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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 3 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Export Licence Applications

1. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps she is taking to improve the application process for export licences. [905845]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Export Control Joint Unit has statutory responsibility for the licensing of controlled exports. In 2020, it administered more than 16,000 licences. The ECJU provides guidance and training on the application process. Work is presently under way to modernise the application process and the technology that supports it, to make it more efficient and more transparent.

Sarah Green: Trying to export goods is currently a slow and inefficient process. One toy business in Chesham and Amersham told me that it now spends significantly more time on the paperwork than it ever did before. A recent survey of businesses in Buckinghamshire showed that 58% have experienced a rise in cost due to an increase in the same red tape. What proactive, practical steps are the Government taking to help businesses of all sizes to export their goods to the rest of the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In 2020, the ECJU administered nearly 16,000 standard individual export licences. It completed 62% within 20 working days, against a target of 70%, and 85% within 60 working days, against a target of 99%. That is why we have brought in work to modernise and streamline the application process so that it will be more efficient and—further to the hon. Lady's point—will allow businesses to know that they can use the system as effectively and with as little red tape as possible.

Global Trade Barriers

2. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to reduce barriers to global trade for British businesses. [905847]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): We are negotiating and implementing free trade agreements and removing barriers that British businesses face across the globe. Last financial year, we resolved more than 200 barriers across 74 countries, an increase of 20% on the previous year. We have so far secured FTAs with 70 countries plus the EU, covering nearly £800 billion-worth of bilateral trade in 2020, delivering benefits for communities across the country.

Andy Carter: British produce and food and drink are some of the best in the world, especially when they are made in the north-west of England. What steps are the Government taking to reduce market access barriers for businesses in Warrington South and the north-west? What have they done in the past year to help British exporters?

Mike Freer: The Department is working hard to reduce barriers to trade, including for my hon. Friend's constituents in Warrington South. For example, I can tell him that we have successfully secured access for British wheat to Mexico, poultry to Japan and lamb to the USA, just to name a few of the barriers that have been removed, boosting food and agriculture among many other products across the globe.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Survey after survey of business owners report unnecessary hassle and difficulty in exporting to European markets, with extra red tape, checks and delays too often the norm. As no one in the Government is getting a grip on this, why does the Secretary of State not get herself down to Dover to understand directly what needs doing to ease the very real difficulties that British businesses face?

Mike Freer: If we could export broken records, I think the hon. Gentleman would be a winner, but I have to say that his description is far from the truth. What are the Government and the Department doing? We have the export support service, the Export Academy, export champions, international trade advisers in the UK and overseas, agri-commissioners, hundreds of staff focusing on specific sectors, the tradeshow programme, UK Export Finance and trade envoys. The key issue is that in-country, where we find specific issues, we liaise country to country to resolve them. It is simply not true that the Government are doing nothing. In fact, we are seeing exports starting to recover and appetite for British goods and services going up ever more.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister is reeling off figures, but he might want to consider this one: 4,300 fewer businesses in the UK are exporting goods and services than in 2018, according to the Government's own annual stocktake. Why are this Government so anti-trade?

Mike Freer: The information is that exports to the EU are now up. Also, the export support service is now proactively contacting those customers who have stopped exporting, because there can be a variety of reasons why people drop off the radar for exporting. Just seeing

the glass half empty is not boosting trade in the United Kingdom. We are proactively contacting those companies to get them back on the pitch and back exporting, and talking up the United Kingdom.

Drew Hendry: They are great at talking the talk but not at walking the walk. The European Union will remain Scotland and the UK's largest export market for some time to come, yet this Government have done nothing to remove or even ease non-tariff barriers, bureaucracy or Brexit red tape, and they have not done anything about the labour shortages that are hampering exporters. They have spent the past year decimating the fishing industry and its livelihoods. This year, why are they going after farmers, with the Australia and New Zealand trade deals, already roundly condemned by the farming industry, set to result in floods of cheap, lower-quality meat and dairy products being exported into the UK from around the globe?

Mike Freer: All I can say to the hon. Gentleman is that it is a good job that I am leading on exports, not him, because all he ever sees is problems. We are doing stuff. We are doing exports. It is simply not true that the Government are doing nothing. I have been out in the markets. I am not sure whether the Scottish lead on exports has done many overseas visits. I am happy to work with the Scottish National party if it would actually come out and do something. We are removing trade barriers. We have already sent poultry to Japan and lamb to the USA. We are working with the Gulf states, increasing halal sales and sales of Welsh lamb. It is simply not true that this country will be flooded with cheap imports. That is pure scaremongering.

Steel Exports

3. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What further steps she is taking to increase exports of steel. [905849]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): My Department recently published our refreshed export strategy, which has an action-led 12-point plan, and we have introduced a whole range of support measures, as the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) has just set out, to help exporters to thrive in the global market, including, of course, our high-quality steel, internationalising key trading sectors and raising the UK exporting culture across the UK for the long term.

Bill Esterson: We can learn from the United States, of course, where the Made in America Act 2021 and informal targets in Government contracts support US steelmakers. The UK Government have told me that the World Trade Organisation does not allow them to do that, but the US example shows that that is not true. Will the Secretary of State tell her colleagues across Government that we can help boost steel exports if the UK Government give a big vote of confidence to our steel industry and start to make, buy and sell more in Britain?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: UK steel exports across the world are worth nearly £4 billion. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are in very detailed talks to ensure that our

UK to US steel exports get back on track and to clear out the issues caused by the section 232 tariffs over the past couple of years. We and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continue to work with the steel industry to ensure that what is some of the world's best steel, made across our UK steel yards, will continue to find new markets. We work not only with the US but with all our likeminded allies in the WTO against those market-distorting practices that some nations choose to use, which continue to degrade and devalue the high-quality steel made in the UK. We continue to work very closely with the industry but also with those across the world who want to make sure that the steel market works as it should.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Expanding on that question, could my right hon. Friend explain what progress she is making on resolving the section 232 tariff issues regarding exporting steel to the United States?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: In 2018, the US imposed section 232 tariffs on global imports of steel and aluminium—a defensive reaction at the time to overcapacity in the global steel market and for its own national security purposes. I was able to get the negotiations back on track. My counterpart Secretary Raimondo and I started negotiations to resolve this issue in mid-January. The negotiations are proceeding at pace. Our officials are working flat out to clear through some of the issues, and we hope very much to be able to bring good announcements here in due course.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her clear commitment to helping the steel sector. In 2021, the UK's export levels of steel decreased by around £53 million of GDP compared with the previous year. What steps has the Secretary of State taken to ensure that there are no further decreases in 2022 and that small steel businesses, which I have in my constituency, and larger manufacturers are supported in this very uncertain period?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman is right. As post-covid markets and industrial sites pick up, the demand for steel across the world is growing at pace. We want to make sure that the high-quality steel that we make across the UK finds the right markets. On my travels in my role, I speak regularly to those across the world who are doing complex infrastructure work where our high-quality steel products will be an important part of their procurement programmes. We are making good progress. As I say, I work very closely with the BEIS Secretary to ensure that we give the steel industry all the support that it needs.

Trade: Australia and New Zealand

4. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase trade with (a) Australia and (b) New Zealand. [905850]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The free trade agreements that the Government signed with Australia in December and with New Zealand on Monday this week will end tariffs

for British exporters and slash red tape, while making it easier for smaller businesses to break into these important markets. The deals with Australia and New Zealand are expected to increase bilateral trade by 53% and 59% respectively in the medium term. These FTAs are also expected to boost the UK economy by over £3 billion.

Andrew Rosindell: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on signing the free trade agreement with New Zealand, which is another positive step in rebuilding the bonds and historic links we have with the Commonwealth nations, but does she agree that we must do all we can to maintain the benefits secured by this deal by ensuring that any changes to alcohol duty will deliver for UK consumers and that they do not see domestic taxes on wine go up as we finally, and rightly, remove the tariffs?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: Our deal with New Zealand is indeed very good news for UK consumers, increasing choice and helping to lower prices on all New Zealand products that are going to come into the UK. The deal removes all tariffs, saving up to 20p a bottle on New Zealand wine. As my hon. Friend seems keen, he will be pleased to know that the products that British consumers love, such as Marlborough sauvignon blanc, will be more affordable. The question on domestic taxation continues to be one that the Treasury looks at and decides on the basis of the health of our citizens, and I shall continue to allow the Chancellor to make those decisions.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Earlier this week, I had the privilege to meet the president of the Farmers Union of Wales, who has expressed concerns about both trade deals, specifically in relation to tonnage of imported meat and whether it will be on the bone or filleted, as this will make a significant difference to the scale of flooding of the UK market. The president tells me that he has been unable to get an answer from the Department on what he deems to be a pretty simple question. I used to be a butcher, and I know that there is a significant difference between the weight of something boned and something deboned when anyone buys it in the shops. In all seriousness, could the Secretary of State clarify this here at the Dispatch Box, or get in touch with the Farmers Union of Wales to confirm this important point in terms of supporting our farming industry?

Mr Speaker: That is a filleted question.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I have learned something new about the hon. Gentleman. I did not know that that was a former career of his, and I look forward to bringing him into future trade deals to discuss the minutiae of these details. I will ensure that my officials liaise with the Farmers Union of Wales in detail, so that it has absolute clarity on what is in that very large document—a treaty is not just a couple of bits of paper—and we will of course be publishing all the paperwork and the relevant support documents for Parliament and the wider community to have a closer inspection. I will make sure that my officials pick that matter up this week.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): It is welcome to see the progress the Government are making with the digital partnership with Singapore, the Australia trade agreement, the New Zealand trade agreement and the

comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. This is not anti-trade but pro-trade—and free trade, for that matter. The Secretary of State has come before the International Trade Committee and told us that she would give us scrutiny. The Trade and Agriculture Commission was given eight days' advance warning on the New Zealand deal, but the International Trade Committee was not. Can she tell us why the Committee was not given the scrutiny of the New Zealand deal that it should have had?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The Minister for Trade Policy answered a point of order yesterday setting out the detail of the communications. We always try to ensure that we are able to provide the information in as timely a manner as we can. I am looking forward to my opportunity to discuss the Australian and New Zealand trade deals in more detail with the International Trade Committee—I think it is already in the diary—and I know that it will hold me to account 100% when I get there.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A £150 million hit to fishing, forestry, agriculture and food manufacturing from the New Zealand trade deal was described in this Government's impact assessment as nothing more than a "process of economic adjustment" and just a

"reallocation of resources within the economy".

This again exposes the Government's shock-doctrine, libertarian approach to free trade and the economy. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether she is content for those sectors to just go down with the Brexit ship?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The New Zealand free trade agreement will see bilateral trade increase by almost 60%, which we expect to boost the UK economy by nearly £1 billion in the next few years and to increase wages across the UK. Red tape will be slashed for nearly 6,000 UK small and medium-sized enterprises, with nearly 250,000 people working in those supply chains. UK exporters will no longer pay tariffs on a huge range of foods, and they will now have an advantage over international rivals.

It is exciting that we will be able to offer new opportunities for our smaller businesses to discover and grow into the New Zealand market. Indeed, we will be working very closely with our New Zealand partners as we look to accede to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership later this year, which will open up enormous new markets for all our exporters across every field of opportunity.

Trade Deals: Farmers and Food Producers

5. **Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** What steps she is taking to support farmers and food producers through trade deals. [905851]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Our aim is to support and promote farmers and producers, to create opportunities for them and to ensure they have the knowledge and support to capitalise on those new opportunities, to be a positive force for improving standards and to ensure that our producers do not face unfair competition.

Kevin Hollinrake: Environmental regulations and restrictions, on pesticides for example, are there for good reason, but they cost our farmers money either in sourcing alternatives or in lower yields. The farmers I speak to are very concerned about the use of chemicals, such as Paraquat in Australia and neonicotinoids in large parts of the European Union, that they are not allowed to use here. Their costs are therefore higher. Will these matters be addressed in the trade deals so that we get a fair and level playing field?

Penny Mordaunt: There are many things we can do to drive international standards, to improve animal welfare and to encourage others not to use particular pesticides that affect insects we are keen to have around a bit more. There are many things we can do outside free trade agreements, and we have done them. As my hon. Friend knows, we have championed many of these issues.

I have a responsibility to understand the opportunities for our farmers not just in volume but in value, and to understand the additional costs they may face in producing very high-quality produce, which is obviously welcome. I have a deep and growing understanding of these matters, and I work closely with our colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We understand the detail, we are talking to agriculture commissioners and Ministers around the world, and we will arrive at the right place in all the trade deals, which are obviously bespoke to each nation.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): In October 2020 the Department for International Trade said that, within five months, up to 77 extra British food and drink products would get protected status in Japan, thanks to the UK-Japan trade deal, highlighting Carmarthen ham, Shetland wool, Yorkshire rhubarb and Lakeland Herdwick lamb among the products that would benefit. Can the Minister confirm that, despite all the time that has passed, during which 56 new EU products have been recognised in Japan, fewer than half the UK products we were promised have even reached the consultation stage, including none of the specific products I mentioned?

Penny Mordaunt: I would be happy to update the hon. Gentleman with the specifics, but our analysis shows that the deal we have done with Japan will, in the long run, increase our trade but also improve our workers' wages. These are good things. We obviously require other nations to put through legislation, to scrutinise and to get processes through their own Parliaments and committees, but that is what we will work towards. Those things will improve our economy and make a real difference to our workers and producers.

Trade with EU: SMEs

6. **Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD):** What support her Department is providing to SMEs that trade with the EU. [905852]

16. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What support her Department is providing to SMEs that trade with the EU. [905869]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): To support businesses exporting to the EU, the Department launched the Export Support Service in October 2021. The ESS provides businesses with access to answers about exporting their products or services to Europe, routes to other Government services and access to other forms of export support, such as the export academy. Monthly goods exports to the EU for December 2021 are nearly 21% higher than the 2020 monthly average, higher than the 2019 monthly average and higher than the 2018 average.

Sarah Olney: My constituent George Chattey runs a company called LuvJus drinks. He imports his drinks, which are manufactured in Austria. He recently had a consignment stuck in a warehouse for more than two and a half months because he could not get the right advice, either when he placed the order and arranged for the export, or when the drinks were in the warehouse and needing release. Can the Minister tell me what he is doing, or what the Department is doing, to improve the quality and availability of advice to importers, both at the point where they are arranging their imports and when such problems occur? We cannot have perishable goods sat in warehouses for that length of time, and my constituent had an enormous amount of trouble getting the right advice from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and other bodies.

Mike Freer: Actually, no, I cannot tell the hon. Lady, because I am the Minister for exports, not the Minister for imports. What I can do is ensure that the relevant Minister comes back to the hon. Lady with a substantive answer if she wishes to write to me with the details.

Wera Hobhouse: In my constituency, businesses keep contacting me to share details of the detrimental effects that Brexit has had on their business, such as countless zero-sales days, which they had not experienced before. I am not making that up. Will the Government listen to small businesses, stop their Brexit ideological blind spot about this and, for example, reopen the SME Brexit support fund, with a simplified application process and an expanded remit?

Mike Freer: I am not sure I am the one with the Brexit blind spot, but I have to say that the Government are working very hard with our trade industry groups and our representative bodies. I frequently meet those groups, ranging from the Federation of Small Businesses all the way up to the CBI. Officials, both here in London and in post, will work with specific Governments to eradicate any issues inter-country, where there is perhaps an overzealous interpretation of the rules. More deep-seated problems will be dealt with on a Government-to-Government level. If the hon. Lady has details of specific businesses and specific issues that she would care to share, I would be more than happy to ensure that the Export Support Service gets back to her or to her constituents who wish to export.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): UK aid promoted trade in Africa by making borders seamless through digitising all the administrative processes. Is that on our agenda for trade with the EU at all? It is monstrous that we are filling in forms.

Mike Freer: I understand from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Trade Policy that we aim to have the best border in place by 2025.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister accept that the EU is not the whole of Europe, and that a wider Europe is out there open for SMEs? Will he say what he is doing to encourage trade with that wider Europe?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend is right to say that there is a global market, not just the EU, and the wider European market. The export strategy “Made in the UK, Sold to the World” is there to assist. Specifically on support, we have the ESS, the export academy, the export champions, a network of trade advisers both here and overseas, agrifood and drink attachés, the tradeshow programme and UK Export Finance. If any hon. Member wishes to find out more about the specific support we provide, they are welcome to attend the parliamentary export showcase on 9 March in Portcullis House.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure you would agree, Mr Speaker, that it is hard to concentrate on trade this morning, given the unfolding tragedy we see in Ukraine. But getting down to the earth of trade, may I say that Huddersfield is the beating heart of manufacturing and we also have lots of farmers in our beautiful countryside in my constituency? How have this Government got it so wrong that my farmers are unhappy and my SMEs are unhappy, because exporting, which they are so good at, is so darn difficult now and they do not seem to be getting any direction or support from this Government?

Mike Freer: All I can suggest is that the hon. Gentleman gets his exporters to talk to me and not to him, because we will provide them with an optimistic and enthusiastic support service. He should come along on 9 March to the export showcase and find out the specifics of the practical support that we will give to his constituents.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Recent research from the British Chambers of Commerce shows that over two thirds of SMEs that export say that the EU trade deal is not enabling them to grow or increase sales. Rather than just saying that he is waiting for answers from the EU, as he did at the last International Trade questions, will the Minister tell us precisely what proposals he has made to the EU, and when, to reduce the additional cost of paperwork associated with export health certificates and to eliminate the problem of companies being asked to register for VAT in multiple EU states?

Mike Freer: I will take that question away to my colleagues in both the Treasury and the Foreign Office, and get her a detailed answer.

Trade and Export Promotion

8. **Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba):** What further steps she is taking to promote trade and exports for UK businesses. [905855]

Mr Speaker: Who wants it? Come on, Minister!

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): Perhaps I should just stand at the Dispatch Box full time. My Department has a strong package of support for British exporters, as I have reiterated several times already this morning, so that they can take advantage of the markets that we are opening through our free trade agreements. From encouraging businesses to export through the “Made in the UK, Sold to the World” campaign to our world-leading UK export finance offer and our on-the-ground support in the UK and overseas, UK businesses are being supported at every stage in their export journey. I repeat that there is an offer to attend the export showcase on 9 March.

Neale Hanvey: UK connectivity is concentrated in England, and particularly in the south-east of England. That presents a growing challenge to Scottish businesses, given the impact of carbon and haulage costs, and queuing at the port of Dover, particularly with perishable export goods. Does the Minister agree that reviewing the port infrastructure, and particularly the reintroduction of ferry links from Scotland to Europe, is of growing urgency, and will he meet me to discuss possible mechanisms to improve that situation?

Mike Freer: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to look at the specifics, and where necessary to liaise with the Scottish Government on any specific Scottish matters.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The renewable energy sector has been one of the success stories in the UK in recent years, particularly in my constituency where there are many well-paid jobs. What are the Minister and his Department doing to ensure that we can export more from the renewable energy sector?

Mike Freer: First, may I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he does as one of the Prime Minister’s trade envoys? The work that we are doing on green energy and renewables is at the heart of the export strategy. On any specific issues that my hon. Friend would like to take up to ensure that we can boost that world-beating sector, we would be more than happy to link up his constituents, or any companies that he wishes to put in contact with us, so that they can exploit the opportunities globally, where we are a world leader.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Promoting trade has to be done in the context of protecting British interests. The 2019 Conservative manifesto made a commitment to cover 80% of UK trade with free trade agreements. The unanswered concern of the Farmers Union of Wales about meat on or off the bone raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmere (Chris Elmore), who is no longer in his place, shows just the level of scrutiny required to protect the interests of our farmers, as does the protection of our jobs, consumer standards and environmental and welfare commitments. Does the Secretary of State not worry that not only will she be responsible for a broken manifesto promise but, by taking on an “any deal will do” approach, she is undermining UK interests?

Mike Freer: No, the whole ministerial team are absolutely confident that we will continue to deliver world-beating FTAs, and we liaise with all who have

interests. The hon. Lady mentioned things such as agriculture and food, and we liaise with representative bodies such as the NFU to ensure that their concerns are fully represented in the FTAs. I am sure that she will join us in celebrating all the FTAs that are opening up new markets so that we can export the best of British products.

Trade Negotiations: Foie Gras and Fur Import Regulation

9. **Allan Dorans** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the potential impact of the Government's plans for regulation of foie gras and fur imports on trade negotiations. [905856]

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government are committed to upholding the UK's high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards, as outlined in our manifesto. I have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Government will update the House in due course on any future legislation.

Allan Dorans: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. My constituents in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, and elsewhere, are very angry that the Government are considering dropping the proposed ban on foie gras and fur imports, when there are perfectly acceptable alternatives to both that do not involve cruelty to animals. Foie gras involves the force feeding of ducks and geese to fatten and enlarge their livers, and fur imports into the UK involve animals being kept in cages that are far too small. How can the Government continue to claim that the United Kingdom is a world leader on animal welfare?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We have agreed groundbreaking animal welfare provisions in our Australia and New Zealand trade deals, including stand-alone chapters reflecting the importance of animal welfare. As we do more trade deals in the months and years ahead, that will continue to be an incredibly important part of our focus. In relation to the specific issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised, DEFRA ran a call for evidence last year, from 31 May to 28 June, seeking public views on the fur market. A summary of responses to that call for evidence will be published soon.

Trade: Persian Gulf Countries

10. **Alexander Stafford** (Rother Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase trade with the Persian Gulf countries. [905857]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): The Gulf is an important trading region for the United Kingdom, with an overall trade relationship worth £32.4 billion in 2020. The countries of the Gulf Co-operation Council are among our largest trade partners globally. Having just completed a public consultation, we aim to start negotiations on a free trade agreement with the GCC later in 2022. Work continues bilaterally with countries in the region. In fact, having just returned from a visit to the United Arab

Emirates, I can tell my hon. Friend that I have seen at first hand that the opportunities for UK trade in the Gulf are enormous.

Alexander Stafford: Can my hon. Friend the Minister set out some of the potential benefits for the UK, and especially for Rother Valley, of a trade deal with the Gulf Co-operation Council, particularly around jobs and investment?

Mike Freer: I can reassure my hon. Friend that the Gulf represents a massive opportunity for many goods, from education and defence to vehicles, food and agriculture. It is an open market where people want to buy British, where we are a trusted partner and where we are regarded as a seller of high-quality goods. I can reassure him that in food and drink alone, the demand for top-quality British produce is already more than £600 million a year.

Exports: European Markets

11. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What further steps she is taking to help businesses export to European markets. [905859]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): As I told the hon. Members for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) and for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) earlier, my Department launched the Export Support Service in October 2021, as a free service to support exporters to Europe. That unified service is just one part of the package of measures—I have listed them a couple of times—that the Department provides to UK exporters.

Gerald Jones: Small businesses in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney continue to tell me the difficulties that they are having with exporting to the EU and the added bureaucracy, and I am really keen to hear from the Minister about further support. I heard what he said earlier, but I do not think the message is getting through. There is a lesson to be learned about communication and how to get that message to businesses, because they are clearly not aware of the level of support that is out there. Perhaps he could give some more detail about the support and grants that are available, and what more the Government will do.

Mike Freer: I will not reiterate the full list of support that is available, but the hon. Gentleman is welcome to come to the export showcase next week to see all that in detail. If he would be interested in becoming a parliamentary export champion for his constituency, to make that line of communication much stronger and direct to him, I would be very happy to facilitate that appointment.

CPTPP Membership

12. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What progress her Department has made on securing UK membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. [905862]

14. **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): What progress her Department has made on securing UK membership of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. [905866]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): On 18 February, Japan announced that the UK can move to market access negotiations, the next phase of the accession process. We aim to have concluded negotiations by the end of this year.

David Duguid: I thank my right hon. Friend for her response. The CPTPP is a great opportunity to deal with a growing economy, a growing market, and a market that is precisely for the kind of high-quality food and drink products that are produced in Scotland, and in my constituency of Banff and Buchan. Contrary to some reports in recent weeks, will my right hon. Friend provide a firm commitment that in no future or current trade deal will we allow the import of hormone-injected beef or any other foodstuff that would be illegal to produce and sell in the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for giving me the opportunity to flatten that myth. The UK's import standards include a ban on using artificial growth hormones in domestic and imported products, and our trade deals do not and will not change that. I hope that he will call out people who are scaremongering about these deals, as the deals are good for our producers and good for driving global standards, and they will be good for our economy and wages in this country.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My right hon. Friend and her Department are to be massively congratulated on having got to the final stages of the CPTPP agreement. It is a market worth £8.4 trillion. Does she agree that it presents an enormous opportunity to propel our exports into a very high growth area of the world in the Pacific Rim and that it will have particular implications for certain sectors such as food and drink and financial services?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind remarks. There are indeed many people across the Department and our network around the world who are to be congratulated on getting us this far. He is right: there are massive benefits in market opportunities, but the deal will also have a disproportionately positive effect on sectors here that have high wages. That will really help in creating jobs with above average wages. We will work very hard to ensure that we can realise those opportunities in the shortest possible time.

Flow of Goods from the EU

13. **Joanna Cherry** (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): What steps her Department is taking to (a) reduce barriers to and (b) increase the speed of the flow of goods from the EU to the UK. [905865]

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): Removing barriers to trade is the core business of this Department, and we have plans to introduce the best border in the world by 2025.

Joanna Cherry: I thank the Minister for her answer. Unfortunately, Brexit has erected trade barriers with the European Union, and businesses are struggling with imports and exports. A new business in my Edinburgh South West constituency lost thousands of pounds importing a consignment of honey, because it lacked

the correct paperwork. A huge amount of effort went into sorting out that paperwork, which was ultimately unsuccessful. The Scottish chamber of commerce tells me that Scottish businesses are effectively spending twice as much in costs due to inconsistencies in interpreting rules for imports and exports across the European Union and its partnership countries. This situation has been brought about by Brexit, so the Government have a responsibility to help businesses, such as the one in my constituency that I mentioned. Will the Minister reopen the Brexit support fund to help business?

Penny Mordaunt: I would say two things in response to that. First, much of the friction that the hon. and learned Lady is talking about is coming from the EU's requirements on us. In voting for Brexit, it was not our intention, or the nation's motivation, to erect trade barriers. The problem was that the price of frictionless trade was too high. That is why the UK has left the EU. What we want to do is remove barriers; we want as frictionless trade as possible. I hope that she will help us make the case to the EU to do that.

We have the Export Support Service which the Under-Secretary of State for International Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer) has spoken about, and also the Trader Support Service, which is focused absolutely on these issues. There is also financial support to enable businesses to export or to get their sectors better prepared for some of the challenges that they are facing. Our door—I speak for all Ministers—is always open to the hon. and learned Lady if she wants to raise individual cases. We stand behind our producers, our manufacturers and our exporters, and we will do everything we can to ensure that they are maximising the opportunities available to them.

Agricultural Exports to EU

15. **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): What steps she is taking to support agricultural exports to the EU. [905867]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): We support our farmers and food producers through all stages of their export journey to Europe and across the world. That includes support to exhibit at global food and drink trade events such as Sial in Paris and through the UK trade show programme. We also provide support through our network of agriculture, food and drink trade advisers based across Europe and we are working with the National Farmers Union and the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board to establish a mentoring programme for agricultural exporters.

Hywel Williams: The British Veterinary Association reports that over the past two years the number of EU vets registering for work in the UK has fallen by two thirds, while demand for food-related export certificates has increased 12-fold, by 1,255%. Wales was denied a seat at the trade negotiations, of course, and now Welsh farmers face increased competition from New Zealand and Australia. Is the hon. Gentleman really satisfied that his Government here in London are supporting Welsh food exports?

Mike Freer: Yes.

Topical Questions

T1. [905839] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): In light of Russia's outrageous, unprovoked invasion of Ukraine it is more important than ever that we stand together with those who share our values and take swift and firm action against those who seek to overthrow democracy and threaten our allies. Trade between friends and allies promotes growth and prosperity and, in a climate of mutual respect, free and fair trading rules bring a mutual economic and cultural boost between nations.

Last week I was in Singapore to sign our new digital economy agreement, the most innovative trade agreement ever signed. The digital sector alone adds £150 billion to the economy and lifts wages, with workers earning around 50% more than the UK average. The agreement connects the UK to the fastest-growing economies in the Asia-Pacific region and furthers our bid to join Singapore and 10 other nations in the trans-Pacific partnership. Membership will mean access to a free trade area with a GDP of £8.4 trillion and vast opportunities for our UK exporters.

On Monday this week, I signed the UK-New Zealand free trade agreement with my fellow Trade Minister Damien O'Connor. The agreement is the UK's second trade deal negotiated from scratch since leaving the EU. We are demonstrating that global Britain can achieve as a sovereign trading nation, and we are strengthening ties with a close ally that shares our firm belief in free and fair trade.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the trade deals thus far. Last week we held an excellent debate in Westminster Hall on the UK-India talks, and I congratulate her also on kicking those talks off. Will she update the House on the progress of those talks, and can she ensure that we conclude them by the end of this calendar year?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: On 13 January this year, our UK-India FTA negotiations were launched in Delhi. That first round concluded on 28 January. Discussions were productive and reflected the UK and India's shared ambition to secure a comprehensive deal that will boost trade for both our nations. The positive discussions laid the groundwork for the UK and India to make positive and efficient progress, and the second round is due to begin on 7 March. I would not wish to give a precise landing zone, but we are working very closely and with optimism and effort on both sides.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The whole House stands in solidarity with the Ukrainian people, who are defending the right of sovereign nations to live in freedom with courage, determination and fortitude. Labour supports the toughest possible economic sanctions on Putin's Russian regime, which is carrying out this barbaric and illegal invasion. I welcome the restrictions on banking and financial measures and the export ban on high-end technical equipment and components in

electronics, telecommunications and aerospace, but at the same time we can and must do more. Labour Members have called for a total ban on exports of luxury goods to Russia. Will the Secretary of State heed those calls and commit this Government to that export ban on luxury goods so that Putin and his inner circle cannot live a Mayfair lifestyle in Moscow?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: It is a great reassurance for the Ukrainians to know that in all parts of the House, here in the mother of Parliaments, we all stand together supporting them in every way that we can, and, across the world, bring together those voices that say, without exception, that the unprovoked aggression that Putin is showing Ukraine is unacceptable. We will continue to work across Government to make sure that we are using our UK powers as well as working with allies from across the world to tighten the screw so that Putin and his regime will find it more and more difficult not only to sustain their military campaigns but also find that they will no longer have access to their funds. The Foreign Secretary will continue to work on a number of areas. The impact of the SWIFT sanctions will be dramatic and catastrophic for Putin.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I do of course appreciate that it is vital to work together with friends and allies, but let me push the Secretary of State on this specific point, because cutting off the supply of luxury products would send a further signal to those in Putin's Kremlin, who have, by the way, often accumulated wealth and possessions at the expense of the Russian people. We can act on this and we can act now. So will the Secretary of State work with her colleagues across Government, and indeed Governments across Europe who have concerns, whether on clothing, jewellery or diamonds, to get a comprehensive ban in place to stop Putin and his inner circle living in luxury while barbaric, evil acts are perpetrated on the people of Ukraine?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We will continue to work across Government using all the tools I mentioned, but in the meantime I encourage all those who continue to export to Ukraine to use the Export Support Service if they need that support. We will continue to use all the tools at our disposal to make sure that Putin understands fully that the behaviour he is demonstrating is absolutely outrageous. The Foreign Secretary will lead those discussions.

T2. [905841] **Selaine Saxby** (North Devon) (Con): We have many successful global exporters home grown in North Devon, such as Turnstyle Designs, S+H lighting and Saltrock surf wear, but many smaller companies feel that this is not something that they can do. Will my hon. Friend highlight what support is available to companies in remote and rural areas such as North Devon to help them to grow and export?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We have already undertaken over 80 virtual Export Academy events in the south-west of England. If she would like to attend the export showcase on 9 March, we can show her the full range of support that we can provide to her companies.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Farmers in Wales and in Gower are rightly angry because the Government's own assessment shows that it is the beef and sheep markets that are going to suffer in the light of the Australia and New Zealand deals. Farmers in Wales cannot and never will be able to compete on price. How do Ministers and the Secretary of State square that circle and protect the livelihoods of farmers in Wales?

The Minister for Trade Policy (Penny Mordaunt): In all these deals we need to stay focused on what are the actual benefits and what are the actual risks for farmers and producers. To give one example, currently New Zealand does not use even half of its quota, so the notion that this market is suddenly going to be flooded with sheep meat from New Zealand is not correct. We need to look at the facts on this. There will be opportunities for our producers and that is what we need to stay focused on.

T3. [905842] **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): Both myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Paul Bristow) had the great privilege of visiting Bangladesh last month with the Al-Tazid Foundation, where we had the opportunity to meet not only His Excellency the High Commissioner, who is doing such a fantastic job, but the Bangladeshi Foreign Minister. We also took part in the business side. Bangladesh's economy is growing at great pace; it is an increasingly dynamic economy. I appreciate that we are going to do a trade deal, but can the Secretary of State outline what steps are being taken by the Government to intensify trade, co-operation and investment between our country and Bangladesh?

Mike Freer: Bangladesh is one of the fastest growing global economies and is strategically important to the UK as part of the Indo-Pacific tilt. DIT is preparing to hold a second trade investment dialogue with Bangladesh this year and there will be a visit by the Prime Minister's trade envoy later this month. I am more than happy to speak to my hon. Friend, and I will ensure that any specific issues are fed into that dialogue.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Trade rules are so often rigged against women, especially women living in lower income countries. Will the Department commit to carry out mandatory gender impact assessments on all future UK trade deals in order to promote greater gender-just trade?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As part of the free trade agreements we have negotiated so far, we have specific gender chapters, because we wish to use the authority and the commitments that we make to these issues and work with these friends and allies with whom we are drawing trade agreements together. We want to ensure that we push for those values and for ground-level opportunities for SMEs led by women across the world, so that they can achieve.

T4. [905843] **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Some pork producers, including Cranswick, which has premises in Thirsk and Malton, did the right thing and self-suspended export licences to China due to a covid outbreak. Seventeen months later, those licences have not been reinstated. Can we do whatever

we can to get these licences back in place? It would help Cranswick, those other producers and the pig industry generally, which is suffering quite badly.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and it needs to be resolved swiftly. Ministers from across this Department are lobbying to that effect, as are our Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Prime Minister has raised it personally.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It cannot be business as usual. As many countries are needing to divest and diversify their energy supply away from Russia, what trade mechanisms can the Secretary of State put in place to ensure that the UK can be part of that effort to assist those countries achieving that objective?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: As we continue to look at how we can use our sanctions powers and work with allies across the world, things like the new sanctions brought in by the Secretary of State for Transport over the past week will start to bite on energy flows coming out of Russia.

T5. [905844] **Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): I warmly welcome the new trade deals that are being announced. Not all of them include financial services, which is our biggest export sector. Working closely with the Treasury, can the Secretary of State update the House on where the strategic focus is in increasing access for financial services firms and financial services exports?

Mike Freer: The Government remain committed to championing export opportunities for our world-class financial services businesses. Through targeted export campaigns and an expansion of existing support services, we are promoting trade opportunities across the financial services spectrum and in specific areas such as asset management, green finance, fintech and insurance. The Government are also signing ambitious free trade agreements that will open new markets and reduce market access barriers for UK financial services, and I am in regular dialogue with the City Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) on these issues.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): When the Secretary of State responded to the question about luxury goods by not answering it, it begs the question, why not, and raises the question of whether there are conflicts of interest behind it. The contrast with Syria, where export controls were put in place, is stark. If it was appropriate for Syria, why is it not appropriate for Russia? I remind her of her words. She talked about working with allies and tightening the screw, so will she now, with her colleagues across Government, put in place that ban on luxury goods?

Penny Mordaunt: First, as someone who has been personally threatened by Alexander Temerko, I would just say that the hon. Gentleman is wrong to make insinuations about Members of Parliament in that respect. If we are going to assist this situation, stop those who are enemies of this state and have clean politics at both ends of this House, we need to focus on individuals,

their moral obligations and what they have and have not done. The hon. Gentleman caveated his remarks to the Prime Minister yesterday in that spirit, so I caution him to follow his own advice.

On the issue of luxury goods, many products have been exported not only to Russia, but to other countries supporting Russia's appalling, barbaric war.

There are obviously complex legal obligations surrounding that, which is why the Department has stood up the export support service. There was much criticism of Italy's carve-out on those products, which I think was wrong. Our objective is clear: Russia must pay the price for this barbaric war and our policies will do that.

Mr Speaker: Order. We ought to be cautious about the language we use against Members. I support the Minister, who is suffering heavily from intimidation from people who I would not support. Let us be a bit more cautious about how we put things in future.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and of the Opposition in condemning the Ukraine invasion and in their criticism of Russia. It goes far wider than that, however, and it certainly cannot be business as usual, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) just said. The free world is now in an existential struggle with despotic regimes such as Russia and China. What does global trade look like in the new era? I invite my right hon. Friend to—

Mr Speaker: Order. They have to be short questions. [*Interruption.*] In fairness, Sir Bernard, you know better than anybody, which is why you are the Chair of the Liaison Committee. I think the Secretary of State has got the message.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Can she bring forward the White Paper?

Mr Speaker: Do you want to leave? Seriously, it is not fair to other Members. I have to look after all Back Benchers.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: We will continue to work across Government and with our allies to ensure that Putin's regime feels the absolute force of all the sanctions that we can bring to bear.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Short question: I have every respect for the Secretary of State. Will she promise to burn the midnight oil and do something very dramatic to take on Russia and those countries that have failed to criticise it?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that not only I but every member of the Cabinet and all our Ministers are indeed burning the midnight oil to ensure that, as we work with our allies across the world, the message is absolutely clear and that pain—economic and other—is felt firmly by Putin.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): This year's research by Social Enterprise UK has found that social enterprises are overtaking the rest of the private sector

in the proportion of firms that are exporting overseas. Does my hon. Friend agree that that shows the value of greater diversity in business?

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. With my other hat on as Minister for Equalities, I can say that with the full support of the Secretary of State, we are working to ensure that the exporters and their supply chains are fully representative of all sections of society.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What conversations has the Secretary of State had with her counterparts in the Scottish Government about how to increase Scottish exports to South American countries?

Mike Freer: I am planning to visit our new trade and investment office in Edinburgh and I look forward to a dialogue with my counterpart at the first opportunity.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Can the Secretary of State update the House on the plans for a UK-Israel innovation summit and free trade agreement, following her recent visit?

Mike Freer: Israel is one of our strongest allies and largest partners in global trade. We are working closely with our Israeli counterparts to deliver a successful summit in the next few weeks.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that although the big landmark trade deals, such as those with Australia and New Zealand, grab all the headlines, of equal importance is the less-publicised work that she is doing to tear down the trade barriers that prevent the export of British goods and services around the world?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Not only do the free trade agreements open the door for new opportunities to take away market access barriers but we continue to work week in, week out to pick off those market access barriers that can release more trade with friends and allies around the world. Some 200 of those have been cleared in the last month and we will continue to work closely on others. I encourage businesses that have particular issues to bring them to the Department's attention.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): In standing four-square with the people of Ukraine, it is important that we really make sanctions work and the Government have led the world in doing that. Cryptocurrencies have been widely used to evade sanctions. Will my right hon. Friend look into that matter?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: I will ensure that my Treasury colleagues take note of my hon. Friend's question.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Steel is hugely important for Rotherham and Rother Valley, which is why it is essential to see the tariffs set by the United States on British steel dropped as soon as possible. Can my right hon. Friend outline what steps she is taking to get a resolution on this to get more jobs for Rother Valley and Rotherham?

