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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 15 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

HIGHGATE CEMETERY BILL [*LORDS*]

Lords amendment considered and agreed to.

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Cost of Living Increase: Impact on Households

1. **Kim Johnson** (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the impact of inflation on living standards. [906058]

6. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What fiscal steps he plans to take to help reduce the impact on households of the rise in the cost of living. [906063]

16. **Ms Marie Rimmer** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): What fiscal steps he plans to take to help reduce the impact on households of the rise in the cost of living. [906075]

18. **Steve McCabe** (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What fiscal steps he plans to take to help reduce the impact on households of the rise in the cost of living. [906077]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): The Government, of course, recognise that inflation is rising and are closely monitoring the situation together with the Bank of England. We are also putting in place policies to help families meet the rising cost of living, such as freezing duties, cutting the tax rate in universal credit and increasing the national living wage. Last month I announced to this House a £9 billion package of support to help households with rising energy bills.

Kim Johnson: The question was about what assessment has been made. The Resolution Foundation predicts that inflation will rise above 8% but benefits will increase by only 3%. Liverpool has some of the most deprived communities in this country, with 33% of children in my Riverside constituency suffering poverty. Does the Chancellor believe that now is not the time to increase national insurance contributions while the cost of living is increasing, forcing people into poverty at the highest level since the 1970s? Will he commit to putting measures in place in the spring statement?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about children in poverty, and I am pleased that there are now 300,000 fewer children in poverty than in 2010 thanks to the actions of Conservative-led Governments. We all know that the best way to ensure the children do not grow up in poverty is to ensure that they grow up in a house where people work, and that is why I was delighted this morning to learn that there are record numbers of people on payroll.

Gerald Jones: Citizens Advice has told me that one in six people in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney are unable to pay their energy bills right now, and that is before they spike next month and before the Chancellor's national insurance hike. Some 86% of people said that they did not think that the October energy loan scheme would make a difference in helping to pay their bills. The conflict in Ukraine will inevitably lead to a further surge in energy prices, so if he will not accept Labour's suggestion of a windfall tax on oil and gas producers, what exactly will the Chancellor do now to relieve the pressures on people in my constituency and across the country?

Rishi Sunak: We are putting in place support to help households meet the rising cost of energy bills, and £9 billion of support will help to ensure that four out of five households in England will receive £150 starting this April, with a further £200 of support towards the autumn. Of course, councils have been given extra money for discretionary funding to help households in need as well.

Ms Rimmer: Since the Chancellor announced his household loan scheme in response to the energy crisis as well as a huge rise in national insurance, the world has changed. Other Departments have adapted to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. When will the Treasury?

Rishi Sunak: With regard to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Treasury has been hard at work with our international partners to put in place the most comprehensive set of economic sanctions that this country has ever had and that Russia has ever experienced. I am very proud of the job we have done.

Steve McCabe: If the Chancellor had appreciated last autumn the extent to which energy costs and other household bills would rise, would he still have advocated a national insurance rise?

Rishi Sunak: We have reacted to rising energy bills by putting in place £9 billion of support, which will get to households far faster than the proposals put forward by the Opposition, with the £150 reaching four out of five households just this April when the price cap goes up. It is also worth bearing it in mind that, because of the price cap, households will be protected from further increases all the way through to the autumn.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): The cost of fuel is now an eye-watering £2 a litre in some areas, which has led to a huge VAT windfall for the Treasury. When the Chancellor thinks about his spring statement, will he look not just at cutting fuel duty but at mileage recovery rates? They have been at 45p a mile for more than a decade. Now is the time to put them up to 60p at least.

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his suggestions, and of course I will bear them in mind. He is right about the rising cost of fuel at the pumps, although I am pleased to see that over the last few days, the price of Brent has fallen by about 25%, illustrating the volatility of the situation.

Fay Jones (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): The cost of living is biting hard in Brecon and Radnorshire. Heating oil is eye-wateringly expensive and extremely hard to come by, while a local haulage firm in Llandrindod Wells is coughing up an extra £60,000 per month on diesel. It is wrong to assume that those who live in rural areas are wealthy enough to withstand these pressures, so can my right hon. Friend reassure my constituents that he has them in mind as he considers all the options available to him?

Rishi Sunak: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Representing as I do a rural constituency like hers, I know the difficulty that our constituents are facing. That is why our £9 billion package of support for energy that I announced earlier is done by electricity meter, ensuring that those who are off the gas grid also benefit.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): The impact on energy prices of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the sanctions will inevitably mean that Britain is poorer. There is nothing that we can do about that overall, but we can help to smooth the impact. I welcome the announcement this morning that there are 275,000 extra people on payroll. What more can the Chancellor do to improve companies' ability to hire workers and to enable people to keep more of their own money; for example, through the reduction in the taper rate on universal credit?

Rishi Sunak: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his typically thoughtful question. He is absolutely right about the circumstances we face. The data this morning shows record numbers of people on payroll, and that is to be welcomed. Indeed, the unemployment rate is now back to the levels we saw before the pandemic, thanks to our plan for jobs. There are record vacancies, and we want to get people into work. The best way to do that is to give them the skills they need and cut taxes to increase incentives. That is exactly what this Government are doing, and I expect us to make more progress in the months ahead.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): With council tax being one of the biggest items in household budgets, could the Chancellor remind the House which party tends to be the best, in a local council, for setting council tax?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend makes an excellent and timely point. She knows that I know that, in this country, if people want good local services delivered for the lowest possible council tax, they need to vote Conservative.

Mr Speaker: You should not make the Chancellor blush.

I call the shadow Minister, Pat McFadden.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The package on energy announced by the Chancellor last month has already been rendered obsolete by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Some estimates of average annual household energy bills suggest that there will be rises to £3,000 or even more from October. That is a ruinous figure for many of our constituents. Will the Chancellor revisit this support package in next week's spring statement, and will he reconsider his refusal to fund help for hard-pressed households through a windfall tax on the enormous profits that oil and gas companies are making?

Rishi Sunak: It is worth bearing it in mind that, because of the price cap, households will be protected all the way through the autumn. We do not know what the price cap will be at that point. If the right hon. Gentleman knows, he is probably in the wrong line of business, and it would be good if he could tell the rest of us. Regarding a windfall tax, Conservative Members believe in getting more investment into the North sea and exploiting our domestic resources. The roundtable that my right hon. Friends the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the Prime Minister and the Business Secretary hosted yesterday showed that there is enormous appetite to invest more in the UK. A windfall tax would put off that investment.

Mr McFadden: Of course, there are global factors driving up energy prices and inflation in many countries, but what singles out the UK is this Government's decision to impose a tax rise on working people right when the impact of rising energy bills is hitting people the hardest. Why are the Government so determined to make the cost of living crisis worse now with these tax rises, particularly when the Treasury is briefing anyone—including the Government's own Back Benchers—who will listen that the Tory party is planning pre-election tax cuts?

Rishi Sunak: The right hon. Gentleman talks about exceptionalism with regard to policy. Part of the reason we are in this situation with energy prices is the decisions made by the previous Labour Government, in particular on nuclear energy, which we are now rapidly having to make up for. We are also committed to tackling the unprecedented backlogs in the NHS, getting the waiting lists down, and recovering from covid. Every single penny of the health and social care levy will go to the people's No. 1 priority and, although things are difficult, I know that is what people want to happen.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): I represent an area in Cornwall where a large number of people are on the state pension. I know, from conversations that I have had with the Chancellor, that he is particularly concerned about that demographic. Given the critical rise in the cost of living, I wonder whether one of the easier routes to address it would be to reinstate the triple lock for next year.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right to highlight pensioners and to support them in the way that he does. He will know that we made a decision temporarily to move to a double lock this year because of the anomaly in the reported earnings, which would have meant a very large rise statistically that would not have been justified or fair in the circumstances. That said, I am pleased to say that pensions are now at their highest

level relative to earnings in over three decades because of the Government's policy on the triple lock, and we continue to be the party that will support those who need our help.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Sanctions against Putin's regime are absolutely necessary, but they will add an extra layer of economic harm on top of the existing Tory cost of living crisis. The Chancellor must use the upcoming spring statement to deliver an emergency package of support to householders and businesses, whose costs have spiralled out of control. Will he turn his buy now, pay later energy loan into a grant, reinstate the universal credit uplift, increase other benefits with inflation and scrap the VAT and national insurance hike that will damage so many people?

Rishi Sunak: What we are doing is tackling the cost of energy. Unlike the hon. Lady's party, we believe in the future of the North sea and we are investing in it. We want to make sure that we promote the jobs that are there. On upcoming support for energy costs, the Scottish Government have plenty of powers on welfare and tax, and if they think that they can make a difference, they should use them.

Kickstart Scheme

2. **Andy Carter** (Warrington South) (Con): What assessment he has made of the progress of the kickstart Scheme. [906059]

3. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What assessment he has made of the progress of the kickstart Scheme. [906060]

10. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What assessment he has made of the progress of the kickstart Scheme. [906067]

19. **Dr James Davies** (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): What assessment he has made of the progress of the kickstart Scheme. [906078]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): Some 130,000 young people across Great Britain have benefited from the kickstart scheme so far, including in my hon. Friends' constituencies. That is lower than the 250,000 jobs that the scheme could have funded, but the scheme was designed at a time when unemployment was expected to peak at 12%. The reality is that, thanks to the intervention by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, the economy has recovered better than expected and unemployment peaked at 5.2% in 2020.

Andy Carter: I am grateful for that response. Last week, I went to visit Sigma, a great local business in Warrington South, which has employed nine people under kickstart, and that has made a massive difference. Can my right hon. Friend tell me what steps the Government are taking to help businesses retain young people as we approach the end of the six-month kickstart programme?

Mr Clarke: It is great to hear about my hon. Friend's visit to Sigma, and I know that 180 kickstart jobs have been created in his constituency as of December. For those on universal credit who do not immediately continue into full-time unsubsidised work, support will continue to be available from the young person's work coach to help them use their newly gained skills, and support will also be available from the wider DWP youth offer.

Cherilyn Mackrory: Last week I visited the jobcentre in Truro where they told me that kickstart has been a huge success. We have had around 620 kickstarters across Cornwall, providing urgently needed jobs for our young people. Given that the scheme will end this month, can my right hon. Friend expand on what the Department will do to support skills and apprenticeships, particularly for young people across Cornwall, so that we can be at the heart of the levelling-up agenda?

Mr Clarke: Spreading opportunity by levelling up our skills base is at the heart of our wider levelling-up White Paper—it is one of the core missions that it sets out. The Government will invest £3.8 billion in skills by 2024-25, which is equivalent to a cash increase of 42% compared with 2019-20. On apprenticeships, I am happy to say that last year more than 3,000 people started apprenticeships in my hon. Friend's county of Cornwall. We want to see that work continue.

Henry Smith: Over recent months, many young people in Crawley have benefited from the kickstart scheme. In contrast to every Labour Government, which have all left office with unemployment higher than when they started, does my right hon. Friend agree that the way to recovery for our economy and the cost of living is the multi-billion pound plan for jobs that the Government are delivering?

Mr Clarke: My hon. Friend is right about the Government's record on employment, just as he is right about the Labour party's record on unemployment. To continue to boost employment, wages and living standards, he rightly references our plan for jobs, which is proving to be an enormous success. In total, the Department for Work and Pensions spend on labour market support will be more than £6 billion over the next three years.

Dr Davies: I recently visited the Dyserth Falls holiday park in my constituency, which is under renovation, to speak with some of the 40 members of the public who have been employed there under the kickstart scheme. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all those who have taken part in the scheme, especially those who have been given permanent jobs, and set out what ongoing support there will be for those who have completed their placements?

