Bill has received Government support, as the Minister informed us yesterday.

Since 2003, disabled people's organisations and disability charities have not stopped campaigning for BSL's legal status. I thank the activists and organisations who have continued to fight to make it happen, such as the British Deaf Association, RNID and the Royal Association for Deaf people. In my constituency, the local Lanarkshire Deaf Club has been vocal in calling for such a Bill to raise and protect the status of the language in Scotland and the UK.

As has been mentioned, the Scottish Government have used their devolved powers to promote the use of BSL in Scotland and to engage with the deaf community to develop the first British Sign Language national strategy, which I commend to the Minister; I am sure that she is aware of it. Often, we do not need to reinvent the wheel and I am sure that she will take lots of good points from it and bring them forward. As part of the national strategy, the Scottish Government set up the BSL national advisory group to represent the views of BSL users and I am delighted about the British Sign Language council. Everything works better if lived experience is used at its foundation.

UK-wide legislation is needed, however, to ensure that British Sign Language gets legal protection as a language in its own right, and I am happy that that is now happening. It is an indigenous language of Scotland and the UK and, as such, deserves to finally have the legal recognition accorded to Gaelic and Welsh.

The Bill provides a great opportunity to break down barriers; to begin to create a more inclusive, equal and fair society for deaf people across the four nations; and for signers to be prominent in the public arena, as they are in Scotland. It is almost impossible for them not to be—even my party's annual conference is signed front and centre, which is really useful and good. We need more inclusion across the public sector and I am pleased that the Bill will do that. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire again.

1.58 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): How wonderful that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, as you represent Doncaster School for the Deaf, which is one of the oldest deaf schools in the country since 1829. How wonderful to be here to speak on the Bill on behalf of the Opposition with my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper). As she said, she is not famed for her patience, but she is famed for her determination. How wonderful, too, to have been one of the Merseyside kids who learned to finger spell, as I did in the early 1990s. Until today, I never realised that I had her to thank for it.

The stories that my hon. Friend tells of her mum and dad echo across this country, in which working-class talent has too often been written off because of a loss not on their part, but as part of a structural flaw in our society. Every step, like today, on the journey towards equality offers us all a better hope of using all our talents not just for individual gain, but in service of our wonderful country.

I want to pay tribute, as so many Members across the House have, to all those who have campaigned long and hard for a British Sign Language Bill that would provide the legal recognition that the language deserves. I say to all those who have led campaigns up and down the country, right across the United Kingdom, that their potential success, which we begin today, is a credit to their work. I know that all Members join me in that thanks and celebration. At the last two general elections, the Labour party manifesto committed to legislating for a BSL Act and to giving the legal recognition that the language deserves, and we are very pleased that the Government are backing the Bill today.

All too often, as we have heard, deaf people and BSL users are not provided with the support that they need. Throughout society, we impose far too many barriers on the use of British Sign Language that need not be there. As a result, the deaf community live with worse outcomes and life chances that could be so much better. That includes the failure to provide the correct support in schools, which harms children's outcomes, or the inability of NHS services to provide qualified and registered BSL interpreters at appointments. That means, as we have heard so often, that people are put in situations that they do not want to be in, where family and friends have to act as an interpreter, which is just not appropriate, or people leave appointments unclear about a diagnosis or how they should take their medication. Those clear examples demonstrate why the Bill matters.

Legal recognition can be a powerful moment to raise the status of British Sign Language across the UK, but the Bill can do much more than that. The Opposition fully support the mechanisms in the Bill to publish guidance to Government Departments and public bodies and give them clear, objective standards.

I will not say much more except to agree with the many and good contributions that have been made. It would be great if the Minister said a bit about how the Government will implement the Bill. I know that many in the deaf community will want to hear her say how she will continue her work with them to make this the beginning of a journey that will fundamentally change our country.

The Bill commits Departments to review their implementation of the guidance as set out in the Bill, and it would be great if the Minister also confirmed some details about publishing that so that we can see the path ahead and, as has been mentioned, how it will interact with the national disability strategy. We also want to see the Bill progress swiftly through Committee and make progress in Parliament without delay—

[Alison McGovern]

[Interruption.] The Secretary of State is nodding and I thank her for it. People outside this House will see our joint determination on this issue.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for West Ham (Ms Brown), who made excellent contributions from the Opposition side of the House, and to all the Members who have joined together today to send a message about the change that we want to see. I want to say how proud we are of the deaf community for winning this fight and for the journey that our country will go on.

I say, lastly, to my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire that Merseyside today is very proud of her. Atheist though I am, I cannot comment on the Almighty, but I can say that all kinds of Scousers, plastic and otherwise —that is, people from Birkenhead—are exceedingly proud of her. I know that if her mum and dad were in the Public Gallery right now looking down on her, they simply could not be more proud. Let her example spur on every single campaigner for equality in our country. Sometimes progress happens; this is what it looks like.