Anne-Marie Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is a champion for Rother Valley, and he will be pleased to know that our section 232 tariff negotiations are going well. I will be speaking to my opposite number, Secretary Raimondo, in the next few days, and we hope to reach a conclusion very shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, there are 123,000 SMEs. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure they are awarded the same trade

opportunities as those in the rest of the United Kingdom, and has the Northern Ireland protocol hindered trade opportunities for SMEs?

Mike Freer: I will raise that with my colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office to make sure that they have full access to all the trade support mechanisms that I outlined previously to ensure that all Northern Ireland businesses are fully aware of all the support packages available to them.

Business of the House

10.35 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): The business for the week commencing 7 March will include:

MONDAY 7 MARCH—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill.

TUESDAY 8 MARCH—Opposition day. Subject to be announced.

WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH—Estimates day. There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department for Education in so far as it relates to the national tutoring programme and adult education, and the Ministry of Defence. At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 10 MARCH—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, followed by a general debate on International Women's Day. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 11 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 14 March will include:

MONDAY 14 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Professional Qualifications Bill, followed by remaining stages of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

It is devastating for us all that we continue to see the consequences of Vladimir Putin's unprovoked and unjustifiable attack on Ukraine. It is a heinous violation of international law, and the Labour party stands with our allies, including NATO and our other partners, in condemning it in the strongest possible terms. We have a united House and a United Kingdom. We will continue to strengthen our unity and resolve, and we stand in complete solidarity with the Ukrainian people and with our NATO allies among countries on the border.

On Tuesday, the Home Secretary came to give a statement on the assistance the UK is providing to people fleeing this conflict, and we welcome this. However, there are still some questions about how it is working in practice, and I would be grateful if the Leader of the House took these up. Quite a broad range of family members of Ukrainians in Britain should now be able to come to the UK, but it seems that family migration visas are currently not being administered to people arriving via France, but being administered only from eastern European border countries. Despite what the Home Secretary said here on Tuesday, the guidance on the website is still not quite clear, particularly on whether Ukrainians in the UK who do not have indefinite leave to remain can bring family over. Colleagues have also raised concerns about whether the helpline for this situation—I am afraid that helplines are a bit of a business questions theme—has been fully operationalised.

Could the Leader of the House please ask the Home Secretary to come back with some clarifications on these questions?

We know that the toughest possible sanctions must be taken against all linked to Putin and against the Russian Government's interests. Russia must be fully cut out of the western economic system. The sanctions package so far announced contains good measures, but we believe the Government could go further on banking sanctions, individual asset freeze designations against Putin's oligarchs and so on. We want to work co-operatively with the Government on this. Will they go further?

There is also the question of the enforcement of sanctions. The Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation—the body meant to deal with this—appears to have issued only six fines for sanction violations in six years, despite many more breaches. Could the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come and explain to the House what he is doing to ensure sufficient resources are in place so that sanctions on dirty Russian money can be properly enforced?

We welcome the progress that the Leader of the House has announced with all stages of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill next week, especially given that last week he and the Prime Minister said it could wait until the next Session. However, in its current form a key plank of the Bill—the register of who truly owns property in the UK—will not come into force for existing owners until 18 months after the Bill passes. That gives Putin's cronies plenty of time to launder their assets elsewhere, so will the Leader of the House please confirm that the Government will support Labour's amendments to shorten this timeframe and finally clean up the corrupt Russian money that has been too long allowed to infest the UK?

We will continue to work with the Government to strengthen our support for Ukraine and our NATO allies, but we also cannot ignore the reality of the continuing cost of living crisis. This week we have had a massive rail fare hike that will be a nightmare for millions of passengers. Families already facing soaring taxes and bills will be hit with the highest rise to the cost of the daily commute for almost a decade, pricing passengers out of the railways and undermining urgent action needed to tackle the climate emergency. I am sure the Leader of the House will be aware that for his constituents a season ticket for commuters from Hucknall to Nottingham, a 15-minute journey, has gone up by over £200 under his Government, so may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary on why rail fares are surging, forcing people up and down this country to pay the price for decisions from Downing Street?

Finally, may I wish colleagues and people in Wales and everywhere a happy St David's Day?

Mark Spencer: I welcome the hon. Lady's comments about St David's Day and, more importantly, about Russia and Ukraine. It is vital that this House works together and her co-operation and support for the measures the Government are introducing is vital and should be fully recognised.

The hon. Lady mentioned refugees and I think even she would have to recognise that the way in which the Government are performing and opening our doors to those who find themselves in the most terrible of circumstances is the right way to proceed. We are being

very welcoming: we are allowing people who are here already to extend their stay and to stay indefinitely, and our doors are very much open to those who find themselves in those circumstances. I hope the hon. Lady will continue to work with us to improve those measures.

On sanctions, we should recognise the speed with which the Government have worked. We have introduced measures and sanctions that have really taken the pain back to Vladimir Putin. The introduction of the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Bill next Monday is a demonstration of the speed with which the Government are operating, but there is more to come: more sanctions will be brought to this House and another economic crime Bill will be brought forward in the very near future. The Government should be praised for what they are delivering. It is absolutely clear to see that the Prime Minister and the Government are not only leading for us but are leading in the world. We were the first country to call out and say Russia should be removed from the SWIFT banking system; there was resistance in the international community and the Prime Minister has convinced those countries to support us and remove Russia from that system. That is clear global leadership from the Prime Minister.

On the cost of living, the hon. Lady is of course right to recognise that there are challenges. She mentioned the rise in the cost of rail tickets, and even in my constituency people are facing that, but she must also recognise that under a Labour Government the investment in some of that infrastructure was sadly lacking. Labour electrified 11 miles of rail line; this Government are performing much better than that. We are investing in our rail infrastructure. In comparison, the Labour Government did not perform very well; we are still reaping the rewards of their lack of investment even 10 years later.

Another example is our nuclear energy industry. If the Labour Government had invested in our nuclear infrastructure, we would not be facing some of the challenges we face. Luckily, this Government are taking those challenges seriously and investing in our rail infrastructure and our energy infrastructure. The hon. Lady should be supporting us in doing that.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): With everything that is going on in the world, I wonder if the Leader of the House could still find time for a debate on Malvern Hills College. It was taken over by Warwickshire College Group in 2016. There is an education covenant on the site. It was closed during the pandemic and it has not reopened. It appears that Warwickshire College Group is trying to flog the site to the highest bidder and is refusing mediation. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on this matter, which matters so much to my constituents?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to this issue. I am sorry to hear of the challenges that Malvern Hills College is facing. I know that she is a champion in her constituency for the next generation and their right to be educated at great establishments. There is an opportunity for her on 14 March at Education questions. I am sure she will be here to ask the Secretary of State directly what he can do to assist.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It has now been a week since the Russian invasion of Ukraine began. We can only look in awe at the passionate

defence of their country by the Ukrainian people. We can only imagine the horror this morning in the cities now almost completely encircled by Russian forces.

The SNP is grateful to the Leader of the House for the flexibility he demonstrated in arranging the House business last week. I am sure he will want to convince us that he will continue that approach as we go into the business next week. What we need to see as a priority is an increase in the number of people, Putin's friends, being personally sanctioned. When will we see further, necessary measures to get Russian money totally out of our financial institutions and our politics? When can we expect to see the UK brought into line with the bulk of the rest of Europe in allowing Ukrainian refugees free access to the UK?

I do not usually bring up constituency cases, but I want to mention Gavin Price who runs the Schiehallion hotel in Aberfeldy. He has offered employment to two people who are fleeing Ukraine. He says he will pay for accommodation and flights, and meet the cost of any work visas, and I am sure he is not alone among businesses in making that generous offer. He was told that that could take up to three months. Surely, we must be in a position to set red tape aside and allow people to come here when there are places available for them to do so?

It is right that we are now almost exclusively focused on the darkening situation in Ukraine, but we cannot simply forget the issues around the behaviour of the Prime Minister and the series of parties at No. 10. He is the first sitting Prime Minister to be questioned under caution by the police, for 12 alleged breaches of covid rules. Will the Leader of the House update us on when we might be able to further consider that matter? I am sure he undoubtedly agrees that this is an issue we must return to with utmost seriousness.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am genuinely grateful for the support of the SNP in sending a single message to Vladimir Putin about the way he is conducting himself. I am also grateful that he recognises the flexibility the Government are demonstrating in their ability to make available time at the Dispatch Box for questions and debate about what is happening. I think that will continue. I also pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's constituent Gavin Price. That is a true demonstration of what the British people feel and how welcoming we are as a nation to those people who find themselves in the most terrible circumstances.

In that context, when we consider the horrors happening in Ukraine, to try to pivot back to Downing Street events looks a little crass, if I might say that to the hon. Gentleman. We are thinking about families literally fleeing for their lives, with their villages and towns bombed and destroyed. To try to pivot back at this moment in time is a little bit crass. As he is aware, an investigation is taking place. Once it is concluded, I am sure there will be an opportunity for him to make his political points and undoubtedly he will.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Government have very generously supplied £4.5 billion to Transport for London to cover loss of income. The trade unions, for the second day this week, have literally brought London to a halt. There is, of course, one person who is completely silent about that: the do-nothing Mayor of

[*Bob Blackman*]

London. May we have a statement from the Transport Secretary on the position of the talks about a long-term deal on the financial basis of TfL? What action will be taken to prevent this happening again?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to draw the House's attention to this matter. He refers to the do-nothing Mayor, who, of course, when standing for election was vocal in saying that he would not allow strike days on the London underground. Frankly, his record on strikes has been absolutely appalling. I contrast that with his predecessor as London Mayor, who was exemplary in delivering better transport to the people of London. On 17 March, my hon. Friend will have an opportunity to question the Secretary of State for Transport and draw attention to the London Mayor's lack of performance.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the statement and announcing the Backbench Business for next Thursday, when we will debate International Women's Day. I remind him that we have an application on the stocks for St Patrick's day on 17 March, with a debate on the Irish in Britain.

This morning, I was contacted by my constituent Sarah Thomas, who is head of the Pechersk campus of the British International School in Ukraine. Thankfully, she is now at home in Gateshead, but she is massively concerned about her work colleagues, many of whom are UK nationals with Ukrainian families and family members who are either still in Ukraine or in nearby countries and cannot get visas for their family members to travel to safety here in the UK.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his work as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. I hear his plea for St Patrick's day on 17 March, and we will try to deliver on that. He is right to draw attention once again to the plight of those people facing devastation in Ukraine, and their friends and families. The Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary are working hard to try to ensure that the transport passages to the UK are as free and flexible as possible.

Jo Gideon (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Con): Measured against World Health Organisation guidelines, 100% of schools, GP surgeries and hospitals in my constituency are located in places with dangerous levels of air pollution. That means that, for 3,000 babies born across Stoke each year, their first breath is toxic. Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation have recently partnered to highlight the impact of air pollution on respiratory diseases. Levelling up Stoke-on-Trent Central must include tackling this health issue, which disproportionately affects constituencies such as mine. Will the Leader of the House secure Government time for a debate on this important issue?

Mark Spencer: The Government take air pollution incredibly seriously. Latest published figures up to the year 2020 show that air pollution has reduced significantly since 2010. Our clean air strategy has been praised by

the World Health Organisation as an example for the rest of the world to follow. Our nationally determined contribution commits us to supporting decarbonisation approaches, striving to improve air quality and minimising adverse impacts on human health. We have provided £880 million to help local authorities develop and implement local air plans. There will be Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions on Thursday 10 March, and I hope that my hon. Friend will take that opportunity to question the Secretary of State further.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Plans for a west midlands gigafactory in Coventry will result in a £2.5 billion investment in the local economy, creating up to 6,000 new, highly skilled jobs directly alongside thousands more in the wider supply chain in Coventry, Warwickshire and the surrounding region. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the west midlands gigafactory venture so that we can hear how the Government intend to put their full support behind the rapid delivery of this crucial project?

Mark Spencer: I will give the hon. Member every assistance that I can in my role as Leader of the House. She is right to highlight this fantastic plan. I will also write to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that he, too, puts his full weight behind the plan.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows that Derby has an exceptional industrial and railway heritage and is at the centre of the UK's rail network, with connections across England and Scotland. However, those are not the only reasons that Derby would make the best location for the Great British Railways headquarters. Does he agree that Derby has the largest concentration of rail sector employees in the country, and that this provides an incredible opportunity for collaboration between the public and private sector in the rail industry once GBR moves in?

Mark Spencer: The Great British Railways transition team is running a competition on behalf of the Department for Transport. I should be careful to tiptoe through my answer so I am not seen to be favouring one bid over another. The deadline for expressions of interest is 16 March, and I wish my hon. Friend every success in her pursuit of the Derby bid. The UK has a proud heritage in rail. The Government are embarking on the biggest investment in our railway infrastructure, with £96 billion through the integrated rail plan.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Can we have a debate on the planning laws that allow the conversion of offices into substandard accommodation such as the Imperial Apartments in my constituency?

Mark Spencer: That is an important issue. Local authorities have responsibility to ensure that landlords provide adequate accommodation for their tenants. All conversions of that nature should follow building regs and make sure that standards are upheld for their tenants.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Ruby's is an award-winning fish and chip shop in the village of Thringstone that has been owned and operated

by the same family for almost 50 years. It is one of many excellent fish and chip shops in my constituency, but the owner tells me that the business outlook has never been more volatile. With record price rises for fish, batter, fat, wrapping paper and, of course, energy, many fish and chip shops are worried about whether they will survive. Could we have a statement about what action the Government will take to ensure that they protect the future of our fish and chip shops, which are a great part of British life?

Mark Spencer: I declare my interest in fish and chips, Mr Speaker. Takeaways are recognised as a huge part of the night-time economy. Such businesses provide a service to our communities and should be supported. I wish my hon. Friend's fish and chip shop and all fish and chip shops well, up and down the country.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I recognise that the Government have held a series of debates on the Russian invasion of Ukraine, but in such cataclysmic circumstances there would usually be full-day debates in Government time. This House is more or less unequivocal in its condemnation of the invasion, but there are certain difficult questions that have to be faced, some of which have been raised already. There are also increasing numbers of press reports, which have not really been answered or dealt with yet, to the effect that Indians and Africans are being turned back at the Polish border. Because such complicated issues need to be raised at length, could we have a full day's debate in Government time?

Mark Spencer: I think that even the hon. Gentleman will concede that the Government have offered a huge amount of time. Last week, we had not only Defence questions, but three statements on Ukraine, three hours of debate on the Russian sanctions, Prime Minister's questions, an Opposition day motion, a Backbench Business debate and Friday's urgent question. This week, we have had three statements, three hours of debate on the Russian sanctions, PMQs and an Opposition day motion. The Government have provided a huge amount of time to debate these matters, and Foreign Office questions on 8 March will be another opportunity. The House will continue to debate and raise questions about these matters.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): In Telford, we have two bridging hotels for Afghan refugees, who have been there for seven months now. When I visited, they told me that they want to work, get settled into communities across the UK and rebuild their lives. I have tried to find out how much longer they must wait in limbo in the two Telford hotels, but I cannot get an answer. As we focus on the crisis unfolding in Ukraine, it is crucial that we do not forget the Afghans whom we welcomed last summer. Would the Leader of the House be kind enough to arrange for the Minister for Afghan Resettlement to come to the House to update us on the progress of the scheme?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. This was the biggest mission of its kind in generations and the second largest evacuation from Afghanistan carried out by any country. Under Operation Warm Welcome, we are ensuring that Afghans arriving in the UK are able to rebuild their lives, find work,

pursue education and integrate in their local communities. We are working closely with local authorities to bring forward enough offers of housing to provide every family with a suitable home as soon as possible.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Commenting on people's personal appearance is dangerous territory, but may I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your wonderful choice of tie?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): You'll be called again.

Mr Speaker: You'll be called first next week.

Wera Hobhouse: In cities such as Bath, Airbnb has had a devastating effect, and not only on the local housing market but on traditional B&Bs and small hotels. The effect is particularly dramatic when whole houses are turned into Airbnb properties. It is a travesty of the original intention behind Airbnb as part of the sharing economy—now it is just big business. Before any further damage is done, could we have a statement from the Business Secretary on how he intends to address the huge damage that Airbnb does to local family life and to local businesses?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady raises an important matter that is worthy of debate. She will also recognise, however, that by facilitating people's ability to visit Bath, Airbnb has a huge beneficial effect on the rest of the economy, with people visiting cafés, restaurants, museums, antique shops—

Kevin Brennan: Chip shops.

Mark Spencer: And chip shops, as the hon. Gentleman suggests. It is important to facilitate people's ability to visit and make use of tourist attractions. I am sure that the Business Secretary will have heard the hon. Lady's comments, and she will have an opportunity to address them directly to him at the next Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions.

Mr Speaker: For the record, this is a Warrington Wolves tie and it really does double up well in showing support for Ukraine.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Everyone in the new city of Southend-on-Sea stands in full solidarity with the people of Ukraine at this terrible time.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the performance of the UK's ambulance service? Twice in the past month elderly, vulnerable and frail residents in Southend West have been left, having had a fall, lying in the street, cold and frightened, not knowing when an ambulance will arrive—it then arrives hours later. Despite urgent representations to the chief executive of the East of England ambulance service, we have not even had an acknowledgment. This service is not fit for purpose and must be addressed urgently. Please may we have a debate on the UK's ambulance service?

Mark Spencer: We are committed to supporting ambulance crews, who work tirelessly to respond to emergencies every day. We have more than 4,000 ambulance crews in operation across the country—an increase of

[Mark Spencer]

500 since 2018—and the Government have invested huge sums in our NHS throughout the pandemic. However, where there are performance issues, it is important that Members raise them, and I would be happy to support my hon. Friend in bringing this to the attention of the Secretary of State.

Kevin Brennan: Can we debate support for our artists and musicians? As the Leader of the House will know, many of them suffered greatly during the pandemic, and freelancers often got no support at all. Those who were lucky enough to get a small grant of £2,500 from the Arts Council were assured in ministerial answers and by Treasury advisers that, as that money was for new projects, it would not be taxed. Yet on 20 January, the day after Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs tax advisers were still giving that advice, they changed their minds. Why are the Government breaking their promise and picking the pockets of our already hard-pressed artists and musicians?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that Treasury questions are on 15 March, and I am sure he will be present to ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer that question directly. He is right to draw attention to those who suffered through the pandemic and whose industries were completely paused for that period of time. We now have an opportunity as a society to get back out there, to visit our restaurants, to enjoy those clubs and venues that provide those services, and to support our artists.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The port of Immingham in my constituency is the largest port in the UK, and therefore a major centre for the logistics sector. The sector is experiencing growing frustration at the delays to customs and the processing of import/export certificates and the like. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a debate in the near future so that we can look at this in more detail?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is right to say that our ports provide an important service not only to his constituents but to the whole economy. This is something that is worthy of debate, and I would encourage him to apply for a Backbench Business debate or even an Adjournment debate to highlight the great work that our ports do.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Many of my constituents are deeply concerned about the standing charges on their energy bills. For those whose energy consumption is low, from next month, when increases kick in, the standing charge will be around a quarter of their entire electricity bill. This means that the poorest are hit disproportionately by these charges. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out what discussions he will have with the energy regulator Ofgem about scrapping standing charges on energy bills so that consumers can more easily and simply compare the costs charged by energy providers?

Mark Spencer: Of course I will take up the matter with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, whose responsibility it is to negotiate

with and talk to the energy providers. The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to it, but the Government have actually put a lot of work into supporting those families who are dealing with the cost of energy increases. Some of the pressures are of course global, but the Government are aware of the challenges we face and will continue to support those families who find themselves in difficult circumstances.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The Government's decision to reduce air passenger duty on return domestic flights is a huge boost for regional aviation and will make it easier to restore commercial passenger flights to Blackpool airport. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on how we can support regional aviation and the role it can play in levelling up, delivering economic growth and boosting tourism in resorts such as Blackpool?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a huge champion for Blackpool and for Lancashire. The Government recognise the important role that the aviation sector plays in the UK economy. The package of reforms announced at the Budget will particularly benefit regional airports, which tend to account for a greater proportion of domestic flights. I would be happy to raise his concerns with the appropriate Minister on his behalf.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): My constituent Anoosheh Ashoori is a British citizen who has been held hostage in Iran since 2017. His prison is well known for the physical and psychological torture of its prisoners. The Government have offered only warm words on getting Anoosheh home, and that is simply not enough. The Iranian nuclear deal negotiations, which will allow hostages to be released, are currently concluding, so will the Government agree to bring a statement to the Chamber on the Foreign Secretary's meeting last month with her Iranian counterpart on this matter?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to this matter. I was appalled to see charges brought against Mr Ashoori, and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has raised the matter with Iran. I wish her well, and let us hope that we can get him home as soon as possible.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The fast-moving situation in Ukraine obviously means that the Government are having to move very quickly on our response to the flow of people leaving Ukraine. In the light of the Home Office statement this week and Home Office questions on the changes that the Government are introducing to immigration policy, and following the request from the shadow Leader of the House and other Members for clarification, can the Leader of the House confirm that he agrees with the assurances given by his predecessor in a letter dated 21 December to the Chair of the Liaison Committee about the expectation of engagement of Ministers with Select Committees, so that the Home Affairs Committee can quickly scrutinise the announcements that have been made this week and call the Minister to answer questions? We know that this is important to all Member of this House seeking answers to the queries and questions of their constituents.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for her work as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee. I hope she would recognise that Ministers are very keen to appear before Select Committees not only to defend but to promote their performance. I also hope she would recognise that, while we are in the middle of this crisis and while Vladimir Putin is waging war on the people of Ukraine, several Cabinet Ministers are very busy. I will take up the matter with the relevant Minister on her behalf and encourage engagement with her Committee.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Can we have an update on Evusheld, an important prevention therapy that could protect immunocompromised people who we know are unlikely to have developed an antibody response from the vaccines? This important drug will give immunocompromised people protection from covid that they do not have from the vaccines and, importantly, will allow them to enjoy the same freedoms as everybody else. In whatever form, such as a statement or a letter, we need to know urgently when Evusheld is likely to be available.

Mark Spencer: I am more than happy to assist the hon. Lady's campaign. I will write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make sure he is aware of her comments. I recognise her efforts in this area, and I know she is a champion in supporting people who have immune challenges. If I can assist her in any way, I will.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House knows that the people of Nottingham and Nottinghamshire are kind and good friends to have in a crisis. There has been an incredible outpouring of support over the last week for the people of Ukraine, with the Ukrainian centre reporting people coming in with offers of money, support and shelter. Given that desire, which has also been expressed to the local authorities and local Members of Parliament, can we have a debate in Government time on how we can harness this incredible act of community solidarity?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to this, and I saw the vigil held in Nottingham city centre in support of the Ukrainian people. A fund has been set up, and the Government have committed to match funding £20 million of that fund. I will make sure he has the details to advertise to his constituents, and I will do the same.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): People across the highlands, including my constituents in Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, continue to pay more per unit for electricity than people anywhere else in the UK, despite seeing clean, cheap, renewable energy being generated in their backyard. Worse still, when the eye-watering price increases come through in April, the many off-gas-grid customers face more misery than ever. This is a UK Government responsibility, so may we have a debate in Government time on the energy crisis facing rural communities, especially in the highlands?

Mark Spencer: I recognise the challenge that the hon. Gentleman highlights. I represent a rural constituency, and there are challenges for those living in rural communities. He is right to recognise that these challenges

are best solved by the Union, and we can certainly co-operate together. The British Government can bring to bear the might of the Union to solve the challenges our communities face.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Leader of the House may have seen this week that my campaign to put an end to the marketing of misleading in vitro fertilisation add-on treatments, such as embryo glue and assisted hatching, is gaining traction. For families desperate to have a child, IVF is already an expensive process and is completely unaffordable and out of reach for so many people. Will he therefore agree to a debate in Government time to discuss this important issue?

Mark Spencer: I agree with the hon. Lady that this is certainly worthy of debate. I genuinely feel for those who are going through IVF. It is very expensive, but these couples will be pursuing it in the hope of ending up with a beautiful bouncing baby. I certainly wish the couples facing these challenges all the best. I suggest that she applies for either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate to highlight these important challenges.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Since the invasion of Ukraine started, the UK has only managed to sanction nine individuals, nearly all of whom have already been sanctioned by other countries—some since 2014. It is only nine individuals, not the hundreds the Prime Minister has referred to. I think everyone in this House wants to see the Government move much faster on sanctioning individuals, because at the moment it feels like we are basically saying to them, “You’ve got a few weeks to sort yourselves out and launder all your money away.” Foreign Office officials and the National Crime Agency are saying, in effect, that they may not be able to do anything, for instance, about Alisher Usmanov for months. He has already been sanctioned in the EU. Can we think of clever ways in Parliament, using parliamentary privilege, to make sure that we can advance these sanctions?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will recognise that we have introduced these measures now where we can bring forward those sanctions. He is also right to recognise that that is best done across the international community, so that there is no safe haven. A process is in place. I do not want to get drawn into discussing individual names in the Chamber today, but the Government are looking very closely at what more we can do and drawing up a list of people we can certainly take our sanctions fight to. I am sure that more updates will be given at the Dispatch Box in the near future.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I do not know whether you are aware of this, Mr Speaker, but my Ukrainian club in Huddersfield very much admires you for the leadership you have shown on Ukraine. Can the Leader of the House think of other ways in which we, as a Parliament, across the Benches, can have more impact? Is there room for a delegation to key people in Europe or to Washington? Is there something we as a House can do more of? Could we have the Cabinet Secretary come here? Individual ministries might be doing things, but is there a really joined up process, right across Departments, taking on this dreadful Russian regime and making sure that sanctions and so much else are as effective as possible?

Mark Spencer: I think the hon. Gentleman would recognise that there is joined-up government here, across all Departments. There is co-operation; we are working together to properly take the message and the fight back to Vladimir Putin through our sanctions regime and our messaging, but also through support in military equipment and humanitarian aid. But I am sure that there are more opportunities the House can take to highlight these important issues, and he will be one of the voices drawing the attention of the world to this matter.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I pay tribute to my constituents Bryce Cunningham, from Mossgiel Farm, and Shirley Wallace of Saxen Office Furniture. They organised community collections for aid to Ukraine and the wider community response was astonishing. However, one issue they encountered was that the first lorry going out to Ukraine was impounded overnight in France. May I get a ministerial statement outlining what work is being done to streamline customs arrangements for humanitarian aid and to co-ordinate voluntary aid as well as strategic military and medical supplies, so that the right aid is getting to the right places as quickly as possible? I understand that there are also pressures on supply chains and supply routes in Poland.

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Member's constituents, who are trying to assist on the challenges that Ukraine and the Ukrainian people face. I think our response is best done at state level. I would encourage his constituents to engage with the Foreign Office to try to get assistance to unblock the challenges that they face. I shall draw the Foreign Secretary's attention to the matter he has raised.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, the children of York lined our city streets to pray for Ukraine, forming a human chain from the Minster to the Bar Convent. On Saturday, the people of York will be standing with Ukraine in St Helen's Square. As they see Polish families opening up their homes to take in Ukrainian families, they want a response from the Government on whether there can be a reassessment of how we can support refugees in this country, bearing in mind that perfection is often the enemy of the good, to ensure that people can come into homes—not just Ukrainian refugees, but Afghan refugees?

Mark Spencer: I join the hon. Member in paying tribute to the people of York, and to British people up and down the country who are opening their arms in support of Ukrainian people. If I can assist in any way, I shall do so, and I shall write to the appropriate Minister on her behalf.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): 2022 marks the centenary of Rutherglen Lawn Tennis Club in my constituency—a huge achievement. I hope that the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating it. Will he schedule a debate in Government time on the contribution of sports to local communities and the benefits for mental and physical wellbeing?

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join the hon. Member in congratulating the tennis club on its centenary. She is right to highlight the fact that sport plays a really important role in not only people's physical health but their mental health. On a Sunday morning, up and down our great nation, thousands of kids and parents are engaged in sport. It is good for the nation, good for their health and good for their mental health.

Mr Speaker: Let us hear the weather from Northern Ireland. I call Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): You have a lovely tie, by the way, Mr Speaker. I was encouraged that this week the Islamabad High Court judge Justice Babar Sattar issued a verdict barring girls under the age of 18 from getting married, even of their own free will, and prohibiting parents from marrying off girls who are under 18. It is welcome news and a giant step in the right direction. It is a crucial step forward in ending forced conversion and forced marriage in Pakistan. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate or statement on that important topic, and on what more must be done to ensure that no girls anywhere in the world, and especially in Pakistan, face the fear of forced marriage?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Member is right to draw attention to what I would call the crime—I think in effect it is a crime—of forcing girls into marriage. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) has a private Member's Bill on this matter. I am sure that he will be able to link up with her to work together to end that barbaric practice across the world.

Russia's Attack on Ukraine

11.21 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): We have entered the eighth day of Ukraine's fight for survival. In the week since Vladimir Putin launched his unprovoked, premeditated and barbaric attack on a free and peaceful neighbour, the UK has led a united Western response to his brutality. We are working with allies around the world on multiple fronts to ensure that the Russian dictator feels the full cost of his invasion. On the military front, we have provided Ukraine with the weaponry to inflict significant losses on the invading Russian forces. On the economic front, we have worked with international partners to cripple the Russian economy, but as history has shown us, there are other powerful ways of isolating rogue regimes.

Culture and sport can be as effective as economic sanctions if used in the right way, and so in the last week I have been working to mobilise the full might of the UK's soft power against the Russian state, and applying pressure both publicly and privately across the sectors to use every lever at their disposal to entrench Putin's position as an international pariah. Culture is the third front in the Ukrainian war. Earlier this week, I brought together governing bodies from across sport and I made the UK's position clear: Russia should be stripped of hosting international sporting events, and Russian teams should not be allowed to compete abroad.

Across sport, the arts and entertainment, we are ostracising Putin on the global stage. The upcoming Champions League final and Formula 1 Grand Prix will no longer be held in Russia. Likewise, Russia has been banned by UEFA, FIFA, World Rugby, the International Tennis Federation and the International Olympic Committee. Venues across the country have cancelled upcoming performances by the Bolshoi and Siberian ballets. Disney and Warner Bros. have pulled their films from Russia. Netflix has stopped its projects. BBC Studios and ITV Studios have stopped trading with Russia too, and Russia has been banned from taking part in the Eurovision Song Contest.

Putin is now suffering a sporting and cultural Siberia of his own making, and it will be causing the Russian leader real pain. Ask Ukrainian tennis player Sergiy Stakhovsky, who gave a very moving interview on the radio earlier this week. A few weeks ago, he was playing at the Australian Open. Now he is back in Ukraine, preparing to fight for his country's survival. He said that Putin loves nothing better than watching Russia's sports teams' glory on the world stage, his athletes draped in the Russian flag.

Putin needs the kudos of these global events to cover up his illegitimacy and the hideous acts he is perpetrating in Ukraine. The Russian despot is desperately trying to hide the grim extent of his invasion from his own people. That is why I strongly support, and continue to encourage, the kinds of emotional displays of solidarity we have seen across sporting events in the last week, including the Carabao cup final and the Six Nations. Lights and symbols cannot stop bullets and bombs, but when Russians see their favourite footballers wearing shirts emblazoned with the bright blue and yellow of the Ukrainian flag, it helps to open their eyes to the cold reality of Putin's actions. Likewise, every time an

international organisation or figure publicly stands up against what Putin is doing in Ukraine, they chip away at his wall of lies. I thank and applaud all those who have done so, in this country and internationally, and I continue to push for organisations to exile Putin's Russia from their ranks.

That is why I have called on UNESCO to bar Russia from hosting its annual world heritage conference in June. It is absolutely inconceivable that that event could go ahead in Putin's country as he fires missiles at innocent civilians in neighbouring Ukraine. If it does go ahead, the UK will not be attending. That is also why I urged the International Paralympic Committee urgently to rethink its decision to allow athletes from Russia and Belarus to compete. Such pressure works; the IPC's decision was the wrong call, and I welcome the fact that overnight it has listened and this morning it has reversed that decision. I wish our athletes the best of luck in Beijing over the coming days. Later today, I will be hosting a summit with countries from all over the globe to discuss how we can continue to use the power of sport to isolate Putin at home and abroad. We have to keep ratcheting up the pressure. Putin must fail.

In my Department, we have been working tirelessly to use the power of tech and the media against the Russian dictator and to shut down and counter his propaganda and lies, because they are key weapons in his arsenal. The Department's counter-disinformation unit has been working to identify and remove Russian disinformation online. Alongside the US and others, we have been working closely with platforms to take pre-emptive action against Putin, and to demonstrate the consequences of his brutality in real time to the Russian people. Apple has paused all sales in Russia, Google has added new safeguarding features to Google Maps and Search, and WhatsApp is hosting a helpline for Ukraine's state emergency service that sends people information and critical news about the local situation.

While big tech has stepped up in a really positive way, we are also encouraging and supporting platforms to go even further to tackle certain challenges, including disinformation, service disruptions and the humanitarian crisis triggered by the conflict.

In this digital age, the Ukrainian war is being fought on the ground and online, so we need to use tech wherever we can as a force for good to counter Putin's aggression, to expose his weaknesses and to bolster the people fighting for their survival in Ukraine.

From the very moment that Putin began his invasion, I was very clear that he must not be allowed to exploit our open and free media to spread poisonous propaganda into British homes. RT's own editor-in-chief has called the network an "information weapon" of the Russian state. That is why I wrote to Ofcom last week, urging it to examine any potential breaches of the broadcasting code. Ofcom has since opened 27 investigations into RT and is now reviewing whether to revoke RT's licence entirely.

In the meantime, those investigations have been overtaken by events. I was very glad to see yesterday that the channel is now officially off the air on British televisions, after it was shut down on Sky, Freeview and Freesat. I have also written to Meta and TikTok asking them to do everything that they can to prevent access to RT in the UK, as they have done in Europe. I am glad that YouTube has already answered this call and done so.

[Ms Nadine Dorries]

We are on the side of free media. That is why it was brilliant to see that the audience for the BBC's Russian language news website has gone up from 3.1 million to 10.7 million in the past week. Despite his best efforts to censor reporting in Russia, Putin's own citizens are turning to factual, independent information in their millions.

At this point, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks and admiration to all those journalists, working for the BBC, ITV and other news outlets, who are risking their lives to bring us unbiased and accurate news from a live war zone. We will keep ratcheting up the pressure on Putin, and I will use all the levers in my Department to ensure that he is fully ostracised from the international community.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister, Chris Elmore.

11.31 am

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I associate myself and the official Opposition with the comments that the Secretary of State has made about the courage of the Ukrainian people and those who are returning to fight for their country. I add my support to all the journalists who have travelled from the UK and around the world to report—free reporting, challenging Putin's agenda and countering his disinformation. Those journalists are heroes and we owe them a great debt.

We are in agreement. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell), who cannot be here today, has long been calling on the Government and sporting and cultural bodies to take tough action against Russian aggression and Belarusian complicity.

Our thoughts today are with the Ukrainian people and armed forces. We see acts of heroism day after day and courage beyond words in the face of Putin's illegal invasion. Only a few hours ago, Russian troops took control of the city of Kherson, a stepping stone to the port of Odesa, where Ukraine's main naval port and navy reside. With each passing day, the situation continues to escalate. This situation requires the fullest and strongest possible international response.

Across this House, we all recognise the importance that Putin and Russia place on participating and succeeding in sporting and cultural events, from chess to ballet, to football. Indeed, in 2010, when Russia won its bid to host the 2018 World cup, Putin spoke enthusiastically about the impact that football had had on his native Leningrad during the second world war and how "it helped people to stand tall and survive."

Success in sport buoys a nation, boosts national pride, and offers an unrivalled feel-good factor, bringing people together. Indeed, sport can offer a cloak of legitimacy and deflection. Despoths such as Putin crave this international attention and spotlight. We know the value that Putin places on hosting international tournaments and on Russia competing in international competitions. That is why we have been calling for full and immediate sporting and cultural sanctions against Russia and Belarus from the start, and for those countries to be banned from international competitions.

UEFA and Formula 1 moved quickly to cancel events in Russia. Others have now followed suit. Regrettably, though, some have dragged their feet, or are hedging

their bets. International sporting and cultural bodies must hit Putin where it hurts and send a clear, immediate and unequivocal message to the Russian people that Putin has turned their country into a pariah state. We welcome this morning's decision by the Paralympic committee to ban Russia from competing in the winter Paralympics. We should see no fudges, no ifs, no buts—outright bans must be the norm.

We fully support what the Secretary of State has announced today, but we have some questions. What further discussions is she having with sporting bodies on the complete and total boycott of Russia and Belarus? I understand that some, such as FINA, have said that Russian athletes and officials can take part, but with neutral status. She rightly raises tennis, but Russian and Belarusian players will still be able to play at upcoming grand slams, including Wimbledon, under a neutral flag—

Ms Dorries indicated dissent.

Chris Elmore: I can see the Secretary of State shaking her head, so does she agree with me and the Opposition that we must do more to ensure a total ban from tennis tournaments, ensuring that no Russian or Belarusian will play at Wimbledon?

On culture, we have seen British institutions, many of them recovering from covid, left with no clear guidance regarding the cancellation of the Russian touring ballet, for example. It should not be for individual organisations, teams or nations to boycott Russia alone. What guidance will the Secretary of State provide to UK organisations and institutions to ensure that they speak with one voice, and what pressure will she place on international bodies that do not ban Russia and Belarus outright?

What is the Secretary of State doing about those who have bought their way into the fabric of British life, such as Abramovich and others, buying football clubs and gifting to arts and other valued institutions? What is the advice for arts and cultural institutions that have received and do receive gifts from oligarchs and those who prop up Putin's regime? What about football and sport more widely? Will she act quickly on Abramovich and other oligarchs to ensure that they cannot profit from Putin's war? Why are the Government allowing oligarchs such as Abramovich time and notice to sort out their affairs and divest any assets that would otherwise be subject to sanctions?

We stand ready to support the Government's actions, but we want to see them go further and faster on international bans. We also want to see the Government take Russian money out of our world-renowned institutions such as the Premier League and our arts and cultural scene. We have seen sportwashing, culturewashing and artwashing of dirty Kremlin-linked Russian money. We need action to tackle that now.

Finally, on disinformation, we welcome Ofcom's investigation into RT. Online disinformation and fake news is rife. Russian bot factories are spouting lies and trying to distort the truth of Putin's atrocities in Ukraine. We welcome the Secretary of State's announcements this morning, but I ask her to go further. The online safety Bill should include additional measures on tackling that disinformation before it is put to the House for Second Reading. Can she give that commitment today?

It is right that the international response to Putin's aggression should be exclusion from sporting and cultural events. Words must become deeds, and Putin should feel the consequences of his actions.

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. He has raised some valid points, all of which are being addressed. He spoke about athletes competing under neutral flags, tennis players coming to Wimbledon and other sporting events. As I said in my statement, I am holding a summit this afternoon with in excess of 20 of my ministerial opposites in countries around the world, and I hope we can take a joint position on this matter. It is important that we take a global approach as far as possible, because that will have more impact and will be a sustainable position for the long term.