Mr Clarke: As my hon. Friend knows, I know Dyserth very well. In fact, I will be there the weekend after next. I join him in congratulating all those who have taken part in the kickstart scheme, especially those who have secured full-time jobs. Kickstart is, of course, only one part of the wider package of support for young people that is under way. The DWP's youth offer, which runs until 2025 and is worth £60 million, includes a 13-week youth employment programme, supported youth hubs and, crucially, specialised youth employability coaches.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Just in case colleagues in the House did not quite hear the Chief Secretary, he admitted that kickstart has failed. It promised young people 250,000 jobs and got barely half of that. But it is worse than that. The National Audit Office said about kickstart that there was

“limited assurance over the quality of the work placements created by the scheme, or whether jobs created by employers would have existed anyway”.

So in relation to the failed kickstart scheme, what does the Chief Secretary make of the following economic expression: “dead weight loss”?

Mr Clarke: With respect to the hon. Lady, of whom I am a great admirer, that is an unfair characterisation of the success of the scheme. It clearly needs to be situated in the wider context. In fact, the British economy has performed much better than anyone expected when the scheme was set up. There are robust processes in place that make sure that we genuinely are adding additional value. So work coaches have to certify that the people on the scheme are eligible for it and would have been unlikely to find work without it. Employers need to demonstrate how the jobs created are additional. Finally, it is important to contrast this scheme with the last Labour Government’s future jobs fund, which reached its total far more slowly and was far less effective. This scheme has got 130,000 and rising young people into work. It has been a great success.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is interesting that the Minister can call kickstart such a resounding success, given that last month the Public Accounts Committee said that the Department that runs the scheme does not know what success looks like because it launched the scheme without any idea as to what the success criteria would be. It also has no way of knowing whether the young people who are referred to kickstart jobs are the right young people and it is not properly evaluating the longer term support that employers give to those young people. Does the Minister agree with the PAC report, which was endorsed by a Committee consisting of a majority of Conservative MPs?

Mr Clarke: No, I do not agree with that report. It is an unfair characterisation of a response that was put in place at pace to meet an unprecedented crisis in our employment market. The wider success of our policy on youth employment is best measured by the fact that in January there were 500,000 more employees aged under 25 than there were in January 2021. The kickstart programme has played its full part in helping to make that possible.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Businesses in the steel industry are more likely to be able to support the kickstart scheme if the Government manage to get Donald Trump’s unfair tariffs of 25% on British steel exports lifted, as the Japanese and the EU have already achieved. Has the Chancellor spoken to the Chief Secretary about this issue, and if not why not?

Mr Clarke: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point about tariffs. Obviously, the Government believe in free trade and it is something that we want to see happen too. As a Member of Parliament who represents a steel-making constituency, I am keenly aware of this as an issue. The Department for International Trade leads on the issue, and I know that the Secretary of

State and her predecessor have had long and ongoing conversations with their American counterparts about getting those tariffs lifted.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): With the scheme failing to attract the numbers that were predicted by over 80,000, will the Minister outline what structure is in place to attract those who have lost out, to ensure that those young people have opportunities to find a life career? Will the new scheme be UK-wide?

Mr Clarke: Youth unemployment is lower today than it was pre-pandemic, and the wider success of the scheme has to be judged in the context that the worst-case scenario that we were looking to offset never came to pass because of the interventions that we made. If a scheme does not achieve the headline numbers that were anticipated at the time it was established because the wider economic performance of the country was so much better than anticipated, that is a success, not something to bemoan.

Gambling Industry Reform

4. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits for the Exchequer of reforming the gambling industry. [906061]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately): Gambling contributes over £3 billion per annum to the Exchequer. The Government keep gambling duties under regular review to ensure that the sector continues to pay its fair share. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is reviewing the Gambling Act 2005, after which the Government will assess the impact of any reforms on the Exchequer.

Carolyn Harris: Analysis carried out by both NERA Economic Consulting and Landman Economics concluded that, given that online gambling is “labour intensive” and predominantly based offshore in avoidance of UK corporation tax, its net impact on the British economy is negative, particularly once the direct cost to Government, estimated by Public Health England to be £647 million, is factored in. Will the Government support the upcoming reviews of gambling regulation—the Minister said it is under active consideration—and welcome any moves to reduce gambling harm and the associated cost to society and the economy?

Helen Whately: I know that the hon. Lady is a committed campaigner on gambling as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on gambling related harm. Specific to her point about offshore gambling operators, I am sure that she knows that since 2014 gambling duties have been taxed on a “place of consumption” basis, so offshore operators pay taxes on profits related to UK gambling.

To the broader point of the gambling review, I spoke to the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who is leading DCMS’s work on gambling, just yesterday, and I assure the hon. Lady that the Government stand ready to take action where there is evidence that vulnerable people, such as those suffering from gambling addictions, are being exploited by gambling operators.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The term “gambling” covers a broad spectrum of activities. Does the Minister share my concerns that over-zealous regulation of the gambling industry as a whole could lead to some damaging unintended consequences, such as driving vulnerable individuals to the black market, which is completely unregulated, loss of revenue to the Exchequer and damage to the greyhound and horse-racing industries, which employ lots of people?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There is the basic principle that people should in general be free to spend their money as they see fit. There are about 100,000 jobs in the gambling industry in this country. It is important to ensure that we protect people who are most vulnerable from exploitation, and I know that the gambling review I mentioned is looking carefully at the best way to do that.

Cost of Living Increase: Universal Credit

5. **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of reviewing the inflationary uplift in universal credit in response to the increase in the cost of living. [906062]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): Details of ministerial discussions are not normally disclosed. Treasury Ministers have meetings with a wide variety of organisations in the public and private sectors as part of the process of policy development. From April, universal credit and many other benefits will be uprated by 3.1%, the rate of the consumer prices index in September 2021. In addition, the Government are providing support worth over £20 billion across this financial year and next to help families with the cost of living.

Stephen Farry: Millions of families across the UK, both in and out of work, depend on universal credit and other benefits. As the Minister knows, the 3.1% uprate was set in September. We are now seeing inflation of over 7%. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trussell Trust and many other organisations highlight the real jeopardy that families are now facing. They have no plan B. Indeed, families are facing cuts in real terms of over £500 over the course of the year. Surely that decision has to be reassessed in the light of changing circumstances.

Lucy Frazer: CPI has been the default inflation measure for the Government’s statutory annual review of benefits since 2011, as the hon. Gentleman knows, but we are fully aware of the impact on households of the cost of living. That is why we are providing £20 billion of support, whether that is through £9 billion of support to help with rising energy bills or through universal credit. As he also knows, we have cut the taper rate so that families can keep an additional £1,000 annually in their pockets.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Does the Minister think that the uplift coming next month will be enough to get people all the way through next winter? If she recognises that there is a problem, will the Government consider bringing forward next April’s increase to this autumn, to give people a bit more money to help with their heating and food bills next winter?

Lucy Frazer: As my hon. Friend knows, we have introduced a range of measures to support families, both working and not working. The price of energy is now set until the autumn, and a significant amount of money is going in now and in the autumn.

Reducing Economic Inequality

7. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to help reduce economic inequality. [906064]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): Work is the best route out of poverty. We are investing more than £6 billion in labour market support over the next three years to help people to move into and progress in work. In addition, analysis published at the last autumn Budget shows that in 2024-25, tax, welfare and spending decision since the 2019 spending review will have benefited the poorest households the most as a percentage of income.

Bill Esterson: But real wages are falling by the largest amount since 2014, inflation is set to hit 8% and the energy price cap is going up. In the cause of fairness and sound economics, when will the Financial Secretary and her colleagues admit that it makes sense to use the record profits of North sea oil and gas to help ordinary people, who face a cost of living crisis?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman knows from the statistics announced this morning that wages are up in real terms compared with pre-pandemic levels. In fact, unemployment is now almost back to pre-pandemic levels, and is lower than in Canada, France, Italy, Spain and Australia. On his specific question, the North sea oil industry already contributes additional taxes through a 40% rate, which is double the amount that other corporations pay.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): My constituency has one of the lowest rates of gross value added in the UK and is desperately in need of jobs and investment. The island is known as “energy island” because we have wind, waves, solar, tidal and—hopefully—nuclear. I was delighted to hear the Chancellor mention nuclear and the fact that he has committed to the £120 million future nuclear enabling fund, but will he also commit to publishing the criteria and bidding process, so we can move at pace in this vital sector?

Lucy Frazer: It is great to see the good work going on in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Of course, her question is for our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who I am sure is considering it carefully.

Managing the Public Finances

8. **Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to help ensure value for money in public spending. [906065]

13. **Lucy Allan** (Telford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to manage the public finances effectively. [906071]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke):

People are rightly angry that fraudsters stole from covid support schemes, as am I. When the schemes were launched, there was cross-party consensus that we needed speed to protect jobs, and because of our action unemployment peaked at 5.2%, not the 12% predicted at the start of the pandemic. We designed the schemes to prevent as much fraud as possible, and lenders stopped nearly £2.2 billion of potential fraud from the bounce back loan schemes. We continue to take action on multiple fronts to recover money that was claimed fraudulently.

Nia Griffith: It is not just a matter of fraud; it is a matter of incompetence as well. The National Audit Office has been scathing about the UK's wasteful spending of £37 billion on private contractors to deliver the test and trace system in England, while we in Wales had a more efficient system through partnership with the Welsh Government and local councils. What guidance is the Chief Secretary giving Departments on how to avoid giving such wasteful contracts in the future? Does the guidance include considering, wherever practicable, the delivery of service contracts through public authorities, where any profit remains in the public purse?

Mr Clarke: We always continue to encourage best value, and this is at the heart of all Treasury documents on the use of public money. On the hon. Lady's point about test and trace, it is very important to reaffirm that the great majority of the costs associated with this scheme were about testing as opposed to tracing, and it was only that scheme that allowed us to come through the enormous challenges of the period, particularly prior to the availability of the vaccine, in a way that allowed our society and our wider economy to keep going to the extent that they could.

Lucy Allan: My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has been incredibly agile in responding to exceptional crises. As he tackles the impact of Putin's war on our economy, will the Minister take every measure to accelerate growth, including reducing taxes on fuel and energy?

Mr Clarke: As has been discussed earlier in this session, as my hon. Friend rightly highlights, the Government recognise that households do need support with the rising cost of energy. Indeed, the Chancellor has already provided support worth some £9.1 billion for the financial year 2022-23. On her wider point about boosting growth, the Chancellor outlined in his Mais lecture the importance of the Government investing in capital, people and ideas, so that we can strengthen the economy and make sure that the UK is best placed to succeed in what is a challenging set of circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Murray (Ealing North) (Lab/Co-op): Just in the last seven days, we have learned that 7 billion items of personal protective equipment were not fit for purpose, the Government are burning 500 lorryloads of it a month and former Treasury Minister Lord Agnew admitted that the lack of anti-fraud measures in the Government's covid business support packages meant it was "happy days if you were a crook".

When billions of pounds of public money have been lost through the Chancellor's incompetence, is the Minister ashamed to be hiking taxes on working people by billions of pounds next month?

Mr Clarke: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman misunderstands the situation in regard to PPE. Over 97% of the stock that was ordered was suitable for use. Indeed, when it comes to the wider figure covering the PPE piece, £4.7 billion of that represents PPE that will be used by the NHS, but which was procured at a greater price than it carries today owing to the scarcity that prevailed at that time, and another £3.3 billion represents PPE that can be used in non-medical settings, and the Department of Health and Social Care has already sold and donated stock in this category.

On the wider fraud point, this goes back to my earlier answer that we had to design these schemes at pace to protect jobs—I think this was agreed across the House—and we rightly, I think, made sure that that was the priority. We then built in the protections that were needed, and the protections have made sure that we are able to pursue anyone who has defrauded the taxpayer.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Lord Agnew's evidence to the Treasury Committee last week was a damning indictment of this Tory Government's "terrible complacency"—his words—about fraud and protecting public money, and he does not buy what the Minister says about working at pace either. Lord Agnew anticipates that there will be an "avalanche of claims" from the banks on the state guarantee of the bounce back loan scheme arriving at the Treasury in the coming weeks, so can the Minister tell the House what actions he is taking to prevent yet further billions of public money from waltzing out the door in the midst of a cost of living crisis?