2.4 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Chloe Smith): I join many others in thanking the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and congratulating her on all the work she has done to bring forward the Bill, working with me to do so. I see, loud and clear, her commitment and dedication in championing BSL, for the reasons she has set out so eloquently. I am humbled to join her in doing that. We both have personal experiences of deafness in our families, and we share that passion for change. We hope that, through the Bill, we will see an increase in the use of BSL by everybody in society and a better deal for deaf people.

The Bill will recognise BSL as a language in its own right, and place a duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to issue guidance on the promotion and facilitation of BSL. It will also require the DWP to report on information supplied by ministerial Departments regarding their use of BSL. As is now widely known, I am pleased to confirm that the Bill has the Government's full support, because, among many other good reasons I shall come on to, we share a set of goals and ambitions that is reflected in our national disability strategy. I am sure that all of us here today want to be able to make such change. I am also pleased, Madam Deputy Speaker, that today's proceedings in this place are available with BSL interpretation, as that is only right, and I hope that more can be done here, with Parliament being a beacon.

The Government are committed to supporting all people with a disability, including deaf people, to lead fulfilled and independent lives. For deaf people, that must include the ability to communicate with others through BSL or other forms of deaf communication. Across the UK, as many as 150,000 people use some form of BSL every day, according to the British Deaf Association—that is thousands of our fellow citizens—and for many it is their first language and main form of communication, as has been explained. However, ignorance and indifference remain, and that is what we want to tackle. The vocabulary and syntax of BSL do not replicate spoken English and many deaf citizens have a lower reading comprehension age than the general population, and too many deaf people in the UK still face social exclusion as a result of linguistic exclusion, affecting employment, education and access to healthcare. I am pleased to hear Members from around the Chamber make points on all of those valuable aspects.

This Government already recognise the importance of deaf people being supported and enabled to communicate through BSL where they wish to do so. I am glad that the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) is here today, because she made the point that recognition was given to BSL in a ministerial statement in 2003. In addition, the Equality Act 2010 already means that employers, service providers and public bodies should provide services in BSL when it is requested and reasonable to do so. We do not intend to make any changes to that Act, so that supporting architecture remains in place. However, individual BSL users can often find themselves not receiving the interpretation they need. The hon. Member for West Lancashire and campaigners are clear that more recognition and guidance is needed, and I agree.

I, too, am very grateful to all who have campaigned for the Bill and for sharing the challenges that BSL users face. I am pleased that we have been able to work together to give recognition and make real improvements to the communication options for deaf people. I also briefly wish to thank my officials, who have been working very hard to bring this about, and my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for his support in forging cross-party consensus for an important goal here today. Many hon. Members have come to the Chamber today especially to help their deaf constituents' voices be heard, which is magnificent.

Through the Bill, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will regularly report on what each relevant Department—those detailed in the schedule of the Bill—has done to promote or facilitate the use of BSL in their communications with the public. Part 2 sets that out in more detail. Such communications could include public announcements, the publication of any plan, strategy or consultation document, or any activities promoting the work of that Department, for example, press conferences. Reporting on such things will give us a much better understanding of how BSL is used across Government and how we can continue to improve communication for BSL users.

The Secretary of State will also be required to produce guidance on the promotion and facilitation of the use of BSL, as set out in part 3. Such guidance may include advice not only on reporting requirements but best practice for BSL communications, and even case studies to set out the value of BSL provision.

I note that Members from Wales—notably my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie)—contributed to the debate. I wish to make it clear that we absolutely share their intention to support deaf and disabled people throughout the entirety of the UK, including in their constituencies. We are working behind the scenes to establish that, in the appropriate way in respect of the devolution settlements, in the Bill. I refer Members to the territorial extent set out in the explanatory notes. I also acknowledge the contribution of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and welcome her support.

In the lead up to the debate, my Department and others have held a number of stakeholder forums to ensure that we understand the views and perspectives of disabled people. That work will continue as the Bill passes through Parliament. We are also going further: I am going to create a non-statutory board of British Sign Language users that can advise the Government on matters pertaining to BSL. I will of course let the House know more about all such aspects as time goes on.

To complement the approach in the Bill, we are developing a suite of non-statutory measures that will help to promote and facilitate the use of BSL. That work includes examining how we might increase the number of BSL interpreters, reviewing how we might work in DWP to ensure that the Access to Work fund helps BSL users, and aiming to update the national disability strategy to facilitate and promote BSL usage. I also acknowledge the wider work across Government to benefit BSL users, including the expansion of jury service, as noted by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for South Swindon (Sir Robert Buckland). I am very much looking forward to the development of a British Sign Language GCSE, which has been mentioned several times.

Let me end on a personal note. As many Members have said, this is a national moment: throughout the autumn, in popular culture, we saw the inspirational success of Rose Ayling-Ellis on "Strictly Come Dancing". From that, we see interest in BSL on the rise. The Bill is an important next step. We want to seize the moment to help to improve the lives of deaf people and those closest to them. It is a crucial step and will make a tangible difference in deaf people's everyday lives, not least because we will listen to deaf people about how that should be done.