Some of these issues are very difficult, involving athletes who have trained all their lives to compete in certain events. As the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box on Wednesday, we are not anti the Russian people; we are anti-Putin and his regime. However, the actions of Putin have consequences, and at this afternoon's summit I hope we will reach a position on many of the issues the hon. Gentleman has raised, and release a statement afterwards.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to the Dispatch Box. In line with her brief, I point out that we now know today that US intelligence has made it clear that President Xi knew about the invasion before it took place—in fact, he had asked the Russians to delay their invasion so that it would not affect the Beijing Olympics. We also know that when the Russian 4G system was attacked, hacked and brought down, it was Huawei, based in Cambridge, that helped to repair the system for the Russians.

I hear that the Government are thinking about a trade deal with China and that they think that China can be an interlocutor with Russia. May I remind my right hon. Friend and the Government that a similar argument was advanced in 1940, whereby Mussolini was going to be the interlocutor with Hitler, and Churchill refused that? When will the lesson be learned?

Ms Dorries: I thank my right hon. Friend for his points. Obviously most of them are not in my brief and I cannot comment, but I am sure his comments have been heard. I cannot comment on his assertion that the invasion was held for the Beijing Olympics, because I do not know that is the case. As I said in my answer to the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), we are holding an international summit this afternoon with world leaders—20-plus, I hope, by the time we get to this afternoon—to reach a position, and we will release a statement after that.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement.

Last night people throughout Ukraine were once again subjected to vicious aerial bombardment from Russian forces, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has now confirmed that over 1 million people have fled Ukraine, with countless more displaced within the country. I urge the Government again to reconsider their position, as often we are not remembered for what we have done but for what we have not done, and so far every country in the EU has opened its borders and we are still arguing over that.

This morning, Putin's propaganda machine was in full force, with schoolchildren throughout Russia to be given a virtual lesson on

“why the liberation mission in Ukraine is a necessity”.

Regrettably, this Government's inaction has allowed the Russian state-owned Sputnik and Russia Today to spread Putin's lies into every home across our islands. It is of course welcome that RT is now officially off-air on British televisions after it was shut down on Sky, Freeview and Freesat. However, this is not an action of the UK Government; it is because of sanctions imposed by the EU. I have asked twice this week already and got pithy replies as to why we would not do that. Why did we have to wait for the EU to take action before Putin's propaganda outlets were taken off TV here? Why are the UK Government waiting for the EU's sanctions to do their job for them?

Russian state misinformation has undermined western societies' democracy and security for almost a decade now. The Secretary of State says that we are in the eighth day of Ukraine's fight for survival. That is not true; it has been eight long years, and we have stood aside and allowed this misinformation on our television stations and our radio channels every single day during that time. Two years on from the Russia report, no action has yet been taken on misinformation and Russian state influence in the UK. Does the Secretary of State not agree that failure to act on Russian misinformation and influence over the past years has left the UK less able to respond to Putin's aggression now? It is clear that more needs to be done to counter its effect throughout society and it must be done now, so what steps is she taking to crack down on Russian state misinformation online?

Ms Dorries: I do not think the hon. Gentleman actually listened to my statement. We have been very strong in leadership right from day one—from the day Putin launched his illegal action. It is not the case that all roads lead back to Brexit, particularly in war. We, as politicians, are not able to control the free press in the UK, and that is a good thing, and all the organisations and companies that operate the infrastructure and the network that streams Russia Today are based in the EU. Therefore, the EU was able to use its sanctions quite rightly to close down that network of companies and the satellite used, which was over Luxembourg. It is not the case that Russia Today is streamed into British homes. As a result of concerted effort and discussions, Russia Today is no longer streamed into British homes, whether via TV, Sky, Freesat or Freeview. As I said in the statement, we have contacted Meta and TikTok to implore them to stop streaming Russia Today via their online platforms. It is my position that we will not stop until we have persuaded every organisation, based in the UK or not, that it is wrong to stream Russian propaganda into British homes.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Yesterday, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted overwhelmingly to condemn Russia for its aggression and to call for it to withdraw its forces from Ukraine. It is now clearly apparent that internationally, Russia is a pariah. Vladimir Putin operates on the basis of the dissemination of lies, so it is excellent news, as my right hon. Friend has said, that as a matter of practice, it is now impossible for British viewers to watch the lies being broadcast by Russia Today. While it is right that Ofcom should be independent, can my right hon. Friend convey to Ofcom what I perceive to be the feeling of this House—that it would be deplored were Russia Today ever to be seen on British screens again?

Ms Dorries: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend. He may have seen that I published the letter that I wrote to Ofcom shortly after I wrote it last week. It has launched 27 live investigations into Russia Today. I hope that it expedites those investigations, and that they result in the removal of Russia Today's licence so that it is never again able to have the platform to broadcast its propaganda into the UK.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly commend the Secretary of State for the statement that she made earlier and on the tears that she was pouring out over journalists such as Clive Myrie, who are doing a fabulous job. I hope she will not be cross with me now—she likes being cross with me—but some of us are anxious about why we are not going further on the sanctioning of individuals. It is a mystery to me why Roman Abramovich has not yet been sanctioned. The Government know that he has been engaged in illicit activity and is a person of concern to the Government, which is why they have not been encouraging him to come to the UK. I do not know why Alisher Usmanov has not yet been sanctioned. He has been sanctioned by the EU, but not by us. He owns Sutton Place. I do not know why we have not seized that asset. I do not know why the UK has not yet seized a single yacht, flat or property of any kind while other countries in Europe are able to do that. Finally, I wonder whether the Minister will condemn John Terry today. I do not know whether she has seen this, but he has posted today a photo of himself with Roman Abramovich, who is one of Putin's cronies. What will the people of Ukraine think of the former England football captain?

Ms Dorries: I thank my friend the hon. Gentleman for his warm words. I think I just held the tears back—I am a blubberer, as he knows—and I commend him. For Members who have not been on these Benches for many years, he is not a Johnny-come-lately to this issue; he has been campaigning on these issues for many years, including on Magnitsky, and he is a good friend of Bill Browder. He has been raising the issue of Russia for as long as I have been here, which is a very long time. I thank him. It is no surprise to me that he is like a dog with a bone on this, because it has always been one of his passionate interests, and MPs are always at their best and most effective when they campaign in their moment, and his time is here, on this.

I heard everything that the hon. Gentleman said. I heard what he said in business questions. I have heard everything he has said since this happened last Thursday, and I have been watching him carefully—that may disconcert him. Obviously I cannot name individuals in the way that he can, but I know that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is working on sanctioning. He knows that sanctions are its responsibility and that it is working on those sanctions. I also know that he knows about issues around the National Crime Agency and others, and we all know that this is the mother of Parliaments. We are a legislator, and we abide by the principle of law. He knows that, too, and I know he will find that frustrating.

In football, however, I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we have tolerated the investment of Russian kleptocrats for far too long. Yesterday's announcement showed that we have reached a turning point. We need to ensure that football clubs remain viable—that is an important point.

I will bring forward our response to the fan-led review as soon as I can, as well as an independent regulator and a fit and proper person test for owners. The fan-led review was led by my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) and it could not have come at a more opportune time. I see that as a turning point and there can be no arguments against bringing it forward.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. He knows that I am limited in what I can do in my Department. I cannot mention names. I hope that we will see the Foreign Office come forward with the sanctions that he is looking for.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I, too, commend my right hon. Friend for her statement. Truth will out. Millions of Russians and Ukrainians are turning to the BBC for their news. May I suggest to her that in the battle for democracy in Ukraine and more globally, we will have to better resource our hard and soft power capabilities. Given what she has said from the Dispatch Box, does she accept that we need to spend more on some of the key components of our soft power capabilities, including the BBC World Service and the British Council, on a sustainable basis, not just a one-off basis? There is no shortage of state-on-state aggressors waiting in the wings.

Ms Dorries: I hear my hon. Friend's points. The situation in which we find ourselves in the Department is that we are re-evaluating many policies that have been long standing for many years, not having ever believed that we would be in the situation we are in today. I have heard what he said and I can only reassure him that we are having a number of discussions on a number of fronts.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in praising our BBC and the other free independent British journalists who have been proudly providing the finest objective independent journalism and putting their lives at risk, as she noted. That is in direct contrast to the squalid work of Putin's misinformation organ, Russia Today. I note what she said about the Government not closing down free speech, but my constituents are asking why, in these exceptional circumstances, we could not stop Russia Today being on our TV sets straightaway rather than waiting for the EU to act.

Ms Dorries: Because the infrastructure, the individual companies, the satellite that streamed Russia Today and the framework in which it operated were all sat in the EU, not the UK. The British television screens were in the UK, but the companies that operated Russia Today were in the EU.

As the right hon. Lady will know, the first thing that I tried to do, almost immediately, was to stop Russia Today streaming into UK homes. I was slightly frustrated by the fact that, of course, politicians have absolutely no influence over the free press, and nor should they. That is the responsibility of the regulator Ofcom, so the first thing I did was write to Ofcom and urge it to review the output of Russia Today. It announced that it was launching 17 investigations, which then increased to 27 investigations, but I was equally frustrated to discover that that would take some time.

In the meantime, events took over. The EU provided its own sanctions on those organisations based in the EU and on the satellite above Luxembourg. It ceased the transmission and shortly after that, transmission to Freesat, Freeview and Sky ceased. As I have said, apart from Meta and TikTok, people cannot see Russia Today on their television screens. It was purely due to the fact that those were EU-based companies, not UK-based companies.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I really welcome the statement made by my right hon. Friend. I do hope we hear that UNESCO is withdrawing its conference in Russia, because that is totally inappropriate. If it needs a home, I am sure we could host the conference in Belper in Mid Derbyshire. Can my right hon. Friend confirm whether her Department is planning future cultural and sporting sanctions against this evil Kremlin regime?

Ms Dorries: We do not want to look as though we are being opportunistic in saying we could hold the conference in the UK, but I am sure many Members will have suggestions about their constituencies.

I want to make my position clear: no Russian or Belarusian athletes or sportspeople should be taking part in any sporting competitions. That is why, as I have said, I am meeting, I hope, 20-plus Ministers—my opposite numbers—this afternoon to reach a joint position with other nations, so that we can move forward on a platform of understanding that we all have the same opinion and the same approach, which will make it much easier to deal with such situations as they arise throughout this difficult period.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I want to praise the Secretary of State for what she said about our broadcast journalists, and I would perhaps add Channel 4 News and Sky News to the list she gave. I do hope she takes that into account when considering the future of Channel 4. I also want to praise what she said about my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). However, I do recall attending—and history should recall this—the best ever attended all-party parliamentary group meeting in this House when hundreds of her colleagues were mobilised to depose my hon. Friend as the chair of the all-party group on Russia because of his strong views on Vladimir Putin.

Leaving that aside, on the issue of Everton football club, Alisher Usmanov has been sanctioned by the EU for being a pro-Kremlin oligarch with particularly close ties to the Russian President, Vladimir Putin. Does the Secretary of State think it is acceptable that his assets are currently funding Everton football club?

Ms Dorries: On the hon. Member's first point, I do not think that my colleagues hit the APPG—

Hon. Members: They did!

Ms Dorries: Could I just finish the sentence? I do not think that my colleagues hit the APPG because of the views of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on Putin; they did so because they wanted a different chair—and I was not one of them.

I cannot comment on the football club that the hon. Member has mentioned. As he may know, my grandfather was one of the founders of that particular football club.

As I have said, we are waiting for the Foreign Office and the sanctions that the Foreign Office is working on. We have reached a turning point in football club ownership in this country, which is why I will use every power I have, in my office and the Department, to ensure that we bring forward a fit and proper person test for football club owners and that we bring forward an independent regulator as soon as possible both to regulate football clubs and to ensure that they have the right ownership in place. It is important that we also protect the viability of those football clubs that are in question at the moment to make sure they remain football clubs and are still there.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for her statement. She is absolutely right that culture is an important front in this war, as sport and the arts are part of any country's DNA. Russia is spreading lies and disinformation through the media, so will she do all she can to ensure that media platforms counter Russian disinformation and provide the opportunity for brave independent journalists to spread their work both here and around the world?

Ms Dorries: I absolutely agree. My point is that the work of all our journalists—all British journalists—is of vital importance at this time. The work of an independent and free media—free from political interference—is of the utmost importance. We are seeing that now with journalists across all of our media outlets, including Channel 4. ITV has been doing an amazing job, as have Sky and the BBC—I cannot mention them all—and we have freelance journalists out in many countries as well. They are doing an amazing job.

The Russian Government are conducting an aggressive set of information operations against Ukraine and NATO in a transparent and shameful way to justify military action against Ukraine, and the campaign has been escalating. As I have said, this is just as much an online war as a boots-on-the-ground or a tank-stuck-in-the-mud war. Both in broadcasting and online we are doing everything we possibly can, using our disinformation unit, to minimise disinformation and the amount of propaganda that gets into people's homes, and doing everything we can to ensure the Russian people get to hear about the true situation and what is actually happening in Ukraine.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I also thank the Secretary of State for her comments, particularly on the journalists who are keeping us informed and ensuring the truth about what is happening in Ukraine gets out; we should never forget the threat to their own personal safety and the danger they are putting themselves in so that we can be informed. Can the Secretary of State assure us that such considerations will be taken into account when looking at the future funding of the BBC, Channel 4 and the media, particularly given that the Russian language service listenership has tripled to more than 10 million during this crisis? That shows the importance of the BBC World Service, which in its current format came into being in 1939. Can the Secretary of State assure us that the future funding of the World Service will be looked upon in the light of what has happened?

Ms Dorries: I speak as someone who ran a school in Africa for a year and waited every day to hear the words announcing the World Service. First, it is funded through

[Ms Dorries]

the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, not my Department, and also I have always said that the BBC is a great British global brand and it needs protecting. I have always said it was a polar bear on a shrinking icecap and we needed to review the funding model in order to protect the BBC and the best of the BBC, which includes the World Service.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): On behalf of everyone in the new city of Southend-on-Sea, I welcome the statement and congratulate the Secretary of State on this vital work. She is absolutely right that we must isolate Russia completely and utterly in terms of culture, media and sport, but she is also right that we must lead the international community on this and we will only be successful if we can persuade everybody to join in with her vital work. Can she elaborate on the scope of the summit she is holding this afternoon, and assure us that key players in the G20 will be joining her in this vital work?

Ms Dorries: I welcome my hon. Friend and thank her for her question and comments—and I welcome Southend to its city status, too. On the scope of the summit, we will be discussing all things sporting and relating to the war in Ukraine. There are some very difficult questions. Things are happening very quickly. Only yesterday the International Paralympic Committee issued a statement that Russian and Belarusian athletes could take part, and the change came only as a result of our leading—our pressure—and leading other nations. Rather than dealing with situations as they arise, it is important that we have a coherent position—globally if possible—towards these situations. I hope that, as a result of the summit, we will produce a statement that says, “This is our position” and that it condemns Russia and Belarus on the sporting stage. Do not be in any doubt: sport is incredibly important to Putin. It covers his illegitimacy. There is nothing he likes more than seeing Russian athletes on the world stage draped in the Russian flag. He needs it; we need to take it away from him and make sure that never happens again while this situation continues, and that is what the summit this afternoon will be about.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I join the voices urging the Secretary of State to look very seriously at how we finance the total UK media effort, which should cut across Government Departments. In particular, I want to return to the point she rightly made about the important role of our incredibly brave journalists. Underlying those incredibly brave journalists are some incredibly brave Ukrainians, people who are frightened to death and who have put up with the most atrocious circumstances of death, destruction, and violence. Will she ensure that those are the voices that are heard across Russia? In the end, they are far more important than British voices. Ukrainian voices speak very, very loudly.

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment, because we have not mentioned Ukrainian voices in providing information about what is happening in Ukraine via their own journalism and their own creative and inventive means of getting information out. He is also right to talk about our own journalists who are risking their lives in live war zones. We should, and we do, commend Ukrainians. Each one is a citizen

journalist in their own right, doing their bit to bring to the world the horrors of what is happening in Ukraine today. They should be equally commended.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for all the work she is doing to isolate Russia, and Putin in particular, at this time. I am sure she will join me in welcoming the decision by Formula 1, which I think has been made while she has been in the Chamber, to not only cancel the grand prix in Russia but the contract with Russia, so there will not be future grands prix in Russia. Will she send a strong message to the sporting world that sanctions will continue to ratchet up until such time as Putin's Government are no longer in power, and the Russians are free to choose their own leaders and return to the world of sport?

Ms Dorries: Very well said. I commend my Sports Minister, the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), who has been holding conversations day and night since last Thursday. He has been working incredibly hard, along with officials in my Department. They have had no time off since last Thursday and have all worked equally hard. It has taken a huge effort to get to Formula 1 withdrawing from Russia, when all that planning, organisation and money was in place. It takes a huge effort to get the message out from the Department that we find it unacceptable, do not condone it and think it should be withdrawn. It is not just words from me; it is the effort of the whole Department, officials and Ministers alike.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) is right. We will not condone any organisation that hosts sporting, cultural or creative events in Russia. We will campaign against that and push against that as much as we can. The purpose of this afternoon's summit is to ensure that we are not just leading but are part of a wider coalition of Ministers and countries who hold the same position.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is right that we concentrate on sanctions and ostracising the Putin regime, but we will have to look to the future. As people leave their elderly relatives, and children wave goodbye to their parents, generations and decades of hate are being sown. After the last world war, we learned to build up relationships between cities and towns, and Bristol has often led the way in twinning, cultural partnerships and relationships. May I urge the Secretary of State and her colleagues to quickly start thinking about how we can support our towns and cities across the country to build relationships with towns and cities across Ukraine—and, in future, the Russian people?

Ms Dorries: We know about those stories of people leaving their families, the harrowing pictures of fathers leaving their babies behind and mothers leaving for Poland while fathers fight, through our print media, so it is important to mention our print media. As well as our journalists broadcasting from a war zone, our print media and print journalists are telling the stories, giving us the colour, backdrop and human stories behind what is happening. That is how we know so much. Those stories from our print journalists are also disseminated online so that people can read about what is happening. It is important that they get a mention.

The hon. Member is right, but she is talking about the future and, as she will accept, Ukraine is not in a position for that today. However, that will be an important part of the rebuilding, and we will be at the forefront of that. She is right about helping those towns and cities to rebuild, but when will that day come? As I stand here today, we do not know. We can only pray and hope that it is sooner rather than later. However, I reassure her that when that day comes, as we have led in the western world's response against Putin, we will also lead in the recovery of Ukraine.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and work in ensuring that Putin is in a sporting and cultural Siberia of his own making. Not all heroes wear capes; many wear flak jackets. I thank all the journalists bringing unbiased news, bravely challenging disinformation and helping to make Putin an international pariah. She mentioned stories, and it is particularly pertinent on World Book Day to thank all those journalists sharing important stories. Does she agree that they are heroes?

Ms Dorries: What can I say other than yes? Absolutely. We are all watching every broadcast of the news and we are all reading the newspapers. We all know the danger that journalists in both broadcast and print media are putting themselves in every day. We in the House of Commons are protected; they are in a theatre of war, putting themselves in harm's way. We cannot commend them enough in this House today.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Secretary of State is acutely aware, as we all are, just how spineless and pathetic football authorities are when faced with people with large amounts of money. In fact, the Football Association's only fit and proper person test is one question: "How big is your wallet?" If they have enough money, they can buy up whatever they like. The answer to that is already in her hands: the Crouch report, which she mentioned, and it has been with us for months. We had an urgent question on Derby County and the troubles it faces weeks ago, long before the Russian invasion. Will she implement the Crouch report as quickly as possible? That would protect our clubs—the fabric of our sport—against not just Putin's gangster friends but other international criminals.

Ms Dorries: I thank the hon. Member for his words on the Crouch report, which is incredibly valuable and opportune at this time. Its recommendations involve the establishment of a regulator, which is no easy feat and involves the Treasury and funding. Since the report was published in, I believe, December, my first statement was that, in principle, I accepted the role of an independent regulator. Given the situation that we are in now, we are looking to introduce the Crouch report as soon as possible, which will involve the establishment of an independent regulator and a fit-and-proper-person test. That work is being evaluated. I hope to do it as soon as possible. It is not that we do not want to do it; we are trying to do it as fast as we can.

Mark Logan (Bolton North East) (Con): Not that I ever watched it, but 206 was the channel number for Russia Today in my office in Westminster—obviously, it is no longer "Russia tomorrow". Will the Secretary of State give us words of resolve to say that Putin may be Russia today, but he will not be Ukraine tomorrow?

Ms Dorries: What a fabulous statement—well said. What can I say? I can only agree. I cannot top that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We are all completely indebted to our British journalists in Ukraine who are serving not just us but the Russian people who are tuning in to hear the truth—often for the first time—about what is happening. For that to continue, we need to ensure that the digital and telecoms infrastructure is intact. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that we make our contribution to keeping that infrastructure in place?

Ms Dorries: My officials have been holding conversations day and night—many operators are based in the US, not the UK—since Putin launched his horrendous war on Ukraine. We are doing everything that we can to assist both with telecoms structure and with ensuring that the messaging gets through to the people in Russia as people in Ukraine about what Putin is actually doing. As I said, as a result of some of those conversations, WhatsApp has launched an end-to-end encryption service that the Ukrainian people can access to find out what is happening in their location on a minute-by-minute, real-time basis and where they can get emergency support and help. All such services happen as a result of international discussions that are ongoing on an hour-by-hour basis.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Science Museum in my constituency has decided not to proceed with an exhibition relating to the trans-Siberian railway. Does my right hon. Friend agree that our cultural institutions have shown great leadership in ostracising Putin and his cronies?

Ms Dorries: I absolutely do. I commend every institution that has taken what some feel is a brave line, but it is the right line and the right position: not to engage with, not to display, not to interact with and not to provide facilities for any Russian cultural institution or exhibition. With all consequences come costs, and we will feel the pain of some of that, but that is nothing compared with the pain that the Ukrainian people are experiencing minute by minute. I urge all cultural organisations across the UK to take that hard line against Russia, knowing that, in doing so, that will help to expediate the end of this illegal occupation of Ukraine and get to a position where we can open those cultural pathways and start to help to build a Ukraine for the future.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Russia's attack on Ukraine is unacceptable and must not be tolerated. The House has heard frequently about the financial difficulties facing the entertainment industry in the last two years. The Russian state ballet has had performances cancelled around the UK, with ticket holders to be refunded by venues. What support will the Government provide for venues that are now out of pocket due to cancelled performances?

Ms Dorries: Hopefully, those organisations' insurance policies will kick in as a result, because this is war. At the moment, all of our efforts are focused on helping the people of Ukraine and helping to beat Putin.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the way in which she has worked with cultural and sporting bodies to ostracise Russia. The premier league is one of this country's best cultural and economic exports around the world. Does she agree that ending the broadcasting of premier league games in Russia and Belarus will help to expose the horrific extent of this barbaric invasion to the people of those countries?

Ms Dorries: Yes, I absolutely agree. That is our leadership—don't do it, don't promote Russia, don't broadcast Russia. Sadly, local Russians will suffer and pay the cost as a result, but I am afraid that Putin's actions have consequences. We are holding conversations this afternoon—we have ongoing conversations—with officials and sporting organisations to take that hard line of not broadcasting, not facilitating and not displaying Russian football, Russian goods and Russian shows—anything. We must not do it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Secretary of State for her statement, her resilience, her courage and her clear and strong leadership, which we all admire in this Chamber. Some say that politics and sport should never mix, but this is not about politics; it is about life and death. Every way we can, in every aspect of life, we must get the message across that we will not overlook, we will not forget and we will not accept Russia—that is the only way forward. Does she believe that in the present situation, as this House is saying clearly, the art world must consider its exhibitions? Will she allow it to make its own determinations whether those should continue, or will she issue guidance on what should and must be done?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Gentleman is right that sport and politics should never mix, but we are in the theatre of war and it is very different. Sport is a very useful tool in the theatre of war, particularly against someone like Putin—which is why sport and politics will very much

be mixing. We are providing, we hope, the clearest leadership we can in our messages to sporting, cultural and creative institutions about what we expect of them.

Will we publish guidance? I hope that over the coming days and weeks, all those institutions will hear the message, heed the guidance that we are giving and make the right decisions themselves. A statement will be issued this afternoon as a result of the summit, and I am sure that more will be forthcoming over the coming weeks, but we hope that everyone gets the message loud and clear.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I very much agree with her approach of allowing the independent regulator to make decisions about who broadcasts in this country, because they are not decisions for politicians. However, may I say gently that next time she speaks to the chair of Ofcom, she might want to suggest that when a mad dictator declares war on a sovereign country, Ofcom could perhaps be a little more proactive in its approach to broadcasting in this country?

May I ask what steps the Department is taking to support UK media broadcasters and print journalists in the theatre of war to ensure that they are kept safe? It is highly likely that Russia will take steps to disrupt the World Service. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that that free service is available to people in Ukraine and Russia?

Ms Dorries: I am sure that the chair of Ofcom has heard my hon. Friend's words loud and clear. On his second question, we cannot make any guarantees—it is a theatre of war. We cannot guarantee that the Russians will allow the BBC and British-based journalists in Russia to remain there; we cannot guarantee that we will be allowed to continue to broadcast; we cannot guarantee that we will continue to get messages to the people of Ukraine. The only promise I can make to the House is that we will do our very best to ensure that that is the situation for as long as possible.

Backbench Business

Welsh Affairs

12.23 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

A belated happy St David's day, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am very pleased indeed that the Backbench Business Committee agreed to the collective request from Welsh Members for this St David's day debate. It is an important historical event, and I feel that it is a particularly important debate this year, given what is happening. I am pleased that it is taking place and that Welsh Members have turned up in significant numbers despite, let it be said, some strongly competing demands. Good for them.

I will focus on two issues. The first is the shared prosperity fund and the fog around it, which I hope the Secretary of State will sweep to one side; the second is the very real cost of living crisis that people in Wales face today.

As we know, the shared prosperity fund is intended to replace European structural funds, from which Wales in particular derived a tremendous benefit over many years: west Wales and the valleys was designated an objective 1 area because of objective need, and significant resources were allocated from the EU to Wales. The Government said that they intended to replace that funding with a shared prosperity fund, and we have been waiting for the details with bated breath for some time.

We were initially promised the fund last year. We were then told, "Hang on a minute—the details will be in the White Paper on levelling up," but the White Paper was published with only a passing reference to the shared prosperity fund. A guidance note was published, but that was all. We are now told that we must wait until next month for more details of the fund.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the lack of detail is extremely corrosive, particularly to small community organisations and small businesses? They are trying to plan ahead, but clearly they are being impeded by the Government's delay—and probably, I am afraid, by their incompetence.

Wayne David: There is a great deal of concern about it, undoubtedly. Many of us were hoping that the Government would be true to their word and that a streamlined system would be introduced quickly and effectively. That clearly has not happened, so one of my questions to the Secretary of State is whether he will provide further clarification in this important debate, in some detail, about what will happen with the shared prosperity fund.

We have heard that the Government's intention is to match European funding pound for pound. I welcome that statement, but I have to say that I am slightly concerned that that commitment may be more apparent than real. The European funding period was seven years, but we have yet to hear any commitment from the Government beyond the current short-term spending round. That could be as short as two years, so the big question is what happens after that.

Local authorities and other organisations have long-term projections for how their money will be spent. They have fed back to a number of hon. Members their very real concern that they can now commit only to projects that last two years, whereas reality and the needs of their communities dictate that they should have a longer-term perspective. If we are to make the promise of pound-for-pound support real, let us flesh it out. I will give the benefit of the doubt to the Government, but I have to say that there is nothing to substantiate the rhetorical claim that is being made.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I share the hon. Gentleman's concerns about the shared prosperity fund, which was debated in Westminster Hall this week. There are other things that we agree on, too. Does he agree that the ties that bind us together as British and Celtic nations are worth celebrating, and that more should and must be done to make the most of our wonderful tourism opportunities through the shared prosperity fund? Between our two nations, I believe we have the United Kingdom's most beautiful countryside and equally warm-hearted people—the Welsh and the Northern Irish people together.

Wayne David: Indeed. It is extremely important to celebrate the diversity of the United Kingdom and the mutual respect in our communities. That respect extends not only within the United Kingdom—long may it be united—but beyond our borders into other European countries and internationally. It is extremely important to remember that.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. May I pay tribute to him after his announcement that he will retire from this House at the next general election? He will recall that he was very kind to an 18-year-old student from his constituency—that was in the Pugin Room on my first visit here some time ago, on the day of the Conservative leadership challenge.

My hon. Friend will recall the community renewal fund. His county borough and mine were excluded from the planning process for that first fund. It is a systemic problem with the Government: they are not allowing local authorities to plan, they are not allowing them to have the funding, and they are not letting officials at local government level understand the process for applying for the shared prosperity fund. That is simply delaying any bids to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Wayne David: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. On the community renewal fund, he is right that there was tremendous concern in the Caerphilly borough and in his constituency in the Bridgend area that those valley areas were, for some mystical reason, excluded from the Government's list of 100 prioritised areas. Thankfully, as far as Wales was concerned, that prioritisation list was pushed to one side and all local authorities bar one received support from the community renewal fund.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) on the huge contribution that he has made to this place and to Welsh politics more broadly.

[Stephen Kinnock]

The mess that my hon. Friend is talking about—the community renewal fund, the lack of information and the governance issues mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore—is symptomatic of a strategy to cut the Welsh Government out of the shared prosperity fund, and that is symptomatic of a broader strategy to completely dismantle devolution in our country. Does my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) agree that it simply does not make sense to cut the Welsh Government out, because we need that strategic overview of what is happening with economic development in Wales? Unfortunately, this is due to a politically motivated aim to dismantle devolution, and the UK Government are using the shared prosperity fund as a vehicle for those purposes.

Wayne David: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend has made, and is making, a huge contribution to this debate through his able chairpersonship of the all-party parliamentary group on the shared prosperity fund.

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way, and I will pay a broader tribute to him when I speak.

I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of issues such as the community renewal fund. We secured 23% of that fund for 165 projects in Wales, which is above and beyond the UK share that we would have got from any European project. Will he reflect on that sharing of the fund and hope that we secure more? When I talk to local authorities, they tell me that they are very welcoming of the schemes and the fact that they engage with them directly rather than through third parties.

Wayne David: It is a complicated situation. Initially, we were extremely concerned because, objectively speaking, areas of obvious need were being excluded for no good reason at all. That situation has changed, and I have to say that is because of our strong lobbying. It is very important to recognise that.

If we look across the border, we see that the situation in England is very worrying indeed, because in many cases resources were allocated not on the basis of need, but on the basis of a perverse formula that was concocted to help areas that most of us would agree do not need support. I am concerned about what has happened so far and the implications for the future.

The Government have apparently moved away from a competition mechanism whereby local authorities and others compete against each other. However, given the performance of the community renewal fund, I am worried that we will get another perverse formula that does not recognise what most of us would consider to be objective need. That is what happened with the European funding, but we are concerned that it may not happen with the shared prosperity fund.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) touched on my final point about the shared prosperity fund. He said that he was concerned about how it would relate to devolution. It is extremely important that we ensure that different tiers of government—central Government and the Welsh Government—work together. There must be, to repeat the phrase I used earlier, mutual respect between the two institutions. They need

to pull together so that resources are used to maximum effect. It worries me greatly that there is, unfortunately, quite a lot of friction between the Welsh Government and central Government. I have to be honest: it seems to me that that is because central Government refuse to co-operate fully with the Welsh Government on economic development. I plead with the Wales Office and central Government to move away from that approach and to recognise that, at the end of the day, our interest is in the wellbeing of the people of Wales. We need to pull together in the interests of all our people, not indulge in petty squabbles and friction, and the onus is on central Government to do that.

It is very important that the Secretary of State issues a clarification today on the shared prosperity fund and sweeps to one side the fog that has descended over the replacement for European funding. We need clarity on what is going to happen in the very near future.

The second issue that I would like to address is the cost of living crisis in Wales. I referred in the Welsh Grand Committee to the Bevan Foundation's excellent December report, which gave information on poverty in Wales in winter 2021. Two of its conclusions are very worrying. First, it said:

“Households are struggling to make ends meet—Nearly four in ten Welsh households (39 per cent) do not have enough money to buy anything beyond everyday items, up from 33 per cent in May”.

It also concluded that living costs were still rising, stating:

“Households across Wales have seen their living costs increase. More than half have seen the cost of food increase with more than six in ten seeing the cost of their utilities increase.”

As we all know, since that report was written at the end of last year, things have become much more difficult for many families—for all families, in fact—in Wales.

We all know that the fuel crisis is an important part of the general crisis. Unfortunately, the situation in Ukraine and Russia is making it worse—we cannot get away from that fact. I am extremely concerned about how it impacts directly on my constituents. I will give two examples. One constituent recently got in touch with the constituency office in Bedwas, Caerphilly to let us know that she would usually pay £80 a month for her fuel bill but that it has now jumped to £210 a month. That is a 162.5% increase. She told us that she is going to have to choose between heating and eating for her and her child. That is the reality, and that is just one example.

Another constituent said that his combined energy utility bill was £101 a month, but from this March it will increase to £340 a month. That is a huge increase—it is phenomenal. He is a retired gentleman and says that he has a good pension, but even he will find it difficult to make ends meet.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly important point. Is not that the reason why the Chancellor's buy now, pay later scheme is so misguided? These constituents are already going to be potentially getting into debt as a result of those eye-watering rises; they do not need more misery piled on later.

Wayne David: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. Unfortunately, people still believe that they are being given money by the Government when in reality we all know that it is a loan that has to be paid back.

As we also realise, this is not a short-term crisis; it is going to continue for some time yet. There has been a slight delaying of the pain but no resolution of the difficulties that many people are facing. There is a need for a wholesale cut in VAT, but we also need to target those people who are in the greatest need again. Everybody is facing a crisis or a problem, but those who will bear the brunt of it are the poorest in our society. I urge the Government to rethink their whole support policy and to have not just a holistic policy, which is absent, but a policy that focuses particularly on those people and families who need support most of all.

For example, I welcome the fact that the Welsh Government's winter fuel support scheme is making funds available only to those claiming universal benefit. That is a recognition that that is where the need is greatest, and I hope that this Government will learn from their good example. Clearly this is an ongoing situation, and I really hope that the Government will not just acknowledge the situation but revisit what they are doing to alleviate real fuel poverty and poverty generally for many people in Wales.

Finally, I would like to comment on the situation in Ukraine and the support that many people in Wales are giving to the Ukrainian people in their hour of need. I am sure that every single Member has been close to tears when they watch the television, particularly this morning when we saw families and small children crying and leaving their homes to find refuge and sanctuary elsewhere. I think that all of us, irrespective of our political affiliations, would want to do everything we possibly can to help those people in their terrible need. I pay credit to the fact that the Welsh Government, even though they have limited resources, have made some £4 million available in humanitarian aid and declared Wales to be a nation of sanctuary. Good; so it should be. That is something we can all be proud of.

I am pleased that the Government here in London have said that they intend to provide match funding for the resources provided by members of the public to the Disasters Emergency Committee, but the scale of the crisis that we see unfolding is truly enormous and horrifying, and all of us need to do far more. We need to do a lot in this House to encourage and work with the Government so that they can give the greatest possible support. We need to ensure that this Government work with the Welsh Government to ensure that aid and sanctuary are provided to those people who need them. Also, we all have a responsibility to go back to our constituencies and do everything we can to work with local people to provide the infrastructure and mechanisms to ensure that the support they want to give is channelled effectively and quickly. I am sure that we can all commit ourselves to doing that.

Hywel Williams: I am sure that we would not want to forget the brave people in Russia and the Russian people living in this country who are protesting against the war. I organised a large rally in Caernarfon last Saturday, where I spoke to a Russian lady who lives locally. She told me through her tears that this was the first time she had ever felt ashamed of being Russian. She was there with a Ukrainian friend. There are also people in Russia who are standing up and protesting against the war, and we should support them as fully as we can.

Wayne David: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. One thing that is very clear is that the Ukrainian people's struggle is not with the Russian people; it is with Vladimir Putin, whose actions can only be described as barbaric. It is important that we have that solidarity in place to give our maximum support to the people facing such horrific circumstances.

I will conclude by saying that it is appropriate, on this day and in this debate, to remember something that St David repeated time and again, which is that is important always to be generous to those people in need. That is absolutely right.

12.44 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): May I belatedly wish you a very happy St David's day, Madam Deputy Speaker? May I also say what a great pleasure it is to follow the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David)? This is not the first time I have followed him. I also followed him as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Wales Office, and I would like to pay tribute to him for all the hard work he has done over the years for Wales.

We speak today on the important issue of Welsh affairs, and I am delighted that the Backbench Business Committee has facilitated this debate. We speak also against the sombre backdrop of the events in Ukraine. We are living through difficult times—arguably the most difficult times since the end of the cold war. Russia's unjustifiable aggression against Ukraine has made us all realise the truth of the old adage that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. Making a strong contribution to the United Kingdom's vigilance against the threats posed by an aggressive Russia are the 850 soldiers of the Royal Welsh Regiment who were recently deployed to Estonia as part of the defence of NATO's eastern flank. The 1st Battalion the Royal Welsh is the successor to the historic regiment, the Royal Welch Fusiliers, one of the most ancient regiments of the British Army, which historically recruited in north Wales. I am sure that we all wish the soldiers of the Royal Welsh and their families well at this difficult time.

As the hon. Member for Caerphilly mentioned, sad events such as this tend to bring out the best in the Welsh people. I have no doubt that the tragedy of Ukraine is touching the hearts of the people of all our constituencies. In fact only today, while I have been waiting to speak in this debate, I have received two emails from constituents. One was from Mrs Parry in Llanfair Talhaiarn, who wanted me to advise on how she and her neighbours could get a supply of nappies to the refugees in Ukraine. The other was from Mr Bolton of Abergele, who drew my attention to the activities of Abergele Viewpoint, which is supporting the Disasters Emergency Committee. Like the hon. Member for Caerphilly, I commend the Government for already committing £20 million to that fund and committing to match-fund anything that the public raise.

The crisis in Ukraine is not only a humanitarian one; it has focused attention on a number of issues, not least the issue of energy. Many European countries are heavily dependent upon Russia for natural gas. It has the largest natural gas reserves in the world. Germany, for example, takes over 40% of its natural gas from Russia. Italy takes about 50%. Some of the smaller countries, such as Bulgaria, are virtually entirely dependent upon Russian

[Mr David Jones]

natural gas. Germany has halted approval of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline as part of its sanctions against Russia. That is a move that is likely to infuriate President Putin, and I would suggest that his retaliation is only a matter of time. Fortunately, we in the United Kingdom rely on Russian gas for only around 3% of our own natural gas supplies, but nevertheless, the potential for energy shortages on the continent should be a wake-up call for all of us. We need to do more to ensure the security of our domestic energy supply, and that means not only gas but the carbon neutral sources of energy that will be crucial if we are to meet our net zero targets.

Kevin Brennan: The right hon. Gentleman rightly mentions the UK Government's assistance in relation to the Ukraine crisis. During this St David's day debate, will he acknowledge and praise the Welsh Government for setting aside £4 million of their budget for financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine?

Mr Jones: Obviously we should commend the Welsh Government for doing that, and we should commend everyone who is lending their resources to the Welsh national effort. Wales is a generous nation, and its generosity is demonstrated by all the stories we are hearing in this debate.

North Wales potentially has a huge role to play in helping to secure the energy supply of this country. It is well placed to become an energy powerhouse, and not only in relation to what I would describe as the low-hanging fruit of wind energy. I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) would wish me to draw attention to the potential of Anglesey as an energy island, which should be developed as a priority.