Mr Clarke: On the hon. Lady's point, the Government set up the £100 million taxpayer protection taskforce at the Budget back in March 2021, and that taskforce is expected to recover between £800 million and £1 billion from fraudulent or incorrect payments over the next two years. That builds on the work that has already been done, which saw Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs recover £536 million in 2020-21. Other agencies of the state are also involved in this important work. The National Crime Agency has made 17 arrests, 106 directors have been disqualified as of February 2022, there have been 48 bankruptcy restrictions and 13 companies have been wound up in the public interest in relation to bounce back loans.

Regional Growth

9. **Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to encourage regional growth across the UK. [906066]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately): At last autumn's Budget and spending review, we announced a comprehensive package of investment to level up the UK and encourage regional growth. This included the £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, the £2.6 billion shared prosperity fund and £1.6 billion of investment in the next generation of the British Business Bank's regional investment fund.

Damien Moore: Does my hon. Friend agree that town deals are one of the most progressive ways of supporting regional growth, and that the one for Southport will kick-start our economy locally?

Helen Whately: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his hard work to secure the £37.5 million town deal for Southport, which will be truly transformative for his constituents. That funding will bring in more private investment to his constituency, building on public funding and providing new jobs and opportunities for his constituents. It will be levelling up in action.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The stark reality in the north-east is that we have seen rising child poverty and reliance on food banks in recent years, and the poorest households lost £1,000 when the Government cut universal credit in the autumn. Rising prices look set to take away another £1,000 from households, before the economic impact of what is happening in Ukraine. Ahead of the spending statement next week, may I urge the Treasury please to do more to tackle the destitution that will be inevitable if nothing is done to intervene to support households in the north-east, who will then support the local economy to grow?

Helen Whately: As other Ministers have outlined, we are supporting households with the rising cost of living, including a package worth £21 billion of support. In particular we are supporting those on universal credit by reducing the taper rate to ensure that work pays. Looking further ahead, through our commitment to levelling up we are investing across the country in skills and infrastructure, with the levelling-up fund to improve growth, boost prosperity, opportunities and pay, and thereby improve people's standard of living.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): The Minister will be aware of the positive contribution that financial services can make to levelling up all over the country. With that in mind, and with the work of my all-party group on financial markets and services on levelling up, will she commit that the Treasury will work with the industry to spread opportunity within the financial services sector, to help that sector spread opportunity through all regions of this country?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I know he is knowledgeable about this sector. It is important to remember that financial services are to the benefit of the whole country, with two thirds of jobs in financial services being outside London and the south-east. Financial services are absolutely an important part of our ambitions for levelling up.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In rural communities, especially Cumbria, we are deeply concerned about the Government's apparent lack of concern about growth in the rural parts of this country. Is the Minister aware of the enormous damage being done to farming in the UK, just at the moment when we need our farmers the most, by the reduction in basic payments? That started in December when farmers lost between 5% and 25% of their basic payment, without any availability of anything to replace it for years to come. Will she intervene now to keep basic payments where they currently are, so that we can keep Britain farming?

Helen Whately: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I also represent a rural constituency with significant agricultural interest, and I assure him that we have protected agricultural funding through this Parliament. We are committed to levelling up across all parts of the UK, in rural as well as urban areas.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): What steps is the Minister taking with our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that areas that need levelling up are able to attract private sector investment?

Helen Whately: That is a very important point. Levelling up is not just about public sector investment—indeed, the lion's share of investment in future growth in our economy will come from the private sector. One important thing that the British Business Bank is doing with its regional fund is crowding in private sector investment, so that we will get more private sector investment on top of the public sector investment we are putting in.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The shared prosperity fund could be one of the Government's most effective means of encouraging regional growth across the UK, but only if the investment goes where it is most needed. Does the Minister believe that the Treasury should apply the funding commitments that were rightly made to Cornwall also to the Tees Valley as well as to South Yorkshire?

Helen Whately: We are making a substantial investment through the shared prosperity fund and other funds across the country. We have committed to ensuring that the shared prosperity fund will be at least as much as parts of the country received before through EU funding, and I am committed to the hon. Gentleman's area just as much as to Cornwall and other parts of the UK.

Levelling-up Fund

11. **Peter Gibson** (Darlington) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the levelling-up fund on job opportunities and the economy across the UK.
[906069]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately): By investing in local infrastructure, the levelling-up fund will strengthen local economies, boost job opportunities and improve the day-to-day lives of people across the UK. So far, we have committed £1.7 billion to 105 projects, and at the end of the month the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will publish its monitoring and evaluation strategy for the funding.

Peter Gibson: With £23.3 million invested through the towns fund, £105 million for Bank Top station and 1,700 civil service jobs coming to Darlington, we are a leading example of how the Government's levelling-up agenda is benefiting communities in the north-east. The second round of the levelling-up fund will continue that work. Will my hon. Friend outline the timescales for the delivery of that round?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is a fabulous campaigner for Darlington, as evidenced in all the funding that his local town has secured. I am a regular visitor to Darlington, as are my Treasury colleagues, and have seen those investments already making a difference. He asks about

the second round of the levelling-up fund. It will open for business this spring, with further details to be published shortly.

Tackling Illicit Finance

12. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What steps he is taking to tackle illicit finance. [906070]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): We continue to review and reform our regulatory and enforcement approach to ensure that, as illicit finance evolves, our responses do too. We have announced an unprecedented package of sanctions, including against prominent Russian oligarchs. Last night, we brought forward the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 to crack down further, and we will continue to do further work on the economic crime Bill in the next session. We have also brought a new kleptocracy cell into the National Crime Agency to tackle those explicit threats.

Mr Bradshaw: But it took a group of anarchists to seize Deripaska's London mansion yesterday, so when will the Minister do what Europe and America have already done and seize rather than just freeze Putin's cronies' assets? When will he close the loopholes that still allow them to escape sanction by putting their assets in their family members' names or using shell companies based in British overseas territories?

John Glen: The Government have worked closely with the US and the EU on a whole range of interventions. We have sanctioned 500 individuals and entities, including 386 members of the Russian state Duma. We have also worked with the US on the expulsion of banks from the SWIFT banking system, cut off 3 million Russian companies from capital markets and seen \$250 billion wiped of Russian stocks. We will continue to work closely with our allies to ensure that our response continues to be comprehensive.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The Government have once again delayed the long-overdue reforms to Companies House that could have deterred illicit finance, prevented covid fraud and provided vital information to the authorities. I will ask the Minister an important question, and I want him to update the House accurately. How many Russian-linked individuals and businesses have been wrongly given Treasury-backed covid-related business support?

John Glen: We worked to give widespread support to lots of individuals across the economy. I cannot give the hon. Lady the exact chapter and verse on individuals who have been supported, but we will continue to work on Companies House reform, which will be the most significant reform of the companies register in 170 years, and later this year we will publish a second economic crime plan and fraud action plan to address the threats that we continue to see.

Topical Questions

T1. [906083] **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak): In response to Russia's unprovoked aggression against Ukraine, the Treasury has helped deliver a world-leading package of economic sanctions to deliver severe consequences to the Russian economy. Across insurance, finance, trade, public and private capital markets, clearing, SWIFT, central bank assets and, indeed, bank asset freezes, we are ensuring that the Government play a leading role in making sure that Putin's aggression does not go unpunished.

Marsha De Cordova: Families in my constituency are facing the cost of living crisis, and the planned real-terms cut to social security will force more of them into poverty and into having to make impossible decisions between eating and heating their home. According to the Trussell Trust, one in three on universal credit were not able to dress for the weather last month as they could not afford appropriate clothing or shoes. That is unacceptable. Will the Chancellor increase the level of social security support in his spring statement next week to alleviate some of the worst impacts of the cost of living crisis?

Rishi Sunak: As is common to all other years, welfare is uprated annually by September's CPI. That will be the case next year as well, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Financial Secretary laid out. For those on universal credit we have cut the tax rate to ensure that work pays, delivering a £2 billion tax cut to 2 million on low incomes—the best route out of poverty.

T3. [906085] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): With the cost of fuel reaching record levels, we face a cost of living rise across the board. Everything we consume has to be delivered, and in Clacton that can be a long way. France is offering rebates and Germany a fixed price reduction. Has my right hon. Friend considered a special reduction, of say 15%, for vital fuel users, such as haulage companies?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right to point out the importance of fuel as a cost for both businesses and households. That is why I am proud that we delivered the eleventh freeze in fuel duty in a row. That has delivered huge savings for households and businesses over the past several years.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Millions of people are worried sick about soaring bills. Meanwhile, BP says it has more cash than it knows what to do with and has compared its record profits from inflated prices to a cash machine. Those profits are not being used to fund new investment. They are going on dividends and share buybacks, so why will the Chancellor not make North sea oil and gas companies pay their fair share of taxes to tackle the enormous cost of living crisis?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Lady talks about a fair share. It is worth bearing in mind that oil and gas companies are already taxed at double the rate of all other companies: 40% versus 19%, currently. Last year saw the lowest amount of investment in the North sea on record—just a few billion pounds. As my right hon. Friends who were at the roundtable yesterday know, there are billions of pounds of projects waiting to be unlocked. We want that investment and those jobs here in the UK.

Rachel Reeves: That is not happening with the share buybacks. The Chancellor is totally out of touch. He does not seem to understand how the cost of living crisis is affecting the least well off in society, as campaigner Jack Monroe highlighted. The Institute for Fiscal Studies confirmed that the poorest households face an inflation rate 50% higher than the richest households. The Resolution Foundation warns that between 2020 and 2022, 700,000 more children will have fallen into poverty. That is devastating, but it is not inevitable. The Chancellor can and must do more in the spring statement to provide people with real help, not just a loan. Why is he so intent on shielding oil executives, instead of protecting the poorest in society?

Rishi Sunak: The best way to help people cope with rising energy costs and bills over time is to make sure we have a diversified and secure supply of energy, more of which comes from here at home. I share the hon. Lady's concern for those on the lowest incomes. I am proud that all the evidence points to the fact that the decisions made by this Government over the last few years have benefited those on the lowest incomes the most. We have protected those who need our help, and we will continue to do so.

T5. [906087] **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Further to our recent meeting, has the Minister had an opportunity to consider my proposals for a traffic light system to inform the public of the tax approval status of investment schemes?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): It was very interesting to meet my hon. Friend, together with his colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on investment fraud, and to hear his idea. As we discussed, Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs is very keen to make clear which schemes do not work. That is why, in the Finance Act 2022, the Government legislated to allow HMRC to name promoters and the schemes they promote at the earliest possible stage, to warn taxpayers of the risk of entering into those schemes, and to help those already involved to exit avoidance.

T2. [906084] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Research by Scope showed that one third of disabled households were already living in poverty last year. NatCen's recent report on health and disability benefits, which was commissioned by the Government, further illustrates the devastating impact of insufficient financial support. What do Ministers have to say to disabled people who are already struggling and are now living in fear of worse to come?

Rishi Sunak: We are spending record amounts on supporting those who are disabled. Relative to the OECD, I think we are spending in excess of the average for other leading countries. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has a particular programme of support in place to help those who are disabled to move into employment; plans were announced earlier this year.