Rose and her journey to glitterball glory have played a huge part, but many of us have personal stories in our back pockets. I am incredibly proud to support the Bill, which is very meaningful to me because I have a family member who is probably at home right now watching with the subtitles on. That is somebody who crashed out of the work that they loved because of increasing hearing loss. That is an example to me of somebody who spurs me on in the kind of work that we can do here in Parliament when we work together. When we find the important issues on which the might and power of Government can come together with personal stories and we can create change, we have a privileged opportunity for public service. I am proud to commend the Bill to the House.

2.13 pm

Rosie Cooper: Is it not fantastic that the Chamber has spoken with one voice today? It has been absolutely brilliant. I have enjoyed working with the Minister and her team. Look what a difference we have made by working together across the House. We have made a difference and we will make a difference.

On the behalf of the deaf community, I thank each and every Member for their support for the Bill. My dad would have loved to have been here today, as would all those campaigners who have gone before and upon whose shoulders we stand on this momentous day. Thank you, all. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"] *[In British Sign Language: "Thank you, all."]*

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No. 63).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper), the Minister and everybody involved in making the Bill happen. It has been a good day's work.

Business of the House Commission Bill

Second Reading

2.14 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a great pleasure to follow the debate on the very important Bill that has just received its Second Reading. It has indeed been a good day today: two other Bills have received their Third Readings. Let us continue that tradition, and pass this Bill to create a Business of the House Commission.

Before I begin my speech on the Bill, let me point out that regardless of anything I say about the Whips, I do like Whips, and I absolutely do not think that they bully or threaten anyone. However, this is about parliamentary sovereignty, so I apologise if the Whips take it in the wrong way.

Let me start with a little story:

"The House of Commons' historic functions were to vote money for governments to spend, and to scrutinise laws.

It now barely bothers with the first, and does the second extremely badly.

There was a time when legislation that had been formulated after months of civil service and ministerial deliberation was sent to the House of Commons which would pore over it, shape it, send it back, get it back, look at it again - and improve it some more.

Bill by bill. Clause by clause. Line by line.

Every piece of legislation would be put under intense scrutiny.

Is it legally sound? Will it be effective? Is it worth the cost?

Compare that to today.

Let me take you on the journey of a piece of legislation as it passes through the modern House of Commons.

It's likely to have been dreamt up on the sofa of Number Ten.

A Bill gets drafted.

It's sent to the House for a couple of hours of routine debate among a few MPs.

Then the bell rings, the whip gets cracked and suddenly, out of nowhere, all these other MPs turn up to vote.

More often than not, they don't even know what they're voting for.

The Bill limps through.

Then it goes to the Standing Committee.

Their duty is to look at the details clause by clause.

But it's packed full of people that the whips put there.

So, surprise, surprise, the Government rarely loses the vote on any of the individual points of detailed scrutiny.

And then it's back to the House to do it all again - debate, bell and then vote to wave the legislation through.

Every Bill now has a 'programme motion' setting out how much time can be spent scrutinising and debating each part.

These are automatic guillotines, and the time allowed for scrutiny is set in advance, before anyone can see whether or not a particular issue is contentious or complex.

Watching a minister in the Commons drawing out one point for an hour to fill the time, to an audience of dozing backbenchers - this is not accountability.

How has the mother of all Parliaments turned itself into such a pliant child?"

Can anyone in the House put up their hand and tell me who made that speech? It was the best speech that that Prime Minister ever made. It was made by David Cameron, and it was made in 2009, before he became Prime Minister. It is headed "Fixing Broken Politics", and it continues in great detail. It is a wonderful speech. It identifies exactly the problem that we have in our democracy, particularly that section about the Government's control over the timetable of this House.

Unfortunately, when David Cameron came to be Prime Minister, he seemed to have forgotten that speech. I thought it would be a good idea to read some novels, so I got hold of the manifestos of the three parties for the 2010 general election. Actually, I tell a lie: I got hold of two of them, because I could not find the Liberal Democrat one. Sorry about that. The Conservative manifesto is entitled "Invitation to Join the Government of Britain", and it is very well written. The Labour one, which has a much fancier cover, is called "A Future Fair For All". I ploughed my way through them. I got to page 67 of the Conservative manifesto, which refers to

"establishing a Backbench Business Committee to give the House of Commons more control over its own timetable"

and

"allowing MPs the time to scrutinise law effectively".

Very good. I looked up the Labour one, which says on page 93:

"To further strengthen our democracy and renew our constitution…A new politics also means strengthening the power of Parliament to hold the executive to account."

Brilliant, I thought.

In 2010, that all got blown away by the fact that there was a coalition Government. At that time, there was a bible, and any of us who lived through that period will know it was called—

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): It was called the coalition agreement.

Mr Bone: That was it. I have it here somewhere, unless somebody has pinched it. Here it is: "The Coalition: our programme for government". Let us remember that the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives got together; there were four wise men and they produced this brilliant document—it was, to be fair, how the coalition governed for that duration, and they pretty much stuck to it. There is one section I rather like and have always liked, on page 27:

"We will bring forward the proposals of the Wright Committee for reform to the House of Commons in full – starting with the proposed committee for management of backbench business. A House Business Committee, to consider government business, will be established by the third year of the Parliament."