The Prime Minister has said it is his ambition to see a new nuclear power station started in this Parliament, and there could be no better location for it than Wylfa on the north Anglesey coast. I was once told by a senior nuclear engineer at Hitachi, which previously had an interest in Wylfa, that it is the best site he has seen anywhere in the world for a nuclear power station, and I strongly urge the Government to pursue the development of Wylfa with appropriate private sector partners as a priority. I am pleased that the Nuclear Energy (Financing) Bill will soon become law, as it will provide a financing model, the regulated asset base, that should prove more attractive to domestic investors.

Similarly, I suggest that Trawsfynydd should be considered for the location of a new fleet of small modular nuclear reactors. That proposal has the support of the local authority, it has significant local expertise and it has a lot of the necessary infrastructure. Siting an SMR in Trawsfynydd would present the prospect of a new north Wales-developed industry that could relatively quickly be rolled out across the country and, indeed, internationally, putting north Wales ahead of the game.

We should also look seriously at the concept of tidal lagoons. Sadly, as we know, the proposed Swansea lagoon did not proceed.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman congratulate the Labour-controlled city and county of Swansea on how they have turned around the Swansea tidal lagoon to make it a financially viable project that will provide energy at reasonable prices to over 800,000 homes in the Swansea area?

Mr Jones: It would be wonderful if that is the case. If it is happening, it is clearly welcome.

I draw attention to the proposed Colwyn Bay tidal lagoon in my constituency, which would have an installed capacity of around 2.5 GW. That is significantly more than the Swansea lagoon. Frankly, it would have the output of a nuclear power station. It would be completely carbon neutral and would probably require little maintenance throughout its very long lifetime of around 125 years, as a minimum.

Along with my hon. Friends the Members for Vale of Clwyd (Dr Davies) and for Aberconwy (Robin Millar), who also have constituency interests, I recently had a meeting with the Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change to discuss the proposal, and I am pleased to say that he appeared to be more than interested. Again, I urge the Government to work with prospective developers on producing a feasibility study on what would be a hugely important piece of energy-generating infrastructure off the north Wales coast.

Hywel Williams: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman would not want to ignore the flood-prevention function of such a lagoon, which is one of the reasons why I support it, too. Communities along the north-west Wales coast have suffered very much in the past, and we remember the poor people of Towyn many years ago. I am sure that is another benefit of the lagoon.

Mr Jones: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will remember that we discussed lagoons on the Welsh Affairs Committee 15 years ago. I would not want to see another 15 years pass before the Government do something to encourage such a development. He is absolutely right that another important function of lagoons is that they are an additional layer of coastal protection, quite apart from the leisure opportunities they present, so they are extremely important.

The Mersey Dee is a hugely important industrial and commercial area that straddles the north Wales-England border. It is the seat of many nationally and internationally important companies such as Airbus, Toyota and Vauxhall, but it is hampered by the border passing through the middle of it. Part of the area is subject to economic policies developed in Westminster, and the other part is subject to economic policies developed in Cardiff. There is frequently a lack of joined-up economic development policy, which impedes the region in achieving its full potential.

The Mersey Dee Alliance is an important organisation comprised of private sector companies, local authorities, academic institutions and others. Its focus, and that of the all-party parliamentary group on Mersey Dee North Wales, is to maximise growth in this unique cross-border region. I and other officers of the group, together with leaders of the Mersey Dee Alliance, recently had a meeting with the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), to discuss ways in which a more co-ordinated approach to the region might be pursued with the Welsh Government.

There are good reasons to do so. In fact, Dr Elizabeth Haywood, in a 2012 report for the Welsh Government, recommended the creation of a quasi-city region straddling the border between England and north Wales. I strongly urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to work with colleagues in the Welsh Government to reassess

that report and to work to create that city region, with a formalised role for the Mersey Dee Alliance, to produce co-ordinated policies for the whole region. I think the proposal has widespread support in north Wales and north-west England, and it would do a great deal to improve still further the economic potential of what is already one of the most important industrial areas of the country.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I support my right hon. Friend because such cross-border interaction is vital for my Clwyd South constituency.

On north Wales becoming an energy powerhouse, I draw attention to incremental, smaller renewable projects such as the Corwen community hydro project in Clwyd South. The big projects are vital, but it is also extremely important that we increase the incidence and reach of smaller projects that can do so much for our individual communities.

Mr Jones: I am pleased to agree with my hon. Friend. It is welcome that so many innovative smaller projects are now coming forward. As I said, the problem in north Wales is that we have been pursuing the low-hanging fruit of wind power, which I believe has now reached saturation point. We should be considering more developments of the sort he describes to generate the energy we need.

Once again, I am very pleased that Welsh MPs have the opportunity today to debate Welsh affairs on the Floor of the House, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating this debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Kevin Brennan.

12.59 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I join in the tributes to my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who has announced his retirement at far too young an age? There is plenty of life left in him yet. I wish him and his partner Jayne well when, eventually, in some considerable time, perhaps in a couple of years, he stands down from the House. May I also extend that to you, Madam Deputy Speaker? With both you and my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly announcing your intention to leave the House at the next election, we will be poorer on these Benches in the future. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly is not leaving because in one of the last Welsh affairs debates I claimed the title of *Tad y Tŷ*—the Welsh Father of the House—as the longest serving Welsh Member of Parliament, having sneaked in before everybody else back in 2001 and taken my oath first of the Welsh intake at that time. I know it was dispiriting for all the other Welsh Members to suddenly realise that their hopes of ever being *Tad y Tŷ* were threatened by my claim to that title.

We meet to celebrate that patron saint of Wales and St David's Day, and to discuss Welsh affairs, as we usually do each March. As I have said before, this should be a permanent fixture and we should not have to go to the Backbench Business Committee with a begging bowl to ask for this debate each year. As other Members have said, we meet at a time of great peril for

Ukraine and for the world. I want to take this opportunity to express the solidarity of the people of my constituency, in Wales's capital city, with the people of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, and the whole of the Ukrainian people. Hon. Members may not be aware, although some will, that one of my predecessors had strong Ukrainian ties. In what can only be described as a temporary historical blip, the voters of Cardiff West broke habits that were decades old and returned a Conservative MP in 1983. I am afraid that the experiment was not a success and after four years they returned to Labour, and have done so ever since, to my considerable benefit. The name of the late Conservative MP for Cardiff West was Stefan Terlezki, who was born in what is now western Ukraine in 1927. I should make it clear that his politics and mine could hardly have been more different, but his extraordinary life story, where he was both enslaved by the Nazis and conscripted into the red army, from which he absconded, is a reminder of the suffering that the people of Ukraine have endured through war in their history. When Ukraine became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, he warned of the dangers of maintaining overly close ties with Russia and pressed for Ukrainian membership of the European Union. We now see his fears being realised before our eyes.

Hon. Members also may not be aware of this Welsh connection with Ukraine, but we are learning more about Ukrainian history, perhaps for the first time. For example, the city of Donetsk in Ukraine owes its creation to a man from Merthyr Tydfil, John Hughes. Towards the end of the 19th century, he left the Welsh valleys to start a new life in what was then one of imperial Russia's industrial centres. In 1869, Hughes, along with dozens of others, embarked on a daunting journey of more than 2,000 miles, boarding eight ships and heading eastwards, ultimately using the opportunity to set up a state-of-the-art steelworks and ironworks of his own in what is now Ukraine. He chose the Donbas region, because of its rich mineral deposits. As word reached the ears of skilled workers, engineers and managers back home, around the site there gradually grew up a thriving town of expatriate Welsh people, which was christened Hughesovka and later Yusovka. It had grown to a population of 50,000 by the turn of the 20th century, although its Welsh influence would come to an end with the Soviet revolution in 1917, after which it was renamed Stalino and later Donetsk. Today, there still remains one part of Donetsk known as Yusovka, and we, as Welsh MPs in the UK Parliament, send a message, across political parties, of solidarity with the people of Ukraine.

However, Wales is the focus of today's debate and I wish to talk a little about Welsh leadership. The past two years of the covid pandemic have highlighted the issue of leadership and styles of leadership, providing a case study in different types of leadership at a Wales and a UK level. There is no doubt that the people of Wales have been glad to have had my friend and constituency colleague Mark Drakeford as First Minister during the past two years of the covid crisis. His thoughtful, serious and empathetic approach has provided a contrast with the shambolic, chaotic and irresponsible behaviour of the UK Prime Minister; while a bevy of drunken parties, in breach of the Government's own regulations, were proceeding at the heart of the UK Government, in and around No. 10 Downing Street, the First Minister of Wales was devoting every ounce of his efforts and

[Kevin Brennan]

attention to protecting the Welsh people against the deadly virus, even taking the precaution of occupying a small separate building in his garden to avoid spreading it. Throughout, he was prepared to take difficult, potentially unpopular decisions for the good of the nation. In short, he was faithful to the facts, not a hostage to the headlines—that was the approach the UK Prime Minister, in his desperate desire to not upset the right-wing press, pursued.

We see further evidence of that compassionate leadership in Wales's response to the Ukraine crisis. As I mentioned in an intervention, the First Minister has made it clear that Wales is proud to be a nation of refuge and has set aside £4 million from the Welsh Government's own budget for financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. I still do not understand why the UK Government were content until recently to provide passports and privileges to Putin's pals but are still refusing to waive visas for Putin's Ukrainian victims in their desperate hour of need. The quality of that Welsh leadership has been reflected in the polls. In a recent poll, in January, in Wales, more than 1,000 people aged 16 and over were asked about leadership during the pandemic and the different approaches that were taken in Wales and England. They were asked which approach they preferred, and 60% preferred the Welsh approach, 17% preferred the English approach, 10% did not know and 13% expressed neither opinion. Other polls have shown that even voters in England preferred the Welsh approach to the covid crisis than the one that has been taken in England. We need to reflect on the whole issue of leadership and what it means, and I think that Mark Drakeford been an exemplar of good political leadership.

I also wish to mention the excellent leadership of Wales's capital city, Cardiff, by council leader Huw Thomas and his Welsh Labour colleagues. During the pandemic they acted so that no one needed to go hungry, setting up an advice line, and co-ordinating with Cardiff food bank and delivering 13,271 food parcels. On refugees, Cardiff hosted one of the highest numbers of people seeking sanctuary per head of any local authority in the UK; 50% of all asylum seekers in Wales have been hosted in Cardiff in recent years, and the people of Cardiff have been generous in doing this. On the environment, Cardiff has been recognised by the Queen's green canopy, the UK-wide tree planting initiative for the jubilee, as a champion city. Cardiff Council has planted more than 25,000 trees and started work to increase canopy cover from 19% to 25% of the city. This year, 16,000 trees will be planted in a single planting season.

On culture, the post-covid-lockdown "Live and Unlocked" music gigs at Cardiff castle last August, funded by the council and the Welsh Government and curated by grassroots venues and supporting performers, who have struggled during the pandemic, were a huge success. Successive Purple Flag awards for excellence in the night-time economy have been given to Cardiff since 2019, and £130 million of business support was distributed by the council during the pandemic. The council also adopted a new street-naming policy that I particularly welcomed using Welsh language names by default, with an expert panel proposing names that reflect local history and historic place names. Cardiff Council is working towards parity in the number of English versus Welsh language street names across the city.

That kind of leadership needs to be praised, and I hope that it will be added to at the forthcoming local elections in Wales in May by the candidates for Welsh Labour in my constituency, who I think will all make excellent councillors, including Jasmin Chowdhury, Stephen Cunnah and Susan Elsmore in Canton; Leo Thomson, Kanaya Singh and Caro Wild in Riverside; Peter Bradbury and Elaine Simmons in Caerau; Russell Goodway, Maliika Kaaba and Irene Humphreys in Ely; Laura Rochefort and Peter Jenkins in Llandaff; Helen Lloyd Jones and Tyrone Davies in Radyr; John Yarrow in Pentyrch; and Claudia Boes, Saleh Ahmed and Lorna Stabler in Fairwater. I believe that great leadership requires clear vision, integrity, the ability to see round corners and a willingness to take on difficult decisions. Both the Welsh Government and Cardiff Council have shown that.

I will move on to one final point: the pig-headedness of the Home Office post Brexit on certain issues, and its impact on the Welsh economy and, particularly, Welsh tourism and tourism across the UK. I refer in particular to school trips that are undertaken by children from member states of the European Union. I was formerly a chair of Cardiff castle when I was a member of the local authority in Cardiff. It is a wonderful centrepiece of our capital city, and was bequeathed to the city by the Marquess of Bute and the Bute family. It is a major tourist attraction in Wales and in the city of Cardiff, and a big attraction for coach parties of school children from the continent of Europe, particularly from France, Italy, Germany and other EU countries.

As a result of Brexit, the Home Office has decided that any child visiting the UK on a school trip has to have a full passport. Previously they need only have carried an identity card or some group identity passport. That was all that was required to participate in the school trip. As a result of that decision, it was reported in *The Guardian* at the end of last year—this evidence was confirmed by Bernard Donoghue, the chief executive of the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, at a recent meeting of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee—that 80% of some travel companies' customers are now going elsewhere than Wales, or the rest of the UK, as a result of the policy.

Craig Williams: Would Welsh schoolchildren—British schoolchildren—going into the European Union Schengen area in the past couple of decades have got away with a driving licence, or would they have needed a passport to enter?

Kevin Brennan: I took many school trips over, and they did not require a passport in order to travel because group travel arrangements can be made within the European Union.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making some really important points. The cultural differences around our country are also made great when we can travel to Europe. I had the great opportunity as a member of the national youth choir, orchestra and brass band of Wales to be able to tour Europe as a child. Artists and musicians are now struggling to tour across Europe because of the visa issue. That point desperately needs to be raised for our choirs, brass bands and orchestras.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend and I have raised that point many times in this House, but I want to get to the nub of the issue. This policy is a choice, not a requirement,

by the Home Office. It is a choice that is causing significant damage to British business and to our ability to attract these kinds of school trip tours to our country, and it is affecting our visitor attractions. When the Home Office is asked why it is pursuing this particular policy, the answer that it has given to organisations such as the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions is that that is what people voted for in the Brexit referendum. It has a point; I remember seeing that bus, on the side of which was written: “No more French schoolchildren coming to visit our country!” Is that what people really voted for in the Brexit referendum—no more French schoolchildren absconding and taking our jobs; no 12-year-olds stealing British jobs? The Home Office has adopted a ludicrous position, which it needs to revisit urgently.

Mr David Jones: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point that tourism is a vital industry in Wales, especially in north Wales and not least in my constituency. My tourism operator constituents are terrifically concerned about the prospect of a tourism tax in Wales, which the Welsh Government seem to think is a really good idea. Does he think it is a good idea too?

Kevin Brennan: It is a great distraction technique to try to stop me when I was reaching my peroration. It is absolutely irrelevant to the point that I am making. My view has always been, and I have made it absolutely clear, that those sorts of things should be decided locally. People should have the option to decide how best to handle their tourism funding at a local level. That has always been my view, and I would have thought that it is a view that might fit in with Conservative philosophy, rather than centralising everything.

To return to the point that I was making about visitors to Wales, as a result of the policy, as I have said, there has been a significant reduction. It will have a huge impact if we do not have schoolchildren from Europe visiting. As a former teacher, if I had a class of schoolchildren some of whom had a full passport and some of whom had only an identity card, I would do the same as continental schoolteachers are doing now: I would not bring my class, because I would not deprive some of an opportunity to visit while allowing others to take it up, and neither would any teacher worth their salt. Whenever we took a school trip, if someone could not afford it we ensured that, somehow or other, the funds were put together quietly behind the scenes to allow that child to travel. This is a ludicrous example of Lord Frost’s pig-headed Brexit dogma, and it should be stopped. The Home Office should reverse the policy so that children can come and visit Cardiff castle again, and we can have the joy of seeing them on the streets of our capital city.

1.17 pm

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for bringing the debate to the House. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan). I may not agree with all his views, but I certainly have a very high respect for his support for cultural activities and other areas of important activity in Parliament.

I made my maiden speech in this St David’s day debate two years ago, which seems like a different age—before covid and the invasion of Ukraine, and at

the very start of my work as the Member for Clwyd South, representing the interests of my constituents and trying my best to help them through numerous problems and upheavals over this dramatic period. Wales has always been the fulcrum of my political views and activities over many years, growing up at Lake Vyrnwy and then serving as a county councillor, town councillor and mayor of my town, before being elected to represent Clwyd South in 2019.

My reaction to the dramatic events of the last two years has always been first and foremost from a Welsh perspective. When I signed the book of solidarity for Ukraine two days ago here in the House of Commons, I signed it on behalf of the residents of Clwyd South. When I stood yesterday with other hon. Members, many of whom are here today, to give a standing ovation to Ukraine’s ambassador to the UK, Vadym Prystaiko, I thought of people across my constituency who have pledged their support for Ukraine and its freedom from the tyranny of Russia. I also thought of two of my constituents: Mr and Mrs Jones, who have managed to bring two members of their family back from Ukraine to safety in their home town of Corwen.

That prompts me to make one remark with regard to the criticism of the Home Office that we have heard from the Opposition Benches. The Home Office, in my opinion, has worked extremely hard to deal with the complicated process of bringing people here from Ukraine when they may have moved over to Romania or Poland. From my point of view, representing my constituents, I can say that the Home Office has gone the extra mile to help those people. I think we will see a very different picture over the coming days as more and more people come over from Ukraine, as the protocols are developed and changed.

I am delighted that this week, we have been able to bring Wales in all its glory to London with numerous events, particularly in Westminster with the raising of the Welsh flag in New Palace Yard; the first ever eisteddfod at Westminster, held in Speaker’s House; a reception at No. 10 Downing Street; and, of course, this debate. Wales is of huge importance to me. I love Wales and its special character, and I feel that that is typified by my amazing constituency of Clwyd South, with its beautiful scenery and heritage, as seen in the Dee Valley, in the Maelor around Bangor-on-Dee, and in Erddig and Chirk Castle; its pioneering industrial heritage in our proud former mining communities, the Llangollen steam railway and the Llangollen canal, with its mighty aqueduct designed by Thomas Telford; the many successful businesses that have started up and replaced the work of the old industrial and mining communities, and which are now thriving in Clwyd South alongside larger and more famous companies, such as Cadbury’s in Chirk, Village Bakery in Coedpoeth and Wrexham, and Ivor Williams Trailers in Cynwyd and Corwen.

The special character of Wales is typified also by the beautiful Welsh language and culture, as showcased by the Llangollen International Musical Eisteddfod and the Fron and other male voice choirs; our hard-working farming communities and those who love the outdoors—walking our hills, taking a narrowboat along the canal, canoeing on the River Dee or taking part in the many other activities that draw so many visitors to Clwyd South—and, most importantly, by our close, caring communities, where everyone looked after each other

[Simon Baynes]

during the pandemic, and our frontline workers in the health service, shops, council services and other organisations went the extra mile to keep people safe. In those communities, people do not interfere in each other's lives, and they bring that special Welsh sense of humour to raise our spirits and keep us sane in difficult times.

Representing my constituents here at Westminster also brings home to me how much Wales benefits from being part of the United Kingdom. Like my Welsh Conservative colleagues here today, I take great heart from the fact that under this Conservative Government, the Union—specifically as it relates to Wales, but also across our whole United Kingdom—has grown stronger and continues to do so.

Our response to the pandemic shows the benefits that the Union brings to people across the UK. To support the booster rollout and wider covid-19 response, we have now confirmed a further £270 million that the Welsh Government can spend in advance of budgets being finalised at supplementary estimates in the new year. This is on top of the £3.8 billion that has been provided to the Welsh Government through the Barnett formula over the recent period, and on top of the extra £5.2 billion that the Welsh Government received in covid funding in 2020-21.

Vaccines have been the way out of this pandemic. The UK Government have secured and purchased vaccines on behalf of the whole United Kingdom, and over 6.5 million doses have been delivered across Wales. I emphasise that the speed and scale of this programme would never have been possible if we had stayed in the EU. We have heard a significant degree of criticism from the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), but if we had followed the Welsh Government's policies and stayed in the EU, we would never have got the vaccine programme off to the flying start that we did. That would have had a major impact on the health and wellbeing of people in our nation.

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend has mentioned the vaccine roll-out, which has been terrifically impressive. Will he also commend the men and women of the armed forces, who were called on to help deliver the vaccine roll-out in Wales?

Simon Baynes: Indeed, the armed forces have made a tremendous contribution to helping in the fight against covid. Currently, 411 military personnel are available to support the pandemic response in Wales, and that includes 313 supporting the Welsh ambulance service and 98 deployed to assist the seven health boards across Wales. My right hon. Friend made the point in his excellent speech that the deployment of the Royal Welsh to Estonia is another vital aspect of how the armed forces are helping us to deploy and present our position in the terrible crisis in Ukraine. That is testament to the fact that as a United Kingdom, we are stronger in our defence and in dealing with the health and wellbeing of our country. We can bring the whole strength of the United Kingdom to assist Wales and the rest of the UK. That is why, for me, being a Unionist is vital.

People and businesses in Wales have benefited from direct financial support from the UK Government. The facts are well known, but 475,000 jobs have been protected

through the furlough scheme, and £2.4 billion has been provided to 60,000 Welsh businesses through the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme and the bounce back loan scheme.

The hon. Member for Caerphilly mentioned the shared prosperity fund. It is important to point out that the Government have committed, at a minimum, to matching the size of EU funding in Wales. Over and above that, as a Member of Parliament for a constituency that lies not in west or south Wales, but in north-east Wales, I must make the point that a large part of Wales received no benefit from EU structural funds. The shared prosperity funding and the new ways of financing and helping Wales give us a great opportunity to help all communities, so that we are not stuck to some rigid dogma concerning geographical areas, but we can focus on all areas where there is deprivation and a need for levelling up. The new system will be of huge benefit, and it will be a much improved way of helping communities across Wales.

Overall, Wales receives considerably more funding per head than England—about £120 for every £100 per head spent by the UK Government in England. Furthermore, Wales's notional net fiscal deficit—the gap between total public spending for Wales and public sector revenues from Wales—amounted to £14.5 billion in 2020-21. This equated to around 18% of estimated GDP for Wales, or £4,556 per head. These are dry details, but in truth they represent an extraordinary Union dividend for Wales.

In Clwyd South, we have historically been starved of investment by the Welsh Labour Government in Cardiff bay, but we have seen renewed vigour from the UK Conservative Government to correct this injustice, with unprecedented levels of funding coming into the region. [Interruption]. Would the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) like to intervene?

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He speaks about being starved by the Government, but that is not what the Welsh people say, and it is not what they said at the ballot box in May last year.

Simon Baynes: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. Part of the issue that we are dealing with is that Labour almost entirely represents south Wales, and it has only one seat north of the valleys, in Alyn and Deeside. Therefore, it does not surprise me that Labour Members really do not understand how much people in north Wales feel left behind and uncared for by the Welsh Government. I am afraid that her remark bears out exactly what I am saying.

The levelling-up fund bid for Clwyd South was developed by Wrexham and Denbighshire Councils and sponsored by me, as the Member of Parliament, and it proved successful. It is vital investment for my constituency, going from the Trevor basin through Llangollen and Chirk and on down to Corwen, and bringing huge benefits to the communities, the Llangollen canal and the Llangollen railway. One central part of it is the world heritage site at the Trevor Basin, which incorporates Telford's magnificent aqueduct. It is an extraordinary fact, but until now there has been absolutely no public investment in the world heritage site by either the Welsh Government or the UK Government. I am delighted

that the UK Government have now put their money where their mouth is and supported these tremendous projects within my constituency.

These projects will have an important catalyst effect on local communities, addressing not only the issue of visitors, but the health and wellbeing of our communities through the use of the canal and so on. Very close to the Trevor Basin lies areas of derelict industrial land. My hope is that this money will not only improve the visitor experience and life for the residents of my constituency along the Dee valley, but act as a catalyst for further development of areas that are in bad need of improvement and regeneration.

It was my pledge in the 2019 election to work constructively to deliver the change and investment that Clwyd South needs. I am proud to have worked with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales and their team at the Wales Office, as well as the rest of the UK Government, to bring improvements to my constituency.

I finish with reference to the comments made by Huw Edwards when he introduced the Eisteddfod on Tuesday in the Speaker's House and celebrated St David's famous exhortation:

"Be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things that you have heard and seen me do."

I felt that those wise words had an extra resonance this week, as we are almost overwhelmed by the great events that are besetting our world. By focusing on activities that we can control—the little things to which St David referred—such as helping others, working hard, raising money to help people in Ukraine, looking after our family and friends, volunteering and taking an active interest in our community, we will find a way through the darkness and emerge on the other side, and, in the words of St David, "be joyful and keep the faith."

1.32 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing this debate and thank him for the huge amount of work that he did in government as a Minister in the Wales Office, and also for his work in defence, in foreign affairs, on the constitution, on Scotland and so on. As we all know, he has brought many, many talents to the House and we wish him well for the future.

This year marks 100 years since Labour became the party of the majority of people of Wales, winning 18 out of 35 seats at the general election in 1922, with the Liberals taking 10 and the Conservatives six. For Labour politicians, being an elected representative is about trying to improve the lives of our constituents, strengthening the cohesion of our communities, making sure that we value each and every one, and looking after those who fall on hard times.

The Llanelli constituency has been represented continuously by Labour MPs since 1922. I am privileged to follow three distinguished parliamentarians: Dr J. H. Williams, Jim Griffiths and Denzil Davies. A party can only bring about radical universal change when it is actually in government—be that at UK level, Senedd level or council level.

I pay tribute to Jim Griffiths, who was described by James Callaghan as "one of Wales's greatest sons". If we look back at some of Griffiths' achievements, we can

see how relevant they are to some of the problems that we face today. In that radical Government of 1945, he brought in family allowances. They were to be paid to the mother, which is something that campaigners had been wanting for a very long time. He saw the poverty and malnutrition in his constituency and was determined to look after people who fell on hard times. He brought in the National Insurance Act 1946, which ensured unemployment benefit and sickness benefit, and the National Assistance Act 1948, which ensured that those who were unable to make the contributions necessary to be eligible for those benefits—people who had disabilities; people who had been unable to make enough contributions to cover their old age—were covered. He also brought in the Industrial Injuries Act 1946 to look after those who were injured at work, those who needed a disablement pension for life, and indeed money for the dependants of those who were killed at work.

We need to think hard about how we look after the poorest in our society today. It is 12 years since the Conservative Government came to power. In that first year, they broke the benefits link to inflation that had always been there. Even Margaret Thatcher did not break that link. We have seen 12 years of erosion in the value of benefits, plus, of course, the £20 cut that we saw earlier this year. It is all very well to say that that was additional, but we must bear in mind those 12 years of erosion. It was hardly a fair compensation for that, and that money did not even go to those people on legacy benefits. Then there were the cuts in tax credits. It is all very well to talk about the softening of the taper on tax credits, but that does not make up for the amount of cuts that there have been to them.

I fear now that, with rampant inflation, we will see malnutrition return. We are already talking about people having to choose between eating and heating. If that goes on for more than a few weeks, children will suffer—their development will suffer—and, sadly, we will risk returning to a pre-1945 state. I urge this Government to look again at how we treat the poorest in our society, particularly in respect of the cost of living crisis.

Jim Griffiths was also known for his work in developing what we now know as the Wales Office, a precursor to the whole idea of devolution. We have been able to do things differently in Wales with a Welsh Labour Government. Gradually, we have had more powers, and we have developed and implemented policies that reflect Welsh Labour principles. The Development Bank of Wales, for example, has supported many businesses and helped them grow, working to the priorities of the Welsh Government, including growing the missing middle—those medium-sized businesses that we are still short of in Wales.

The Welsh Government have been not only providing support for the foundation economy, which is home-grown local businesses feeding into the local economy, but using public procurement to support the local economy and promote ethical procurement—not using firms that blacklist or trash workers' right. We also have a social partnership approach—a partnership between Welsh Government, businesses, industry and trade unions. Interestingly, because the Welsh Government gave out more money than usual during the pandemic, they were able to increase the number of firms that are involved in a partnership that has conditionality attached to it for

[*Nia Griffith*]

having that money from the Welsh Government. That conditionality is about saying that there will be growth and job provision, about saying that there will be fair work and workers' rights, about looking after the wellbeing of the workforce, including mental health, and about having a commitment to tackling climate change.

It is very noticeable that the National Audit Office gave the Welsh Government a clean bill of health on the way they had gone about procuring supplies during the pandemic, while the UK Government, sadly, wasted billions by giving contracts to cronies. Frankly, we are all very ashamed of that. It is also shameful because all of us paid for that.

Public transport is a real challenge for us in a very large country. It is vital to help people get better access to education, training and job opportunities. I know that the Welsh Government are committed to building on their work for Transport for Wales, by taking over the railway franchises and by ensuring that we have a better bus service that is more responsive to people's needs and that looks at ways to make fares more accessible. I know people in rural areas of my constituency who are very dependent on buses with quite high fares to get any job opportunities, because the mining villages that once offered such opportunities now do not, so they have to travel to towns such as Carmarthen and Llanelli for work.

Of course, it is not just the infrastructure that we need to look after; we must also invest in our people. That is something the Welsh Government have taken seriously, with initiatives such as all-age apprenticeships, workplace learning and better digital inclusion. Levelling up is a huge challenge, and I do not pretend that the UK Government have an easy job to do. Working out how to spread power, wealth and opportunity is really difficult. It is not only about getting the appropriate structures in place, but about getting the appropriate ethos and the right relationship between one layer of government and another.

I must say, however, that the way the Conservatives are running the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund shows brazen disregard for the devolution settlement. The Tory UK Government are completely ignoring not only the Welsh Government, but the partnership work done between the Welsh Government and Welsh local government leaders on strategic priorities. Instead, we have an England-focused Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, which has not dealt with Wales since pre-devolution days in 1999, and which has allowed previous Tory Ministers to give money to each other's constituencies, to the detriment of more disadvantaged areas. Will the current Secretary of State be any better?

Again, that contrasts with the close working relationship that the Welsh Labour Government have with the leaders of the 22 Welsh unitary authorities, whatever their political colour, throughout the pandemic, recognising the vital role and burdens that councils have shouldered. We can contrast that with what we hear from council leaders in England about the lack of consultation with the Tory Government. In dealing with the covid pandemic, time after time there was no real consultation, nor even sometimes any communication from the UK Tory Government to the other nations of the UK. Perhaps that should not surprise us, given the poor communication

even within the Tory Cabinet and the Prime Minister's absence from Cobra meetings, but it has serious consequences. It is not only a poor way to run the UK; it also fans the flames of separatism.

It is important that we pin the blame clearly on the Conservative Government for the way they behave, rather than allowing the idea to take hold that it is the existence of a UK Government that is the problem. As we talk about a better balance of power, wealth and opportunity across the UK, we must also celebrate the huge benefit that comes with being part of the UK and being able to tackle big problems such as climate change together.

What is really needed is to put that relationship between the UK Government and devolved institutions across the UK, whatever form they take, on a firm statutory footing. The relationship between areas and different levels of Government should be one of mutual respect. As the Welsh Government have clearly set out, the UK Parliament should not normally seek to legislate for a territory in relation to matters within the competence of the devolved legislature of that territory without that legislature's explicit consent.

Instead of pitting areas against each other, we should look at ways that different areas can complement each other, perhaps by developing different industrial specialities. That means developing effective funding mechanisms to get away from competitive bidding and ministerial interference—simply creating systems that work better than what we have at present.

The Welsh Government have not grabbed power to themselves; they are using their power to enable local authorities. What we have seen this year in the local government settlement is a very generous settlement to local councils across Wales: a 9.4% increase in core revenue, in recognition of the huge work that local councils have done throughout the pandemic.

On test and trace, Wales used local councils with local knowledge and local people with a public service ethos to provide a service—we might joke that the Welsh are all very nosy, so we would know where so-and-so was on a Saturday night and who he or she might have been meeting. It is so much better to have that ethos than to have the billions wasted in England on contracting out to firms all over the country that did not even manage to train up or employ their people half the time. If we have that ethos and local knowledge, the service can be delivered so much better.

The financial settlement will help to put our local services on a firm financial footing—firmer than has been the case for a long time, as we have had to absorb the swingeing Tory cuts to the Welsh budget. The settlement is the result of months of constructive dialogue between Ministers, leaders and officials in local government and the Welsh Government. Councillor Andrew Morgan, the leader of the Welsh Local Government Association, commented:

“Investment in councils is more than figures on a spreadsheet. It's about investing in our communities, our people and in our vital services that help improve and change lives, whilst continuing to respond to two global challenges: the pandemic and climate change.” I hope we can all work towards those ends.

1.45 pm

Craig Williams (Montgomeryshire) (Con): It is a great delight to take part in this debate, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne

David) for opening it. I know we all say that there should be a staged item on the parliamentary programme every year, but through the usual channels we seem to have it on an annual basis, so clearly something works, and I hope that that continues long after his retirement. I pay particular tribute to him; his Unionist credentials have never been in doubt and since I have been elected his sage advice and warm words for our United Kingdom have been incredibly welcome. They will be missed on the Labour Benches—although hopefully there are still years to come before then in which he can move the debate.

I echo the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) on energy policy and in particular the role of nuclear in Wales. I wish him and other colleagues championing it success—I had better mention my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) and her long-haul campaign to deliver nuclear power on Wylfa and Trawsfynydd.

I also echo the points made around the Royal Welsh battle group. We have leaned heavily on our armed forces during covid with military aid in response to civil authorities' requests, and the strength of the United Kingdom can be seen nowhere better. I know that from my own experience nigh-on two weeks ago, when we called the Welsh Ambulance Service because I was helping a dear lady who had fallen over on Welshpool High Street. Ten minutes later, an ambulance turned up and out jumped a paramedic and a member of our armed forces. It is great to see that support continuing. Clearly it is not sustainable, but that is what our armed forces and the United Kingdom Government are there to do: to provide support where we need it the most.

In this debate more than most, our thoughts are with the armed forces as they forward deploy to support our NATO friends in eastern Europe. The Royal Welsh has done a tremendous job for us in this country during the covid crisis, the floods and other crises; now we lean on it again to ensure the defence of the realm and to support our NATO allies.

I also pay particular tribute, as we have all done this week and in years gone by, to Wales Week. I am sure most Members of the House have been to a Wales Week event this week. Wales Week London—Wales Week world, as it is now—has become a feature of the diary. I pay particular tribute to Dan Langford and Mike Phillips, who are bastions of the championing of Wales, our culture, our heritage and our business and are positive about the opportunities that Wales, the Welsh people and the Welsh business community have. They have brought Governments, communities and businesses together.

I implore the Secretary of State to continue his great work with Wales Week, working with the Foreign Office to ensure that not only is the Welsh flag flying at our embassies around the world every St David's day, but that business communities and the Department for International Trade are invited and that our businesses are championed at UK level, as they rightly deserve. There were 90 events in London throughout Wales Week—an historic high. I am in no doubt that the whole House will wish Wales Week continued and greater success.

We have heard a bit about the UK shared prosperity fund, and I want to discuss not just the words but the commitments to date surrounding the replacement of European money. I accept the benefit of the doubt

given by my hon. Friend—I call him that to reflect St David's Day—the Member for Caerphilly, and that was kind of him, but this is not just about words. The community renewal fund gives 23% of the UK funding to Wales—way above any Barnettised formula in the past. That is a clear direction of travel. We have secured 7% from the levelling-up fund. Again, that is way above what we would see from a UK Government scheme if we just were just going to honour the commitment.

Wayne David *rose*—

Craig Williams: I fear that this is the last time I call him my hon. Friend; it will be back to hon. Member.

Wayne David: If it is indeed the direction of travel that the Government should be generous to Wales, why on earth do they not come forward with some hard figures to prove that assertion?

Craig Williams: The hon. Member makes an interesting point given that I have just given him two hard figures. The latest schemes coming out of the United Kingdom Government show that this is not about words, but action—actual funding leaving the Treasury and the levelling-up unit and going into Wales. We have 23% from the community renewal fund going straight into schemes across Wales and 7% from the levelling-up fund—way above any Barnettised formula. The figures are there, so he need not ask for them. Now we need to work together.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who is not in his place, talked about an attack on devolution. With the objective 1 funding, we qualified once, we qualified twice, and we continued to qualify. That was not a great thing to continue doing, as countries in eastern Europe managed to use the funding programmes organised by the European Union to grow their GVA and so no longer qualify because their prosperity, skills and poverty indicators were all going the right way. In Wales, we are still under the Welsh European Funding Office. This is not just a political assertion from the Conservative Benches. The Audit Wales, Committees of this House and the European Union itself wanted to know time and again why the European funds that were going to Wales were not getting any better outcomes than countries in eastern Europe—the outcomes that our constituents wanted. I remember during the referendum, when we were on the same page, wondering why the response was so bad in the south Wales valleys.

Nia Griffith: Does the hon. Member accept that many of the financial levers are not in the control of the Senedd, including the whole taxation and benefits system, which affects the GVA of the population of Wales very significantly? Therefore, there are 12 years in which the Conservatives share responsibility for whatever deficit he is referring to in terms of where he thinks the development should have gone to? In addition, why is there this aversion to including the Welsh Government together with his Government and local government to talk about the priorities of the levelling-up fund and the community renewal fund, instead of just ignoring them?

Craig Williams: I could make a 10-minute speech on the irony of that intervention, but I can see the Deputy Speaker looking at me funny so I will not. Most of those arguments could be made for most of the eastern

[Craig Williams]

European regions, as they have different constitutional settlements and local government as well. We could go back and forward on that, on an academic level, for a while.

Going back to the attack on devolution, I have seen the discussions around what mutual respect means for Labour Members. They do not mean mutual respect; they mean that they want the Welsh Government to control all decisions. It is not about putting things together; it is about having a veto over what this Government are doing. I find that completely frustrating, given what I have described as happening with former European programmes. The leader of Powys County Council has been unequivocal in welcoming the levelling-up fund and community renewal fund—schemes that, for the first time ever, provide real investment in mid-Wales. This is hugely significant.

I reflect on the exchange between the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes). Looking at the political map of this place, above the Brecon Beacons there is beginning to be a political discourse of two countries—or three with mid-Wales—where there is a palpable feeling of neglect coming from the south Wales Labour party, as we see it.

Nia Griffith *rose*—

Craig Williams: Two speeches are enough.

I would push back heavily on the willingness of communities in north, mid, and, no doubt, south Wales to access funding directly from the UK Government to work with us on strategic issues. Mutual respect is always chucked around in this Chamber, but in the Union connectivity review, for the first time ever, the UK has looked at taking responsibility for connecting the United Kingdom. When the European Union did that through its trans-European network, there was not a single utterance in this place. In fact, there probably were some utterances from the Conservative Benches, for a very different reason. It was absolutely fine for Welsh Labour and the Welsh Government to have the European Union dictating where infrastructure spend should go in the United Kingdom in connecting the whole of Europe, but the second the United Kingdom Government say how to connect our great four nations together, there is outrage, saying it is an attack on devolution. [Interruption.] That intervention from Scottish Members will feature independence, I am sure.

Montgomeryshire has a strongly cross-border population. A good chunk of the workforce, if not the majority, cross the border to work every day. Our district general hospital is in Shrewsbury in England. Our sixth-form colleges are over the border. We are a community that certainly does not see, or want, the huge policy divide that is being asserted on the Opposition Benches.

Simon Baynes: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the bits that is missing from mutual respect in Wales is from the Senedd to local authorities, and that one of the enabling and exciting aspects of the new funding arrangements, particularly with regard to the levelling-up fund, has been to put local authorities in the driving seat and give them the respect that they deserve in this process?