T6. [906088] **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): In his last Budget, the Chancellor slashed universal credit withdrawal rates, delivering an 8% tax cut for the least well off, but as I explained in "Poverty Trapped", the combined deductions from income tax and benefits

withdrawals often still top 70% for the lowest-paid. If tax rates above 45% destroy work incentives for high earners, why should it be any different for low earners? How much more opportunity, energy and ambition could we unleash if these regressively high and unfair rates were cut even further?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the effect of a high effective tax rate on incentives to work. That is why the Government reduced the universal credit taper rate from 63% to 55% and increased the universal credit work allowance by £500 per year, which is essentially a tax cut for the lowest-paid, worth more than £2 billion in 2022-23, and means that 1.9 million households will keep an extra £1,000 per year on average.

T4. [906086] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Waste recycling businesses face an increase in tax on red diesel of thousands of pounds per month from April. I take it that the Chancellor agrees that waste recycling has important economic as well as environmental benefits, so what plans has he to address the sudden rise in costs for businesses that process and reuse waste materials?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Helen Whately): The changes to the taxation of red diesel were announced back in 2020, were confirmed in spring 2021 and are coming in this year, so businesses, including in the sector that the hon. Member refers to, have had plenty of time to prepare. It is absolutely right that we tax fuels that are highly polluting; unfortunately, diesel is one of them.

T7. [906089] **Jill Mortimer** (Hartlepool) (Con): Hartlepool proudly stands with Ukraine and fully supports the sanctions imposed on Putin's regime. How will the post-Brexit windfall refund of £200 million from the European research fund for coal and steel be spent on supporting our steel industries?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend is an active campaigner for the steel sector in her constituency. I can assure her that energy-intensive industries such as steel receive substantial support from the Government, including free allowances from the emissions trading scheme and the £315 million industrial energy transformation fund, to help them to cut energy bills.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): A statutory instrument entitled the Customs (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2022 was on yesterday's Order Paper for approval by the House. It amends the customs arrangements for the United Kingdom by excluding Northern Ireland from them, changing the term "United Kingdom" to "Great Britain". That runs totally contrary to the assurances given by the Prime Minister that Northern Ireland would remain part of the UK customs territory; it runs contrary to article 4 of the Northern Ireland protocol; and it now means not only that Northern Ireland is part of the single market under the European Court of Justice, but that it is outside the UK customs territory. The motion relating to the instrument was not moved. Can the Financial Secretary give an assurance that it will not be brought back to the House until there has been a meeting to explain why it is necessary, what its impact on Northern Ireland is and why the Government have brought it forward?

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to answer that question. I understand completely the concerns of people in Northern Ireland about the impact of the protocol; the right hon. Member will know how seriously the Government take those concerns and how we are negotiating with the EU to ensure that we get the right arrangement for Northern Ireland. I can give him assurances here and now about what the statutory instrument was doing: it was making very minor technical changes in a number of areas, for example in relation to the provision of information that might have to be given but that was never previously enforced. It was actually easing up the requirements for those who operate trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. These were technical changes, and I am very—

Mr Speaker: Order.

T8. [906090] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Chancellor for his swift actions to protect Fylde consumers from rising energy prices. However, we are all aware that emergency intervention is not sustainable in the long term, and undermines our need to end our reliance on foreign fossil fuels. Fracking is not the solution. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to invest in domestic renewable and nuclear energy—the fuel for which is manufactured in Fylde—as well as in improved energy efficiency?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend has made an extremely good point. Now is the moment for us to go full steam ahead with our transition away from fossil fuels. We are investing in nuclear, we are accelerating our progress on renewables, and we are boosting energy efficiency in homes across the country. This is how we will bring bills down, improve our energy security and tackle climate change.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): When the Government set up the coronavirus business interruption loan scheme, they recklessly failed to agree any guidance on early repayments. As a result, businesses are now being charged extortionate fees and are facing bankruptcy. Why is the Chancellor putting the profits of unscrupulous lenders above the recovery of our small businesses?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): He is not doing that. The schemes were set up in various ways, depending on the size of businesses, and it will be for the individuals who borrowed money to engage with the lenders to refinance those loans on a case-by-case basis.

T9. [906091] **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): People in my constituency who live in mansion blocks where heating is paid for centrally do not currently benefit from the energy price cap. That is clearly an anomaly. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss ways in which we might ameliorate the situation?

Helen Whately: My hon. Friend has made an important point. We recognise that some people living in mansion blocks are part of a heat network and are not covered by the price cap. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the £144 million in discretionary funding that went to councils as part of the recent £9 billion energy support package, and to forthcoming legislation in which we will give Ofgem new powers to regulate prices in the sector as a matter of priority.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We really must start seizing assets and not just freezing them. That is the only way in which we can make sure that the money goes towards the reconstruction of Ukraine. Would it not also be a good idea for us not just to look at the really famous people like Abramovich, but to look at the people who own £750,000 properties in the UK and who may be the cousins, brothers, sisters, parents or some other proxy of Russian oligarchs in the UK? Must we not also do far more to tackle the personal finance of President Putin, much of which, I am told, is in the UK?

John Glen: As ever, the hon. Gentleman has made a powerful point about a very important matter. Work with our allies is ongoing to establish how we can deepen our response in a co-ordinated way in order to make a real impact on illicit finance.

T10. [906092] **Sir David Evennett** (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I regularly visit businesses throughout my constituency, and have been fortunate enough to meet some very talented apprentices who are eager to develop their skills and build careers. Does my hon. Friend agree that apprenticeships will play a key role in closing the skills gap by helping young people to gain employment in more highly skilled roles, and can he say what action the Government are taking to encourage more employers to take on more apprentices?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): My hon. Friend has made an excellent point. He is right to champion the value of apprenticeships, in which the Government keenly believe. I had a great roundtable with apprentices in Newcastle recently, and heard for myself just what a difference they are making both to their employer and to the wider economy.

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): It is estimated that the Chancellor's smash and grab on national insurance will raise £13 billion. By happy coincidence, at the end of the financial year the Chancellor will have an extra £13 billion-worth of borrowing, because the Government have not met the borrowing expectations. Will the Chancellor use that happy coincidence to scrap the tax on jobs?

Rishi Sunak: The forecast for the public finances will be updated next week. As for jobs, I am happy to confirm that, according to today's figures, there are record numbers of people on payrolls, record numbers of vacancies, and, indeed, more people in work now than before the crisis—and the unemployment rate is now lower than, or at the same level as, it was before coronavirus hit.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The Government have repealed many of the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020, but they have not repealed the Act itself. This means that the Treasury can still order Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to start support schemes such as furlough without recourse to Parliament. Control of expenditure is Parliament's first responsibility, so are the Government going to repeal the Act in total, or will the Treasury take action to give the proper powers back to Parliament?

Rishi Sunak: I would be very happy to look into the matter that my right hon. Friend raises.

Shale Gas Production

12.35 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to confirm what the Government's current stance is on shale gas production in the UK.

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): In response to Putin's barbaric acts in Ukraine and against the Ukrainian people, we need to keep all our energy options open. We have always been clear that the development of shale gas in the UK must be safe and cause minimal disruption and damage to those living and working in nearby sites. This is not a new position. Shale gas and new approaches could be part of our future energy mix, but we need to be led by the science and have the support of local communities. That was in our general manifesto, on which my hon. Friend and I stood at the last election.

The pause on fracking implemented in November 2019 on the basis of the difficulty in predicting and managing seismic activity caused by fracking remains in place, and we will continue to be led by the science in our approach. We are clear that shale gas is not the solution to near-term issues. It would take years of exploration and development before commercial quantities of shale gas could be produced. Additionally, fracking relies on a continued series of new wells, each of which produces gas for a relatively short time. Even if the pause were lifted, there are unlikely to be sufficient quantities of gas available to address the high prices affecting all of western Europe and it would certainly have no effect on prices in the near term.

As the Business Secretary has said, we will continue to back our vital North sea oil and gas sector to maximise domestic production while transitioning to cheaper, cleaner home-grown power at the same time. We will shortly set out an energy supply strategy that will supercharge our renewable energy and nuclear capacity, as well as supporting our North sea oil and gas industry.

Lee Anderson: Last Wednesday, the Secretary of State for Business told this House that

"it did not necessarily make any sense to concrete over the wells".—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 354.]

Given that the wells at the Preston New Road site in Lancashire are the only two viable wells in the whole of the UK, pouring concrete down them would be the end of the shale gas industry in the UK. That would be an inappropriate step at this time. We are in the midst of an international crisis, and as the Prime Minister has said, the west has become addicted to Russian gas. We must rectify that immediately; it is a national emergency.

The House was assured last week that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and No. 10 agreed that those wells should not be filled. However, Government rhetoric is not being matched by action on the ground, and Cuadrilla, the company that owns the wells, has spent the last six days trying to get hold of anyone in the Government or the Oil and Gas Authority to get confirmation that it no longer needs to carry out the abandonment process, but it is being ignored. Officials are dragging their heels and, with just days to go, Cuadrilla is legally obliged to plug the wells by 30 June. The OGA keeps confirming that. The Business Secretary

says that Cuadrilla should "formally request an extension", but that is nothing but jobsworth mentality. It is just kicking the can down the road, and we will be back here having the same argument in a few weeks' time.

Can I ask the Business Secretary why he does not just give practical effect to the words he uttered last week and instruct the OGA to reverse the decision to concrete over the wells? That is what Cuadrilla is waiting for. Either the Government think those wells should be filled or they do not. To concrete or not concrete, that is the question; to frack or not to frack. If we do not want to see concrete being poured down our only viable shale gas wells in the middle of an energy crisis, the Business Secretary needs to act quickly.

As western civilisation grapples with an energy crisis, I am at pains to understand why the Government are risking jeopardising Britain's long-term energy security over some tiny procedural nonsense. The course of action is clear to me—[*Interruption.*] I hear some chuntering in the House today, but I challenge any MP in this House to come to my constituency and speak to some real people who are struggling with their gas bills. Not one person in this place has to worry about paying their gas bill, so those Members should hang their heads in shame.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his engagement, and I know he has a long-standing interest in energy on a number of fronts. I commend him for his continuing interest.

Nothing has changed in Government policy relating to fracking and shale gas. On the international crisis, my hon. Friend says the west is addicted to Russian hydrocarbons, but I would say that the UK is not. Last year we imported 4%, but typically we get less than 3% of our gas from Russia. The figures for oil are higher, but they are nothing like the eyewatering percentages we see among our European friends and partners.

On the holes in Preston New Road, Lancashire, the Oil and Gas Authority—the independent regulator—proactively approached Cuadrilla as recently as this week to ask whether it will apply for an extension. However, Cuadrilla has not made a straightforward application to do so. As with any licensee, Cuadrilla can apply for a straightforward extension from the Oil and Gas Authority if it wants to extend the deadline.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and I met the Oil and Gas Authority today, and it is ready to consider Cuadrilla's letter and potential application. The Government hope the regulator would consider it favourably.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this urgent question. He is right to try to smoke out the Government's position, and it is no wonder he is confused—I think he will remain confused after the Minister's reply.

Let us be clear that the Government placed a moratorium on fracking because they said it is dangerous and they could not rule out

"unacceptable impacts on the local community."

The Business Secretary said in 2020 that "fracking is over," and just a few days ago he wrote

"it would come at a high cost to communities and our precious countryside".

[*Edward Miliband*]

Yet last Wednesday, just three days later, the same Business Secretary said

“the Government are open to the idea.”—[*Official Report*, 9 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 355.]

Yesterday, at Chatham House, the Minister ruled it out. The Government are all over the place.

I will ask some questions, because this issue does matter. It is about our energy security, it is about communities that are deeply worried about the impact of fracking, and it is about the climate crisis. Has the Minister or his Department seen any scientific evidence since the 2019 moratorium that suggests fracking might not be dangerous and might be safe? If he does not have any evidence, why is he approaching the Oil and Gas Authority to ask it not to concrete over the wells, which was the original decision? If he does not think fracking is safe, why is he sowing uncertainty in communities across our country? If he does not have any evidence, will he assure the House that no review of fracking—no nods, no winks and no nudges—will be announced in the relaunch of the Government’s energy strategy? Clarity on this matters.