Brilliant, I thought. We have created a Backbench Business Committee, but it seems that they forgot to move on to the House. I once asked my Chief Whip at the time when we were going to get that. He said, "Over my dead body." I could understand why the Chief Whip on our side does not want to give up power, but then I realised that the lot over there were not complaining because when their Chief Whip gets into power, he wants to do exactly the same.

The previous Speaker had a little word with me. He said, "Peter, I don't think this Government is going to bring this in." I said, "It's in the bible—it's there!" He said, "No, Peter, they're not going to do it." When I challenged the Government on it, they said there was no agreement. Hang on a minute. There was agreement from the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats,

who were a really powerful party in those days. There were 50-odd of them—certainly more than now. The Labour party was supportive of it, too. How could they argue that there was no agreement?

It is great to see the excellent Minister here. We have always agreed, including on my Bill on constituency boundaries, which went through. In fact, in Committee, she actually debated my Bill by accident and not the Government's Bill. All we are doing today is agreeing with something that everyone agreed with back then, when there was a crisis in Parliament.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case for the Government to give up control of the timing of Parliament.

Turkeys might talk about Christmas. They might promise Christmas at election time. They might write about dreams of Christmas in optimistic documents with other ends. But why, when it comes to it, would turkeys ever vote for Christmas? How could we persuade them to do so?

Mr Bone: The first reason they should do so—in this particular case—is that it is good for them. This change will happen only when there is a Government in crisis, which is why the Wright reforms produced the Backbench Business Committee and the election of Select Committee chairs; they were all magnificent reforms. We now have an opportunity. Some argue—I could not possibly put this forward—that there is a bit of a crisis going on in the Government at the moment. Maybe one reason is that they have taken Parliament for granted. They have not done what they are supposed to do.

Did the Leader of the House suggest earlier this week that we have a presidential system, and there might have to be a general election if there is a change of Prime Minister? Hang on, we do not have a presidential system, and I happen to know that if the President is removed, there is always someone to replace him—there is never an election, so I did not follow that logic. The real issue, which has driven me and many people in the House up the wall, not least Mr Speaker, is the announcement of Government policy to the media first. That is not behaving properly in this House. That is an extremely unsatisfactory state of affairs and it needs to be changed. If Downing Street is in a listening mood at the moment, which I think it may be, it needs to do something and stop that. I do not want to see any reports announced by "Sky News", rather than by a Minister at that Dispatch Box.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the issue goes even further than what he is describing, because we have the spectacle today of the Metropolitan police seeking to interfere with the content of Sue Gray's report on the specious justification that it wishes to prevent prejudice to a criminal investigation, yet the only law on the statute book in relation to prejudicing a criminal investigation relates to proceeds of crime legislation, which is certainly not what we are talking about at the moment?

Mr Bone: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I expect that explosions are going off in Downing Street at the fact that the Sue Gray report might be delayed or might never see the light of day. No one has been charged. We do not even know that a crime has been committed, and if it had, it would be something that is subject to a fine.

I appreciate that it is not the Government's decision in this case, but Sue Gray's. I would say to the Metropolitan police, "We understand what you are saying and your advice, but we are going to ignore it, because it is in the national interest to publish that report." I hope that will happen, but it cannot be blamed on the Whips—sorry, I said the Whips by mistake; I normally blame the Whips for everything. It cannot be blamed on the Government.

With this Bill to create the business of the House commission, we can go to where we should have gone before, which is to give Parliament the right to decide on the timetabling of business. It is not right that all the power lies with the Government. We have Backbench Business debates, and hasn't that Committee worked so well? We have had some really important debates.

I remember David Nuttall proposing that we have a referendum on the European Union back in 2011. The debate was timetabled by the Government for a wet Thursday when no one would be here, they hoped, and then George Osborne said, "No, I'm going to teach those Eurosceptics a lesson. We will bring it forward to the Monday and make it really important." What happened? Members of this House went back to their constituents. We had a really strong three-line Whip. Whips were threatening careers. They said, "Peter, you will never be a Minister if you support this motion." Well, they were probably right on that point, although it was not anything to do with that particular vote. Some 81 Conservative MPs voted on a Backbench Business motion that changed the history of this country, because after that, David Cameron realised that we had to have a pledge to have a referendum. The Backbench Business Committee has worked extremely well, but its problem is that it does not know when it will be given the time. Backbench Business time is supposed to be in primetime. That is what the Wright reforms called for.

Going back to my point on the commission, it is not about stopping the Government getting their business through; it is about making sure that we have the time to scrutinise it, so that we will not be forced to debate an important thing in an hour. The commission could decide it will have three, four or six hours of protected time. This mother of Parliaments should decide how things are timetabled, not the people sitting in No. 10. If we did that, Minister, we would get better scrutiny, better laws, and would it not be a better place?