Craig Williams: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We have seen that time and again. It is ironic that anyone should say we are attacking devolution given that those on the Treasury Bench and former Secretaries of State have empowered the Welsh Government and the Welsh Parliament with a plethora of new powers. I well remember when planning powers were devolved and an aspect of those, for energy, was devolved directly to local authorities. The first thing the Welsh Government and the Welsh Parliament did was to take those powers from the local authorities and centralise them. That is the theme of devolution since Labour has been at the helm—power and control. I very much welcome the increase in funding to the local authorities, especially the rural ones. I am big enough to say from the Conservative Benches that the First Minister of Wales got many of the decisions right during covid, and he did a good job in the round, but now is the time to restore the civil liberties to my constituents and to Wales. Now is the time to back off from the day-to-day control and, I am afraid, the nanny state, to a certain degree, that seems to develop around the covid rates.

Let me return to my central point—the great opportunities in trade going forward. Hopefully in the next St David's Day debate we can leave the old Brexit arguments aside and start really focusing on what is great for our Welsh agriculture and businesses. It was hugely terrific to see the investment go into Randall Parker, one of the biggest sheepmeat abattoirs in the country, through Pilgrim's UK. Members will reflect that for decades we have been worried about our sheepmeat market, the process, our abattoirs and our capacity. For the first time ever, money is following actions and words, and we are seeing investment, growth and new markets.

I implore you, Secretary of State, in my final concluding remark, to ensure that by the next St David's day debate, the New York market has access to the most sustainable, net zero meat in the world—Welsh lamb—and we can be championing that success and that emerging, burgeoning market.

I think I have taken enough time in this St David's day debate. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] If Members would like me to continue, I could move on to page 2 —[Interruption.] The Welsh Grand Committee will, I am sure, meet before long.

2 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing this St David's day debate on Welsh affairs. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams). My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly and I went to the same school: Cynffig Comprehensive School in my home town of Kenfig Hill. I was the sporty one, and he was the musician. When I made my maiden speech in May 2015, my hon. Friend sat by my side in the Chamber for many hours waiting for me to be called, and he has been at my side throughout my time in Parliament. I thank him for all he has done for the people of Caerphilly and Wales.

In my maiden speech I spoke about the historical and political aspects of my Neath constituency, and my dear friend Hywel Francis, the former MP for Aberavon, helped me write that speech. My speech was about other people, not Hywel, but today I will speak about

Hywel and how he was, in so many ways, involved in creating and recording the contemporary history of my Neath constituency.

Hywel tragically died on 14 February 2021, aged 74. Even though Hywel was the MP for Aberavon, we in Neath only loaned him to Aberavon, because so many people in Neath regard him as one of Neath's finest, and I do, too. I have spoken with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and he wants me to mention just how much Hywel meant to him, too.

Hywel was born in the village of Onllwyn in the Dulais valley, Neath, and he had a rare childhood. Born into one of the leading communist families in south Wales, he was the son of Dai Francis, general secretary of the South Wales Miners' Federation. When Hywel was a child, he met Aneurin Bevan, Arthur Horner and Will Paynter, and he lived a lifetime in awe of men like Dai Dan Evans, who Hywel mentioned often. Hywel was a child of the revolution. With that background, Hywel was destined to study history at Swansea University, and he went on to complete a PhD, which was two volumes of intricate, beautifully written historical analysis.

In 1984, Hywel's PhD was published as "Miners Against Fascism", one of the finest studies of the international brigades ever written. It pioneered the use of oral history and broke with the long-established tradition within the Communist party regarding what the Spanish civil war was all about. Welsh miners from south Wales made up one of the largest contingents within the British battalion of the international brigades in the Spanish civil war, and they brought with them trade union militancy, extra-parliamentary activity and internationalism. Hywel wrote about the compulsion imposed on some of the volunteers and the effects on the wives and children of those volunteers who joined up. Much of the history of south Wales was dependent on Hywel's PhD and his subsequent publications. Hywel would probably have had much to say about Putin invading Ukraine.

In 1969, Hywel joined with Welsh academic, cultural historian and author David Burton Smith, known as Dai, and they made a plan to recover the fast-disappearing archives and intellectual material of the south Wales coalfield. This led to the founding of Llafur, which Hywel made sure that I joined, in a Swansea pub in 1970. Llafur brings together people from all walks of life who have a common interest in Welsh people's history, because history does not just inform us about our past, but can help us understand the present and shape our future. That is what Hywel did—he brought people together, and he was always full of ideas. In fact, Llafur has had such an effect on promoting Welsh history that people are now undertaking historical studies of Llafur.

In that Swansea pub in 1969, the south Wales coalfield history project was also created, and that led to the establishment of the South Wales Miners' Library in the autumn of 1973. My friend Sian Williams is the secretary and vice-president of Llafur and has been the librarian of the South Wales Miners' Library since 1985. Before I became an MP, I was national coach for Squash Wales, and I coached Sian's three sons in squash. Wales is one big family. We shall be celebrating the South Wales Miners' Library's 50th anniversary next year. Sian and I cannot contemplate doing that without Hywel.

As a young boy, Hywel was mesmerised by hearing Paul Robeson at the Ebbw Vale Eisteddfod in 1958 and hearing his voice down the transatlantic link to the Porthcawl Miners' Eisteddfod. Every year between 1952 and 1957, Robeson was invited to attend, but his passport had been withdrawn by the US Government because of his outspoken left-wing and anti-racist views. Hywel was so proud when Paul Robeson Jr. visited the South Wales Miners' Library in 1989 and again in 2007.

Hywel played a prominent role during the 1984-85 miners' strike, and in 2009 Hywel collected his earlier writings and memories together to publish a book on the 25th anniversary of the miners' strike in Wales entitled "History on Our Side". The title comes from the words and actions of the 1984-85 strike, what was happening across the world in 2008, and the words of Tower colliery striking miner Robert True in June 1984, who said to Hywel:

"Surely we can't lose, history is on our side".

Hywel started to keep a diary during the strike, but became aware of police surveillance, so went through a gradual process of self-censorship. Phil Thomas and Penny Smith from the Welsh Council for Civil and Political Liberties recorded their experiences for their book "Striking Back", but they hid their tapes under the floorboards in their house. I became friends with Phil and Penny when I did my law degree at Cardiff University during the nineties. Phil was head of the law department, and I am still in touch with him now.

Hywel believed that his miners' support group in the Dulais valley was the best, because of the talented and committed people who rose to the challenge of developing what was to become an alternative welfare state. Kay Bowen from Dyffryn Cellwen was the food co-ordinator who organised food for more than a thousand families for 12 months. Dai Donovan from Ynyswen was one of the fundraisers. Dai built strong links with trade unions in London, a range of political organisations and the gay and lesbian community, who donated a minibus. The most successful fundraiser was Alun "Ali" Thomas, the secretary of Onllwyn miners' welfare club, which Hywel called "the palace of culture". Ali was away collecting funds in Ireland, north Wales and other parts, and he became known as our roving ambassador or our foreign secretary. Many years later, Ali became the councillor for Onllwyn and leader of Neath Port Talbot Council. He is a great friend and has helped me so much, but when he tugs at his braces and says, "Now look here, lovely girl," I know that I am in trouble. He is one of the best storytellers, especially after he has had a few sherbets.

The fundraisers organised many concerts which featured the South Wales Striking Miners Choir, Elvis Costello, Billy Bragg, Jimmy Somerville, the Communards and the Flying Pickets to mention a few. The Welsh Striking Miners rugby team went on a fundraising tour of Italy. The funds, some £350,000, were looked after by the support group's treasurer Christine Powell, whose fearsome dog Butch slept on top of the money until it was deposited in a bank.

The support group also produced its own weekly newspaper *The Valleys' Star*, whose editors were Frank Rees from Ystradgynlais and Margaret Donovan from Ynyswen. It was distributed all over the world and was included in striking miners' food parcels. The wise picket organisers believed in talking rather than fighting and they were so good at it that some people were talked into submission.

[Christina Rees]

Hywel's support group was different in that it was led by women: the secretary of the group, the formidable Hefina Headon from Seven Sisters, who was courageous on the picket line and a great public speaker and fundraiser; Siân James, who went on to become the MP for Swansea East; and Margaret Donovan, who developed a women's support group and who travelled to fundraisers to speak and to picket. Since retiring as an MP, Siân has returned to live in Neath.

All of that and more, with a bit of poetic licence, was made into the film "Pride", which was filmed in the palace of culture and the village of Banwen at the top of the Dulais valley. I have watched the film many times and I always cry when my friend and singer-songwriter Bronwen Lewis from Seven Sisters sings "Bread and Roses".

Wayne David: I agree with my hon. Friend that it was a remarkable film. If anything, however, it did not give the thanks that were due to Hywel Francis for his role in all those activities.

Christina Rees: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Hywel worked behind the scenes; he did not like to be in the limelight, but I totally agree that there should have been a place for him in the film.

Hywel and the support group organised the annual commemoration of the start of the strike in the palace of culture, which became known as the "Glorious 12th". He brought together all the people involved in the support group who were still alive, the cast of "Pride" and many of his friends. At the 2019 commemoration, I had the honour of unveiling a memorial plaque for Hefina.

Hywel saw history as a means for social change and his boundless energy and relentless activism had a profound effect on everyone who had the privilege to meet him. I was in awe of him, but he had the gift of making people think that they were the important ones. His networking was the stuff of legend. He had many friends throughout Neath, Wales and beyond who he kept in touch with by text and email, which he signed off as "H", and by telephone calls that turned from minutes into hours. He would start by asking, "What do you think of this, Chris?", but by the end of the call, he would have given me far more guidance and advice than I could ever have given him, all delivered with his quick-witted humour and lots of anecdotes along the way.

Hywel could never be accused of rewriting history to portray himself in a better light, because he was our guiding light. He used his charm to find consensus by working behind the scenes, cajoling and persuading—never demanding. He was a man who always had a long-term plan and who drew in many of his friends to achieve a common good. We could never say no to H. We are lost without him and we miss him more every day. After standing down as MP for Aberavon, Hywel and Mair returned to live in the village of Crynant in the Dulais valley, and I spent many hours in their house putting the world to rights.

Many hon. Members may not know that Hywel was an accomplished rugby player. He was president of the Seven Sisters rugby club from 2005 to his death and he was the author of "The Magnificent Seven" about its

history. He played rugby from 1972 to 1980 and was awarded the Seven Sisters RFC club badge in the 1972-3 season. He played 78 times for the first 15, and scored 22 tries, with a total points score of 88.

After I had been selected as the candidate for Neath in 2014, Hywel took me to Seven Sisters RFC to watch the first team play against my home town of Kenfig Hill. He introduced me to the chairman Jeff "Jako" Davies, who has become one of my dearest friends. The club's compère Emyr Lewis, who is well into his eighties, took great delight in reminding the crowd that "Chris is from Kenfig Hill" every time that Seven Sisters scored against them. I must be one of the few MPs who has voluntarily joined a rugby club committee—and I still do not know how that happened.

Hywel was instrumental in me becoming the patron of the Seven Sisters ladies team. My friendship with the club captain, former Ospreys captain and former Welsh international Bethan Howell, has grown over the last seven years. Hywel used to call Beth the gay icon of the Dulais valley just to wind her up, but she never bit. She is a formidable person on and off the field. When she puts her arms around me, I feel loved and safe—and a little bit crushed. I am a squash player and I am proud to have played more than 100 times for Wales, but even though she has tried to persuade me to play rugby—on the left wing obviously—one tackle and I would be done for!

Hywel was a one-off who influenced the lives of many people. His friends will ensure that that is never forgotten and that his ideas are taken forward to influence the lives of future generations. *Salud comrade!*

2.16 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) and her wonderful tribute to Hywel Francis, who I know all hon. Members miss. We send our love to Mair. It is also a pleasure to take part in the annual St David's day debate, which was so ably led by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), whose wise words, contributions, sage advice and friendship we will all miss following his announcement that he will not contest the next election. There is a while to go yet, but we will miss him when the time comes.

Proceedings in Parliament this week have obviously been dominated by events in Ukraine, and all our thoughts are with the Ukrainian people in these dark times. That was demonstrated yesterday in the Chamber by the reception for the Ukrainian ambassador, which was one of the moving moments of my time in the House. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) said, there are long-standing ties between the people of Wales and Ukraine, with city of Donetsk, which was originally known as Hughesovka, having been founded by the Welshman John Hughes, who made his reputation and fortune as a leading engineer at Uskside Engineering in Newport.

Coalmining and steel production have played just as important a role in the economic and cultural life of central and eastern Ukraine as they have in south Wales. We are all united in our solidarity. As my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly said, the scale is enormous and horrific, and our contributions reflect that.

Like other hon. Members, I have constituents with friends and family in Ukraine and at least one constituent who is currently stuck in the country after travelling there to care for dependents before the invasion began. In her case, her family members were refused a visa application for entry to the UK last year by the Home Office. I hope that everything will now be done to ensure that visas for Ukrainians looking to flee the conflict can be processed swiftly and that a robust system to reunite Ukrainians with family members here in the UK is put in place promptly. I note the announcements this week, but I pray that action is swift. That family have been told by a Home Office adviser that they should be eligible, but they now tell me that there may be no safe passage out from Zaporizhzhia, which is surrounded by Russian forces.

With the failures of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme, we have seen how not having comprehensive and compassionate structures in place can have real consequences. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West, I am grateful to the Welsh Government for voicing their strong support for providing Ukrainian refugees with sanctuary in Wales and for providing £4 million in financial and humanitarian aid to Ukraine. We are a nation of sanctuary and a nation of compassion, as is demonstrated by the groups and individuals across Wales that are already doing what they can to support Ukraine. Groups such as the Polish Community for Ukraine and the Women of Newport, including my constituent Kamila, have been overwhelmed with support for their emergency appeal just this week.

I know that Newportonians in Prague are raising donations in Newport for refugees on the ground. I am grateful also to the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) who have donated to the Disasters Emergency Committee's Ukraine humanitarian appeal. I know that we all hope the Government can ensure this money reaches those who have fled their homes to escape the conflict as quickly as possible. Of course, it will again fall to our councils on the frontline to welcome those fleeing Ukraine. I ask the Secretary of State to make sure that the UK Government, working with the Welsh Government, ensure that they have the financial means not just to welcome them, but to support them.

Today's debate comes at a time when we are looking to the future after the pandemic. That was clearly not the case on St David's Day in 2020, and two years on from the devastation of the first wave of covid in March 2020, it feels a good time to take stock. I thank all those in Newport East and beyond who have helped us get to where we are now, including the many community groups, charities and volunteers on the ground who helped keep people connected and very supported during the darkest hours of the pandemic.

I also thank our local councils, Newport City Council and Monmouthshire County Council, which kept key services in Newport East running as smoothly as possible in unprecedented times. We should not forget or underestimate how difficult that was. I remember the conversations at the start of the pandemic, the scenarios being anticipated and the very difficult decisions being considered. It was leadership at one of our hardest times, and I certainly will always be thankful for those who step up and are willing to hold those positions at such times. As the *Tad y Tŷ*, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West, said, our councils play a

pivotal role, as we all know, right on the frontline of delivering our services—be they the schools our children attend, care for the elderly, keeping the roads safe, waste collection, recycling services, parks and sports facilities and more. It is our councils that are key to—and are—looking ahead with ambition for a much brighter future after the pandemic.

Labour-led Newport council, very ably led by Councillor Jane Mudd, spent the pandemic, among many other things, distributing more than 9,000 laptops and devices to pupils, and administering nearly £55 million of Welsh Government funding to Newport businesses to support them through the pandemic period, including grants that supported over 70 new start-up businesses and targeted support for sectors such as the arts and leisure. I think the council is a leader in many ways. We are the UK's best city for recycling, employer of the year at the Welsh Veterans Awards, and a hub for sports with the National Velodrome of Wales, the Football Association of Wales's Dragon Park and other major events venues in our city. They are all world-class facilities that are on our doorstep. Our future plans include a new leisure centre, the reopening soon of Newport market—the largest indoor market refurb in Europe—and a new 4-star hotel over the river in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West, as well as lots of new modern housing developments in the city centre. This is all in the plan for the regeneration of our city.

Monmouthshire council also deserves praise for its work supporting vulnerable residents and bringing people together during the pandemic. A great example of this are those on the Monmouthshire youth council whom I met when they came to Parliament last week. Throughout the pandemic, the council provided a regular virtual forum for young people to discuss the issues that matter most to them at a time when schools, colleges and social activities were restricted. As the mother of two teenagers myself, I very much appreciate the work of people such as Jade Atkins, its participation officer, who convenes the group that puts in that work, and I know the real difference it can make.

Hon. Members have mentioned levelling up, but last year I worked closely with Monmouthshire County Council on its cross-party bid for levelling-up funding for Caldicot. It is a real shame that this strong bid for improvements to the leisure centre and the town centre was rejected by the UK Government, as indeed were all bids from the Gwent area. I hope that future tranches of levelling-up funding will be more inclusive of all regions of Wales, or the accusations of pork barrel politics may ring true again.

May I note, on behalf of the wonderful and dedicated volunteers at the Magor Action Group on Rail, that it has a bid in for a new walkway station for Magor and Undy? I mention to the Secretary of State that its restoring your railway bid is in at the moment, and it would be much appreciated if he could nudge his Department for Transport colleagues for an update on the next steps, as would his taking the lead, following the Burns Commission, to provide the funding to reverse the historical underinvestment in rail in Wales by investing in our lines and new stations. We are watching that very keenly.

I want to pay tribute to the work of the Labour group on Monmouthshire council, which has combined constructive opposition to the administration with its

[*Jessica Morden*]

continued campaign for better services across the county and improved infrastructure in areas such as Severnside in my constituency to match the rapid growth in house building we have seen locally. It is important that, after the upcoming local elections in May, the council, which this year received the highest increase in its core funding settlement of any local authority in Wales from the Welsh Government, now prioritises this investment where it is needed most. We need to invest in infrastructure where we are building new house developments.

I will cheekily take this opportunity to wish all the candidates standing in Newport East the very best of luck for 5 May. I am very proud of the candidates whom Labour has chosen in the Newport and Monmouthshire wards in my constituency. They are a very enthusiastic and talented cross-section of our community. We have a firefighter, a brewery worker, a nurse, a journalist, a taxi driver, a lecturer and small business owners, and they are all hoping to be given the privilege of serving their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) spoke about the benefits of the strong collaboration between our councils and the Welsh Labour Government, and that should never be underestimated. Wales led the way on the vaccine roll-out across the UK and maintained the most generous comprehensive package of support for businesses of any UK nation. Now, as we look beyond the pandemic, the Welsh Government have come up with a £330 million package of extra help for the cost of living crisis—a funding package that, yet again, is significantly larger than the equivalent support provided by the UK Government in England.

Of course, there is only so much that a Welsh Government and local authorities can do with the powers afforded to them. This is true of the steel industry in Newport, where the UK Government must provide our steel industry with the support it needs on decarbonisation and electricity costs. We have talked about that in the House—other members of the all-party group on steel and metal-related industries are here—for over a decade. It is also true of funding for our police, which has been cut by this soft-on-crime Tory Government over the last decade.

On the cost of living, Conservative Members need to acknowledge the part they have played in enabling this crisis. It was the Government who failed to regulate the energy market, failed to invest in home-grown renewables and failed to end our dependence on imported energy. They cranked up national insurance contributions while cutting universal credit, and then responded to the lifting of the energy price cap by marching their MPs through the Lobby to vote down Labour's motion to cut VAT on household energy bills with a windfall tax. As I highlighted in my Westminster Hall debate last week, the cost of living crisis in Wales and across the UK is now very real, and it is pronounced for businesses as well as for households.

That is especially true for industries such as hospitality which were already dealing with the shockwaves of the pandemic. Hospitality means about £3.6 billion to the Welsh economy each year—that is a major contribution—and, pre-pandemic, the industry trade body UKHospitality Cymru reported that the sector employed 180,000 people in Wales, about 140,000 directly and 40,000 in the

supply chain. The challenges that the sector faces are multifaceted, from energy costs to recruitment, which is currently at an all-time low. Representatives from local hospitality businesses tell me that the sector now needs greater support from the Government in their efforts to recruit and retain staff as the recovery opens up the economy. The sector in Wales also wants to discuss the scheduled increase in VAT in April, which UKHospitality suggests could lead to price inflation of around 12.4%, compounding other supply chain cost pressures.

I hope that the Government can work with the hospitality sector in Wales now as it seeks to recover the confidence that has been lost over two challenging years.

2.30 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am very glad to contribute to this debate, much of which has indeed been a debate—that is refreshing, as the toing and froing is very useful. I thank the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing the debate. He and I, and the Tad y Tŷ, the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), came into Parliament in 2001—clearly I was not as canny as the hon. Gentleman in aspiring to that title. Still, that was 20 years ago and how time flies when one is enjoying oneself—or not, as the case might be. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the debate in this most momentous of weeks. I would like to pay tribute immediately to the bravery and continued resistance of Ukraine's armed forces and people in the face of the illegal and criminal Russian aggression. Our thoughts are with them in these dark times, and I hope that, through our collective action against Putin and his cronies, the people of Ukraine know that they are not alone.

On Tuesday we celebrated dydd gŵyl Dewi, St David's day, the day that brings people together in Wales, and indeed across the world, to celebrate our place in the world. We of course celebrated here in Westminster, and I thank Mr Speaker once again for allowing us to use Speaker's House to bring some people together for a wonderful programme of events, which I think everybody enjoyed. It was organised by the hon. Members for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter) and myself, and I am grateful to them for their work. The hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire is in our thoughts today, she having lost her mother a couple of days before St David's day. I saw her at the event and she said to me, "Mum would never have wanted me to miss a party," which was a wonderful thing to say. Our thoughts go out to her today.

The spirit of community was also reflected in the Senedd, where Members of all parties, including the Conservatives, supported Plaid Cymru's long-standing call for St David's day to be made a bank holiday. Some 80% of the people of Wales are in favour of that, according to a recent poll by the BBC, and the Parliament of Wales has backed a motion to that effect. The UK Government have a duty to deliver and might follow the lead of my local authority, Gwynedd, which for the first time gave all its workers a day off. Wales has the lowest number of bank holidays of the four constituent parts of the United Kingdom, so a St David's day bank holiday is long overdue. We are the only devolved nation without the powers to do this, which represents yet another asymmetry in the treatment of devolved nations by Westminster.

Kevin Brennan: Does the hon. Gentleman have any confidence that the UK Government will listen to their Welsh Conservative colleagues, not least because in a recent business statement the previous Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who now has another ministerial job, could not even name the leader of the Welsh Conservative party?

Hywel Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes a fine point. I am afraid I could not name the leader either—I never know whether it is our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State across the Chamber or Mr Andrew R. T. Davies, the rather excitable leader of the Conservative group in Wales. Possibly it is the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). He gets my vote, as I really enjoy talking to him, although we rarely agree about anything—he is a very fine man. But the serious point is that we need a bank holiday to celebrate our saint's day.

This week there was yet more evidence of the other long-standing crisis, that affecting our climate, in the form of the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report. As the UN Secretary-General noted, the severity of the challenges facing our climate, our ecosystems and our way of life mean that the report is, in his words, an “atlas of human suffering”; that is a striking way of putting it. The report underlined in stark terms how those least responsible for climate change will face the worst risks, which is the poor of the earth mainly; how climate change will drive the widespread extinction of life both on land and in the sea; and how these life-threatening events will continue to multiply. We all have a duty and responsibility to mitigate and adapt to these outcomes. As such, I urge the Government to update their net zero commitments and use the upcoming Budget to fiscally empower Wales and the other devolved nations to meet their own net zero and sustainability commitments and targets.

Further to this, the Government must reconsider their position on the Crown Estate in Wales. They devolved the management of the Crown Estate in Scotland to Scotland in 2017, but Westminster retains control of that estate in Wales. This means that revenues from Wales's natural resources are siphoned off to Westminster and the Treasury rather than staying in the communities where they are generated. This injustice and constitutional asymmetry is particularly pertinent to our net zero ambitions. Were we to get those rights and that power, the opportunities for us in Wales would be breathtaking. For instance, through 17 offshore wind projects, Scotland has secured nearly £700 million for its public finances and attracted a global consortium of developers who will further invest in a Scottish supply chain. This is great for Scotland and the world, and for the environment, and clearly demonstrates how local control is essential to maximise the benefits of the green transition.

While our resources are smaller in Wales, the most recent round of auctions demonstrated the potential wealth of Wales's offshore wind resources as the Crown Estate's Welsh marine portfolio increased in value from £49.2 million to £549.1 million—about a tenfold increase. Simply put, we have an opportunity in Wales to better deliver the renewable electricity needed for our net zero transition and for energy security. I urge the Government to reconsider their position ahead of the Budget and to work with Wales, rather than over us, to help meet our net zero commitments.

Finally, I would like to close by considering the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. As I said earlier in the debate, I was deeply moved at a rally I organised in Caernarfon on Saturday. We had between 200 and 300 people there, including people from Ukraine and Russia. I was deeply moved by the commitment shown by local people; we organised the rally overnight essentially, calling it on Friday afternoon and holding it on Saturday lunchtime.

More broadly, I applaud the UN General Assembly meeting yesterday and voting overwhelmingly to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine. The international community showed itself to be united in the face of Russia's illegal war and demanded the full withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine. Plaid Cymru also fully supports the sanctions regime introduced by the UK, the European Union and the US, and urges the Government to go further in their pursuit of Russian influence and money in the UK.

Hundreds of thousands of people have already been displaced by this conflict. Wales stands ready to assist as a nation of sanctuary, as has been said—*gwlad lloches ydym ni*. We are a land that welcomes people and gives sanctuary, and we are ready and willing to take in those displaced by this illegal conflict. As someone said at the rally on Saturday, “Close the door on the thieves, open the door for the refugees”—in a nutshell. That is why I urge the Government to waive all visa requirements for Ukrainian refugees coming to the UK and match the support offered by the EU, and to put in place support for the Welsh Government to implement their nation of sanctuary plan.

I will make one further point on this matter. The Prime Minister, at Prime Minister's questions, said it was impossible for the UK to do that because countries on the mainland of Europe were within Schengen. Therefore, they had open borders and by necessity had to have a unified plan allowing movement. He neglected to mention, despite the heckles from those on the Opposition Benches, the fact that Ireland is outside Schengen. But Ireland has said, “Come. Don't worry. It doesn't matter if you have no contact with us. Come, there is a welcome for you.” That is how we should be in Wales, too.

To conclude, in these times of crisis we must all come together and play our part. Wales can and will do more to further our common future, whether on climate action or on helping those displaced by conflict. I urge the Government to step up, listen to the wishes and aspirations of the people of Wales, and work with everyone to deliver on them.

2.41 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing this Backbench Business debate on Welsh affairs to celebrate St David's day.

I would like to make my initial comments about Ukraine, because on Sunday we had 400 people gathering in Mumbles in my constituency—I was unable to join, having tested positive for covid. Ukraine Wales organised the event and it was very well and widely attended. I was very upset that I could not be there, but I did speak to my constituents Stuart and Galina Morgan. Galina is Russian and I saw the hurt on her face as she spoke about her disappointment about what is happening in Ukraine. She is half-Ukrainian and feels horrified by Putin's barbaric actions.

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

Hearing stories at first hand about the work being done by so many people across Gower and across Swansea to support our Ukrainian community makes us realise that the community is pulling together. I am also very pleased with the work of the First Minister and the Welsh Senedd on Wales being a country of sanctuary, and with Swansea's Labour council on Swansea being a city of sanctuary.

I am going to take my speech in a little bit of a different direction, and I will be putting some asks to the Secretary of State, which I hope he can help me with. It is an honour to speak in this debate. I echo the words of the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), who asked for St David's day to become a bank holiday. As he said, it has the full support of the Senedd and a Mr David Davies in Penclawdd, who runs a very avid campaign in the *South Wales Evening Post* to make St David's day a bank holiday, which I commend him for. Let us be honest: it is about time it happened.

I grew up in Llanelli next to the Gower constituency, but overlooking Stradey Park. I bang on about having represented Wales. I have nine caps for international rugby and my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees), who is not in her place, represented Wales in squash. It is a real honour to be able to represent a country. Rugby in Wales is about identity. Villages and towns and their rugby teams across the Gower constituency are absolutely fantastic. Their communities are at the heart of my constituency, which is made up of small towns. Penclawdd, Pontardulais, Loughor, Mumbles, Swansea Uplands and Fall Bay RFC—this is where the talent in Wales is being grown, with grassroots rugby and the commitment of volunteers. Our communities, our regions and the Welsh Rugby Union are investing in girls rugby. I am very proud to be an ambassador for the West Swansea Hawks team, which has age-grade rugby for girls. It is fantastic. I know the niece of my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) plays for them and she is very proud of her achievements—so am I, actually.

Going back to rugby players from my constituency, as today is World Book Day I would like to pay tribute to some rugby greats who have written books. I remember two years ago paying tribute to my friend Lowri Morgan when she was here for an event at Downing Street—which, again, I was not invited to. She is a TV presenter, an adventurer and an ultra-marathon runner. She is also lucky enough to have played rugby with me. She has written a book, "Beyond Limits". I spent a week in Norway with the Armed Forces Parliamentary Scheme and the royal marines, which took me to my limits. I cannot imagine what it was like for her running an ultra-marathon in the Arctic Circle. It is really important that we share the experiences of sports people, because they are us and we are sports people. I could never do that, mind you. It is a brilliant book and I commend her for it on World Book Day.

The book by my constituent James Hook, a player for Ospreys and Wales, and David Brayley, another constituent, is absolutely brilliant. It has not only won an award, but he has written a sequel. The book gives young people—boys and girls—the inspiration to pick up a rugby ball and play for their country. Another constituent is Ryan Jones, a recent MBE and a great individual. There are so many and I could go on, but I shall not.

My *raison d'être*, the whole point of being a Member of Parliament, is to empower women and girls to achieve in their lives, to pull down the barriers that are put in their way, to tell their brothers that they can play for Wales as well, and to fight for the right to do that as we are 51% of the population. As I said, I grew up in Llanelli overlooking Stradey Park. My brother Julian, five years older than me and far more attractive, had it all going for him. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] You wouldn't believe it, but it's true. He played for Wales under-18s and under-21s, and beat the All Blacks. His advice to me when I went to university was, "In freshers week, make sure you join a club and find yourself something to do, something where you can play to your strengths, Tonia." I think that was code for, "Find a sport where you can throw your weight around." I was very proud to play at Exeter for the women's team in the town and for Exeter University. That afforded me the opportunity to play for Benetton Treviso in Italy. I turned down the opportunity to play for Italy, I'll have you know. I chose to follow my heart, which is Welsh. In my fourth year of university I had the opportunity to play for Wales, to be awarded full colours at university and to follow my dreams. That is what I wish for all women and girls in sport.

Last year, together with 120 former players and coaches, I wrote to the Welsh Rugby Union, because we felt strongly that women's rugby in Wales was being badly let down. Many things could be blamed for that. I played back in 1996—a long time ago—and felt that things had not really moved on, and many other former players felt the same way. We saw the captain, Siwan Lillicrap, crying on TV and felt her pain. We knew how the pride to pull on a jersey for Wales is unique but that that pride was being really hurt by a lack of attention and force, and we did not want to see that.

I was glad that the chief executive, Steve Phillips, spoke to a small group of us to explain the WRU's plans and say how it would turn the situation around. He said that it would review women's rugby, with the review undertaken by Kevin Bowring, Helen Phillips and Amanda Bennett. That was a very important process. The Secretary of State may be aware that something similar happened in Ireland, where the Irish women's team put together a letter and went to the Government. However, their report was published—they had their report and saw what it said—and we need that to happen in Wales. The Welsh Rugby Union must publish its review of women's rugby in Wales. That publication would be groundbreaking in fast-tracking female development in Welsh rugby for the next 10 years.

The WRU is a great organisation that has produced great rugby players, but we can always do better, and it takes a great organisation to be honest with itself and reflect on its mistakes, warts and all. If there is a sexist and misogynistic culture, that needs to be called out and addressed. We need to know why women on the executive board have resigned. We need to know why women are leaving the WRU. In the conversations that I know the Secretary of State will have with the WRU and other governing bodies in Wales, will he press them to ensure that they are stamping out sexism and misogyny in women's sport in Wales? We are great in Wales, we are proud to be Welsh, and we must ensure that sexism and misogyny is gone. Will he, like the Irish Government, ask the WRU to publish its review into women's rugby so that we can accept the mistakes of the past and embrace a more equal future for women and girls?

I am a proud Scarlets supporter—much to the chagrin of some of my constituents in Swansea and Gower—but I am pleased to see how the regions are also embracing the women and girls' regional game and age-grade rugby. That needs to be invested in. I look forward to having a conversation with the Secretary of State on that, because I see the potential for the WRU, the Irish Rugby Football Union and other countries' rugby governing bodies to come together for a Celtic or European league so that there is another level of rugby for young women and girls—older women as well, if they are good enough—to strive to play in. That would put us on a competitive stage with England, France and New Zealand, and we would be in the right place for the women's rugby world cup again.

I pay tribute to Nigel Walker, who was brought in by the WRU and has addressed so many of the issues that were haunting the women's rugby team. He has worked day and night, and that man has a heart of gold—he is brilliant. I also pay tribute to Liza Burgess, who is also part of the WRU set-up—I think she is now the coach or manager of the under-18s women's team. Women and girls need our support in rugby in Wales. I hope that the Secretary of State will meet me for a conversation on that as well as press the WRU to publish its review and find out why women are leaving. If there is a culture of misogyny and sexism in that organisation and other governing bodies in Wales, I hope that, along with me, he will help to stamp it out.

2.53 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) in this important debate. She is a vociferous campaigner for women's sport, not just in Wales, but across the globe. She has given me a brilliant opportunity to humbly brag about my fantastic niece Robyn, who plays for West Swansea Hawks rugby team, is hoping to be capped for Wales in the under-18s girls squad and has just been given a place in the Wales under-17s netball squad. We can clearly see where the talent is in my family.

I join colleagues in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing this important debate. It is my third St David's day debate in this place—how quickly has the time gone?

It would be remiss of me not to mention what has been happening in Ukraine. The people of Pontypridd and Taff Ely send all their thoughts and prayers to the people of Ukraine. Colleagues have mentioned Wales's history and proud relationship with Ukraine; we have always stood together. Pontypridd has its own very special link with Ukraine: our Member of the Senedd and Wales's Counsel General is my very good friend and colleague Mick Antoniw, who is of Ukrainian heritage, as colleagues will know. We stand with him, with all his family and with all Ukraine today.

I would like to make a few important points about the incredible work that is going on in Wales as we head into what I hope will be the road to recovery from the pandemic, once and for all. It has been an extremely busy period for all of us in this place, with the very welcome return of the Welsh Grand Committee only a few weeks ago. Very sadly, I had an unavoidable clash and was unable to speak in the debate, but I look

forward to participating in the next one. With any luck, my Welsh learner language skills will finally be showcased on an appropriate stage.

This St David's day, I want to touch on how the coronavirus has changed lives in Pontypridd and Rhondda Cynon Taf and to celebrate how my community has come together in difficult times. In Pontypridd, we have seen huge physical changes to our town centres, particularly in Ponty town. With the impact of the pandemic, the flooding and changes in how we shop and use our high streets in comparison with the years before, it has been incredible to see people and businesses in our community reimagining what our high streets can be and how they serve our communities.

We have seen a real explosion in the number of cafés, restaurants and bars making use of the space. I cannot list every single one, but I will give a quick shout-out to some incredible places that I have had the great privilege of visiting in recent months. From the award-winning Janet's Authentic Northern Chinese in Ponty market and the new Gatto Lounge, both of which I visited with my team in the autumn, to the brand-new No 12 cocktail bar, which is very handily located next door to my office, we are seeing a huge growth in what our high streets have to offer. Old favourites such as Alfred's and the world-renowned The Prince's are drawing in more people than ever.

Especially in the pandemic, people have been encouraged to support local businesses where they can. Crucial to that success is the hard work of the fantastic Pontypridd business improvement district team, who have done so much to support businesses in recent months. Across my constituency, our many small businesses have had to get creative over the past few years. As ever, there are too many to mention, but I will name a handful: the brilliant Kookoo Madame in Ponty, Pink Zebra in Llantrisant, the Glamorgan brewery, Bragdy Twt Lol in Treforest, Best Buds by Samara florists in Tonyrefail, Bradleys Coffee in Talbot Green, Cortile Coffee in Ponty town and the Deli in Pontyclun. Special mention must go to the incredible efforts of Dawn Parkin, who is up for a St David's Day award this year in the Senedd; to the team at Interlink, who fundraised to support people at the beginning of the pandemic; and to the team at Beefy's Baps, who helped the elderly by distributing free food to all those in need.

It is not just small businesses that have been at the heart of our covid recovery. Our fantastic local tourist destinations have helped to take the lead on our road to normality. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Royal Mint in Llantrisant, which the Secretary of State and I had the great opportunity of visiting last year, rapidly went from making coins to making personal protective equipment. It then acted as a major covid testing site for much of the pandemic. It really is a fantastic and fascinating place to visit—I recommend it if you are ever in Pontypridd, Madam Deputy Speaker—and it is busy making coins to mark the Queen's platinum jubilee this year. Also busy is Nantgarw China Works, which I recently visited alongside the Welsh Government Deputy Minister for Arts and Sport, Dawn Bowden MS.

Investing in such local tourist destinations is a crucial part of supporting communities across Wales in their recovery from the pandemic. Long-term, sustainable changes are also crucial to towns and communities like mine if they are to continue to be fit for purpose for our residents in the long run. For example, I have started to

[Alex Davies-Jones]

see Pontypridd as something of a transport hub for Wales. We play host to the new Transport for Wales offices right in the middle of town, which, combined with our strengths in aviation and engineering and fantastic local coach operators such as Ferris Holidays and Edwards Coaches, are bringing vital jobs and infrastructure to our community.

While the Government's confusion over devolved responsibilities is clearer now than ever, I want to talk briefly about the importance of devolution to my constituents. All hon. Members participating in the debate understand the importance of devolution and of working closely with our counterparts in Welsh Government. Our Labour Government in Wales have worked hard throughout the pandemic to take a cautious approach. They are leading by example, unlike some people, and are working hard to support everyone through the significant challenges that we have faced. I have been in Parliament for a few years now and my experiences as a Welsh MP and as a former shadow Minister for Northern Ireland have made it clear to me that for much of the UK Government the devolved nations are just a distant second thought.

We all remember well the controversy that surrounded the UK Government's disastrous attempt to cut free school meals for children in England, a policy that I would hope that Members of all political persuasions could see was an appalling idea from the get-go. Luckily for children and families in my area, our fantastic Labour-led local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf Borough Council, led by Andrew Morgan, has for some time been providing parents with the vital cash needed to put food on the table for children.

We have also seen the Welsh Labour Government boldly invest in our creative sector in a way that continues to be missed by the Chancellor in Westminster. Recently they announced £15 million from the third round of the cultural recovery fund to support the arts and cultural sector through covid recovery. Clearly, the Welsh Government recognise, in a way that seems to be missed in England, the unique value of our brilliant local creative sector across Wales. In Pontypridd and across RCT we have some incredible musicians, including our Welsh icon Sir Tom Jones, but there are also smaller groups and organisations that have benefited hugely from Welsh Government support. From the world-renowned brass band the Cory Band, to our very own Dance Crazy in Llantwit Fardre and Green Rooms in Treforest, I am pleased to report that our creative industries locally are still alive and kicking, despite an extremely difficult few years. Long may they continue.