Finally, would it not be the best thing that the Government can do to guarantee energy security—the Minister should be clear about this—to have a green energy sprint by ending the onshore wind moratorium, ending the objection to solar power, embracing tidal power, moving forward with nuclear and having a properly funded national energy efficiency programme?

Greg Hands: I am delighted to see the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box. He says he is confused, but I have been absolutely clear that Government policy is unchanged from the 2019 manifesto. I am not sure what he finds confusing about Government policy being unchanged.

We did not put our 2019 manifesto on an Ed stone, but it is available online for anybody to see the manifesto pledges on which all Conservative Members ran. Government policy is unchanged, with or without an Ed stone. The right hon. Gentleman says we are sowing uncertainty. No, we have given absolute certainty. Government policy is unchanged from the pause announced in December 2019. There is no review. This is a science-led policy, and support from local communities would be needed if there were to be a change.

Finally, we heard about the “green energy sprint”, which is extraordinary. Since the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in 2010, we have increased the proportion of our electricity generation coming from renewables from 7% to 43%. In any normal terms, that would be a sprint, but it is also a marathon, in the sense that we have done that over 12 years. It has been almost a “sextupling” of the amount of energy coming from our renewables since he was in office. He talks about nuclear, but he will also remember the 1997 Labour manifesto, which said that Labour saw “no economic case” for new nuclear power stations. He has the cheek to come to the Dispatch Box today to urge that we get on with nuclear. The Government are getting on with nuclear and with renewables, doing exactly the green energy sprint that he has suggested.

Mr Speaker: I call the Member whose constituency has been mentioned, Mark Menzies.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Let me outline at the start that this does affect my constituency, and I am disappointed that my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) did not have the courtesy to give me advance notice that he was going to be asking a question pertaining to my constituency.

These are not viable wells. Will the Minister just confirm that? The wells in 2012 that caused the first national moratorium were concreted over, with the blessing of Cuadrilla. The last thing it wanted to do at that point was frack again in those wells, so it dug 3 miles away. Both those wells have triggered the second national moratorium, so they are not viable wells. Will the Minister confirm that and stop this nonsense now?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend illustrates well the point about the importance of keeping local community support if this were to happen. As stated in our manifesto, this was based on what local communities felt at that time. I do not think any local community felt it more strongly than my hon. Friend’s in Fylde. On the process, we have been clear that if Cuadrilla were to apply to the Oil and Gas Authority to extend that deadline, this would be considered by the OGA in the usual way. I repeat that the Secretary of State and I spoke to the OGA just this morning to confirm that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, Alan Brown.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a rare thing in the Chamber but I completely agree with the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) and the Minister’s opening remarks: now is not the time for knee-jerk reactions. Given that we have this energy crisis, now is the time to stay strategic and not make daft decisions. Clearly, doing fracking would not do anything to change the west’s reliance on gas, even if, as the Minister’s says, the UK does not rely on Russian gas. He can reconfirm that fracking would not release enough gas to change the international market price, so we would still be paying the same wholesale prices. Is it not the case that there is not enough geological and scientific coring information, to the right depths, to understand the viability of extraction, let alone the risks of seismic tremors, which, as we have already heard, occurred at Preston New Road? Therefore, fracking should be ruled out, in the way the Scottish Government have done. Do we not need to invest heavily in renewables? We keep hearing about nuclear from those on the two Front Benches, but committing £63 billion of capital and financing costs to Sizewell C is madness. Our approach should be straightforward renewable energy. I keep going on about pumped storage hydro. Last week, the Secretary of State said that I had been going on about it for 18 months and that it is a good solution but he needs to assess value for money. When are we going to get that value for money? When are we going to get a change to the transmission grid charging system, which is blocking the deployment of Scottish renewables? We need to invest more in tidal stream, to increase the floating offshore target and to set an onshore wind target as well. Let us maximise investment in renewable energy.

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that response. He is right in the first part of what he says: fracking is unlikely to change gas prices—or UK fracking

is unlikely to do so. It is certainly unlikely to change it quickly, which is what I said in my opening statement. He is also right to point to the importance of following the science, and geological information is really important. However, I have to say to him that on nuclear he continues to be wrong. The SNP's ideological hardcore opposition to nuclear is against Scotland's interests. We have just seen the closure of the Hunterston nuclear power station, which provided enough nuclear energy to supply every home in Scotland for 31 years. It was a great Scottish, as well as UK, solution. Our other great source of gas is the North sea, where I would like to see the SNP approach becoming more constructive and supportive of the North sea transmission deal that the UK Government did a year ago.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I support what my right hon. Friend is saying about the need for more renewables and for nuclear. We all support the objective of net zero by 2050, but we are now in a gas supply crisis. The Government insist that we are in a European market; Europe is heavily dependent on Russia. We need to produce as much gas as we can. It is a simple question: is shale an option for the Government in the immediate term, or not? That is what we need to know; otherwise, the wells will be concreted over, which the Government said they do not want.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for renewables, nuclear and net zero, all three of which belong together, right at the centre of Government policy. He said that there was a gas supply crisis, but I would not characterise it that way. The UK has very secure sources of gas supply: around about 50% comes from the UK continental shelf; a further 30% comes from Norway, our great friend and NATO ally; and 20% is bought on the international market. There is obviously an issue with the price, but I do not share in my hon. Friend's characterisation of a gas supply crisis.

Finally, my hon. Friend asked whether shale is an option. I repeat that Government policy in this area is unchanged: if people can show that the scientific base and the local community support is there, Government policy would be to allow shale if that turned out to be where those two key considerations led.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): As the Council of Europe rapporteur on hydraulic fracturing, I know, as may the Minister, that 5% of the methane produced by fracking is leaked through fugitive emissions. As methane is 80 times worse for global warming than carbon dioxide, that makes fracking worse for global warming than coal, so instead of looking at fracking will the Minister redouble his efforts on renewables, in terms of wind farms in England and marine in Wales? Will he also look to store renewable energy in organic batteries which, when produced at scale, are cheap and do not result in pollutants?

Greg Hands: There were a few questions there. In respect of the data on emissions, it is impossible to judge what UK fracking emissions would look like because data has not been produced on that.

The hon. Gentleman says that fracking is worse than coal; I can be certain that there are more emissions in the production of liquefied natural gas than in the UK continental shelf natural gas. That is for sure—there is two and a half times as much. I would expect the hon.

Gentleman to rally behind our call to maintain the UK continental shelf production that is currently ongoing and to import, hopefully, less LNG.

The hon. Gentleman talks about redoubling in respect of renewables. We have Europe's largest installed offshore wind capacity, which we are already committed to quadrupling. That is twice the rate of the redoubling for which he called.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): The moratorium introduced ridiculously low seismic limits that appeared to have been written by someone who did not understand the Richter scale. Should not the decisions be taken by local planning authorities, with community involvement, and the limits set at levels similar to those we might see for development in London, for example? Should we not be locking in the community benefits of fracking sites?

Greg Hands: I strongly commend my hon. Friend for his support for Government policy on energy, and particularly nuclear. He mentioned seismic limits; I was not the Energy Minister at the time, but I believe that tens of thousands of complaints came in to the Geological Society at the time of the drilling. That showed the magnitude of the public impact of some of the drilling at the time.

On my hon. Friend's point on local consent, I refer him to what I said earlier about the importance of the need to bring local communities on board in respect of any of these projects. With pretty much every type of energy production, we need to bring the local community on board, and that is the case for fracking as well.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): There has been much hand-wringing in the House about the cost of energy, energy security and our reliance on outside sources, yet within our own country we have sufficient gas to do us for 50 years. Does the Minister think it is sensible to turn our back on the jobs and taxes and to spend money to buy gas overseas when we have an indigenous source, a pipeline across the United Kingdom and one of the richest and deepest shale gas seams in the world?

Greg Hands: We are not turning our back on anybody. We have been absolutely clear that it is vital for us to keep our energy diversity and our energy security. We are not turning our back on anybody or anything, but Government policy on this issue is unchanged: we need to see both the scientific evidence and the local community support before we can proceed, as we set out in our 2019 manifesto.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is reassuring to hear from the Government that the support of the community is going to be at the heart of any decisions, because I can tell the Minister that in Rother Valley there is no community support for fracking. In Harthill and Woodsetts, where there is the potential for wells, nobody wants fracking—in fact, the fracking site in Woodsetts is mere yards from an old people's retirement home. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will focus more on renewables, and not on fracking, because every single minute that they spend talking about fracking is a minute not spent talking about renewables and a minute that engineers are not working on renewables? We need to get renewables online, not fracking.

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend, who also takes a keen interest in energy matters, and particularly renewables, makes a really strong point about the need to maintain local support and local consent for these projects. He is quite right that we have a strong focus on renewables. The Prime Minister himself describes the country as the Saudi Arabia of wind. The commitment to renewables comes right from the very top of our Government and exists throughout the Government.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): In his contribution, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) characterised his constituents as “real people”; I assure him that the people of Lancashire are real people. The people of Lancaster and Fleetwood whom I represent are completely opposed to fracking in Lancashire, and I am sure that I speak for my friend the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) as well when I say that.

The reality is that shale gas production is currently paused. The Minister says we would need support from local communities; does he hear loud and clear that Lancashire says no and people in Lancashire do not want fracking? Will he reassure my constituents that the wells will be concreted over and that the Government will consider turning the pause into a ban on fracking?

Greg Hands: What happens to the wells is soon to be a matter of discussion between the Oil and Gas Authority and Cuadrilla. On what the hon. Lady said about maintaining local support, the support of the local community is incredibly important. It is stating the obvious to some extent, but as Energy Minister I have discovered that for all energy projects—whether offshore wind, onshore wind or solar—we need local community support, and fracking would be absolutely no exception to that.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies), who has done so much over many years to support his constituents, who have been adamantly opposed to shale gas extraction. However, frankly, the Opposition talk a load of tosh when it comes to how we are going to meet our net zero ambitions. My right hon. Friend the Minister has set out our amazing achievements in renewables and in our commitment to achieving net zero. Nevertheless, to meet the exponential increase in electricity demand in order to make the transition, we have to look at the lowest-emission fossil fuel, which is gas. If we have safe and secure resources in this country, which we undoubtedly do, it is absolutely right that we talk to communities about whether they would like to have free gas in return for committing to shale gas extraction in their area. That is only right.

Greg Hands: A huge part of the Government’s delivery on renewables in the past 12 years is down to my right hon. Friend, first as Energy Minister and then as Secretary of State at my Department. In both those roles, she drove forward a big increase and made some of the early, tough decisions on renewables, so I absolutely pay tribute to her.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right on gas: the Climate Change Committee itself has said that the use of gas can still be consistent with reaching net zero in

2015, and—let us face it—it is vital for our energy mix today. She also made some strong points about how we keep local consent and local communities on board. In respect of all forms of energy, that is one of the central principles that the Government are keen to maintain.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The Government say that the policy has not changed, but I wonder why it is so hard to make a decision. Ellesmere Port had a public inquiry more than three years ago for a shale gas development and we still have not had a decision from the Minister as to whether that will proceed. Is not it time that the Government stopped trying to have their cake and eat it, actually made a decision and rejected fracking once and for all?