In the 30 seconds that I am going to give the Minister to respond, all she has to say is "yes"—*[Laughter.]* Actually, no; we need more debate, so let us hope that we hit the buffers and we can come back to this next week. As the Minister knows, many of my suggested Bills actually finish up in law, so, at this moment of crisis for Parliament and the Government, would it not be good if we passed this Bill next week? There do not seem to be any Whips on the Opposition Benches, so I think Opposition Members could actually welcome—*[Interruption.]* Oh dear, there is a Whip over there, but hon. Members will take my point: this mother of Parliaments should run its own affairs. It should not be dictated to by somebody sitting in No. 10.

I really just want to emphasise one more point—

2.30 pm

The Deputy Speaker interrupted the business (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

Business without Debate

MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

CLIMATE EDUCATION BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (PROHIBITION OF SECOND JOBS) (MOTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 March.

FLOODING (PREVENTION AND INSURANCE) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

MEDICAL CANNABIS (ACCESS) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (10 December), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 25 February.

CLIMATE CHANGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

PUBLIC ADVOCATE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

COPYRIGHT (RIGHTS AND REMUNERATION OF MUSICIANS, ETC.) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (3 December), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 4 February.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING (CHILD PROTECTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

PRIME MINISTER (TEMPORARY REPLACEMENT) BILL

Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (14 January), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Debate to be resumed on Friday 4 February.

BBC LICENCE FEE (ABOLITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (ABOLITION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

GENERAL ELECTION (LEADERS' DEBATES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

HOSPITALS (PARKING CHARGES AND BUSINESS RATES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

ASYLUM SEEKERS (RETURN TO SAFE COUNTRIES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

PUBLIC HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE) ACT 1984 (AMENDMENT) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

CARAVAN SITES BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

PUBLIC SECTOR EXIT PAYMENTS (LIMITATION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

REGULATORY IMPACT ASSESSMENTS BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT (DECRIMINALISATION FOR OVER-75S) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

GREEN BELT (PROTECTION) BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 February.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know that there was reference to current events in the last debate, which was moved by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), and I wonder whether you and Mr Speaker have been able to express your views about the issues currently confronting the Government that relate directly to the separation of powers. I thought that it was this House that held the Government to account for their policies, not the Metropolitan Police.

As I made clear earlier, there is no reason for the Metropolitan Police to require Sue Gray not to issue her report in an unamended way for the benefit of the Prime Minister, who ordered that report, and of this House, which is eager to see it. It seems that the Metropolitan Police is usurping its position by seeking to interfere in the affairs of state without there being any criminals offences or grounds to carry out such interference.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mr Speaker said yesterday that he would give advance notice to the House if a statement was going to be made about the report. I wonder if he has issued any guidance, in the current situation, on whether a statement is likely still to be made.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Mr Speaker made it clear that he has not received any requests for a statement. I am sure that if any request were to be forthcoming, it would be dealt with in the normal way, which the hon. Gentleman understands fully.

Greenfield Station

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

2.37 pm

Rob Roberts (Delyn) (Ind): It is my pleasure to be able to bring this week's parliamentary business to a close with today's Adjournment debate. I thought I would break with convention by leaving aside beer, cake and police reports, and focus on an issue that actually impacts my constituents day to day. Who knows, maybe it will catch on—fingers crossed; we live in hope. Rather than springing it on the Minister at the end, I give him advance warning that I shall ask for a constituency visit, as well as funding to move the project forward. That will give him something to think on while I dilate on the issue.

Barely a day goes by when I do not hear the term "levelling up", which has been the central plank of the Government's communication efforts over the last couple of years, since the general election. Although "levelling up" is still something of a nebulous phrase that has not been particularly clearly defined, it seems relatively clear that it does represent a fundamental shift towards assisting regions and communities that have been left behind. There are, of course, many ways in which that can be achieved, but in the case of my Delyn constituency, I have long maintained that the thing we need most of all is excellent transport links.

Delyn is one of those constituency names that has people scratching their heads, wondering "Where's that?" Some residents do not even realise that their particular part of Flintshire in north-east Wales has that name. To our east, we have Deeside and the light industry of its industrial parks, as well as a major manufacturer in Airbus. Even further east is Chester, with connections to Liverpool and Manchester. Those areas offer significant job opportunities. To the west, we have the stunning north Wales coast, which brings not only a joyful experience, but a further opportunity for jobs in the thriving north Wales tourism sector, despite the Welsh Labour Government's best efforts to cripple tourism and hospitality over the past 12 months.

My constituency includes a 15-mile stretch of that coastline, from Oakenholt in the east to Gronant in the west, and along that coastal path we find some of the most deprived areas of Delyn. Broadly in the middle of that stretch we find the town of Holywell and its adjoining village of Greenfield. Much of Holywell and Greenfield is in the top 20% of the most deprived areas of Wales, with some parts in the top 10%. With those pockets of deprivation, comes the obvious difficulty of not being able to afford the rising cost of running a vehicle to get to work, even if suitable work can be found locally. Addressing the fundamental causes of that deprivation is key, the most pressing of which is clearly improving the transport network.