To conclude, it is of course undeniable that there is more work to be done, and we are not yet out of the woods in terms of coronavirus and its implications for our local communities across Wales. What is clear, however, is that our Union—our United Kingdom—is at its strongest when we are able to celebrate and respect our differences but unite against adversity. I am confident that the First Minister of Wales and Welsh Labour are the team Wales needs to see us through the pandemic and beyond. I will of course continue to work in partnership with them over the coming months and years, because only by doing so will we be able to truly rebuild a thriving, ambitious and successful nation out of a crisis.

For me that really is the very essence and purpose of St David's day. Long may this work continue. I would like to conclude with the words of St David—his last words:

“Be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things”.

Diolch.

3.1 pm

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): It is wonderful to follow my good and hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), who is a fantastic advocate for her constituency, and to take part in what is one of the very few opportunities for Welsh MPs to talk about Wales.

I pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), who opened the debate and who, sadly, has said that he will stand down at the next election. When the time comes, we will hugely miss his experience and great talent.

There is never a shortage of pride among the people of Wales. We are a resilient, kind, caring nation—always have been and always will be—and we have witnessed that over the past difficult few years. As we reflect on what has been an unprecedented year—I am sure that in 50 years' time it will be a very tough history exam to study for—I am struck by one overarching theme: the strength of humanity. The human spirit has proven itself to be unbreakable again and again over these past few years, and it is being tested once more. We have all seen the barrage of distressing images and videos from war-struck Ukraine. The most poignant that I have seen is of an elderly woman whose blue eyes pierce through the blood dripping down her face. I know that we are all united in our support for the Ukrainian people. We are all deeply saddened and it is hard not to get hugely upset as we see those very distressing images.

Our First Minister's response to Russia's abhorrent attack on Ukraine was to announce that £4 million would be made available to assist with addressing the humanitarian crisis. In that announcement, Mark Drakeford said that he wanted to go even further. Unlike our Prime Minister, he does match words with actions. The Welsh Labour Government have called for a

“simple, fast, safe and legal route for sanctuary”,

with biometric requirements lifted, and for the deadline for the EU settlement scheme family permit to be extended from 29 March. It is unsurprising that hundreds of Welsh supporters have gathered outside the Senedd over the past few days to show their solidarity with Ukraine. During Tuesday's rally, my Labour colleague in the Senedd, Mick Antoniw, the Member for Pontypridd and whose family are Ukrainian, as has been mentioned, praised Wales for its “phenomenal” support. Mick echoed my views and those of many others when he described the steps taken by the UK Government to assist refugees fleeing Ukraine as “totally unacceptable” and in stark contrast to Wales being a “proud nation of sanctuary”. Mick began an online fundraising campaign to buy medical equipment for injured people in Ukraine with a target to raise £5,000. This has recently reached £23,500—thousands of pounds in donations given in a true spirit of random acts of Welsh kindness, something that Mark Drakeford referred to in his own St David's day speech on Tuesday when he said

“let's all do a little something to brighten up someone else's day. We can call them random acts of Welshness!”

I hope we can all follow Mark's example and make sure that we show kindness to those around us during these trying times, just as my constituents have done.

The outpouring of local efforts to collect emergency supplies and give donations has been exemplary and I would like to pay tribute to two brilliant local businesses, Flower Lodge and the Secret Shed in Rhiwbina, who are fundraising and have made some brilliant efforts to progress this. I think all of us on these Benches will agree what a huge difference it makes when we have a true leader in power—someone who leads by example, putting the welfare of his people first, as we have seen in Wales. I also want to pay tribute to the President of Ukraine for this. The sheer depth of his passion and commitment to his country is unwavering, and something I know many of us could learn from.

The Labour Government in Wales are continuing to prove what power looks like in the hands of those who are concerned with their entire population, not just with the top 1% while making the other 99% pay for it. Just yesterday, the Welsh Government confirmed that they will spend more than £1 billion on new social housing over the next three years, £72 million of which will be spent on accelerating the scale and pace of the decarbonisation of homes across Wales, proving once again that they are a true leader on climate change. As a way of combating the Tory-made cost of living crisis, they have also made cash payments available to people on lower incomes to help with their energy bills, as well as providing free prescriptions and free school breakfasts.

In an attempt to break the cycle of poverty, the Welsh Government announced last week what has been dubbed a “brave and imaginative decision” to pilot a basic income scheme. This will focus on a group of around 500 young people leaving care who are turning 18. It will start in the next financial year and each person will receive £1,600 a month, making it the most generous basic income in the world. This group has been chosen because young people leaving care are much more likely to be socially excluded and have poor educational qualifications. It is about giving this group of young people the best possible start to their adult life, and as our Welsh Minister for Social Justice said, we want to support them to thrive, not just survive.

In Wales we look after one another. This is in welcome contrast to those in power here. I am proud that, at local level, we have hard-working individuals, business leaders and community leaders who are prepared to step up in their spare time and bring their experience, knowledge and time to improving our communities. At the risk of echoing my good friend and neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), I want to pay tribute to our local councillors, Dilwar Ali and Jen Burke-Davies for Llandaff North and Graham Hinchey and Julie Sangani for Heath and Birchgrove. I also want to pay tribute to our candidates: Mike Ash-Edwards, Marc Palmer, Jackie Jones, Kate Carr and Jamie Green for Whitchurch and Tongwynlais; Bev Hampson, Morgan Fackrell and Chris Walburn for Rhiwbina; Leo Holmes and Claire O'Shea for Gabalfa; Bethan Proctor and Gary Hunt for Llanishen; David Chinnick, Spencer Pearson and Georgina Phillips for Llisvane and Thornhill; and Khuram Chowdhry and Nicola Savage for Pontprennau and Old St Mellons. I am proud of all of them, and I wish them well in the coming elections.

Finally, I want to say a few words about our language. As our Minister for Education in Wales, Jeremy Miles, reminded us, we should never fail in being proud of our language. It is part of what makes us us, and we have a duty to make sure it thrives. Cymraeg belongs to all of us. Mae'r Gymraeg yn perthyn i ni i gyd.

What we have seen in Wales from our Welsh Labour Government is just that: a clear vision and clear, calm and collected leadership. I am proud of that.

3.10 pm

Richard Thomson (Gordon) (SNP): It is a great honour to speak in such a wide-ranging and overwhelmingly good-humoured annual debate on Welsh affairs. Before I get properly under way, I associate myself with the remarks that all hon. Members have made about the current situation in Ukraine, which distresses us all very greatly. The Scottish and Welsh Governments have used the powers they have to assist as well as they can. In this fast-moving situation, we are all looking to come up with the best possible outcomes for Ukraine. I associate myself with the calls for the UK Government to open routes that allow more people to come to safety and sanctuary in these islands.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) on securing this debate, and I hope everybody in Wales and the Welsh diaspora enjoyed a very happy St David's day on Tuesday. I assure our Welsh friends that, despite recent events at the Principality stadium—I am sure you share my distress in equal measure, Madam Deputy Speaker—we bear no grudges. Hearing the speech by the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) about the amount of rugby development work going on, particularly in the younger generation, it is perhaps no surprise that Scotland has had such a dismal run of results in Wales recently.

In addition to our sporting links, Wales and Scotland have strong historical and cultural ties going back many centuries. Many of our traditions are shared. If the House will permit me, I offer my own modest example. When I was a student at university, I had a good friend called Carwyn, who achieved some measure of fame going around Wales playing the harp to put himself through his studies.

Carwyn and I met in Cardiff and we decided to go out busking. Carwyn had his harp and I had my violin. We went up to Cwmbran, where we did quite well—we made about £30 in an hour, with which we were very happy. We then headed up to Brecon and made about £70 in an hour, with which we were even happier. The following day I was coming over to see friends in London, so we decided to go busking in Weston-super-Mare once we got over the bridge, and we made the grand total of no pounds and no pence in the two hours we were there.

I bear no grudges against the good people of Weston-super-Mare, and perhaps some day I will go back without my violin. I am not sure where that leaves us, but our combined Scottish and Welsh cultural efforts certainly seemed to find more fertile ground in Wales than on the other side of the Severn bridge.

A debate on Welsh affairs is an opportunity not just to reflect but to look forward. The 2021 Senedd election, for the first time, enfranchised 16 and 17-year-old voters, just as we did in Scotland at the 2014 referendum. It amplified the voices of young people in the political

[Richard Thomson]

system, allowing them to have their say on important issues. Perhaps just as importantly, it allowed what we might call the devolution generation to pass its verdict on the shared and sometimes competing visions for Wales we have heard expressed this afternoon.

The election late last year yielded a working relationship between Labour and Plaid Cymru. Plaid is not in government, but that cross-party co-operation reflects the relationship that the Scottish National party now has in government with the Green party in Holyrood. It just goes to show how parties' setting aside differences, establishing their common ground and working together on delivering a common purpose can be an incredibly positive way of working, rather than having some of the crude majoritarianism we sometimes see in legislators closer to where we are now, who are able to press on despite a minority share of the vote.

That agreement, certainly when viewed from Scotland, has resulted in a hugely ambitious policy programme: extending free schools to all primary school pupils; extending childcare to all two-year-olds, setting up an expert group to create a national care service, free at the point of need; taking action on housing—on unaffordable housing and ending homelessness; exploring the creation of a shadow broadcasting and communications authority for Wales to address concerns about fragility in the media and the attacks we have sadly seen on the independence of the print and broadcast media; and, perhaps very significantly, working on plans to reform the Senedd, based on having 80 to 100 Members, to allow for better scrutiny of matters that comes under the auspices of the Assembly, and a voting system that is at least as proportionate, if not more proportionate, than the one that is there now, with some gender quotas, which can really begin to transform the debate in politics. Although I am sure that neither party will have achieved everything out of that agreement that they perhaps desire, all told it is a very broad package of social, economic, cultural and environmental measures, which can help to reinforce the foundations of society in Wales as a modern, prosperous, socially just, confident, inclusive and outward-looking European nation.

The devolution generation might like what they see their Government doing in Wales, just as our devolution generation like what they see in Scotland, but the evidence is mounting that they are far less likely to be enamoured of what they see being done in their name in Westminster, under the current Government. Like most things, that comes back to the problems we are facing as a result of the hard Brexit that has been inflicted on us. Neither Wales nor Scotland were given a seat at the negotiating table and our voices were marginalised. We were told to just suck it up—again, that comes back to the crude majoritarianism I mentioned. That approach displayed a complete lack of respect, not just for the devolved institutions, but for the Union itself—I say that as someone who is avowedly not a Unionist. It seemed to me to tear at the very fabric of what many of us, even if we did not support the Union, thought it had at its heart and what it was all about. Through the likes of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, the remit of devolved powers is being undermined by the UK Government, whether we are talking about not transferring, as we were told would happen, all the powers that were invested in Brussels back to the devolved institutions;

simply arrogating the ability to spend, overrule and overreach in respect of the properly devolved structures of governance; ignoring the lack of legislative consent motions; tearing up the Sewel convention, which was such an important part of embedding relations between Westminster and devolved Parliaments and Assemblies at the outset; and undermining the strategic approach that comes from having devolved government working closely with local authorities by simply trying to create bypass streams of funding.

Nowhere do we see that more than in the “levelling up” agenda. I have to say that it is going to take a considerably greater amount of money than has been indicated to date to compensate for the loss of economic opportunities as a result of Brexit and for the loss of structural funding and individual grants programmes that were supported by the European Union and were done in partnership with devolved Governments and local authorities, rather than being done to them. It is going to take a great deal more than what we have heard and seen so far to tackle some of the deep-rooted economic and structural inequalities that we see across the UK. Let me give an example on the shared prosperity fund. I am happy to be corrected on it if I am wrong, but I do not think I will be. Seven out of 10 of the most deprived local authorities in Wales have yet to see any funding coming through. The situation is only marginally better in Scotland, where about six in 10 authorities are failing to get anything through that process.

That takes us to a really fundamental problem: the UK is one of the most geographically unequal of all the OECD nations, with a political and economic system that is skewed very heavily towards London and the south-east. Success breeds success, but so many parts of the UK are performing below their potential because of the way that we choose to structure our politics and the economy. To give an example, gross value added per head in Wales in 2018 was just 72.8% of the UK level, which is pulled up considerably by the heft of London and the south-east. It is important to recognise that Wales is not necessarily the outlier; it is London and the south-east, because of the pull of the capital city effect.

There are, however, other long-term reasons for the disparity which are equally applicable to Scotland, such as the legacy of rapid deindustrialisation through the '80s and the failure of successive UK Governments to use the powers that they possess in order to alter that picture. Research and development is one such area that seeds success for the future. The Office for National Statistics has data that shows that London, the south-east and the east of England accounted for 42% of total UK R&D funding in 2017. In 2019, that share of the cake had risen to 54%. Meanwhile, Wales in 2019 managed to gather in only 4% of that, which is lower than we would expect from the population share. We have to ask some serious questions about why that is and how it will be addressed, because it certainly will not be addressed by levelling up, or by the modest increase to R&D spending that the Chancellor announced in his recent Budget.

Any commitments to invest in infrastructure would carry far greater weight had the Government not, as I said earlier, bypassed aspects of devolution and the established funding formulas. In Wales, we have a particularly egregious example of that when it comes to HS2, the building of which will diminish Welsh competitiveness at the expense of those regions that will

benefit. I am happy to be corrected if wrong, but HS2 also sits outside the funding formula, meaning that the Welsh Government will not even get the benefits of the proportionate spend that could be put into extending the electrification to Swansea, electrifying the valley lines, or any of the other major infrastructure investments that could really unlock potential in parts of Wales that are crying out for it, and make transformative changes to infrastructure from north to south. Members might expect me to say this, but I do not think that active interest from Whitehall is really needed in order to do that, or more of the self-serving cant that we sometimes hear that devolution is somehow misused whenever the Welsh or the Scots have the temerity to vote for more non-Conservative politicians than Conservative ones. What is needed is to give our devolved Governments the tools they need to get on with the job.

In that regard, I particularly commend the suggestion of my good friend the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) when he spoke of Crown estate devolution. He spoke of the £700 million that has come to Scotland from the latest licensing round for offshore wind, but that is only part of the picture. A significant part of that, once the offshore wind farms are up and running, is the additional revenue stream per megawatt-hour of electricity generated that will be able to be directly invested in public services. That is exactly the sort of empowerment agenda that could really start to bring benefits to Wales, just as it hopefully will in Scotland, in terms of supply chains—tackling the world's environmental problems, ensuring an independent funding base for public services in Wales, and giving our politicians the ability to get on with the job.

My party has long argued that the UK's fiscal settlement is simply not fit for purpose, and the pandemic has really taken that argument out of the abstract and into reality. In his speech, which I listened to closely, the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) spoke of the money that had come in Wales's direction as a result of the pandemic. What I did not hear him say was that the Welsh Government, like the Scottish Government, had to wait for decisions to be taken on the English response to the pandemic before those moneys were generated through the Barnett formula and transferred. That made it much harder than it ought to have been to plan the public policy response in Wales and Scotland—and, incidentally, in Northern Ireland—to the pandemic. A Government who were confident in their stewardship, not just of government but of the Union, would surely look to see how they could overcome such frictions instead of perpetually demanding gratitude when a sclerotic and creaky system of funding eventually coughs and splutters its way into life to deliver the money that it was always designed to supply.

Scotland and Wales have been on quite a political journey since the Parliaments opened their doors. In my own party, we certainly stand in solidarity with the entitlement of people in Wales to exercise their right to self-determination; to choose the form of Government that is best suited to their needs; to choose their own future; and to have their choices accepted without hesitation or qualification from the UK Government. I hope that we can all agree in this place, as democrats, that how far and how fast Wales and Scotland continue on that direction of travel ought to be a matter for the Scottish people and the people of Wales to express for themselves, and for themselves alone.

3.26 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for securing and leading this debate. His recent announcement that he would be standing down at the next election took some of us by surprise, and I hope he knows that his wisdom, his counsel and his huge contribution will be missed in this place. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I thank all colleagues here today for contributing to a wide-ranging and positive debate on Welsh affairs.

With the horrors unfolding hour by hour in Ukraine, I know that it can be difficult to focus our minds closer to home. As we have heard today from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), however, Wales and Ukraine have special historical bonds. One of those is between the town of Merthyr Tydfil in my constituency and the city of Donetsk, which was originally named Hughesovka after the businessman who built it, John James Hughes from Merthyr Tydfil. John Hughes, whose father was a lead engineer at the historic Cyfarthfa ironworks, took a team of around 100 Welsh miners and metalworkers in the 1870s to build the city that is now Donetsk. Our countries have a special link, and we and the people we represent the length and breadth of Wales send solidarity and strength to the brave Ukrainian people as they face Putin's illegal and barbaric onslaught. The thoughts of all of us are with them today.

Today's debate has become an important annual event to mark our patron saint, Saint David. In opening the debate today, my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly talked about the shared prosperity fund, and he asked for further clarification on how it would work. After almost five years, I do not think that is too much to ask, and it would allay the deep concern and uncertainty that exists among local authorities and partners in Wales. Those comments were echoed by the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Ogmore (Chris Elmore), for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) and for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock).

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly talked about the cost of living, the huge pressures that food and utilities prices are creating, and the folly of the Chancellor's £200 loan for utilities. He spoke about the need to support people who are in the greatest need, and he referred to the Welsh Government's winter fuel support scheme, which I will return to a little later.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West again talked about the need for this debate to be a permanent fixture, and he spoke about one of his predecessors in this place, Stefan Terlezki. My hon. Friend paid tribute to the Welsh Government and Labour-led Cardiff Council, led ably by Councillor Huw Thomas, for all the work that it has done in partnership through the recent difficult times. He also highlighted the barriers to cultural exchanges for schoolchildren.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli talked about this year being the 100th anniversary of Labour majority representation in Wales, with Labour taking 18 out of the 35 seats in the 1922 general election. She paid tribute to one of her predecessors, Jim Griffiths, and voiced her concerns about the impact that 12 years of Tory Government have had on the poorest families in our communities. She quoted the leader of the Welsh

[Gerald Jones]

Local Government Association, Councillor Andrew Morgan, who said that support and funding for local government were more than figures on a spreadsheet; they represented investments in people and lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees) talked movingly about the former MP for Aberavon, Hwyl Francis, and his huge contribution to the Labour family, to Welsh life and to his community. She mentioned his role in developing the South Wales miners' library. She also spoke movingly about the contribution of Councillor Ali Thomas, who was a legend not just in Neath but across Wales.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) talked about her constituents stuck in Ukraine and the compassion needed to support safe passage, and highlighted her pride in Wales as a nation of sanctuary. She also spoke of the frontline work carried out by Newport City Council, led by Councillor Jane Mudd, and the delivery of 9,000 laptops across Newport and the £55 million in Welsh Government funding to support businesses there.

The hon. Member for Arfon talked about the need to make St David's day a bank holiday, the climate change challenges in delivering renewable energy, and also Wales's role as a nation of sanctuary.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) talked about the powerful work across communities to unite and offer sanctuary. She spoke movingly about the work being done by rugby clubs across Wales at the grassroots of the sport. She spoke with pride about her own prowess in winning nine Welsh caps, and I know that all of her colleagues are proud of that as well. She also talked about the work being done at grassroots for children, particularly girls, in supporting the foundation of rugby.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) talked about covid through difficult times, on the back of the floods in Pontypridd, and the need to support local businesses more than ever. She also talked about the excellent work of the Labour-led council in Rhondda Cynon Taf, led by Councillor Andrew Morgan, and the support that it has given to families by delivering meals and food.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) talked about the work in unprecedented times, and the role of the Welsh Government in supporting the Ukrainian people. She highlighted the role of our First Minister, Mark Drakeford, and also the work of councillors across Cardiff North in supporting people during these difficult times.

The right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) and the hon. Members for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes) and for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams) also spoke movingly about the work being done across their constituencies.

One year ago, the then shadow Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), spoke in this debate and said:

"This year has been a most extraordinarily difficult year, and I express our enormous gratitude to all our key workers in Wales. I pay tribute to First Minister Mark Drakeford and the Welsh Government for their skill and commitment in handling the biggest health emergency in a century—keeping people safe,

working closely with local government to keep vital services running, providing the most generous support package for businesses anywhere in the UK, and, of course, protecting our NHS."—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2021; Vol. 689, c. 1198.]

Little did we know then that the most difficult of challenges would continue for another year. I once again want to express our gratitude and admiration to our key workers, to the Welsh Government and to our local councils for everything that has been done to keep Wales safe over the past 12 months.

The contribution of our local councils and councillors, their leadership and all their workforce, often go unremarked on, and so, in the time that I have today, I want to highlight just a few of their achievements. Welsh Labour councils up and down Wales have supported our communities day in, day out over the past year. They have played an integral role in the lives of our constituents. As a former councillor, I know the vital role that locally elected representatives play. Whether picking up prescriptions, delivering food or essential medication to those who were vulnerable or shielding, and also to key workers, Welsh Labour councillors have been at the very heart of our communities.

In Cardiff, Councillor Norma Mackie returned to service in the NHS, alongside her council duties, to vaccinate thousands of Cardiff residents in Wales's record-breaking vaccine roll-out—I expect she will have vaccinated more people while I am speaking in this debate. The council workforce in Cardiff were superb, adapting to urgent circumstances—all credit to the council leadership, led by Huw Thomas, working with elected members, the workforce and trade unions.

In Wrexham, Welsh Labour councillors including Malcolm King and Dana Davies volunteer at The Venture in Caia Park, a charity set up by Councillor King, which provides extensive play facilities, learning and support specifically for children and young people. It is a real example of community provision while the independent councillors who lead Wrexham Council fight among themselves instead of for the people of Wrexham.

In Torfaen, at Panteg House in Pontypool, an incredible group of local people run a food bank, a community garden and sports teams, among other things. There are 60 community groups active from Panteg House, catering for all ages from babies and toddlers to pensioners. Initially operating as the free school meals pick-up point for Griffithstown and Sebastopol at the beginning of the pandemic, the scheme quickly snowballed into a community food and clothes bank. Seven days a week, amazing volunteers sort, pack and distribute food and essential items to those in need, as well as offering financial, mental health and physical support across Torfaen. Torfaen's Welsh Labour councillors, led by council leader Councillor Anthony Hunt, are amongst the local residents who make up the volunteers who ensure that households across Torfaen have access to regular food.

Today, however, under the economic management of the Conservative party and the choices it has made, Wales faces the biggest drop in living standards for 30 years: the highest inflation rate for a decade; gas and electricity bills increasing by 54%; a cut to universal credit and working tax credit, with another to come; more people being pushed into higher tax thresholds; national insurance levels increasing by more than 10%, breaking the party's 2019 manifesto promise; and a real-terms cut to state pensions.

In just a few weeks' time, the Conservatives' cost of living crisis will really hurt deeply. Across Wales, the numbers on people's payslips will go down and the numbers on their bills will go up. As more and more households try to cope with the impact of the decisions the Conservative party has made, food banks such as those at Panteg House will only become busier.

Where the Conservative Government fail, Welsh Labour delivers. In Bridgend, the Welsh Labour council has helped more than 4,600 people into work through its dedicated employability scheme, involving free training, supported job searches and CV development advice, to upskill and support those seeking work. At the height of the second covid wave, Welsh Labour's Caerphilly Council delivered its millionth free school meal—an astonishing achievement made possible by a great Welsh Labour council, ably led by council leader Councillor Philippa Marsden and local councillors including Carl Cuss and Eluned Stenner, among others, with financial support from our Welsh Labour Government.

Hundreds of council homes are being built at numerous sites by the Welsh Labour council in Caerphilly, and there are plans for thousands of new council homes in Cardiff over the next two years, including the brand-new net zero council homes welcoming their first occupants in Roath in Cardiff Central. They are 90% more efficient than standard homes, tackling the housing shortage and climate crisis and reducing energy costs all at the same time. There are now hundreds of high-quality new homes in Flint, together with newly built care facilities and a superb town centre regeneration that has created more jobs and apprenticeships locally, all delivered by the Welsh Labour-led council in Flintshire.

Locally, in Merthyr Tydfil, Welsh Labour councillors are looking to replace the ruling Independent Group, whose councillors are too busy squabbling among themselves to look after the needs of residents—something they have in common with the independents in Wrexham, it seems. Just yesterday, the Welsh Labour group on Merthyr Tydfil Council launched an ambitious manifesto that plans to deliver for local people, improving local transport, building on the brand new £11 million bus station provided through Welsh Government funding, and pursuing its No. 1 priority of improving education standards after they have slipped backwards under the Independent administration.

Across Merthyr Tydfil and elsewhere, Welsh Labour councillors are at the forefront of our communities. We have community champions such as Councillor Gareth Richards, who was recently involved in the successful campaign to improve the library facility at Treharris; Gareth Lewis and Brent Carter, who have been supporting those affected by floods in their communities; and all those who helped during the pandemic.

As the effects of climate change become ever more pronounced, freak weather events will continue to become more frequent. Significant investment in infrastructure and flood defences has been made by Welsh Labour councils with funding from the Welsh Labour Government, despite little additional support from this Conservative Government. Most importantly for Wales's future and our future generations, our Welsh Labour Government and Welsh Labour councils are transforming our schools through the 21st century schools building programme, delivering the best possible learning environments for our children and young people. I also pay tribute to the

Welsh Local Government Association for the role that it has played and continues to play in supporting local government across Wales, and to the excellent leadership of Welsh Labour's Councillor Andrew Morgan.

On the whole, we have had a positive debate highlighting Welsh affairs and the contribution of Wales, and Welsh local government in particular.

3.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Simon Hart): I echo the tributes to the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David) for bringing this debate to the House—I also thank the Backbench Business Committee—and regarding the fact that since we last met he has announced that he will be standing down at the next election, whenever that might be. I join in and support his warm comments about Ukraine. I do not think there is a Member of the House with whom those comments would not have resonated, whether here or watching these affairs on television.

However, there the agreement may come to a rather abrupt end. The hon. Member for Caerphilly mentioned two very important subjects: the shared prosperity fund and the cost of living. On the shared prosperity fund, I think that he and other Members, on both sides of the House, will be pleased that the long wait for clarity and publication is coming to an end, and there will be further details available any day now. I am conscious that I may have said that before on previous occasions, but one day I will be absolutely right, and that day is soon. Like other Members who have raised similar issues, he made perfectly justifiable comments about mutual respect and a desire to minimise petty squabbles—an ambition somewhat thwarted by subsequent speeches—but that only works so long as the shared ambition is about outcomes rather than about power.

Kevin Brennan *rose*—

Simon Hart: I will not give way for a bit, but I anticipate that the hon. Gentleman will want to intervene when I get on to his speech.

On the hon. Member for Caerphilly's points about the cost of living, all of us representing seats in Wales will have examples not dissimilar to the ones he has raised in respect of this particularly difficult challenge. While the UK Government have attempted, and continue to attempt, to intervene in all the ways that he suggested so as to be as generous, rapid, thorough, fair and humanitarian as possible, the Treasury must of course balance that with trying to control the inflationary effect of those significant interventions, which, if allowed to run rampant, would end up with greater hardship being suffered by the very families that we both agree need the help that we can all provide.

Wayne David: I would respectfully point out to the Secretary of State that inflation is already very high and that at the same time we have a cost of living crisis for some of our poorest people. The two things go together.

Simon Hart: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. That is precisely why we have to take considerable care with the measures that we are taking, because if we do not, then the already quite pressing inflationary pressures can only get worse. We are in the same place on that.

[*Simon Hart*]

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) rightly introduced early on in the debate a tribute to our soldiers of the Royal Welsh currently stationed in Estonia. That was a sobering and passionate reminder of the role that they are playing and have played in many other pressures facing the nation over the past few months and years. He mentioned, as did others, the potential in the renewables sector, especially in north Wales. He is right to have the ambitions, as is our hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie), for large-scale and small-scale nuclear at Wylfa. The other day, I met representatives of the floating offshore wind sector to talk about the potential in the Celtic sea, particularly off the west coast of Pembrokeshire. There are unbelievably exciting prospects in that regard, so we need to aim high. When I refer to the comments of the hon. Member for Gordon (Richard Thomson) about devolution of the Crown Estate, I will explain why that would limit our ambitions rather than enhance them.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West mentioned the tidal lagoon at Colwyn Bay. That was an argument well made. When visiting north Wales with the Prime Minister the other day, we looked out across the potential site for that. I might add that the Prime Minister has been to that particular part of Wales more often than the First Minister, in fairness to him. That is how seriously we take levelling up and the potential in that part of Wales. I resonate with the comments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West made about the Mersey Dee Alliance. That can be just as easily extended to mid Wales and its relationship with the west midlands as it can to south and west Wales and their relationship to Gloucester, Swindon, London, the south-west of England and beyond, as represented by the Western Gateway.

I quickly turn to the comments of the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), who seems to have generated more use of my highlighter pen than any other contribution today, which is probably what he intended to achieve, so full marks for having done that. He made some interesting comments about leadership, most of which I had some sympathy with, but in his glowing tribute to the First Minister, it struck me that if the First Minister's choice of leadership had been successful, we would be confronting our problems across the globe with the potential of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) as Prime Minister. I am not sure that would necessarily have provided the leadership and robust response to Vladimir Putin.

Kevin Brennan: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Simon Hart: I did not think it would take long for him to rise. Go ahead.

Kevin Brennan: On the issue of leadership and mutual respect, will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to clear up confusion in the House? Is he the leader of the Welsh Conservatives, as according to the former Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), or is it somebody else?

Simon Hart: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the leader of our Conservative group in Cardiff is Andrew RT Davies, and the leader of the Conservative party is

Boris Johnson. The hon. Gentleman should know that by now, I would have thought.

I have to resist the hon. Gentleman's attempt to talk about an English approach or a Welsh approach to the covid response. If anything epitomised a UK approach, it was our response to the covid pandemic, and what better example of that than the vaccination programme, which was originally conceived, researched, contracted, delivered and paid for by the UK Government. It was then distributed, with some professionalism, I might add, by a combination of the Welsh Government—tick that box, we can credit our opponents when necessary and appropriate—with the huge help of the Ministry of Defence, as represented rather conveniently by the Minister for Defence Procurement, my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin), who is sitting next to me on the Front Bench, and NHS Wales. The suggestion that there was either an English approach or a Welsh approach is demonstrably untrue.

I add one last thing. The hon. Gentleman made a rather unnecessarily snide comment about integrity, but when it comes to promises to the electorate, the First Minister and the leader of Plaid Cymru both said just before the Senedd elections that the one thing they would not do is get into bed with each other. Within months of making that pledge to voters in Wales, they did precisely the opposite.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Simon Baynes), with rather good timing—it was a relief at that moment—decided to celebrate everything that is good about Wales, having been treated for a few minutes before that with apparently everything that is bad. I thought that his message to the outside world about what Wales has to offer, and in particular what his part of Wales has to offer, and the strength, value and opportunities that the Union presents, was incredibly well-timed and reminded me of the visit I paid with him to the Trevor Basin back along, where we were able to see for ourselves the joy on the faces of the people who had received funding courtesy of some of the new initiatives from the UK Government to engage in projects that they have hitherto not been able to do.

The hon. Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) rightly made some powerful comments about how we should be helping communities in need at this time, but she went on to mention one or two things that make that more difficult in terms of the relationship with the Welsh Government. The solutions to the very problems that she rightly pointed out are not necessarily always achieved just by dishing out cash. I do not think that the Labour party has a remotely compassionate record to look back on. The undeniable truth is that, every time a Labour Administration have held office for goodness knows how many generations, more people were unemployed at the end than at the beginning. That is nothing to be proud of; it is no sign of compassion at all.

We want to be as fair and as reasonable as we can to as wide a number of people in vulnerable positions as possible not only by making sensible, fair and humane interventions but by creating the best circumstances for job creation and proper well-paid sustaining jobs across the whole of Wales. That is compassionate and that is levelling up. It is not simply about handing out cash, tying people down into the benefits system and offering no hope of being able to move on from that position to a different state of their lives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Craig Williams), again, echoed the armed forces' contribution and made some great comments about the levelling-up fund and how Powys County Council had never been able to qualify for funding of that nature before. I thought he was going to launch into a lengthy speech, because I have heard it often before, on the subject of the Montgomery canal.

Craig Williams: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Simon Hart: I do not think I will.

That initiative, provided courtesy of the UK Government, unleashed private sector funding at the same time. My hon. Friend put his finger on what devolution really means. It is not whether power is held in Cardiff or Westminster; it is about how many people in frontline decision-making positions, who live and feel the opportunity and challenge every day, are brought into the decision-making process in the way we have in Powys—and I hope it will be reflected across the rest of Wales as well.

I was overjoyed that the speech of the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees), unlike others from the Opposition, did not talk down the fortunes of our country, but talked up the record of her great friend Hywel Francis. He was the first and about the only Member of her party who came up to me after my maiden speech in 2010 and, probably through gritted teeth, congratulated me on what I had said.

Christina Rees: I am glad that the Secretary of State is in such a celebratory mood. I am sure that he is as excited as I am that the global centre of rail excellence is coming to Wales, in fact to Onllwyn in my constituency. When will the Government release the funds so that we can get on with it?

Simon Hart: I am delighted that the hon. Lady is delighted that we have been able to put £30 million into that project. That shows what levelling up is capable of and it shows that collaboration and co-operation—all the things that apparently do not happen—are happening in her constituency. I cannot tell her exactly when, but I will find somebody who can put her out of her misery. Her reference to Siân James reminded me of many happy hours, which other hon. Members might have shared, in Patagonia on a trip of the Welsh Affairs Committee courtesy of my absent hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies). I can see the odd smirk of Opposition Members who also remember it.

Nearly finally—somebody once said to sprinkle one's speech liberally with "And finally" to retain a sense of optimism in those listening—the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), who I have known for a long time and who I like to think of as a friend, made a speech that started brilliantly and ended disappointingly. It almost sounded as though the first half was written by her and the second half was written by a Labour policy wonk obsessed with scoring cheap political points.

The good points were brilliant, however, and I very much take on board the hon. Lady's comments about the visa situation and the spirit of co-operation with local authorities. There was a call this afternoon between the UK Government and the Welsh Government on the subject of Ukraine refugees, so that level of co-operation is already in place. In response to her point, I hope that

she will be as pleased as I am that we have now recruited 479 additional police officers in Wales. It is however difficult to get the oxygen into the hospitality sector, which she rightly raised, when the Welsh Government are about to impose a tourism tax and a second home tax on people who like to go and spend money in the hospitality sector in Wales.

The hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams) made a warm tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones), which this week of all weeks was much appreciated, and I know it will be appreciated by her, too. When it comes to additional bank holidays, I have to say that the lobbying I tend to listen to the most is not from politicians, I regret to say, but from the business community in Wales. I will probably now have a few emails within a few minutes, but I have yet to hear any such requests from anybody who is actually striving to make their business work, to encourage investment into Wales and to create long-lasting jobs. The last thing they have been knocking on my door and asking for is an additional bank holiday. They have asked for lots of other things, but that is not one of them.

On the question of the Crown Estate, and to deal with the comments of the hon. Member for Gordon, I have to say—this is similar to my last answer—that very few people who are, I hope, on the cusp of investing significant sums of money and creating many thousands of very good, long-lasting and well-paid jobs in Wales are saying to me that the blockage, or the only thing stopping them doing so, is devolving the Crown Estate. It is quite the opposite. In fact, I think the potential opportunity for income to come into Wales is enhanced by not devolving the Crown Estate, and that is the official Government position.

I loved the quick whip around the world of rugby from the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). It reminded me of how many members of the national side came from Bancyfelin in one particular game, and although I cannot remember the number, I think it exceeded the number who came from Gower. However, we can argue about that another time. I would love to meet her to talk about the youth element of the sport. That is a source of frustration and ambition, as far as I am concerned, but it is of course devolved. We discovered that when we tried to get some money for the WRU at the beginning of the pandemic, only to get sucked into the whole devolution settlement and it became almost impossible to do a reverse Barnett and get in the money that was necessary.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I appreciate the Secretary of State's comments about sport being devolved, but I would like to draw his attention to my main request, which was that he press the WRU for the release of its report last year on the review of women's rugby. That is my key ask.

Simon Hart: Absolutely, and when we undoubtedly meet in Cardiff for a rugby-based evening, I think in a couple of weeks' time, we can with any luck carry on that conversation.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) made some strong comments about culture, but again failed to mention that this is a devolved area and that the investment she referred to was brought to her courtesy of the UK Government's investment in the cultural

[Simon Hart]

sector, Barnettised and made available for those very opportunities in her own constituency. I was surprised she did not mention—I am sure it was an oversight—the £5.3 million that the UK Government have put into the Muni in Pontypridd, which I have visited twice, or the £20 million that her local authority, Rhondda Cynon Taf, has successfully bid for under that particular scheme. Anybody who points a pork barrel politics finger at me gets promptly referred to the hon. Lady, whose local authority came out of that process better than any other in Wales.

And finally, the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin) mentioned random acts of kindness—that was her expression—which gave me a sense of false hope, I suppose, about what was coming next. If we are to be able to operate with the Welsh Government, local authorities and other stakeholders in the form she described, we somehow have to wean ourselves off this pathological inability to recognise that we all have a stake in this game, and not everything that goes well in Wales is down to Labour and not everything that goes badly is down to UK money. We have to prise ourselves off that ridiculously lazy generalisation if we are to make progress and if we are to be able to have a proper, mature conversation about how we level up Wales in the way that I think we both want to do. For all the warm words, there is never an opportunity missed to make a snide comment about some party political point that puts us all back to where we started. I do ask her, with the greatest respect, if we can possibly try to move ourselves away from that rather 1970s model of political exchange.

Anna McMorrin: I cannot let that rest while the right hon. Gentleman attacks my speech. Yes, it was about focusing on random acts of kindness within the Welsh people and the stark contrast with the current UK Government, who are damaging the Welsh people time after time after time. If we speak to my constituents, we hear that they do not get anything from the UK Government. The right hon. Gentleman speaks about outdated 1970s politics; he should speak to his own Prime Minister.

Simon Hart: I rest my case. My son is a constituent, so I will refer to him. It also might have been an oversight in the spirit of the warm relationship the hon. Lady and I are now forming that she has not mentioned the 9% increase in funding for S4C as a bastion of the Welsh language. [Interruption.] The hon. Lady looks astounded; this is a major contribution to our ambitions on the Welsh language.

Finally—last, and least—the hon. Member for Gordon referred to a number of what I thought were slightly predictable points around devolution. Again it reminded me of the fact that it is difficult to make the progress we all want if every single thing we debate in this House is seen through the prism of independence rather than the prism of jobs and ambition. The big difference between his country and our country is that in Wales 54% of people on average voted to leave the European Union back in 2016, and it is brave for somebody of the hon. Gentleman's record in this area to suggest that somehow the voters of Wales were not bright enough to make a decision on this.

Richard Thomson: May I intervene on that?

Simon Hart: I had a feeling the hon. Gentleman might want to intervene.

Richard Thomson: The Secretary of State is nothing if not prescient, on that point at least. Of course there may have been a slim majority in Wales for Brexit, but does he honestly think that has exempted Wales from any of the problems that have afflicted the rest of the UK from that, and if a referendum were held tomorrow would he truthfully expect that result again?

Simon Hart: The obvious statement to make in relation to the hon. Gentleman's claim that somehow Wales and Scotland were not involved in the negotiations is that I was one of the lucky ones who had to sit and listen to his colleague Mike Russell putting the case, as he did loudly and persuasively in the numerous meetings we had on the Brexit negotiations. It is simply not correct to say that the devolved Administrations did not play a very full and active part in those discussions.