Greg Hands: The policy is clear and laid out in our 2019 manifesto. It is not possible for me at the Dispatch Box to comment on individual decisions as they may be being assessed by the Department, but the policy in 2019 is clear that there is a pause on future fracking developments.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I thank the Minister for what he has just said, which my constituents will welcome. Many in this House seem to think that I represent South Dakota rather than Blackpool, which has eight out of the 10 most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, all of which are deeply fearful of higher energy costs. Does not the Minister agree that this debate about fracking is a complete distraction from the task in hand of finding speedy, effective and efficient measures to reduce energy costs in the short run, not a further long-term gamble on unproven technology that is many years away from delivering anything meaningful to my constituents?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend has represented Blackpool incredibly ably for the past 12 years and knows his community well. He makes, again, a strong point about the importance of community consent. He also makes the point about the speedy implementation of alternative, cheaper and cleaner forms of energy. That is why we announced, just a couple of weeks ago, a contracts for difference renewables auction on an annual basis to do precisely that.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Renewables are the cheapest form of energy. It is a well-established industry; fracking is not. Reading the room, I think it is very clear that that is understood here, so why do the Government not ban fracking altogether? The Government have already made new commitments to renewables, but is not now the time, given this new challenge—there is a new challenge; we might not call it a crisis—to double and treble on the plans that are already in the pipeline and make and plan for even more renewables than the Government are currently doing?

Greg Hands: The hon. Member calls on us to double or treble renewables. That is not good enough. We are going for the quadrupling—the quadrupling—of our offshore wind capacity in this decade. It is already the largest in Europe. We are not just doubling or tripling—we are quadrupling that capacity.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Around 85% of the beautiful constituency of Thirsk and Malton is covered by shale gas exploration licences, and we will

need gas for many decades into the future, so, in principle, I am not against it. I happen to think that it would be easier to do exploration in the North sea. The energy experts who spoke to the Treasury Committee yesterday were clear that one thing hampering that is the lack of willingness from our banks to extend moneys to invest in exploration, because they are focusing on environmental, social, and governance goals rather than the national interest. Will my right hon. Friend work with the Treasury to make sure that our banks do support exploration because we will need this gas into the future?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for that incredibly important question. I agree with him: in principle, I am not against shale gas either. He also raised the important question about banks and lending, particularly to the North sea. Let me be absolutely clear from this Dispatch Box: this Government welcome continuing investment in the North sea. That is absolutely part of our energy security and part of our energy resilience. If there is any further sign that banks need a signal from the Government—either from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy or the Treasury—let me send that signal today: we want to see continuing investment in our UK continental shelf.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that biogas from landfill and sewage waste produces cheaper electricity than almost any other form of gas? If that is so, can we do more to up the volume of that production, as, I think, National Grid suggested some seven years ago?

Greg Hands: The hon. Member raises a very good point and a strong point. In terms of what defines something as being cheaper, there are different ways to cut that. It will depend on what the prevailing prices are of alternative sources of energy. He will know that, for example, gas prices are more than 15 times their five-year historic high, so much depends on what the other prices are out there. But as I said earlier, a strategy will be launched by the Government before the end of the month, which will address a number of the different questions in terms of where our energy supply will come from in future years.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Diverse organisations such as the Climate Change Committee and the Net Zero Scrutiny Group, which I chair, agree on one thing: gas will be part of our energy mix to 2050 and beyond. That makes domestic supply a very sensible endeavour. I just put the benefits to the Minister: 75,000 potential jobs; tens of billions of investment; billions in terms of tax revenues; massive savings of CO₂ compared with LNG inputs, which are truly horrific on CO₂, given that they come in on a diesel ship; and the balance of payments positivity. Is there anything in that list that my right hon. Friend disagrees with? Finally, I implore him to send a note of thanks to the US Government who took the dash to shale gas extraction some time ago and it is on the back of that that they have mitigated a lot of our energy failure.

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his continued interest. I am always happy to meet with his group to discuss these issues. He is absolutely right: domestic supply is very important. This is not the

time to be wanting to increase imports of foreign LNG. That is one reason why we want to see a robust UK continental shelf producing UK natural gas. The point he makes about investment, jobs, tax revenues and so on would be considered in the round, but I point out the earlier point about seeing the scientific evidence first and the local community support as well.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Many Wirral West residents are extremely concerned that petroleum exploration and development licence No. 184 covers Wirral West. The Government's failure to ban fracking leaves my constituency at risk of this dangerous technology that would extract fossil fuels at the very time that we should be moving to renewables. I led a successful campaign against underground coal gasification in the Dee estuary in 2013 and last month the Government told me that they no longer support the development of UCG. Can the Minister reconfirm whether that position is still the case, or whether it has changed, and will he ban both fracking and UCG?

Greg Hands: I have laid out clearly that our policy on fracking is unchanged. The hon. Member illustrates well the need to keep community support. When it comes to renewables, this Government's record is one of the best in the world in delivering on renewables. We have the world's largest installed offshore wind capacity, a new dedicated pot for tidal, and a lot of progress on solar and on onshore wind. All these things are helping the UK to produce a very diversified set of energy sources, which is a key part of our response to the current crisis.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I commend the Minister for his clear answer today that, if an application for shale gas is made, there will be no political objection from the Government, but it must be determined on the basis of the support of the local community, by which I presume he means the local planning process. Can he confirm that that approach, based on local community support, will also apply to large solar farms?

Greg Hands: We have an established process in place for large solar farms and I am not changing policy on that. Solar offers a great addition to our armoury of renewables and it has been a big success in this country in recent times. When it comes to commenting on individual applications, I obviously cannot do that because that is the quasi-judicial role of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): At COP26, Wales signed up to the Beyond Oil & Gas Alliance, and we have comprehensively rejected fracking or any new hydrocarbon developments. Shale production will not meet our current energy needs; it will take too long, be too expensive and condemn our climate targets. Will the Minister assure me that he will respect Wales's opposition to fracking, honour our COP26 pledges and not give in to climate deniers and fossil fuel opportunists?

Greg Hands: I remind the right hon. Lady that energy is reserved. However, I refer her to my earlier point about local community support being important in all our energy policy.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The important thing in all these matters is to remain pragmatic. We will need gas even after we hit 2050, because gas, for example, will be the way we make hydrogen and hydrogen is clearly part of the way ahead. The reality is that the Minister knows that. I ask him, whether on shale gas or the North sea, to remain completely pragmatic—as Conservative Governments should be—to recognise that fact and not to allow this new ideological religion to take over everything. If we want to ask somebody, let us ask them whether they feel their gas prices should be rising at the current rate, or whether they would like lower gas prices.

Greg Hands: I agree absolutely with my right hon. Friend on both the importance of hydrogen and on the importance of being pragmatic. He and I were both elected on a 2019 Conservative party general election manifesto and Government policy is unchanged from that manifesto. That is the height of pragmatism: to stick to our manifesto and keep our options open.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is unfortunate that the boss of Cuadrilla has, with the support of the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), used the Ukraine crisis to reopen the discredited case for fracking. Will the Minister simply agree that we are better off investing in the renewable technologies of the future in terms of both our energy security and of meeting our climate commitments?

Greg Hands: We are investing massively in renewables. Our current round of allocations in the contracts for difference auction is larger than in any previous round. Within that, we have announced big support for offshore wind and other technologies and, for the first time, a dedicated £20 million pot for tidal.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Real projects take time and money, as my right hon. Friend knows all too well from his work on nuclear and elsewhere. That is why we are here today. There has been inadequate communication between the decision makers in authority and the company, which knows it has to act now if it is to meet the deadline to put concrete in the wells. Will he please personally intervene to ensure that there is effective communication between the authorities and the company, so that we do not have to bring urgent questions such as this to the House?

Greg Hands: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his ongoing interest in all matters relating to energy, but I must say to him that Cuadrilla was told almost a year ago, in June 2021, of the requirement to decommission the two wells by the end of June 2022. It was given a huge amount of notice to do that. I mentioned earlier that the Secretary of State and I have spoken to the Oil and Gas Authority today, and I believe that further communication will happen with the company.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am glad the Minister has acknowledged that fracking would do nothing to increase our energy security, given that the energy would then be sold on global markets at international prices. I am also grateful that he talks of the importance of public consent. He will know that, given that only 14% of people support fracking and the fact that it would require 6,000 wells to replace even half the gas we are currently using, that will not happen any

time soon. However, I urge him to do more on energy demand. This whole debate has been about energy supply—where is the action on reducing demand? That is where the Government are dragging their feet and that needs to change now.

Greg Hands: We have comprehensive investments going on through the heat and buildings strategy and other initiatives to ensure that energy demand is also addressed. But may I say this, because I think the hon. Member missed the last couple of occasions to put questions to the Dispatch Box? One thing I am sure of is that I am glad we did not follow the advice of the Green party back in 1989, when it scored its record result in an election with 15%. Its advice was that it was impossible to take action on emissions while simultaneously growing the economy. I am really glad that we decided to ignore that advice, because in the intervening 30 years we have grown the economy by 78% and reduced our emissions by 44%, comprehensively proving the Green party totally wrong.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I speak as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the environment. After the 1973 oil price shock wreaked economic havoc across the western world, different countries responded in different ways to ensure it never happened again. Denmark went for increasing wind power, Japan went for increasing solar, France went for increasing nuclear power and in Britain we went for increasing oil production in the North sea. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should learn the lessons of history to ensure that we do not repeat the mistakes, and that the response to high international energy, oil and gas prices should not be to press pause on net zero, but to push full steam ahead with it, growing renewables and nuclear power?

Greg Hands: I think I am meeting my hon. Friend's APPG either this week or next, and I am looking forward to that. He makes some strong points. Net zero is not part of the problem; it is part of the solution when it comes to both the transition and energy security. He talks about not repeating the mistakes of the past and he mentions nuclear. I will put on record that I am glad to see the conversion of the Labour party from saying it was anti-nuclear in its 1997 manifesto to now backing the Government's nuclear programme. I welcome that conversion.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): My constituents in Formby have experienced test drilling, and they have very real safety concerns. I can assure the Minister that there is widespread community opposition to fracking in my constituency. Will he give my constituents certainty that fracking is ruled out? I will tell him how he can do it—by ending the moratorium on onshore wind and giving full-throated support to tidal energy, both of which are realistic options in the Liverpool city region.

Greg Hands: We have just announced a dedicated pot for tidal energy in the CfD round. In terms of providing certainty, may I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he goes back to the 2019 Conservative party manifesto? The policy is unchanged from that. As a friendly, cross-party suggestion, if he wants to give his constituents some assurance, he could perhaps reprint that manifesto in full and distribute it to all his constituents, saying that there the policy is unchanged.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Gas suppliers are asking energy-intensive businesses, including a major paper mill in my constituency, for large up-front payments. As the Government review their energy strategy, will my right hon. Friend look at a proposal for a Government-backed payment guarantee scheme to help companies to manage cash flow and avoid the need for prepayment?

Greg Hands: Of course we are acutely aware of the difficulties that some energy-intensive industries face. My ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), is looking at that all the time, and we review the situation constantly, but those schemes are often a matter for the Treasury and for agreement with the Treasury.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Back in 2014, the people of Warwickshire were very vocal in their opposition to proposed fracking licences across the county by Cluff Natural Resources. I am sure the Minister would agree that our objective must be to reduce energy demand. Why was it, then, that his Government tore up the zero-carbon homes legislation of the previous Labour Government, which would have seen 1 million new zero-carbon homes built from 2016, reducing the demand for energy in this country?

Greg Hands: I think the hon. Gentleman is inviting me to go back down memory lane to 2010. I will tell him this: thanks to the actions of this Government, the number of homes that are energy efficient and clear those minimal criteria has massively increased in the past 12 years. Ensuring that energy-efficient homes are there is something that this Government are delivering on.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Evidence to the Treasury Committee yesterday reiterated that fracking is not worth doing, but also pointed out that part of the problem is the UK Government's poor and inconsistent stewardship of our resources in the North sea compared with our neighbours in Norway, who have had a long-term and consistent plan for their resources. What commitment do the Government really have to their own transition plans—that was a question yesterday—and will they invest in renewables, which will benefit not only the environment and our economy but our energy security in years to come?