As part of the 2019 general election campaign, the vast majority of the doors on which I knocked in Holywell and Greenfield were consistent and strident in their request that a new train station be established to serve their region. Earlier this week, I asked constituents for their feedback on social media and I have picked out a small selection, but in truth they are all extremely similar. Pam Lloyd said:

"With the bus service from Greenfield to Chester or Rhyl taking forever to get there—one hour 20 minutes on a good day—a train to the same destinations would take less than 30 mins and be more reliable and comfortable."

Margie Roberts said:

"The roads are so busy, it's only common sense to have an alternative to using the car; and the bus service is far too slow."

Probably the most obvious call for help came from Natalie Edwards, who said:

"As I only have access to a car at weekends, I am reliant on public transport if I need to go anywhere other than my home town during the week. The bus journeys - even a short hop to the coast - take far too long to make them comfortable for people like me with chronic illness and hidden disabilities. Subsequently, if I can't walk to where I need to go, which isn't far as I have arthritis in my spine, I am defeated before I even start. This limits job opportunities as I live in a small town."

There were so many more testimonies we would need a lot more than a half hour Adjournment debate to go through everyone's stories and thoughts on the matter, but suffice to say I received dozens of comments over the past few days since I told people that this debate was happening. Every single one of them was positive and supportive of the project.

There was a station on the North Wales coast line called Holywell Junction, but it was closed as part of the Beeching reforms in 1966. Re-establishing the station, along with improved bus services from Greenfield up into the main Holywell public transport hub, would be absolutely transformative for the town. It would enable people to get to an increased number of better paid job opportunities. Studies have shown that only 8% of available jobs in the region lie within half an hour's public transport travel time of Holywell, but more than 160,000 vacancies come into view within a 90-minute journey. Sadly, a 90-minute journey from Holywell on the bus would take you only as far as Chester in one direction and Llandudno in the other. The equivalent journey on the train would take a quarter of the time. Anything that can be done to cut public transport journey times should make those jobs much more accessible in an affordable way and should be an absolute priority to help the residents of these deprived areas to get themselves on to a more solid footing in life.

It would not just get people out to jobs, however. Holywell in and of itself has some fantastic reasons to visit: the town name—holy well—is something of a giveaway, as it is the location of St Winifride's Well, which is the oldest continually visited pilgrimage site in Britain; and the beautiful Greenfield valley. Both are well worth the trip. A station would bring more tourism into the town, which would further improve the economic outlook. Indeed, the county council's local development plan identified the area of Holywell as a tourist hub for the county. In addition to the well site and Greenfield valley, both of which see around 40,000 visitors per year, hundreds of thousands of people use the Flintshire section of the Wales coastal path, which runs adjacent to the tracks.

For businesses, enabling fast connections to the Deeside industrial parks and beyond would mean companies currently based outside of the region would have the opportunity to expand into local industrial zones in Greenfield, Bagillt and Mostyn. The train station would work in conjunction with the upcoming levelling-up fund bid for the constituency, which is focused on job creation and regeneration of those zones and will in turn make the area much more attractive for new and existing companies to grow into.

Another of the interesting demographic situations in my constituency is that we have a much higher than average over-65 population. The average UK constituency

has 18.6% of residents over 65; Delyn has 23.5%. While five percentage points might not sound like a lot, when we are talking about 70,000 people, that is an extra 3,500 over-65s compared with the average constituency and, as we are all aware, that demographic is more likely to rely on public transport to get around.

We have a large number of children at one end and a large number of people above retirement age at the other, but in the middle we have a drop in numbers and have a much lower percentage than the average constituency of people in what others have called the "economically active" years. Making it easier for people to stay in the area by ensuring that work opportunities are more accessible in the wider region would do a huge amount to stop the working-age exodus and ensure that those skilled workers that we have in abundance in Delyn are able to get to jobs further afield without having to move out of the area.

Getting the bus from Holywell to Chester currently takes around 90 minutes—when they are on time, which is rare. Bearing in mind that the journey is just 17 miles, that is an average speed of 11 mph. Getting a train from Holywell to Chester would take around 20 minutes, a quarter of the time. Older constituents would be able to take advantage of massively reduced travel times in the other direction, up to the coast. A significant number of studies have shown how important outdoor coastal and countryside areas can be in maintaining our physical and mental wellbeing, particularly as we get older.

Other developments in the region would be complemented by a new Greenfield station, making the entire network more viable and user-friendly. They include the upcoming and long-promised development of Chester station, changes on the Wrexham to Bidston line, and an integrated transport plan that will hopefully come to fruition in the north Wales metro scheme, although with the latter it appears that Welsh Government are focusing all their resources on the south Wales metro rather than developing the north. I am keen to work with the Welsh Government to develop that project, which could really benefit the people of Delyn, but sadly so far there has been no engagement and no significant funding allocated to it.