Today's debate has had its moments of optimism, its moments of hope and many moments of respect for our friends and colleagues in Ukraine. I hope it has also served to show what we have in store on levelling up, and also the huge amount of funding. People sometimes question the amount of funding coming to Wales and make an erroneous comparison with what might have been the case had we remained in the European Union, but actually the numbers and the facts show that there is everything to be cheerful about. I want the relationship with local authorities and the Welsh Government to be positive, because if it is, and if we do not get strung up on the minutiae of power and instead concentrate on our important jobs and inward investment agenda and are prepared to enter those negotiations in the spirit intended, we have a real opportunity of the Welsh Government being able to demonstrate they are good and competent at what they do and the UK Government demonstrating we have an important strategic and economic role to play in Wales as well. That is the challenge that faces us, and today's debate has enabled us to move just a few small steps towards achieving it.

Wayne David: This afternoon's debate has been good and extremely worthwhile. It is particularly good that many Members referred to Ukraine and the solidarity the Welsh people are demonstrating to the people of Ukraine; I thank everyone for that.

My only hope is that the St David's Day debate does not have to be applied for every year but becomes automatic. I ask the powers that be in Parliament for the St David's Day debate to be a permanent feature of our parliamentary calendar.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Diolch yn fawr, a hwyl fawr i chi gyd. Wasn't it a very close match on Saturday? If there had only been a third half we would have won.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Welsh affairs.

UK Shipbuilding

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

4.5 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is great to speak to a packed House.

It is a great honour to be able to open this important debate about the future of UK shipbuilding. I am very glad to see the Minister in his place. I know from our previous encounters the depth of expertise and passion that he brings to this debate, and I look forward to hearing his contribution later. I also declare an interest. I am a long-standing member and former north-west regional secretary of Unite the union, which organises workers in the shipbuilding sector, including in my own constituency.

With the national shipbuilding strategy refresh expected shortly, the timing of this debate could not be more appropriate. It is a document that is keenly anticipated across the entirety of the sector and has the potential to define the landscape of British shipbuilding for decades to come. I am sure the Minister knows just how important it is that the Government's plans live up to the lofty rhetoric of the Defence Secretary and the Prime Minister.

Only yesterday, I had the pleasure of taking my hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans), the shadow Minister for defence procurement, on a tour of the historic Cammell Laird shipyards in my constituency. It was clear to see the immense pride which every member of the team took in their work, from the staggers to the shipwrights and the senior management. They have much to be proud of. After a challenging few decades for the whole of the industry, Cammell Laird enters the 2020s with a reputation for being at the forefront of innovation in British shipbuilding and for having delivered some of the most technologically advanced vessels afloat. From its slipways sailed the RRS Sir David Attenborough—commonly known as Boaty McBoat or whatever—one of the most sophisticated research vessels ever built. As we speak, that ship is battling perilous Antarctic waters, following in the wake of the Erebus and Endurance, and gathering vital data about the impact of climate breakdown on the polar regions. Capable of operating in temperatures as low as minus 40° and equipped with state-of-the-art equipment to study the deepest depths of the ocean, the SDA is a marvel of British engineering in which all of Birkenhead can take pride.

Cammell Laird also continues to play an enormously important role in the local economy. It is easily the largest employer in our town, employing 650 well-paid and unionised workers, with a further 1,500 subcontractors active on the site. Its Marine Engineering College continues to offer high-quality apprenticeships to around 50 people each year across every discipline, with a commitment to doubling that number in years to come. These apprenticeships are so highly valued that last year 880 applications were made for just 25 positions. The shipyard's success is being felt far beyond the shipyard walls, with £400 million spent in the wider supply chain in the last five years alone, including £130 million in the immediate locality, supporting over 300 local businesses. But for all the passion, enthusiasm, and commitment that I witnessed yesterday, there is still a sense that the glory days are, at least for now, behind us.

Once the shipyards towered over the skyline of our town, as iconic and powerful a symbol of Birkenhead as the Three Graces are still for neighbouring Liverpool. No more. The time when a young person could reasonably expect to walk out of the school gates and into secure, lifelong work at Cammell Laird is long gone. My mother, father and three of my brothers all learned their trades in the yards. Like so many others of my generation, my future and that of my family's was entwined with the future of British industry. There is probably not a single young person living in our country today who can say the same.

The story of Cammell Laird has been replicated time and again not only in shipbuilders up and down our country but in our foundries, forges and factories. Government Members have told us that the destruction of British industry was inevitable and that we had no choice but to bow to the inexorable tides of history, but, as the UK was cutting its shipyards adrift, Governments in Spain, South Korea and Italy were investing in their shipbuilders, and today they are unrivalled anywhere else in the world.

After many years of decline and industrial neglect, the Government's recognition that change is needed was warmly welcome. So, too was the decision to expand the scope of the national shipbuilding strategy with the upcoming refresh, but if the Defence Secretary is to earn his title of shipbuilding tsar, it is time for him to prove his commitment to revitalising UK shipyards and building a brighter future for this critical industry. I fear that the cracks in his resolve are already beginning to show.

In December 2020, I held a Westminster Hall debate on defence procurement and was glad to hear the Minister agree that the historic increases in defence spending announced in that year's spending review should be used to support domestic manufacturers and British jobs and skills. On that day, I also sought a commitment from him that the Royal Fleet Auxiliary's new fleet solid support ships would be designed and built in their entirety in Britain. That is a fundamental test of the Government's commitment to British shipbuilding, and the signs so far are not promising.

Leading figures in the defence sector, including Sir John Parker, have repeatedly called for the need to recognise social value when commissioning new defence projects such as the fleet solid support ships, but despite classifying these new vessels as warships, the Secretary of State has failed to provide a cast-iron guarantee that they will be built in their entirety in Britain.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a compelling case. Indeed, we have never constructed sovereign warships outside the United Kingdom and it would be a retrograde step for so many different reasons if we were to do so. We must, however, have a shipbuilding industry that goes beyond the construction of warships, where different procurement rules apply. Does he share my frustration at the way in which the Scottish Government's mismanagement of Ferguson shipyard in Greenock has so fundamentally undermined confidence in the prospect of a non-warship shipbuilding industry in this country?

Mick Whitley: The right hon. Member makes a good point. As well as building for defence procurement, we should be building commercial vessels.

[Mick Whitley]

The terms of the competition dictate that the FSS need only be “integrated” in the UK, which means that the lion’s share of the work could be offshored, with British shipbuilders losing out on vital work at a critical time. That would be a tragic betrayal of British shipyards and the thousands of workers that they support.

The Minister will no doubt be aware of my enthusiasm for the bid put forward by Team UK, a consortium of British firms including Cammell Laird, Rolls-Royce, Babcock and BAE Systems. In fact, in the last two years I have inundated his Department with correspondence demanding that the contract be awarded to the consortium, which would truly represent the very best of British engineering, and I repeat my call today. If the Government are serious about supporting shipbuilding, Team UK must be awarded the bid. The benefits are obvious. Instead of allowing non-domestic firms to benefit from billions of pounds of taxpayers’ money, we could create or secure at least 6,700 jobs in British industry, including 2,000 in the shipyards, while seeing £285 million of the total spend returned to Treasury coffers through income tax, national insurance contributions and lower welfare payments.

It is also imperative that the revised shipbuilding strategy looks at the wider issue of procurement. For years, Ministers have waxed lyrical about the extraordinary economic benefits that Brexit would bring, but, instead of the Government taking advantage of our departure from the European Union to throw their full weight behind British shipbuilders, they continue needlessly to follow procurement rules that force businesses such as Cammell Laird to compete with state-owned giants including Spain’s Navantia. It is a David-versus-Goliath struggle. Even when British shipbuilders are in the running for lucrative defence projects, Ministers too often expect them to shoulder enormous financial risks, including 100% refund guarantees that many British shipyards can ill afford.

Let me be clear. UK shipbuilders are not looking for handouts, nor are they asking for taxpayers’ money to be wasted. They know all too well the importance of delivering value for money; they just want a level playing field. They are absolutely right to say that a more benign contracting environment is badly needed if we are to achieve the shipbuilding renaissance that Ministers have repeatedly promised. I hope that when the NSS refresh is published, it will include a recognition that the Ministry of Defence must begin to accept more responsibility for the financial risks inherent in commissioning the top-end vessels that the Select Committee on Defence has identified as so vital to guaranteeing our national security in the deeply uncertain years ahead.

As I said, the shipbuilding strategy has the potential to define the future of British shipbuilding for decades to come, but if shipyards across the country are to make the investment in recruitment and training that they so desperately want to make, they will need guarantees of work in the short term as well. It is not good enough to tell firms that things will get better in 10 years’ time, when so many yards are confronting enormous challenges here and now. We need action now to stem the exodus of jobs and skills from the sector and lay the solid foundations that will be essential if the shipbuilding strategy is to be delivered in full. I hope that the Minister will speak about that issue today.

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

I am sure that the hon. Gentleman recognises that the resources and commitment that we have given to Royal Navy procurement are a real step change and exactly the kind of support that he expects to see delivered to UK shipyards.

Mick Whitley: I accept the point about the budget for defence and for shipbuilding, but when the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities travelled to my constituency recently, he opted not to visit Cammell Laird. Perhaps he knew that the Government are falling far short in providing shipbuilders with the support that they need; perhaps he knew the welcome he was likely to receive from a workforce who have been failed by central Government for far too long. If levelling up is to become more than an empty slogan, we must recognise the enormous potential of British industry, and of shipbuilding in particular, to drive inward investment, create high-skilled work and build a more prosperous future for left-behind towns like Birkenhead.

As a lifelong trade unionist, I have spoken primarily about what investing in the future of UK shipbuilding means for British workers and industry, but national security must not be ignored. The stakes could not be higher. Putin’s appalling attack on the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine has shattered the peace that our continent has enjoyed for so long and has caused human suffering on a scale that none of us thought we would see again. We simply do not know what the future holds, but the appalling scenes that we are witnessing on the streets of Kyiv and Kharkiv are a powerful reminder of just how important it is that we build up our defence capacity at home. That must begin in our nation’s shipyards.

Once again, I urge the Minister to do everything in his power to ensure that fleet solid support ships and all future defence projects in the pipeline are built and designed in their entirety in the UK. That is the very least that our shipyards deserve.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

May I start by picking up on the remarks that the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) made about Ukraine? His points were well made. In preparing for this important debate, I could not help thinking about my visits to Ukraine on behalf of the Ministry of Defence, which have included discussions about that proud country’s ambitions for its navy and for its shipbuilding enterprises. We are all deeply concerned; our thoughts are with all Ukrainians. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made those remarks.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He spoke passionately about what the industry has meant to his family, to him and to his community. I know that he speaks from the heart. I am glad that we have had this opportunity to speak before the launch of the shipbuilding refresh; I hope that we will speak again when it is brought before the House.

Shipbuilding is not only important to the hon. Gentleman, but vital to the United Kingdom. As he mentioned, his constituency has produced many of our finest ships. The first screw steamship to cross the Atlantic and the first guided missile destroyer in the UK were made in Birkenhead. So was the RSS Sir David Attenborough—I will stick with that name, if the hon.

Gentleman does not mind—which is rightly a source of huge pride for Birkenhead as it does its important work in the Antarctic, even as we speak. I was pleased to hear about the number of applications—although I would like there to be more work for more of them—for the training scheme to work in the yard. It is one of the many brilliant training schemes around the country, and I am delighted that the work that we are all putting in for a successful future for our shipbuilding industry is being reflected in the enthusiasm of people coming forward to take those opportunities.

As a maritime nation, ships have long been the guarantors of our defence, the deliverers of our trade and the creators of endless opportunities for growth and expansion. However, we are conscious that the sector needs to be more resilient and more sustainable if it is to thrive in the 21st century as it has done historically. That is why the Defence Secretary was appointed shipbuilding tsar in September 2019. He has gathered the Government together to drive the renaissance in British shipbuilding and to enhance our position as a global leader in ship design and technology. Since his appointment, we have opened the National Shipbuilding Office, which is working closely with industry to drive transformative change across the whole of our shipbuilding enterprise.

We have brought forward plans through the integrated review and defence Command Paper to double Royal Navy investment in its new vessels to £1.7 billion per annum by the end of this Parliament, delivering the defence that the hon. Gentleman speaks of. We have confirmed our commitments for Type 26, Type 31 and fleet solid support ships, and set out our ambition, including for multi-role support ships and Type 32, among other future procurements. We have changed our policy to ensure that all new Royal Navy vessels, not just aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates, are actively considered for build, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said. Having sovereign capacity in our country for delivering our own defence needs is absolutely critical. He was right to allude to that. Through the application of social value to tenders, we are making clear the vital importance of driving wider value for the long-term success of our shipbuilding industry.

On exports, I am the first Minister for Defence Procurement in a generation who can help drive success not just in complex warships such as the Type 26, where we are working so closely with our Australian and Canadian friends, but in highly effective vessels such as Arrowhead, or Type 31, and offshore patrol vessels, with contracts already being awarded and opportunities to pursue them globally.

Learning the lessons of the Parker review, to which the hon. Member for Birkenhead referred, our task is to ensure that the existing success of warship procurement in this country is matched with a renaissance that works across the sector. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to the need for us to have successful commercial entities. He is absolutely right. I do a huge amount of work with the Scottish yards, whose input into the defence industry is absolutely vital. It is a pity that he is the only Member from a Scottish constituency present, because we could have had further discussions, but we are talking about the entire UK shipbuilding industry. It is spread right the way across the United Kingdom, and it is important that all of it thrives. I agree with his sentiments.

We will very soon be setting out our plans to go even further, with the publication of our refreshed national shipbuilding strategy. I have no doubt that this strategy will benefit not just our shipyards but the 1,685 registered businesses in this industry spread right across the UK, 99% of which are small and medium-sized enterprises. Our plans have been developed through extensive collaboration with industry, including businesses in the constituency of the hon. Member for Birkenhead, such as Cammell Laird. I would like to thank them for their insight and support.

As part of the strategy, we will be providing a 30-year, cross-Government shipbuilding pipeline, with a huge range of opportunities for UK shipyards. There are vessels of all types, sizes and complexity, creating a baseline of volume to encourage industry investment in facilities, infrastructure, innovation and skills. That means that they will also be geared up to win commercial and export orders as major new global markets emerge, particularly in green shipping.

Given the vast Government order book, other domestic orders and the export prospects being supported by the Department for International Trade, and with the National Shipbuilding Office seeking to maximise UK work wherever possible, I am convinced that British shipyards are likely to be very busy in the coming years.

While the upcoming strategy extends to all types of Government vessels, at its heart remains an ambition to keep strengthening the Royal Navy, and a critical part of that is our fleet solid support ships, to which the hon. Member for Birkenhead referred. That came as no great surprise; I know that this is a subject close to his heart. These ships will not just be a vital part of our formidable future force alongside our new Type 31 frigates, our two magnificent carriers, our next-generation nuclear submarines, our mine-hunting ships and our multi-role support ships; they are also a great example of how taxpayers' money is being invested in a way that ensures the long-term future of UK shipbuilding.

Our commitment to the fleet solid support programme was outlined in the defence Command Paper published this time last year, and it is supported by the £24 billion uplift to the defence budget over four years. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this project will be delivered very much in line with the new strategy. In other words, it will encourage sustainable investment to ensure the long-term future of our domestic shipyards. I know he will appreciate the fact that, as we are in the midst of a competitive process, I am limited in what I can say, but we have designed the competition to emulate the success of the ongoing Type 31 frigate programme in Rosyth. This means that while we welcome the opportunity to learn from international best practice, we have also been very clear that a substantial proportion of the build, including integration, will be carried out in the UK. We have had a very positive response from industry, and each of the four consortia bidding for the programme includes substantial UK involvement. The bidders are also required to set out plans to help improve the capacity and capability of the UK shipbuilding sector, as well as how they will contribute to wider social value.

Mr Carmichael: On the question of the future strategy, we know that shipping is going to have to tackle its carbon emissions, and some of the most exciting and innovative work in that sector is now being done in

[Mr Carmichael]

relation to hydrogen as a source of power for ferries and other seagoing vessels. Will that sort of future-proofing be part of the Government's strategy?

Jeremy Quin: The right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I do not reveal the full details of the strategy in this packed Chamber this evening, but I can absolutely assure him that it will cover future-proofing and the future of UK shipbuilding. I have mentioned the greener path ahead for the industry, and for shipping in general, and we absolutely wish to embrace that. I look forward to having an opportunity to say more to him about this.

The fleet solid support strategy will create a further major stepping stone to success for our vital shipbuilding industry so that our shipyards will be ready to win work beyond the life of this project, whether that is for Government vessels of any kind, for foreign exports or for domestic orders.

There is a rich and potent future for the industry, and we will be embracing the trends that will make for a successful industry. I hope that I have been able to reassure the hon. Member for Birkenhead, knowing that he would raise the matter, that the fleet solid support programme is being delivered in line with our wider aims to make the sector more competitive and more sustainable. I hope that I have also been clear that we will take every opportunity we can, not just to increase jobs, bolster skills and secure export contracts in the coming months and years, but to truly ensure that we are bringing shipbuilding home. My colleagues and I look forward to being able to commend to the hon. Gentleman and to this House a refreshed national shipbuilding strategy in what I can assure him will be the very near term.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 3 March 2022

[DAME ANGELA EAGLE *in the Chair*]

Windrush Compensation Scheme

1.30 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, The Windrush Compensation Scheme, HC 204, and the Government response, HC1098.

It is a pleasure to serve under you, Dame Angela, and to introduce the debate. I am grateful to the Liaison Committee for allocating time for it. I welcome the Minister, who I know will take seriously the matters raised by Members from across the House. In some respects, I am sorry that the Home Affairs Committee has felt the need to hold the debate, because had the Government responded more positively to our detailed and evidence-based report, it might not have been necessary to call the Minister here today to discuss the shortcomings of the Government's response.

I am delighted to see present my colleagues on the Home Affairs Committee. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who has done much to champion this issue over many years, and the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) are here today to speak to our report and the distressing evidence we heard from the people affected by the Windrush scandal. I am also pleased to welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), who will speak from the Opposition Front Bench.

To set the debate in context, the Windrush scandal that emerged in the summer of 2017 revealed the huge injustices and hardships faced by members of the Windrush generation who had been denied their lawful immigration status as a direct result of Home Office policies and practices over many years. Successive Home Secretaries have subsequently promised to right the wrongs experienced by members of the Windrush cohort, and to recognise the financial loss and emotional distress that Government actions caused. The Home Affairs Committee launched our inquiry in November 2020 because of serious concerns about long delays and difficulties in applying for the compensation scheme. The Committee remains seriously troubled that instead of providing a remedy for many people, the Windrush compensation scheme has compounded injustices.

Our inquiry found that the vast majority of people who have applied for compensation have yet to receive a penny. For some, the experience of applying for compensation has become a source of further trauma rather than redress, and others have been put off from applying for the scheme altogether. Despite the initial Government estimate of 15,000 eligible claims, the Home Office had received only 3,387 applications by the end of December 2021. Of those, 940 claims have received payment. Very sadly, when the Committee's report was

published, 23 people were known to have died before their compensation claims had been decided by the Home Office.

I would like to thank all the people who took the time and effort to engage with the Committee's inquiry and provide the evidence that underpins our recommendations and conclusions. In particular, I thank the individuals who attended the Committee's roundtable and shared their first-hand experience of the scheme, including Dominic Akers-Paul, Glenda Caesar, Gertrude Ngozi Chinegwundoh, Christian Hayibor, Carl Nwazota, Grace Nwobodo and Anthony Williams. I also thank Thomas Tobierre, a claimant, and his daughter Charlotte, who took part in an interview with Committee staff.

Our report considers people's experience of the Windrush scheme and our recommendations focus on changes that we believe would have an immediate impact on the scheme's effectiveness. Before I outline the report, I want to mention two of the heartbreaking accounts we heard during the inquiry. Anthony Williams arrived in the United Kingdom from Jamaica in 1971, aged seven. He served in the British Army for 13 years before becoming a fitness instructor. In 2013, he was wrongly classed as an illegal immigrant and sacked. Mr Williams was left unable to work or access benefits because he could not demonstrate his lawful status. He was also unable to register for a doctor's appointment or see a dentist, and when a tooth infection began to spread, he consequently lost most of his teeth.

Mr Williams applied for compensation within a week of the scheme's opening, but was unable to provide documentary evidence of his salary. In total, for the five years in which his life was affected, Mr Williams was initially offered approximately £18,000 in compensation. Mr Williams told us,

"Even now, I'm still having problems. I still don't sleep. And it's because of the compensation scheme. In the back of my mind now, because I survived five years of virtually living on nothing, the money is secondary now. My sanity is top of the game now to me".

Glenda Caesar came to the United Kingdom from Dominica in 1961, when she was just three months old. She worked in the NHS for over 20 years. In 2009, Ms Caesar was wrongly sacked from her job and then denied access to unemployment benefits. She accrued thousands of pounds in rent arrears. In December 2019, following 10 years of being unable to work, Ms Caesar was first offered approximately £22,000 in compensation. She rejected that initial offer, describing it as "insultingly low".

I wish to welcome the few recommendations that received a positive response from the Government. The Home Office responded most positively to the Committee's recommendations on outreach and engagement. I am grateful for the Department's acknowledgment that more needs to be done to reach eligible claimants. Will the Minister provide an update on progress with the campaign to target non-Caribbean Commonwealth communities, with a particular focus on Ghana, Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh? Has he noticed any increase in applications from those countries as a result?

I am pleased the Government agreed with our recommendation that they should provide the number of full and final impact on life payments at each level of award as part of their regular data releases. Will the Minister confirm when we can expect the first data release? The Home Office confirmed that it would

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

recommence holding face-to-face engagement events; will the Minister take this opportunity to announce in public when the first of those events will take place?

Over the course of our inquiry, we identified a litany of flaws in the design and operation of the Windrush compensation scheme, including the excessive burden on claimants to provide documentary evidence of the losses they suffered; the long delays in processing applications and making payments; the inadequate staffing of the scheme; a failure to provide urgent and exceptional payments to individuals in desperate need; delays in launching and adequately supporting grassroots campaigns to reach eligible claimants; and failure to rebuild confidence in both the Department and the scheme. Although we strongly welcome changes made to the scheme in December 2020 and again in July 2021, many concerns in the Committee's report are yet to be addressed.

Fundamentally, many people are still too fearful of the Home Office to apply for compensation. The treatment of the Windrush generation by successive Governments was truly shameful. No amount of compensation could ever repay the fear, humiliation, hurt and hardship that was caused to individuals who were affected. That the design and operation of the scheme contained the same bureaucratic insensitivities that led to the Windrush scandal in the first place is a damning indictment of the Home Office.

In order to increase trust and encourage more applicants, we recommend that the scheme should be transferred to an independent organisation. In their response, rejecting that recommendation, the Government restated their position that transferring the scheme outside the Home Office would cause additional delays and that the Home Office is the appropriate Department for handling the scheme because of the need to access claimants' immigration history. That is a disappointing response, given the incredibly low number of applicants.

The majority of submissions received by the Committee expressed concerns about the lack of trust in the Department among affected communities and the impact of that on people's willingness to apply to the scheme. Will the Minister think again and consider whether the scheme will have failed if, as a result of that distrust, only a small percentage of the people who have suffered injustice ever come forward and are compensated?

I am disappointed that the Home Office rejected most of our recommendations. I will therefore focus my remarks on the most concerning matters, which relate to our recommendations on compensation, the impact on life, loss of employment and loss of pension. The evidence we received expressed particular concerns about how those categories of claim operate. Despite the concerns raised about the caseworker guidance on impact on life awards, which were outlined in the Committee's report, the Home Office rather oddly referred the Committee to the same guidance in response to our recommendation that the Department provide greater clarity as to how awards are determined.

The Government committed in April 2019 to ensuring that claimants' national insurance positions could be corrected, enabling them to receive the correct amount of state pension. Almost three years later, it remains unclear when a solution will be implemented. Will the Minister provide an update on that?

The Committee heard that the loss of occupational pension is a common type of loss among claimants, yet the Home Office restated its position that such losses are excluded from the scheme. The Committee acknowledges the complexity of the issue and included in its recommendations some options that, although imperfect, would enable claimants to receive some compensation. The Home Office's response did not demonstrate any real engagement with the Committee's suggestions.

On lifting the £500 cap on compensation for legal fees per immigration application, the Home Office restated its position that

"the immigration system has been designed to make sure people do not require legal assistance to make an application for an immigration product."

I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the Committee received evidence from one individual whose family member faced multiple court hearings to prevent their deportation and spent £10,000 on legal costs.

The Home Office rejected our recommendation on introducing funded legal assistance to help people to make a claim. The majority of submissions we received said that legal assistance would be beneficial because the scheme is complex and because comprehensive claims submitted by legal professionals may be processed more quickly by caseworkers. Requests for additional evidence are not uncommon and some claimants reported finding that traumatic, given their previous contact with the Home Office. They told us they would have preferred to manage their claim via a representative.

The Home Office did not commit to making any changes to how applications for urgent and exceptional support are handled. Carl Nwazota, whom I mentioned earlier, applied for that type of support. He told us that throughout the entirety of his interaction with the Home Office he was homeless and living on the street, but the Home Office still refused him access to that support. The Home Office told him that until it received a completed compensation form, it could not help him.

Recently released data shows that from 1 October 2018 to the end of October 2021, just 10% of the requests received for urgent and exceptional support were decided within 10 working days of receipt. It is completely unacceptable that individuals facing hardship because of Home Office failures should continue to be let down and left destitute by the Department while they wait for compensation payments. We are therefore deeply disappointed with the Home Office's response, which does not make any commitment to improving the operation of the scheme.

Sadly, the Home Office's response to some of the Committee's recommendations did not demonstrate that the Department had fully engaged with the issues. The responses to the Committee's recommendations on providing greater clarity as to how compensation for impact on life is determined and on bringing the loss of occupational pension within scope were particularly disappointing, as they did not engage with the real concerns set out in our report.

The Home Office's response to the Committee's recommendations on identifying and addressing the causes of delay lacked any detail. Furthermore, although the Department has increased the number of caseworkers throughout 2021, the published data does not yet show that cases are being processed more quickly.

I have not touched on everything in the report, but I hope I have been able to give an overview of what is a substantial report, and of the issues it raised, which have not been satisfactorily answered in the Government response. Ultimately, many of the concerns raised with us about the compensation scheme echo criticisms made of the Home Office by Wendy Williams in her lessons learned review. We can only conclude that, four years on from the Windrush scandal, vital lessons have still not been learned by the Home Office.

1.46 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Windrush generation was the generation that came from across the Commonwealth, but largely from the Caribbean, to help to rebuild this country after the war. The point about the Windrush generation—a point that may not be understood by Government Members—was that these people thought they were British. They thought they were coming to the mother country. Many of them had pictures of the Queen in their living rooms. The way they have been treated, first in the Windrush scandal itself and then in the debacle of the compensation scheme, could not be more unfair or more cruel.

The lawyers and many of the people who gave evidence to the Select Committee talked about money and compensation, but for the people of the Windrush generation the real scandal was the humiliation at having it brought home to them, by the many aspects of the Windrush scandal, that this society did not consider them British. They were not treated with the fairness and dignity that they would have liked. For the Windrush generation—I cannot stress this enough—this was not about the money; it was about being respected and being genuinely accepted as British. They were treated completely unfairly, in practical, emotional and subjective ways.

The thing that should have struck the Government about the workings of their scheme was that in 2020 Alexandra Ankrah, who worked as head of policy in the Windrush compensation scheme team, resigned because she lost confidence in a programme that was “not supportive of people who have been victims” and “doesn’t acknowledge their trauma”.

It is their trauma that I want to try to convey in this debate.

The head of the scheme resigned, and they paid no notice—they carried on as before. In that same year, nine law firms wrote to the Home Secretary explaining the complex nature of the Windrush compensation application process and asked that claimants be given access to funded legal assistance. The Government’s response was to say, “Well, the scheme was designed so that people could apply without legal assistance.” What people? People who are known to Government Members, and people who are known to Ministers—not ageing members of the Windrush generation. They cannot deal with the scheme without some kind of legal assistance. I put it to Ministers that it is the complexity of the scheme that has meant we have not had the number of applications that we should have had, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) set out.

In the Select Committee’s hearings, we heard evidence from distinguished practitioners, such as Martin Forde QC, who had been the independent adviser to the scheme

and also advised on its consultation and design, and Holly Stow, a senior caseworker at North Kensington Law Centre. The significance of that law centre is that the earliest generation of Caribbean migrants lived in that area long before it was as expensive to buy a home there as it is now, and I knew that area well as a child. Another important person we took evidence from was Jacqueline McKenzie, who at that time was assisting with approximately 200 claims and is probably assisting with more by now.

The policy head of the scheme resigned because she was so appalled at the way the scheme was functioning. Lawyers and others went to the Government to talk to them about the complexity of the system. Above all, given the Government’s original estimate for the potential number of claimants—I think it was 15,000—the number of people applying to the scheme, certainly when the Committee did its inquiry, was relatively tiny. Yet the Home Office has been quite brazen in rejecting the analysis of people who had worked for the Home Office on the scheme and of lawyers and potential claimants.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North pointed out, the Home Office rejected many of our key recommendations, and its response demonstrated that the Department was not engaging with the issues. Above all, the Department’s response to many of our separate recommendations was that it would conduct a review. On almost everything we raised, the Home Office said it was conducting a review. It is all well and good that it is conducting a review on all those separate issues, but it should not need to have a review; it should be prepared to listen to the lawyers, claimants and people working with the community and to look at its own figures. It should be prepared to listen to its own staff members who have worked on the scheme. It should not need to launch a series of reviews.

Meanwhile, because those who came over on the Windrush are an ageing generation, many of them have died or will die before they get the compensation they are entitled to, and I consider that quite shameful. It is hard to believe that the Department does not understand that the more the process is prolonged; the less willing the Department is to take up practical suggestions made in good faith by not just my Committee, but others; and the more the Department is unwilling to listen to people, the longer it will all take and more people will have passed away without justice.

As my right hon. Friend said, many people have argued that the Windrush compensation scheme was inadequate. We know, as my colleague said, that the number of people who have applied for compensation is paltry compared to the number the Home Office originally said were entitled to it. The experience of applying for compensation is traumatic in itself. As I have said, one of the things that is not necessarily factored in when people talk about the Windrush generation is their sense of humiliation, as people who came here to the mother country, at being treated the way they were and having to go through the scheme at all.

As my right hon. Friend said, people have been put off from applying for the scheme partly because of its complexity, which Ministers have been told over and over again. Seeing what happened, seeing how people were treated originally and seeing how some even ended up being deported—seeing all that—the potential claimants of the Windrush generation lacked all trust in the

[*Ms Diane Abbott*]

Home Office. That is why one of our key recommendations was that this scheme should be passed to an independent organisation.

The Home Office said, “Well, that might introduce delays,” but it could not have introduced more delays than the Windrush generation are experiencing now. It could not be any slower than what is happening now. There could not be more people dying than now, while the Home Office is processing what it is supposed to be doing. It is preposterous for the Home Office to argue, “We don’t want to pass it to an independent organisation because of delays.” With this scheme, those at the Home Office are the masters of delays.

We called for an independent organisation because we felt that it would be more efficient and that—I come back to this question of confidence—applicants would have more confidence in an independent organisation and would be more willing to come forward, so that we could increase the number of people applying and getting justice before they pass away, as they continue to do. At the time of the Committee’s report, 23 individuals had died without receiving compensation, and I have no doubt that even more have passed away by this point.

Among other things, we pointed out the excessive burden on claimants to provide documentary evidence of the losses they have suffered. That is a burden. Somebody might have worked hard in the NHS or elsewhere in the public sector, or in manufacturing as my father did, but they are not used to handling that level of paperwork, so it is a burden. In a way, that insistence on finding all the documentary evidence just compounds the pain and misery they have gone through in the Windrush scandal.

Then there are the delays. Like I said, how can those at the Home Office complain that passing the scheme to an independent organisation would cause delays when they themselves have presided over inordinate delays in processing applications and making payments? They themselves have staffed the scheme wholly inadequately. We pointed out the failure to provide urgent payments and the delay in launching and adequately supporting grassroots campaigns, and I think something has been done about that.

It is frustrating for the Committee even to have had to write the report, because many of the systemic faults were highlighted first in the Home Office’s own lessons learned review by Wendy Williams. It is not that we are bringing the Home Office’s attention to such things for the first time; Wendy Williams had set out many of them. The title of her document was “lessons learned”, but the only thing that one can conclude at this point is that the Home Office has learned nothing—lessons have not been learned at all or, if they have been learned, they have not been implemented.

Where do we go from here? It would be good if the Home Office, even at this late stage, listened and implemented some of the findings of the Wendy Williams review, listened to what lawyers and claimants themselves are saying, and listened to the findings of my Committee’s report. The Windrush compensation scheme has to go to an independent organisation, for reasons of increased efficiency and so that people can have some confidence; the Home Office has to look at the level of documentation being insisted on; and, given that Martin Forde QC, has said that applications being completed with legal assistance

would speed things up dramatically, the Home Office should guarantee access to legal assistance for all claimants who require it.

It is important that the Home Office understands that what Home Office Ministers and officials see as a minor administrative challenge, as they have so many more important things to do and to think about, is, for the Windrush generation, their lives. This is a signifier of the care and respect that this society holds for that generation. For Ministers to ignore what is said to them, year after year, about the complaints process and to ignore the suggestions that people make in good faith, suggests to me that they do not respect that generation or understand the humiliation that the generation feels. As I said earlier, it is as if they are waiting for this generation to pass away.

Finally, the Windrush generation came not just from the Caribbean, but from other parts of Commonwealth, as we pointed out in our report. They did not all come on the Windrush or on other boats either. My own father came on an aeroplane, which was very dashing of him at the time. He was an impetuous person; no doubt, that is where I get it from. As I said, they came in good faith and I believe that the Home Office should deal with them in good faith. It is not too late for Home Office Ministers and officials to pay attention to our report, and to other statements that have been made and issues that have been raised, including the view of its own head of policy for the scheme. It is not too late for the Home Office to listen to criticism and finally give justice to the Windrush generation.

2.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for setting the scene so well. It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott). I look forward to the contributions from other hon. Members, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock), and the Minister.

The thrust of the points made by the right hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington was about seeking a methodology to address to the large number of people who have not been compensated, or even talked to at this stage. When the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North set the scene, which she did very well, she outlined the report and where the response needs to come from. We all look to our Minister and good friend to give us some positivity in relation to the questions that we are all asking.

This is not the first time that I have participated in a debate about the Windrush generation, because I believe that we have an obligation, which we have not fulfilled and are still not fulfilling, to do right by these people who do, and did, right by us. That is the thrust of where I come from. Not many people in my constituency travelled as part of the Windrush generation, but that does lessen the issue for me. I support the recommendations in the report and the comments made by the right hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington.

In 2020, I asked the Home Secretary about the report by Wendy Williams. I asked her:

“How does she believe that these can be implemented to ensure that applications adhere not simply to the letter of the policy, but to the spirit of the policy, which would never have intended for

this generation of people, who did so much for the UK when we needed them the most, to suffer so needlessly?”—[*Official Report*, 21 July 2020; Vol. 678, c. 2033.]

Some two years later, we are repeating some of those questions to the Minister, this time hoping that we can get the reassurance that we are looking for. We were assured by the Home Secretary that she was looking to do that, and yet here we are once again, no further forward.

When I read the report by the Home Affairs Committee, I was struck by most of it, but by one paragraph in particular. It said:

“We are deeply concerned that, as of the end of September, only 20.1% of the initially estimated 15,000 eligible claimants have applied to the scheme and only 5.8% have received any compensation”,

as the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said. The report continued:

“It further compounds the Windrush scandal that twenty-three individuals have died without receiving compensation for the hardship that they endured.”

I do not think it would be wrong to ask whether the families of those 23 people would also receive compensation, should they apply to the scheme—I am sure the Minister will come back on that question, as we wish to have reassurance.

Respectfully, I say again that we are still failing here. Rather than another assurance, which I know to be well intended and very well meaning, these people need action in the form of an easily understood scheme that they can apply to in order to get their compensation in a timely manner, and which treats this matter with the respect it deserves. This is not a criticism of the Government; it is a plea to have that scheme in place.

We all know the story of the Windrush generation. I have been greatly moved by some of the TV programmes I have watched on their story. People come up with such hope for the future of this great kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but for some, unfortunately, that hope was not delivered. The Windrush generation answered the call to the Commonwealth and uprooted themselves for the promise of a new life, yet we took what we needed without standing by our duty to them. That has been openly acknowledged. The scale of how remiss we were has meant that a compensation scheme is in place. The Government recognised that it had not been done and that it needed to be done. That is correct and proper. However, what is the point in such a scheme if people are unable to access it, whatever the reason may be? The report sets out some of those reasons.

If only 5% of those eligible have benefited, there needs to be a whole new strategy and way of looking at this issue. The scheme as it is currently operated needs to be better, more focused and fit for purpose. I agree with the Home Affairs Committee that,

“Those who apply face a daunting application process without adequate support; they face unreasonable requests for evidence”,

as was referred to by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, who spoke of the efforts of some of those affected in her introduction. The report goes on to say that

“they are left in limbo in the midst of inordinate delays. Too often, injustice has been compounded rather than compensated. This is unacceptable and must not continue.”

The words of the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington on this matter were appropriate: people came here in good faith and they deserved to have that good faith returned in buckets in every way possible.

I support the calls for the removal of the formal end date and for the 13,800 eligible people to be contacted again and offered support to apply in a more streamlined and accessible format. I hope the Minister is able to respond to that. That might mean working with people one to one, face to face, to work through the system, give them compensation and have their voices heard. I understand that the Home Office is terribly overworked; I know that the Minister, in particular, is most energetic in these matters. We have the Ukrainian crisis at the moment, as well as a number of other issues. There are lots of things to do; I understand that. I am not being critical in any way.

Despite that, I hope that the Home Office finds the funding to allocate for the support and administration of these applications. We have got it wrong for too long; we are past due getting it right. We have to do right by these wonderful people who are very much part of our vibrant British community, and whom we all appreciate, understand and wish to support.

2.9 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I congratulate the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), on securing this vital debate and on the eloquent and comprehensive way she introduced it. Like her I will start by placing on record my thanks to all who contributed to our inquiry and report. I particularly thank the witnesses she mentioned, who gave evidence of their direct experiences as victims of the disgraceful Windrush scandal, and those who have been working on their behalf to secure justice for them.

The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) spoke powerfully about what this issue means for the Windrush generation—more powerfully than I would be able to. In short, they came here in good faith and had to battle against hostility when they arrived. Decades later, they and their descendants had to battle the hostile environment. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, it is heartbreaking that they still have to battle for justice today through the Windrush compensation scheme. Of course a compensation scheme was required, and it is good that it is there, but there was no other option. It is a tragedy that that compensation scheme is now also a source of controversy and difficulty, rather than a trusted and reliable means of ensuring redress for those who have suffered so much already.

As the Committee Chair highlighted at the outset, the Home Office initially reckoned that around 15,000 people would be eligible for the scheme. It has twice revised its planning assumptions downwards, and the number now stands at between 4,000 and 6,000 eligible claimants, so a vital first question for the Minister is why those downward revisions have taken place. Why does the Department think that far fewer people will apply? Given that almost 14,000 were issued documentation or citizenship through the Windrush scheme and could be described as victims of this scandal, why are so few seeking compensation?