Greg Hands: I will give the hon. Lady two pieces of advice. First, she may want to visit north-east Scotland herself and see who the people there, particularly the people in and around Aberdeen, think are more supportive of the offshore sector in its entirety, including oil and gas and renewables—the Scottish Government or the UK Government, because the answer is normally the UK Government. Secondly, she asks whether I am still backing the North sea transition deal. That is a deal done by this Government, so of course we are still backing it. I keep asking her colleagues whether they back the North sea transition deal, and I never hear anything. If she is now announcing that the Scottish National party is backing it, then that is one clear gain from today's contributions from the SNP.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is time that the Government's policy moved from a pause on shale gas production to a full stop. The people of this country have moved on, and so has the science. On Friday, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), was in York looking at the BioYorkshire project, which will change and transform the future of our energy supply through the biofuels industry. Will the Minister not invest in that instead of old technology that simply will not deliver?

Greg Hands: We do invest in biofuels. My hon. Friend had a very good and productive visit, and I thank everybody in York who received him. We do invest, and we make sure that this is part of our diversified energy mix. Diversification is absolutely key in the space of energy, as other countries have perhaps learned to their cost.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): We cannot allow the current crisis to be used as an excuse to greenlight fracking, and, as the Minister said, any potential benefits to prices would not even be seen for years to come. The Government should be focusing on identifying other solutions such as investment in wind or solar power, or using new agricultural policy schemes in the UK to increase nitrogen use efficiency to reduce the waste of artificial nitrogen fertiliser. What alternative projects is the Minister considering?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. On hydrogen, I can confirm that one project pretty near to her constituency—the Whitelee wind farm just south of Glasgow, which I went to in November—is looking at how wind power, in this case onshore wind power, can be converted into hydrogen, with £9.8 million of UK Government support. That will drive buses and dustcarts in Glasgow city for many decades to come. It is exactly that sort of innovative project that the UK Government are backing.

Liz Saville Roberts: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I asked the Minister very carefully about whether he would respect Wales's policy of refusing further coal and gas. I am sure that most people in this House will appreciate that this aspect of energy is devolved to Wales, but he replied that energy is a reserved matter. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on how awareness could be established within this Government as to which powers are reserved and which powers are devolved to Wales?

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister want to answer?

Greg Hands: Well, Mr Speaker, I have nothing to change from my answer. What I can say is that we do have a very constructive relationship with the Welsh Government on areas of energy, as I always had on trade. They hold key levers in areas that are important on delivering energy, such as planning and skills, so of course it is in our interests, on behalf of the people of Wales, to work together as the UK Government and the Welsh Government.

Legal Aid

1.24 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Today I am publishing the Government's response to the independent review of criminal legal aid. Copies are available in the House. Our proposals will put criminal legal aid on a stable and sustainable footing for the future. They will help to deliver this Government's objectives of delivering swift access to justice, and they will usher in the reform we need at this crossroads moment as we build back a stronger and fairer society after this debilitating pandemic.

Covid-19 has been exceptionally challenging across our justice system. We owe our whole legal profession—the solicitors, the barristers, the judges and the court staff—an enormous debt of gratitude for keeping the wheels of justice turning over the past two years. Thanks to their efforts, we are driving down the court backlog and returning to a more normal way of working—in the interests of victims, witnesses, and of course the wider public. I thank Sir Christopher Bellamy for his comprehensive and invaluable review, along with his panel of experts and everyone else who contributed their views.

As I said, this is a crossroads moment. Our legal aid system needs investment if defendants are to have access to the highest-quality advice and advocacy, and if we are to ensure a sustainable criminal legal profession right into the future. To that end, Sir Christopher made two headline recommendations in his review. First, he proposed an increase of 15% in the various criminal legal aid fee schemes. I have accepted this in almost all respects, except where it risks introducing perverse incentives—for example, if it were to be applied to the rate of pages of prosecution evidence.

Secondly, Sir Christopher recommended an overall increase in investment in criminal legal aid of £135 million. Our package of reforms, announced today, matches that recommendation. As part of that, we will hold £20 million aside each year for longer-term investment, including reform of the litigators graduated fee scheme, the youth court, and the wider sustainability and development of solicitors' practice, so that the system pays more, and more fairly, for the work actually done. On top of our additional funding to support court recovery, this will take taxpayer funding of criminal legal aid to £1.2 billion—the highest level in a decade.

Let me now unpack some of this for the House. In the short term, our cash injection will give a 15% boost to police station work, magistrates court work, much of the Crown Court work of advocates and litigators, and the work of solicitors in very-high-cost cases, as well as some of the smaller schemes. While getting pay and conditions right is clearly critical, Sir Christopher also made a number of wider systemic recommendations about the future of criminal legal aid that we also intend to take forward. We will reform fee schemes so that they properly and fairly reflect the way our legal professions work in the real world today. We will increase the diversity of our legal professions, promote a more sustainable criminal defence market, and harness the power of new technology.

Supporting a sustainable, diverse and stable criminal defence market depends both on the right fees and on having an adequate supply of legal practitioners, so we

propose to review the standard crime contract to reduce barriers to innovative ways of doing business. We will offer grants for training contracts for criminal solicitors, and for solicitor advocates to gain higher rights of audience, expanding the supply of high-quality lawyers in the system. The Chartered Institute of Legal Executives has helped to remove barriers to entry into the profession and, in particular, has helped to promote non-graduate routes into the law. We want to take those reforms further again. So under our proposals, CILEX professionals will be able to become duty solicitors without having to achieve additional qualifications.

Work as a duty solicitor often involves unsocial hours and lengthy travel, making it hard for those with caring responsibilities, who are disproportionately women, to pursue a career in criminal defence. We want to make it easier for everyone to work in this area, so we will explore new ways of delivering remote legal advice in police stations. As Sir Christopher highlighted, the sustainability of the criminal solicitor profession is a particular challenge, so today I am proposing to expand the Public Defender Service, focusing on areas where more capacity is needed. That means that when there is risk of market failure, we will have a more flexible range of options to address it.

Next, Sir Christopher recommended that I propose an advisory board that will help represent all parts of the profession and shape future criminal legal aid policy. We will also gather views on how and where the innovative new technology that is helping us with the backlog can be used to even greater effect.

Our proposals respond to the full range of Sir Christopher's review. They will increase efficiency across our system and deliver swifter justice for victims and defendants by incentivising early advice and resolution where that is right and proper. They will reinforce a more sustainable market, with publicly funded criminal defence practice seen as a viable, long-term career choice, attracting the brightest and best from all backgrounds and providing a further pipeline for the judges of tomorrow. It is only right that, as we reinforce the supply and sustainability of legal practice, we look closely at those who our legal system and our legal aid system are there to support, namely those who need legal representation and cannot afford to pay for it themselves.

The thresholds for eligibility for legal aid, which have not been raised for more than a decade, need to be reviewed, and it is timely to review them as we consider our wider reforms. Today, we have launched a separate consultation on legal aid means-testing. Our proposals will ensure a fairer justice system that targets legal aid towards the people who need it most—those least able to pay and the most vulnerable in our society. No one's income or financial situation should stop them enforcing their legal rights or defending themselves when they have been accused of a crime. That is why this Government propose to significantly increase income and capital thresholds for civil and criminal legal aid, so that even more people in England and Wales will qualify for that support.

A funding boost of £20 million means that more than 2 million more people in England and Wales will be eligible for civil legal aid each year, and 3.5 million more will be eligible for legal aid to fund their defence at the magistrates court. We will exclude disputed assets from the civil legal aid means test. That move will particularly

benefit victims of domestic abuse where the abuser is controlling assets. We will also remove the financial cap on legal aid eligibility in the Crown court for all defendants, so that everyone can access the right support at the right time.

At the same time, we will remove means-testing entirely for legal proceedings brought by parents whose children are facing the withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment. At the worst time in any parent's life, those parents must and should have access to proper advice and representation, and they should not be expected to shoulder the burden themselves.

The proposals I have set out today represent a major investment in our legal aid system. They will ensure our justice system is fair, fit for the future and supported by a thriving and diverse legal profession, and that it delivers swifter and fairer justice across our society. I commend this statement to the House.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank the Justice Secretary for advance sight of his statement. I could not agree more that we owe our whole legal profession—solicitors, barristers, court staff and judiciary—a debt of gratitude for keeping the wheels of justice turning over the last two years. I pay tribute to their hard work in helping deliver justice for victims. I also put on record my thanks to Sir Christopher Bellamy and the rest of the team for their work.

Today's announcement and response to the Bellamy review is welcome, particularly the Government's commitment to increase legal aid rates by the 15% that Sir Christopher Bellamy recommended. The proposed restructure of the fee schemes will benefit members of the public and the profession alike. Similarly, we welcome having an independent advisory board to keep policy matters pertaining to criminal defence under review. Can the Justice Secretary outline the membership of the advisory board? Will he ensure that it is both representative and diverse, to help deliver meaningful change?

We will study many of the other measures that the Justice Secretary has mentioned, including the reforms of the duty solicitor scheme, in more detail. However, if the Government accept that criminal legal aid is in a perilous state, the same is surely true of civil legal aid, where decades of cuts and underfunding have crippled practitioners, and we are seeing the same recruitment and retention crisis. Urgent investment is necessary, and the Ministry of Justice has yet to publish any details on the civil sustainability review. We are suffering from serial underfunding of the entire legal aid sector, paired with a strict means test and a huge backlog in the criminal courts.

We know that justice delayed is justice denied, and victims are paying the price. Between 2012 and 2020, annual legal aid spending fell by 27% in real terms, largely as the result of changes under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. That is £4.2 billion over a seven-year period—an average of £600 million a year. Essentially, we have a position where it is simply not financially viable to be a legal aid provider in many areas of law. The Government have accepted that to be the case in criminal law, but the maths is no different in civil law. There is no doubt in my mind that the legal aid sector has survived purely on good will, and I know that at first hand as a former

lawyer. Chronic underfunding has brought the criminal justice system to its knees and created advice deserts across the UK. The steps outlined today are too little, too late.

There can be no surprise then that the profession has voted with its feet. Just a few days ago, 94% of the membership of the Criminal Bar Association voted to take industrial action. That will have a disastrous impact on the backlog in the criminal courts that existed well before the beginning of the pandemic. The Government may find the profession does not accept their response, their appreciation of the urgency or the time it will take to implement. Can the Lord Chancellor set out when the recommendations will take effect? Victims have waited long enough.

While the means test review for both criminal and civil legal aid is welcome, it is of little use to the public if they are eligible for legal aid but cannot access the provider base. Advice deserts are a direct result of the negative impact caused by reductions in legal aid funding. There is no justice if there is no access to justice.

The Justice Secretary claims this is a major investment in the criminal justice system, but make no mistake: it is the absolute bare minimum, and it does not fix a decade of Tory austerity. It fails victims at every turn. The erosion of access to legal aid represents a threat to the rule of law. It does not matter what legal rights an individual has on paper if they do not have the means to uphold them. The Government pay lip service to levelling up the country. When will they level up access to justice?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said about the criminal legal aid proposals and the means test review. The announcement today is principally about criminal legal aid, and if I have understood him correctly, he backs us on all the criminal legal aid proposals.

Can I be clear in relation to the CBA ballot? If the hon. Gentleman welcomes our proposals, presumably he would agree, as I hope would others across the House, that it is totally unwarranted for the CBA now to proceed with strike action.

The hon. Gentleman asked about timing. On criminal legal aid, we will consult for 12 weeks. I would expect him to agree that we should follow the normal public law principles to have that consultation, otherwise we are exposed to a greater risk of judicial review. The hon. Gentleman is nodding, and I am pleased that he does support that, even if some of his colleagues do not. We will then introduce a statutory instrument so that the proposals enter into force in October.

The hon. Gentleman talked about cuts to legal aid. I remind him that a previous Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, had plans to cut almost £200 million a year from the legal aid budget in 2009, as was made clear by the noble lord Lord Carter, who said,

"we had to break the hold of the criminal practitioners and force them to restructure so we could get more control over the costs of provision".