In terms of the environmental issues, currently 80% of workers in Delyn use private cars to get to work, compared with just 63% nationally. Only 0.8% of Delyn's workers use the train for commuting, compared with 5.2% nationally. Increasing the proportion of people using trains in that way, as well as for their leisure activities, would make a huge difference to the carbon footprint of Holywell and north Wales generally, particularly when combined with the recommendations in Sir Peter Hendy's Union connectivity review to electrify the north Wales coast line. I hope the Government will move forward with that recommendation as soon as possible, as it will go some way towards helping to achieve the target of net zero by 2030.

At this point I pay tribute to some of the members of Holywell Town Council, particularly Councillor Barry Scragg and Community Engagement Officer Martin Fearnley, who have been the main drivers of this project for the past five years or so. They have done some excellent work, including a local community questionnaire that elicited more than 700 responses from residents and businesses. The town council's working group on the station project has produced an extremely comprehensive report, a copy of which I will happily provide to the Minister, which succinctly lays out the case for a new station. Its figures show that the catchment area for a station in Greenfield would be around 20,000 to 25,000 people, significantly more than existing stations along the line in Prestatyn, Flint, Penmaenmawr and Abergele, all of which are already shown to be sustainable.

The town council report has since been backed up by a formal transport study from planning specialists Mott MacDonald, commissioned by Flintshire County Council. Its report clearly states:

> "Combined with incremental rail revenue, the total cost of the scheme is negative with revenue more than offsetting investment and operating costs".

That is without taking into account all of the wider socioeconomic benefits I have already mentioned. The study recommends moving to a strategic outline business case and the initial steps of the processes announced last year for Project Speed, as speed is certainly of the essence in providing vital transport links to this left-behind town.

There is no reason for the work to take years. Much of the old station infrastructure is still there, and the access is good. Land for car parking is readily available and the tracks are obviously still in place—and in use. Although transport is in many ways a devolved competence for the Welsh Government to deal with, transport infrastructure, under which this type of project would come, is a reserved matter for the UK Government.

I will close with a request to the Minister that is twofold and, hopefully, simple to deliver. First, will he find the time to join me on a visit to Holywell to look at the site and hear about the plans from town councillors and local residents? Secondly, will he commit to providing the funding necessary for the development of a strategic business case and the follow-on initial stages of that process to confirm what the feasibility study has already been very clear about? The need for a station to serve Holywell and Greenfield is vital, would be transformative for some of the most deprived parts of my constituency and would truly facilitate the levelling up of these communities. Importantly, it would also confirm to the people of Delyn that, despite the Welsh Government overseeing many aspects of it, the UK Government have not forgotten them or abandoned them and are committed to their success and prosperity as much as that of any other region of the United Kingdom.

2.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Rob Roberts) on securing this important debate on plans for Greenfield in his constituency. I listened carefully to his plans and suggestions for Greenfield and will do everything I can to offer constructive suggestions in the course of my speech. I heard his request for a visit, which I am very happy to pass on to the rail Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—to be considered further. I am sure that he will hear back in due course.

We can be clear that infrastructure improvements are needed to level up the Holywell area of Delyn. Such improvements would help to bring Delyn's constituents closer to the job opportunities referred to by my hon.

[Robert Courts]

Friend that exist in the wider north Wales and north-west of England economic region. In October, the Chancellor announced Barnett-based funding for the Welsh Government of £18 billion a year, delivering the largest annual funding settlement since devolution more than 20 years ago. That represents a 2.6% rise in the Welsh Government's budget each year and equates to £120 per person in Wales for every £100 per person of equivalent UK Government spending in England, ensuring that the Welsh Government are well funded to deliver all their devolved responsibilities.

My hon. Friend referred to funding provided by the Welsh Government to explore options for Greenfield station's development. The outcome and results of that feasibility study will be important to his journey for securing funding. It will be important for him and the Department to go through that in some detail, and I know that he will do that. At the same time, he can explore a number of options. First, he can engage with the rail Minister on the rail network enhancements pipeline. The spending review settlement sees continued record levels of investment in rail settlements across England and Wales, with increased budgets from 2022-23 to 2024-25 and a renewed focus on the midlands and the north to grow and level up the economy and provide equality of opportunity.

The Department for Transport also has the new stations fund, which has supported proposals for new stations and the restoration of old station sites. I am afraid that the third round of the fund closed in June 2020, and my hon. Friend will find it disappointing that there are no plans for an additional round. However, we should celebrate its success. Since 2014, we have invested £72 million into delivering eight new stations, with eight more to come by 2024, creating more gateways for the places that they serve. For example, Deeside, near to my hon. Friend's constituency, received £400,000 from the third round of the funding for a station proposal, and last February we opened Bow Street station just outside of Aberystwyth. Although there is currently no funding available for further rounds of the new stations fund, I recommend that my hon. Friend works closely with Network Rail to develop fully his station proposal to ensure that it is fully costed, and supported by a robust business case, in order to make an application to any future funds.