[*Stuart C. McDonald*]

In our report, the Committee put forward a number of reasons that we believe are at the heart of this issue. First and foremost, is it not blindingly obvious that people who have had their lives destroyed by a Government Department will be reluctant, or even terrified, to engage with the same Department again? That is what we argued when the compensation scheme legislation was passing through Parliament, and the argument remains just as strong today. I absolutely appreciate that, having come this far, there is a concern that moving the scheme away from the Home Office could cause yet further delay. There has indeed been far too much delay already, but is it not the case that there is no other option? Surely it is better to have a scheme that has the full trust of Windrush victims and to which they will therefore apply, even if that takes a bit longer. Far rather than pressing on with the current arrangements, which provide little confidence that the scheme will reach all the victims we need it to reach.

I acknowledge again the work that has been done on outreach, but I echo calls from the witnesses and the Committee that more should be done. I urge the Home Office to listen to the detailed ideas for how further publicity and attention can be given to outreach work. At the end of the day, however, that does not address the fundamental problem of people being asked to contact a Department they feel has destroyed their lives and humiliated them.

Another issue that I have highlighted before, and which has been highlighted by our Committee, Wendy Williams, the Public Accounts Committee and others, is the failure to seek out victims in non-Caribbean Commonwealth countries through historical case review in the way the Home Office did for Caribbean countries. The Home Office has said, pretty vaguely, that that would require too much in the way of time and resources, so will the Minister undertake to set out exactly what the Home Office estimates it would cost to conduct such a review? Otherwise, it is impossible to assess whether the Home Office position is remotely reasonable, and we are left with victims across the globe who will have no idea that they can now seek redress and right the wrongs that were done to them. Again, I welcome the new campaign to target people from some non-Caribbean Commonwealth countries, but we fear that it does not go far enough.

Another reason why people will struggle to apply is, as has been said, the complexity of the scheme. Again, it is only fair to recognise and welcome the efforts that have been made to simplify the forms and guidance. We also welcome the change to the standard of proof required for some claims—something that we raised during the passage of the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Act 2020. That said, we need assurance that the standard of proof is actually making a difference in practice. What steps is the Minister taking to assure himself of that, given that the Home Office refused our recommendation that Ministers and senior officials should examine a sample of cases to understand how the standard of proof is working in practice? As has been said, much of the evidence that we heard suggested that people will still be required to provide incredibly detailed documentary evidence of events that happened a long time ago, which would not be necessary in a normal civil claim for damages.

Even when taking into account the changes that have been made, quantifying loss, damage and suffering is an inherently challenging process. Every day up and down this country, people employ lawyers to litigate the amount of compensation that they are due—whether that is because they have been unlawfully dismissed, because they have been injured in an accident at work or a road traffic accident, or because somebody has breached a contract. People employ lawyers because documenting and calculating loss is difficult. Legal aid is available to people on a means-tested basis, so I cannot for the life of me understand why it is not available to people who are seeking to access the Windrush compensation scheme. That is the only way in which we can be confident that people are claiming and securing what they are entitled to as quickly as possible.

Even when people come forward and navigate the scheme, it takes too long to process, as we have heard. New caseworkers have been taken on, and that is welcome, but why has it taken so long, and why does the number of outstanding applications continue to rise? As has been said, it is a tragedy that at least 23 individuals have died before compensation was paid to them. Too many cases are still taking too long, with significant numbers of people having to wait more than a year.

Even if someone comes forward, successfully navigates the system and qualifies for compensation, their problems do not end there. I was startled to read that at the end of December 2021 35% of the final decisions issued had been zero awards. People who met the scheme's criteria were actually being deemed not to be entitled to compensation. Have I understood that correctly? Has the Minister looked into that, and what is his explanation for it?

As the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North set out, the Committee made detailed recommendations on certain heads of claim that are not being properly compensated or are not compensated at all. The Home Office has promised reviews on those claims, which is just about better than nothing, but as the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington said, we need more than that—we need action quickly.

The rejection by the Home Office of other recommendations, such as compensation for impact on life, for loss of employment, for loss of pension and for legal fees, is particularly disappointing. At the end of the day, that means that people are simply not being reimbursed for the actual losses they have suffered, and that is just indefensible. People who spent thousands of pounds battling deportation will not get that money back; people who lost occupational pension rights will not get them back. That is not righting the wrongs of Windrush.

There is still a long way to go in delivering meaningful justice for the victims of the Windrush scandal. I pay tribute again to the victims and the campaigners who continue to push for justice and to colleagues on the Select Committee for continuing to press the Home Office on their behalf. We must and will keep doing so, because the Home Office has to go further and it has to go faster.

2.17 pm

Stephen Kinnoch (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I thank all those who have contributed to the debate. I pay particular tribute the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my

right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who is doing such important work on this matter, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who spoke with such passion about these issues, which are personal for her. I also pay tribute to the other hon. Members who have spoken.

Let us be clear: the Windrush generation have been failed twice—first by the Conservative Government’s hostile environment programme, which harassed and discriminated against innocent victims, and secondly by the delays and blockages in delivering compensation to the victims of this terrible scandal.

The National Audit Office has been critical of the Windrush compensation scheme, and the report by the Home Affairs Committee has now revealed the magnitude of its failings, making it clear that the culture in the Home Office has failed miserably to change when it needed to. The report states:

“Many people who have applied for compensation have yet to receive a penny and we have heard too many stories of people struggling with impossible demands for evidence”
and

“poor communication from the Home Office...the experience of applying for compensation from the Home Office has become a source of further trauma rather than redress. Many of the concerns raised with us about the Windrush Compensation Scheme as part of this inquiry have echoes of the same criticisms made of the Home Office by Wendy Williams in her report into how the Windrush scandal occurred. It is a damning indictment of the Home Office that the design and operation of this scheme contained the same bureaucratic insensitivities that led to the Windrush scandal in the first place”.

That is a damning assessment and it further confirms the fears that the Home Office, in its current guise, is not fit for purpose and that the Home Secretary’s leadership can be characterised as a mixture of incompetence and indifference.

The failure proactively to seek out those victims to whom the Home Office had caused so much suffering has only added to the delays. Between 4,000 and 6,000 people are thought to be eligible, but at the end of January only 960 people—about 20% of those eligible for compensation—had applied, and fewer than 10% have received any compensation at all. It is no wonder that the victims of Windrush have lost faith in the Home Office to deliver this scheme. The treatment of the Windrush generation simply has not improved.

Some of the most damning criticism, from the Wendy Williams review through to this Home Affairs Committee report, has been about the culture in the Home Office. Wendy Williams found that the Home Office was characterised by

“a culture of disbelief and carelessness...a lack of empathy for individuals”

and, perhaps most tellingly, by

“institutional ignorance and thoughtlessness towards the issue of race”.

That is why the Labour party, along with voices from across society, including of course members of the Windrush generation, is calling for the compensation scheme to be completely overhauled by placing it in the hands of an independent body, away from the Home Office. Recommendation 3 of the Home Affairs Committee report explicitly echoes Labour’s call, but the Government, shamefully and predictably, have rejected that suggestion. The Labour party believes that the body leading the compensation scheme must have the confidence of

victims so as to restore faith in the process and get compensation quickly to people who have been so appallingly treated.

Adding to the lack of trust is the fact that the Home Secretary still has not implemented all the findings of the Williams independent review, despite committing in June 2020 to doing so. Where is, for instance, the migrants’ commissioner? The Opposition are also calling on Ministers to come forward with cast-iron guarantees on when each and every one of the 30 recommendations will be implemented—not just a promise that they will be, but guarantees on when.

There has been a complete failure by the Home Office to put right the damage done to the Windrush generation and to give them the compensation they deserve. In fact, the process of applying for compensation through the scheme replicates many of the issues experienced by victims initially, including long delays and excessive burdens on individuals to provide documentation that it is unrealistic to expect them to provide. It is worth noting that, tragically, 23 people who applied to the scheme have died before receiving their compensation. The Government must act, and must act at speed.

Against that backdrop, I have some questions for the Minister. In January, the Home Office was forced to apologise to hundreds of charities and community groups that were still waiting for decisions on applications for funding needed to support Windrush victims to apply to the scheme. We have seen delays with the scheme itself and now delays with that vital funding. Can the Minister set out today what he is doing to put that right? At the end of January, more than 90% of Windrush victims had yet to receive a penny, and 80% had not even applied. Can the Minister give us the updated figures and explain what the Government are doing to encourage more victims to come forward?

On that note, does the Minister agree that trust between this Home Office and the Windrush generation is irreparably damaged and that this vital compensation scheme must be handed to an independent organisation to ensure that victims come forward and get the redress they deserve? That will surely help to restore faith in the process and get compensation quickly to people who have been so appallingly treated.

As I said, 23 members of the Windrush generation have, tragically, died while waiting for the compensation they deserved from the scheme. This is an ageing group of claimants. What is the Minister doing specifically to speed up the process to ensure that the Windrush generation get the compensation they deserve?

The lack of progress on the Windrush compensation scheme is allowing the shameful failings exposed by the Wendy Williams review to continue. The reality is that the time for warm words is over. There has to be a fundamental change in the Home Office and in the compensation scheme. The Government must get on and deliver the compensation that the Windrush victims are entitled to following the dreadful miscarriages of justice brought about by the Government’s immoral and unlawful hostile environment policy. The former Home Secretary said that the Government,

“will do right by the Windrush generation.”—[*Official Report*, 30 April 2018; Vol. 640, c. 35.]

We are yet to see the current Home Secretary coming close to that aspiration. The time for platitudes is over. The time for action is now.

2.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Angela. I thank the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) for securing this debate and all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions. This is an important subject and I am pleased we have been able to discuss it today.

The victims of the Windrush scandal suffered terrible injustices, and this Government are determined to ensure we do everything in our power to right those wrongs. This was a shameful episode in our history; as the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) powerfully outlined, it was not just about people losing a job, suffering an inconvenience or not being able to travel; it was about feeling that their very identity had been taken away. For many, it was even harder than that: it was about being reminded, in our modern society, of exactly the type of prejudices they had met when they first came here back in the 1950s. At that time it was, shamefully, still lawful to act in ways that have now rightly been banned for many years.

We fully understand that this is not just about getting a cheque or some financial recompense; this is about something that struck people very deeply as individuals, beyond whatever financial impact it had. While it is hard to respond to that, compensation—making sure we recompense people where we can—is obviously part of the response, but the hurt felt is very much recognised, and we apologise for it and look to recognise what was done.

The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington spoke powerfully about how this is not just a debate about facts and figures on a spreadsheet. These issues had a very personal impact on people, including people whose parents, who brought them over, had fought for this country. Only a few years before their arrival here as migrants, they had been serving in the military, the then imperial forces, at a time when this nation had made a desperate call for people to serve in its defence. Many had stepped forward, particularly those from Caribbean communities and other communities across the Commonwealth, to defend a country they had never seen, but whose values they believed they shared.

I understand very much why this goes beyond being just an issue about an ordinary claim for compensation—for example, where someone's car has been damaged or a contract has gone wrong. This really struck people quite deeply, which goes beyond what we can do, but paying compensation is an important part of this.

When I visited a community group recently, I was struck by people's commitment to the community and this country. One individual said thank you for the compensation we had paid—they were very grateful for it. I said, "I am pleased you are grateful, but it should never have been necessary for you to have to go through that. It is what you are owed and entitled to, and not something that you should feel you have to thank us for."

The situation we are discussing went on for a number of years. I am sure other hon. Members will have noticed, as I did, that the case on the cover of the Wendy Williams's lessons learned review dated back to 2009. This is not a matter of a particular Government at a particular time—it happened over many years—and the Home Affairs Committee report touches on that.

We are determined to ensure that everyone who suffered because they could not demonstrate their lawful status in the United Kingdom—let me be clear that these people had lawful status in the UK—receives every penny of the compensation to which they are entitled. We are making some significant progress towards achieving that aim and have now paid a total of more than £43 million in compensation.

We remain open to areas for further improvement and welcome some of the constructive challenge we have had from Members across the House. To give credit where it is due, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) referenced his comments in a previous debate, where he highlighted that some of our wording implied a criminal standard of proof—beyond reasonable doubt—when clearly, in this instance, it should be on balance of probabilities, rather than having to reach that threshold. As a result, as he acknowledged, we changed the guidance. We remain open to looking at what needs to be done when such issues are highlighted.

Stuart C. McDonald: I am grateful that that change was made; I thank the Minister for that. What has he done to assure himself that that is actually making a difference in practice? There was a recommendation in the report about looking at a sample of cases, because there is still evidence coming to us that it has not changed much in reality.

Kevin Foster: I am always happy to further consider evidence. Certainly we have seen higher awards being made, partly because of the quite significant changes we made to the scheme last year but also, unsurprisingly, due to the increase in the number of applications to the scheme, which I will touch on in a minute. The change appears to be having an effect, but, as more cases come to a final decision, particularly as reviews in other areas are done, we are open to making sure that it has made a difference. I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the constructive spirit in which he approached the debate on the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Bill, as did the then shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, which helped produce a better outcome all round.

I am keen for Members to see for themselves the work being done in this area. Now that covid restrictions are behind us, I am happy to welcome any parliamentary colleagues who wish to visit the compensation scheme casework team to see for themselves the progress we have made. They can talk to the team working to resolve cases to get people the compensation they deserve. The team is based up in Leeds, separate from some of the other work. For many this is their only role in the Home Office; they are not working on wider immigration matters, although some have experience in those, given the nature of the issues that they deal with. I am certainly happy to welcome people to visit and meet the teams, talk to them and see the work being done. We had hoped to arrange visits at an earlier stage, but with the understandable restrictions during the covid period, it was something we had to consider very carefully. Now that the restrictions are behind us, a visit by the Select Committee would be welcome as well. We would be happy to arrange that.

Although we do not agree with every recommendation, overall we welcome the Home Affairs Committee's report on the scheme, and we are already making significant progress in respect of several of the Committee's key recommendations. However, some of the recommendations are complex and we need to consider those carefully to address the issues raised. I anticipate that Members might say, "Let's have an example, then, of a recommendation you think is complex." We are committed to ensuring that an individual's national insurance position is corrected where an inability to demonstrate status has impacted their entitlement to the state pension. For example, someone may have been unable to have employment and therefore unable to make national insurance contributions, meaning that there are missing years when it comes to the calculation of state pension.

We continue to work with the relevant Departments to resolve this complex issue. We are making progress, although unfortunately I cannot give a specific date today as to when we will be able to bring that change into effect.

Dame Diana Johnson: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Kevin Foster: Briefly.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am just a bit concerned because it is now several years since the issue arose. Getting clarity on what their entitlement to state pension will be is something that will concern an individual. The Minister says he cannot indicate when the issue is likely to be resolved. Does he have a best guess? Will it be a year, two years, five years?

Kevin Foster: We hope it will be quicker than the right hon. Lady has just suggested, and potentially a lot quicker than one of the timeframes that she suggested. I am not in a position today to give a specific date, but we are making excellent progress towards finally resolving this issue. We accept that we need to bring certainty to people, particularly given the age of many of those we are talking about, as touched on by the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. Even the children of that generation are well into their 50s and 60s, given that, in many cases, we are talking about people who arrived in the UK before 1 January 1973. We are conscious of the urgency of resolving this issue. I do not want to make a misleading statement today and give a specific date by which it will be resolved, but certainly we believe we are making excellent progress and getting close to resolving it.

The changes we made to the scheme in December 2020 have significantly increased both the amount of compensation awarded and the speed at which awards are made. Since December 2020 we have paid out over £33 million, in contrast to a total of just under £3 million prior to those changes. We now frequently pay out over £1 million a month in compensation, and we recently paid out one of our largest awards to date—a single award in excess of £260,000 to one individual. I hope that Members will understand why I will not give further details of that case, which may identify the person concerned, given the sums involved.

Ms Abbott: The Minister has helpfully told us the total sum that has been paid in compensation, but how many claimants does that represent?

Kevin Foster: That is a very fair question. The £36.3 million that has been paid—I must say that £43.3 million has been offered, but I will stick to the figure that I used for payment—is across a total of 940 claims, out of the 3,490 received. Obviously, the sums vary, but the largest we have paid recently is over £260,000 to one individual, and there have been a number of payments in excess of £100,000.

It is worth remembering that there is not a cap; there is not a maximum compensation amount that someone can hit. That figure gives Members an impression of the scale of the payments now being made to individuals. As I said, I am sure that people will understand why I will not go into the details of that particular case, given that doing so could divulge the identity of an individual who has just received a significant amount of money.

Stuart C. McDonald: Have I understood correctly that there has been an increase recently in the number of people who have been offered zero compensation? Is the Minister aware of why that might be happening?

Kevin Foster: There have been a number of people whose cases have concluded with a nil offer. Part of that is because we are processing more cases and getting more cases towards a final decision. However, with each case, we believe that we have come to the right decision, and decisions can be reviewed and challenged if people feel that they are inappropriate.

Sometimes, people have just been looking for a formal apology for what happened to them, which is absolutely right. However, in other cases, the impacts may not be linked directly to someone's inability to prove their immigration status. For example, someone may have lost their job due to a criminal conviction rather than because they were not able to demonstrate their immigration status. That would not be covered by the compensation scheme; someone must have lost their job due to not being able to prove their immigration status. That is where a number of the biggest awards have come.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his positive response. He referred to 900 people having been successful. Might the experience of those 900 who have successfully come to the end of the process help the other 13,400—I think that was the figure—who have not accessed the scheme? Is it possible to use their success to persuade others to get involved in the scheme—to show them how they can access it and reach the same successful conclusion?

Kevin Foster: The hon. Member hits on the point that making people aware that significant amounts of compensation can be received is one of the ways of promoting the scheme. I am aware of at least one other compensation claim that resulted in an offer of more than £270,000. The figure that I gave was not a one-off; it was a recent payment made last month, which is why I used it as an example.

We certainly take on board the hon. Member's point that making it clear to people that there are opportunities to receive significant amounts of compensation is part of the way to bring people in, although he will of course understand that, at the same time, we wish to ensure that the scheme is paying those who were affected; it is not simply a way of accessing large amounts of money. We continue to offer preliminary payments of £10,000

[Kevin Foster]

as soon as we have identified that an individual will be entitled to an award, ensuring that affected people receive compensation as quickly as possible and do not need to wait for their claim to be finally concluded.

Rightly, a lot of Members have asked how we are going to increase the pace of progress. The biggest way in which we are doing that is by rapidly increasing the size of our casework team. We have recruited more caseworkers, expanding the number in post to 90, with 55 in training or in mentoring roles—experienced caseworkers mentoring new caseworkers being trained. That shows the scale of the increased resource that will soon be brought to bear, increasing the number of decisions. We have also recruited a further 30 staff who are going through security clearance. By spring, therefore, we expect to have a total of 120 caseworkers in post and to be training them towards all being on the frontline making decisions.

Aside from taking steps to increase our size and the speed at which payments are made, we continue to look closely at any further improvements that can be made to the design of the scheme itself. We are ensuring that it remains responsive to the needs of those making claims.

In the report, the Committee rightly stressed the importance of ensuring that claims are looked at empathetically and that individuals are not required to meet an unreasonable standard of proof—a point well made by my SNP shadow, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East. The Department is firmly committed to ensuring that individuals receive the compensation to which they are entitled in all cases, including those where, understandably, there is limited documentary evidence given the timescales we are talking about—the time over which a claim is spread.

As I have touched on, the scheme operates entirely on the balance of probabilities, and decision makers receive in-depth training to ensure that that approach is applied fairly and consistently. We have a quality assurance team and an independent review process in order to ensure that all decisions are subject to a high degree of internal scrutiny. I also confirm that we are reviewing—as suggested by the Committee—the definition of homelessness within the scheme, to ensure that any losses are looked at in as wide a context as possible and are appropriately reflected in compensation awards.

In the light of that, we will ensure that all individuals who were left without a home or suffered a detriment due to poor standards of accommodation receive the full amount to which they are entitled. However, I stress that under the current scheme rules, claimants are not precluded from receiving an award for homelessness if they were forced to stay with friends or family. This is not just about someone not having a roof over their head.

Our efforts to promote new applications to the scheme and to engage with and gain the trust of affected communities continue. We will relaunch our face-to-face work imminently—I am sure that those present in the Chamber realise why over the past two years we have, unfortunately, been able to do a lot less face-to-face engagement than we might have liked, given the covid restrictions and the potential impact of hosting events during that period.

We have, however, worked with other groups. In November, for example, we worked with Bangladeshi communities through the Birmingham Commonwealth Association.

That links to a point rightly made by hon. Members: while Windrush is associated mostly with the Caribbean, many other communities were also affected. I checked the records during the debate and, to give an idea of the impact on communities from outside the Caribbean, the Windrush taskforce has made nearly 2,000 grants of documentation to those with Indian nationality. There are also, by the way, small cohorts of European economic area nationals who qualify for documentation but, given the impact of free movement over the past few years, would not have been caught up in the incidents that led to the Windrush scandal.

Stuart C. McDonald: One of the recommendations that the Committee made—I think Wendy Williams recommended this too—was that the historical case review process that was conducted for Caribbean countries should also happen for non-Caribbean countries. The Home Office said that that would require too much in the way of time and resources. So that we can assess that, will the Minister write to us after the debate with a little more detail on why he thinks that exercise would be too difficult?

Kevin Foster: I will take that intervention in the constructive way in which it was presented. I think that it would be impossible to put an exact timescale, cost and things on it, but I am happy to set that out in writing. Given that I have said it in this forum, I will place a copy of my letter in the Library of the House for other Members to refer to and, of course, I will send a copy to the Chair of the Committee.

We are focused on what we can do. I have held meetings with Caribbean high commissioners to discuss how we can better promote this to those communities and we are keen to reach out, via diaspora groups from across the rest of the Commonwealth, to make it clear that this is not just about the Caribbean, even though I recognise that Windrush is very strongly associated with those communities.

The hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East highlighted the difference between the numbers of people who have received documentation versus the numbers who have then gone on to apply for compensation. That has been of interest to us as well, so we are writing to individuals who have been provided with documentation under the taskforce scheme but have not yet applied for compensation. Our goal is to highlight to them the opportunity to apply.

Some people, such as EEA nationals, who were potentially entitled by the taskforce to documentation and who were here before free movement applied rather than since, would be very unlikely to have a compensation claim, given the impact of free movement rules and their nationality, yet we are interested to highlight to individuals the opportunity to apply. We have written to 4,500 individuals so far and we will continue to encourage people who have received documentation to consider applying. Again, we make it very clear that this has no bearing on their ongoing status. That matter has been resolved; this is merely about looking to see whether there has been an impact on their life and to bring them forward. We will certainly analyse the response. At a later stage, I would be happy to share some appropriate data in a way that does not identify individuals who may or may not have replied.

A couple of Members mentioned the second phase of our national communications campaign, which is under way. In partnership with our community media partners, we have launched promotional videos and radio adverts, reaching an audience of over 1 million across priority communities. We are keen to target and work with communities. We are conscious that simply taking out adverts in national newspapers or putting things on TV may not be the best way of getting through to those who were most affected by the Windrush scandal—those who were not necessarily the biggest followers of current affairs or the media, who may well have been affected. So we have been thinking about the best methods of outreach, such as community groups, to reach out to some of those people. That work is now under way and we believe it is starting to have an impact, given the impressions and views that we believe people have had of it.

Jim Shannon: Again, I thank the Minister. He is being incredibly gracious in giving us all the chance to intervene and ask questions. I am encouraged by what he says about the community involvement; that is good news. In my contribution, I suggested that face-to-face or one-to-one follow-ups could be another method of bringing more people into the system. Has he had a chance to consider that?

Kevin Foster: Yes. Some of the community groups that we have funded reached out and did leafleting and face-to-face engagement. Now that we are coming out of the pandemic period, we are happy to relook at what we can do on face-to-face appointments. As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, that was difficult during the past two years, not because of any lack of will but because, understandably, people were nervous, and in some instances the regulations would not have permitted it. Certainly, we are keen to review that.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) also asked whether estates might pursue the compensation that someone who had passed away would have been entitled to, and the answer is a simple yes. We have also changed the scheme to provide some funding to cover the costs of seeking probate. We were made aware that there was a potential barrier for people who were not of large means, of having to secure probate where someone had potentially died intestate. We have responded to that, as we are conscious that when someone passes away with an unresolved claim, that can be difficult for the family. We do not think there should be any financial benefits, if I may put it that way, to the Government when a decision has not been made until after someone has passed away; so their estate can make the claim on behalf of their loved one and receive the full amount of compensation that their loved one would have been entitled to.

I shall now discuss some of the areas that the Committee highlighted. The extra time today is most welcome, Dame Angela, as we can have a more in-depth discussion than is usually possible. Where a claim is accepted under loss of access to employment or benefits, the Government will seek to ensure that the individual's national insurance position is corrected. We are finalising that work across Government. The scheme's equality impact assessment has been updated to reflect the assessments that have been carried out for the recent changes to the scheme; it will be published later this

month. I am conscious that I am probably about to get an intervention on what the date will be; we are planning to publish it later this month. I know that the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has been here long enough that if I were to say spring or summer she would say, "Those seasons can be interesting."

We are also reviewing our rules on mitigation of loss and our approach to cases where individuals may charge for immigration applications in order to prove their lawful status. One of the areas where there was the most disagreement with the Government's response was around whether the scheme should be transferred to an independent organisation. We believe that moving the scheme from the Home Office would risk significantly delaying payments to people. Many of the systems that confirm when immigration status existed are controlled by the Home Office, and inevitably the Home Office would play a very large role in the scheme, regardless of where it was formally based.

I accept that there is a need to build confidence in those communities. It needs to be made very clear that the Windrush team is separate—that it is not part of our overall immigration operation, but works separately—and that there are clear protections around data provided to the Windrush team, to ensure that that data is not available for other purposes in the Home Office.

I pay tribute to the Caribbean high commissioners, who I have spoken to on number of occasions about how they may be able to facilitate events where they make it very clear that they are only there to speak on behalf of the diaspora that they represent. They are seen as well trusted individuals who have no agenda other than seeking to help, and they could facilitate events that would encourage those people to come forward. Similarly, we are always prepared to work with colleagues in their communities and constituencies, particularly those who represent large numbers of people who are potentially affected by the Windrush scandal. We can work with them to reach out to those who want to come in and make the application for the compensation that they so richly deserve.

We are keen to focus on the scheme and getting payments out, rather than structural changes that may delay the process. We continue to work with our independent person, and a recent review that he has done concluded that moving the scheme would not speed up the process.

The other point of most contention was around legal access for claimants. We worked with Martin Forde QC to design the scheme to be accessible to anyone without the need for legal assistance. However, for those who want or need support to make a claim, the Home Office provides free assistance in making applications through our independent claims assistance provider, We Are Digital. Most claims that have been concluded have seen claimants receive compensation without any involvement of legal professionals, and we are continuously evaluating how we can better help claimants through the process of their claim. We are working with We Are Digital to ensure that their service is clearly signposted and accessible. We are also surveying those who have made use of the service to see what their experience was. In due course, we would certainly be happy to share with the Committee some of the details of the reactions that we have had from those who have been through that service—once that is finalised.

[*Kevin Foster*]

We continue to review and make progress on the Committee's key recommendations. We want everyone to get the maximum amount of compensation to which they are entitled. As I have outlined, we have made several changes and improvements to the scheme to achieve that goal. Those include: the removal of the scheme's end date, an increase in the minimum award to those claiming impact on life, and an increase in the number of caseworkers to speed up payments and resolution of cases.

We remain open to making further improvements, and we will continue to engage regularly with stakeholders and applicants, both at public events and on a one-to-one basis. The injustices suffered by members of the Windrush generation should never have happened, and we must do all we can to put them right and deliver the maximum compensation to those who are entitled to it, even though we know—as was so eloquently put in the debate—that for many this is not about financial compensation; it is about getting a recognition of the hurt that was caused to them when the identity that they hold as special and at the heart of their character was taken away.

2.55 pm

Dame Diana Johnson: I thank everyone who has contributed this afternoon. It is clear from the speeches we have heard that the Windrush generation has been let down and is still battling for justice through the compensation scheme. What concerns me and the Committee most is that the voices of the victims are not being heard by the Home Office. It is not hearing what victims are saying about their experience and how they are finding dealing with the compensation scheme.

The Minister has said a bit about that, but there is a particular problem with a lack of trust in the Home Office. As a Committee, we say that there needs to be an independent organisation to operate the scheme and to give trust and confidence to the people who have not yet applied. It is disappointing that the numbers are still too low. We are also disappointed about the pension issue. I pressed the Minister on when we will have an actual date for that to be resolved by. There was no mention of the occupational pension, which is not part of the scheme.

We look forward to hearing about the engagements that are about to start post-covid, and we would like details of those. The Committee would like to visit the caseworker unit in Leeds, which is, I think, where the Minister said it is. We would like a day out to Leeds to go and have a look at this and see what is actually happening.

Finally, although we have produced a report and the Government have responded, it is my intention as Chair—the same goes for the members of the Committee here today—to follow this very carefully to see what the Home Office does over the next few months, and possibly years. We will not let this rest. We want to ensure that there is justice for the people who have been so badly let down, and that the compensation scheme goes some way to providing the justice that they are seeking and not yet getting.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Fifth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, *The Windrush Compensation Scheme*, HC 204, and the Government response, HC1098.

2.57 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 3 March 2022

TREASURY

MiFID and Prospectus Regime Reform

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

In 2021, the Government published two consultations on reforms to our capital markets regime: the wholesale markets review—which reviews the markets in financial instrument directive (MiFID) regime—and the prospectus regime review. These consultations form part of the Chancellor's broader vision to improve the competitiveness of the UK's financial services sector and take advantage of our new freedoms in financial services following our withdrawal from the EU. On 1 March, I announced the next steps we intend to take to reform UK capital markets.

Wholesale markets review/MiFID reform

Deep and liquid wholesale capital markets are at the heart of the UK's prosperity as an international financial centre. With the development of the EU's single market, much of our regulatory approach was set in Brussels. Now that we have left the EU, we can use our newfound freedoms to reform these rules to ensure they work for UK markets. I do not intend to make changes for the sake of it, but in many areas of our capital markets regime, it is clear we can improve standards and make regulation more proportionate, cutting costs for firms while improving market integrity. In 2021, we consulted on a number of changes to the MiFID framework, which underpins our regulatory regime for wholesale markets.

The consultation closed in September 2021 and HM Treasury received 78 responses. Respondents from across the financial services sector strongly welcomed the objectives of the review and proposals for reform. In the light of this, I have announced the Government's intention to bring forward legislative changes when parliamentary time allows, to take forward the most important measures that received the strongest support. These include amendments to five key areas of the regulatory framework:

Trading venues and systematic internalisers (Sis): we will remove unnecessary restrictions on where and how trading can happen, to allow firms to get the best price for investors.

Equity markets: we will legislate to simplify how and when firms need to make trading information public before they trade, to reduce costs and burdens for firms.

Fixed income and derivatives markets: we will reform the transparency regime to reduce costs and increase effectiveness, and the derivatives trading obligation to ease burdens for firms when managing risk and prevent market fragmentation.

Commodity derivatives: we will streamline the position limits regime to make it more effective, proportionate and less burdensome to comply with.

Market data: we will bring forward legislation to enable a consolidated tape which would collate and disseminate real time trading data, to reduce data costs and improve quality.

Where changes can be made to the parts of the regime that are already set out in regulatory rules and guidance, the FCA has committed to progress these in line with its normal processes. Where legislative changes are needed but in future would better sit in regulator rules and are not urgent, the Government will wait until

the outcomes of the future regulatory framework (FRF) review have been implemented to bring them forward. The Government believe that this step-by-step approach will ensure that the most burdensome and unnecessary regulatory requirements are removed as soon as possible.

The consultation response document is available at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-wholesale-markets-review-a-consultation.

Prospectus regime review

In November 2020, the Chancellor asked Lord Hill of Oareford CBE to lead an independent review of the UK listing regime. Lord Hill made a series of recommendations to help attract the most innovative and successful companies to UK markets and help them access the finance they need to grow. Of particular importance was his recommendation to undertake a fundamental review of the UK's prospectus regime, which is based on the EU prospectus regulation, now part of retained EU law. This is the regulation which underpins the documents firms must publish when they seek admission to a stock market or raise fresh capital.

Having received widespread support for our proposals from across the sector, I have announced that we will take full advantage of our new regulatory freedoms by repealing the prospectus regulation and replacing it with a regime better tailored to the UK's position as a global financial centre, when parliamentary time allows.

Our reforms will achieve the following objectives:

The changes will facilitate wider participation in the ownership of public companies, and remove the disincentives that currently exist for the issuance of securities to wide groups of investors—including retail investors.

The changes will simplify the regulation of prospectuses and remove unnecessary duplications, without lowering regulatory standards.

The changes will improve the quality of information investors receive under the prospectus regime, giving them more confidence to make their investment decisions.

The changes will ensure that the regulation of prospectuses is more agile and dynamic, meaning that, in future, the regulation of prospectuses will be better able to respond to innovation and change.

Both of these reforms are core parts of the Government's commitment to make the most of our new freedoms in financial services. By doing so, we will enhance the functioning and competitiveness of the UK's capital markets, and ensure they are continuing to help create jobs, support businesses, and power growth across all regions and nations of the UK.

The consultation response document is available at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/uk-prospectus-regime-a-consultation.

[HCWS659]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Transparency Report: Disruptive Powers 2020

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I have today laid before both Houses the fifth iteration of the Government transparency report on the use of disruptive powers (CP 621). Copies of the report will be made available in the Vote Office and online on gov.uk.

The Government remain committed to increasing the transparency of the work of our security and intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and this next iteration of the transparency report is a key part of that commitment.

Publishing this report ensures that the public are able to access a guide to the range of powers used to combat threats to the security of the United Kingdom, the extent of their use and the safeguards and oversight in place to ensure they are used properly.

[HCWS658]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): The Prime Minister has made two new appointments to his trade envoy programme.

The new appointments will extend the total number of trade envoys to 36 parliamentarians, covering 76 markets. The role of a Prime Minister's trade envoy is unpaid and voluntary, with cross-party membership from both Houses. The role supports the UK's ambitious trade and investment agenda by championing global Britain and promoting the UK as a destination of choice for inward investment. They also support the UK's economic recovery through the levelling-up agenda, by helping business take advantage of the opportunities arising in export markets.

The new appointments are:

The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) has been appointed as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Angola and Zambia.

The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) has been appointed as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Tunisia and Libya.

[HCWS660]

JUSTICE

Court Recovery Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): I am today setting out an update on the use of Nightingale court venues.

Since the start of the pandemic, the priority of the Government, working closely with the judiciary and others, has been to ensure the justice system continues to perform its vital role while keeping court and tribunal users safe, in line with public health guidelines.

Hotels, former courts and conference centres were rapidly transformed into courtrooms, known as Nightingale courts, during the pandemic to provide more space when social distancing was in place. These venues have provided our court estate with vital additional capacity as part of our continued efforts to recover from the impact of covid-19.

Combined with other measures—such as removing the cap on court sitting days, the use of remote hearings, and increasing magistrates' sentencing powers—we are beginning to see the levels of outstanding cases in our courts falling. The latest figures show that in December 2021 the Crown court backlog was under 59,000. This is a fall of over 2,000 cases since its peak in June 2021.

Meanwhile, in the magistrates courts, the outstanding criminal caseload has dropped by almost 70,000 cases since its peak in July 2021.

The relaxation of covid-19 restrictions means that courtroom capacity has returned to pre-pandemic levels. But continuing to use some of our Nightingale courts will now help drive court recovery further, tackling the backlog and ultimately helping to secure speedier justice for victims.

So today this Government have confirmed arrangements to extend 13 Nightingale courts from March 2022. This equates to 30 extra courtrooms, mainly dealing with criminal work, but also some civil and family cases.

The following Nightingale courts have been extended:

- Prospero House, London
- Barbican, London
- Croydon Jurys Inn, London
- Mercure Hotel, Maidstone
- Former court, Chichester
- Former county court, Telford
- Park Hall Hotel, Wolverhampton
- Maple House, Birmingham
- Former Magistrates court, Fleetwood
- Cloth Hall court, Leeds
- Civic Centre, Swansea
- Former Magistrates court, Cirencester.

The decision to extend these Nightingale courts was based on operational need and venue availability, ensuring that these extra facilities are in the right place to meet demand and make best use of taxpayers' money.

Nightingale courts at Middlesbrough, Manchester, Liverpool, Bolton, Chester, Peterborough, Warwick, Winchester, Nottingham and 102 Petty France in London will end as planned at the end of March 2022. Use of the venue at Monument will end in early April, with HM Courts and Tribunals Service seeking a replacement venue.

The sites which are closing as planned are not needed because HMCTS has reopened existing hearing rooms as social distancing measures have eased. We now have sufficient rooms in these areas for all the available Crown court judges. We are continuing to deliver a high volume of judicial recruitment, with a recruitment programme of a further 1,100 judges in 2022-23 planned in addition to around 1,000 recruited during this financial year.

The extensions to Nightingale courts are part of our wider approach to increase capacity in line with local demand, building on measures taken over the last two years in response to the challenges of the pandemic, including:

- Legislating to double the sentencing powers available to magistrates from six months to a year to free up an estimated 2,000 extra days of Crown court sitting time each year;

- Investing a quarter of a billion pounds to support recovery in the courts in the last financial year, plus over £50 million for victims and support services;

- Ensuring there is no limit on the number of sitting days in the Crown court this year;

- Opening three rooms at Hendon Magistrates court that are currently being used for Crown court work, with a fourth due to open by the end of March 2022, providing custodial facilities for defendants on remand;

Opening two “super courtrooms” in Manchester and Loughborough, which can accommodate multi-handed trials, and added portacabins at 14 locations to facilitate jury trials; and

Arranging a temporary venue to hear a large trial in Walsall over the next 13 months, avoiding major disruption in the nearby Crown court.

These plans, alongside the decisive action already taken by this Government to date, makes it clear that we remain totally committed to reducing delays in our courts, and pulling every lever available to us to deliver justice for all those who need it.

[HCWS657]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 3 March 2022

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Topical Questions

The following is an extract from Health and Social Care questions on 1 March 2022.

T2. [905763]2002 **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Happy St David's day, Mr Speaker. Physician associates in my constituency, who play a vital role in the NHS, want to hear from the Government when long-awaited regulations that will allow them to take on more responsibility and play an even greater role in our NHS will come forward. Can the Secretary of State update the House and will he meet me and constituents to discuss this?

Sajid Javid: First, I wish a happy St David's day to the hon. Member and all those celebrating. I would be happy to meet her on this issue. The Government

greatly value the role of physician associates. She knows that they bring new talent to the NHS and act in an enabling role, where they can help healthcare teams with their workload. Physician associates will be regulated by the General Medical Council, and the Department has consulted on draft legislation on just how to do that.

[Official Report, 1 March 2022, Vol. 709, c. 900.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid).

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden).

The correct response should have been:

Sajid Javid: First, I wish a happy St David's day to the hon. Member and all those celebrating. I would be happy to meet her on this issue. The Government greatly value the role of physician associates. She knows that they bring new talent to the NHS and act in an enabling role, where they can help healthcare teams with their workload. Physician associates will be regulated by the General Medical Council, and the Department **plans to consult on draft legislation later this year** on just how to do that.

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 3 March 2022

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**not later than
Thursday 10 March 2022**

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