We are also supporting the reopening of rail lines and stations through the restoring your railway fund. This is a £500 million fund to deliver our manifesto commitment and reopen lines and stations, such as those closed in the Beeching report. That will reconnect smaller communities, regenerate local economies and improve access to jobs, homes and education. Restoring your railway is already providing funding for rail schemes that have the potential to level up and connect local communities through the ideas fund. We have provided development funding to 38 early-stage projects under that fund, including the Anglesey scheme.

In addition, the Prime Minister has asked Sir Peter Hendy to lead on the Union connectivity review to which my hon. Friend rightly referred. It was independent of Government and explored how improvements to transport connectivity between Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England could boost access to opportunities and improve everyday connections for people across the whole of our United Kingdom. Sir Peter's review has made a series of significant recommendations to improve connections to, from and via Wales, including reducing congestion on the M4, a multimodal transport study in north Wales, and improved rail links between Cardiff and Birmingham. The UK Government are carefully considering Sir Peter's recommendations and undertaking a period of engagement with the devolved Administrations to inform the Government response, which will be published as swiftly as possible.

As part of the Government's commitment to level up the country, we have further introduced the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund. It was announced to invest in infrastructure that improves everyday life across the UK, including regenerating town centres and high streets, upgrading local transport, and investing in cultural and heritage assets. The results of the first round of the levelling-up fund were announced in October and will see £1.7 billion invested across 105 transport, regeneration and cultural projects that citizens across the UK can expect to see getting under way from as early as this year. As I have noted, the levelling-up fund will deliver genuine local priorities for communities across all nations and regions of the UK, with the majority of funding allocated to those areas that are most in need of levelling up.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend has a number of avenues that he can explore. He will of course know that the feasibility study funded by the Welsh Government will be critical to all of this. He ought to look to round 2 of the levelling-up fund, if a business case is produced. That is an option that he can explore in the spring. He can look out for the further information that will be released in due course on how future rounds of the fund will operation from 2022-23 onwards, and I know that he will consider submitting his proposal with the council to round 2 of the levelling-up fund, which will launch in the spring.

The Department for Transport is also in the process of setting the funding envelopes for the next rail network enhancements pipeline control period, which runs from 2024 to 2029. That work has only just started and is at a high level, and it is difficult to go into much detail at this stage, but it is possible that that is an avenue for my hon. Friend, and I would encourage him to engage with the Department to explore that option.

I hope that my hon. Friend has been reassured by the updates I have provided, which make it clear that the Government and the Department are committed to levelling up transport infrastructure in the UK and strengthening the bonds of our Union, including for Delyn. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing his constituents' concerns and his plans to the House for consideration today.

Question put and agreed to.

2.58 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statement

Friday 28 January 2022

EDUCATION

Student Loan Repayment Thresholds

The Minister for Higher and Further Education (Michelle Donelan): I am announcing details of the repayment threshold and interest rate thresholds that will apply to post-2012 (plan 2) student loans, and the repayment threshold that will apply to postgraduate (plan 3) student loans, for financial year 2022-23.

Plan 2 student loan repayment threshold

I can confirm today that I intend to bring forward regulations that will keep the repayment threshold for plan 2 student loans—the income level above which post-2012 student loan borrowers are required to make repayments—at its current level for the financial year 2022-23. The threshold will be maintained at its financial year 2021-22 level of £27,295 per year, £2,274 a month, or £524 a week. The post-study interest rate thresholds that apply to plan 2 loans will also be kept at their current levels in accord. For financial year 2022-23, the lower interest rate threshold will remain at £27,295—to align with the repayment threshold—and the upper interest rate threshold will remain at £49,130.

It is now more crucial than ever that higher education is underpinned by just and sustainable finance and funding arrangements, and that the system provides value for money for all of society at a time of rising costs. This Government have already confirmed that we will freeze maximum tuition fee caps again for the 2022-23 academic year, the fifth year in succession that we have held fee caps at current levels.

The ongoing fee freeze is reducing the burden of debt on students and is helping to make higher education more affordable for them. However, the overall cost to taxpayers of the system is rising. Since 2018, the repayment threshold for plan 2 student loans has increased each April in line with changes in average earnings. If we do not keep the threshold at its current level, it would rise by a further 4.6% in April 2022.

Maintaining the repayment threshold at its current level, alongside the ongoing freeze in fees, will help to ensure the sustainability of the student loan system, while keeping higher education open to everyone who has the ability and the ambition to benefit from it, including the most disadvantaged.

We will also shortly set out further plans for addressing the student finance recommendations made by the independent panel that reported to the review of post-18 education and funding.

Postgraduate (plan 3) student loan repayment threshold

I can also confirm today that the repayment threshold for postgraduate student loans will remain at its current level of £21,000 per year, £1,750 a month or £404 a week for financial year 2022-23.

Postgraduate loan outlay is forecast to increase in coming years, and 30% of borrowers holding a master's loan (academic year 2020-21 entrants) are not expected to repay their loans in full. We must ensure that postgraduate loans remain sustainable and that is why we are also retaining the current repayment threshold for postgraduate loans.

[HCWS568]

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Friday 28 January 2022

	Col. No.
EDUCATION	37WS
Student Loan Repayment Thresholds	37WS

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