In relation to our criminal legal aid proposals, we are ensuring that we have a sustainable system that supports practitioners but, above all, supports victims, witnesses and the society that we want to build after the pandemic.

[Dominic Raab]

I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that there will be 2 million more people with access to civil legal aid, which he mentioned, and 3.5 million more people with access to criminal legal aid in the magistrates courts. I thank him for his pretty fulsome support for the criminal legal aid proposals. I urge him to reflect on and recall the Labour party's proposition before the 2010 election. I hope that he will be clear that it is totally unwarranted for the CBA to now proceed with strike action.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee, Sir Robert Neill.

Sir Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): This is a very welcome announcement and I congratulate the Secretary of State on taking on board Sir Christopher Bellamy's recommendations. I join him in thanking Sir Christopher for his report and all those in the legal profession who have kept the system going under real difficulty. In appreciating the real difficulty that the profession has been undergoing in these times, does he agree that it is important, in order to get this right, to have the earliest possible increase and to take on board the words of the chair of the Bar Council, who says:

"We will work with the Ministry of Justice to make sure the funds are delivered swiftly, effectively, and fairly."?

Can we meet the Bar Council and the profession in that spirit of co-operation and get this implemented at the earliest lawful opportunity?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend the Chair of the Select Committee is absolutely right and I welcome the constructive responses from the Bar Council and the Law Society. He is right that we must do it as swiftly as possible, but he makes an important point that we must do it lawfully. We are following the normal public law principles in having a 12-week consultation. As I have indicated, we intend to bring the proposals into force through an SI by October. I hope that that strikes the right balance. As he and, in fairness, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) said, we extend our gratitude to all the lawyers—solicitors and barristers—judges and court staff who have done an incredible job through a very difficult couple of years.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State now accept that the swingeing cuts in the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 have hobbled access to justice for a decade? Does he accept what the chair of the Criminal Bar Association, Jo Sidhu, said about the announcement today, which was that it

"will not be sufficient to retain enough criminal barristers to keep the wheels of justice turning and that means victims will be failed"?

If he does not accept that, what effect will it have on the backlog? He currently has a pathetic target to reduce the backlog to 53,000 cases over the next three years. If this is a groundbreaking change, what effect will it have on that backlog?

Dominic Raab: We will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman given that he was there at the time that Labour was planning those swingeing cuts and, indeed, he backed them. Only now, when we have had to deal

with the financial consequences of the economic mess that the last Labour Government left behind and put ourselves on a sustainable footing with the biggest investment in legal aid for a decade, he is complaining.

The Crown court backlog and the magistrates court backlog are coming down. Again, I did not hear from him a clear statement that strike action would be not only unwarranted but the last thing we need as we build back and recover in our Crown courts and magistrates courts.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I am glad that he has followed the excellent recommendations of Sir Christopher Bellamy and I am glad to see the work that I started coming to fruition. He is right to draw a contrast between the approach and language in the Bellamy report and some of the hostile environment, frankly, that the criminal Bar had to put up with under the last Labour Government, which I remember very well. I also commend the raising of the threshold on civil legal aid, which will be one of the single biggest extensions of eligibility that we have seen in many a year. May I press him on the consultation period? I agree that he is absolutely right to follow public law principles, but I suggest that a slightly shorter period of eight weeks followed by an SI could deliver the necessary changes in an even shorter time.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the huge amount of work that my right hon. and learned Friend did, which I was fortunate to inherit, before we came forward with our proposals. I agree with much of what he has said and done in this area. He is right to talk about the environment and the climate within which we talk about lawyers, because it was of course under the last Labour Government that they named and shamed lawyers for earning too much in fees. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) is chuntering from a sedentary position, but he is guilty of doing exactly that under the last Labour Government. We have not done that; we have engaged in a sober and sensible way because we understand the value of the legal profession, both barristers and solicitors.

I understand my right hon. and learned Friend's call for a slightly shorter consultation period but, given the legal risk that I have been advised on, shortening it from 12 weeks to eight weeks does not seem the right thing to do. The consultation period is there not just as a legal matter but to ensure that we can tease out all the detail of the reforms, such as the implications of the fees and of the wider systemic reforms that we are introducing. It is right to take that time and I cannot see how a difference of four weeks can justify strike action in this case.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The Government cannot swerve responsibility for having made the largest cuts that have ever been made to the legal aid budget, which have brought civil and criminal providers to their knees. The whole service is held together by good will. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on legal aid, I welcome every single penny that comes back into the service, but the fact remains that there is a crisis of capacity. Our inquiry report a few months ago showed just how many providers are closing and have been closing every month

over recent years. I ask the Secretary of State exactly what steps he will now take to deal with the crisis in the provision of civil legal aid—he did not answer that in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan)—not least to accommodate the additional demand for service that will now flow into it as an admittedly welcome consequence of adjustments to the means test.

Dominic Raab: I think the hon. Lady was also around at the time when the Labour Government were planning their cuts. *[Interruption.]* She does not like it, but I remind her that it was Tony Blair who said that the Labour Government would

“derail the gravy train of legal aid”,

so I am afraid that she cannot come to the House with those crocodile tears. On her substantive point, however, the consultation on expanding the Public Defender Service and the 15% raise in legal fees will deal with the scarcity of legal aid practitioners in certain areas. As I have already said in relation to the means test review, millions of extra people will become eligible for civil legal aid, which she should welcome.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I, too, welcome what my right hon. Friend has announced. He is right to focus on attracting bright young lawyers into criminal defence work. Does he also recognise that it is important to retain more experienced criminal defence lawyers who can take on the complex cases that, as he will appreciate, form a larger and larger proportion of the criminal courts caseload?

Specifically in relation to pages of prosecution evidence, I understand that my right hon. Friend is following one of Sir Christopher’s recommendations in that respect, but he will understand that that has been a proxy for the complexity and difficulty of criminal cases for some time. If we are not to increase fees in that regard, how does he intend to reflect those complex and difficult cases?

Dominic Raab: I agree with many of my right hon. and learned Friend’s points. He makes the right point that we must ensure that we still have the expertise we need at the high end of the profession. In relation to the rate of pages of prosecution evidence, he will know that we want to ensure that we do not encourage perverse incentives. I am not suggesting that that is done deliberately, but systemically it is something that we need to look at, and it is right to do so. Instead, as set out in the Government’s response, we will invite views on the longer term reform of the litigators’ graduated fee scheme to include the optimal basic structure of litigator remuneration, the role of pages of prosecution evidence in determining fees and what data should be collected to enable a thorough examination of litigator preparatory work. I hope that will address the points made.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): For years, the south-west has been called a legal aid desert. There is currently a huge backlog in the courts; legal aid is one part of the problem and workforce another. Justice delayed is justice denied. Can the Secretary of State tell me what immediate difference this statement will make to the thousands of victims in the south-west who are waiting for justice or who cannot even get justice now?

Dominic Raab: The proposals on the Public Defender Service and the means test review, and the increase in the fees, will all look across the board at areas where there is a scarcity of supply of practitioners willing to take on that work, in order to fill the gaps. I look forward to that and I hope that the hon. Lady will contribute to the consultation.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): The Government are to be congratulated on accepting Sir Christopher’s headline recommendations in full. I saw how much care and consideration went into that piece of work, but I would like to ask my right hon. Friend about chapter 13 of the report, which deals with fee income at the criminal Bar. Sir Christopher found that at every level of seniority female barristers earned less than their male counterparts, on average by 34%. He also found that non-white criminal practitioners earned less than white criminal practitioners by an average of 10%. What reassurances can he provide that this significant injection of public money will not be used to sustain potentially unlawful pay disparities?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this very important point. In 2020, the gender balance at the point of entry among specialist criminal barristers was roughly 50:50, but at the senior level there is a much higher imbalance, with a ratio of 70:30 men to women. What are we doing about that? Our fees changes, for example in relation to duty solicitors, will particularly support younger lawyers. They will disproportionately help women with caring responsibilities.

We are also looking at further diversification through the roles and the rights that CILEX members can acquire. CILEX has allowed non-graduate routes into the profession, and I think 76% of its members are women. More generally, breaking down glass ceilings and barriers to entry into the profession is important. Beyond fees, the consultation will allow us to consult and to understand what more we can do systemically to attract a broader diversity of practitioners into the profession and then, critically, allow them to flourish.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to say that we need to deliver swifter justice for victims, but if you will allow me a slight detour, Madam Deputy Speaker, do we not also need to deliver swifter justice to victims of war crimes in Ukraine? What is the Government’s attitude now towards the International Criminal Court? I think he would agree that attacking a nuclear power station or civilians is a war crime, but will he ensure that it is a war crime to initiate a war of aggression?

Dominic Raab: I share the hon. Gentleman’s interest in this subject and it is a timely, if circuitous, question, because I was in The Hague yesterday, where I met the ICC chief prosecutor and the president of the court; as he Gentleman knows, the ICC is independent and it is for it to determine those issues. I think I was the first Justice Minister to go there, and I was clear that we will provide a package of support, including financial and technical assistance, to enable the office of the prosecutor to do its job. We will be co-ordinating with our allies and our key partners so that is a concerted effort. The message needs to go out to Putin and to every commander on the ground in Ukraine that if they follow illegal orders they will end up in the dock of a court in The Hague and potentially in prison.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I will resist the temptation to broaden questions about the statement still further.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. Will he confirm that the intention is to increase the thresholds each year in line with inflation, so that we do not get to the same position we are in now? If so, what factor of inflation will he include on an annual basis? Finally, what impact does he expect this measure to have on the youth courts?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. We do not plan to index the thresholds, but he makes a reasonable point. We will obviously need to keep them under regular review, but this is a big step change in the threshold and we will keep a close eye on the impact that inflation has on them. More broadly, he asks about the youth courts, which are a crucial part of the system. We are proposing a general uplift of 15% to magistrates courts fees, and the youth courts will be included in that uplift.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Will the review of legal aid specifically look at how disabled people can enforce their rights under the Equality Act 2010?

Dominic Raab: The review does not specifically deal with that, but if the hon. Lady and other groups would like to make submissions to the review, I will ensure they are properly taken into account.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement about the increased funding of £135 million a year. Can he confirm that that extra funding will mean that more of my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme will be covered by legal aid, so that they will be able to exercise their legal rights and defend themselves if they are accused?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We should never forget that as important as the legal profession is—we have all paid tribute to its members—the legal and justice system is there for my hon. Friend's constituents and those of hon. Members across the House; for victims, witnesses and the public at large.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Criminal legal aid issues have become particularly acute in Barnsley in the last few days because the roof of Sheffield magistrates court has fallen in, meaning that defendants are queueing up in Barnsley. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that this a damning indictment of the legal system under his Government?

Dominic Raab: Of course we will look at all courts with maintenance issues, but in reality record investment in magistrates courts has been secured in this spending review. We have increased the sentencing powers of the magistrates courts from six to 12 months, and we are further supporting the practitioners who serve those courts with the measures we have announced today.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Sir Christopher Bellamy's review of criminal legal aid was based on two overriding principles: that remuneration of criminal lawyers should be such as to attract the right legal talent

that the system requires, and that there should be equality of arms so that the resources available to defence are broadly similar to those available to prosecution. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those are the right principles for civil legal aid as well as criminal legal aid?

Dominic Raab: The criminal legal aid system is different from the civil legal aid system, but the overarching principles and the need to ensure access to justice are common to both. That is why under the means test review we have ensured not only that 3.5 million more people will have access to criminal legal aid in the magistrates courts, but that 2 million more will have access to civil legal aid, which I hope addresses my hon. Friend's concern.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. Although it relates to England and Wales, I would like to see this being part of the work that the Northern Ireland Assembly is doing on policing and justice. While decent pay for lawyers, and thereby increased ability of the working poor to gain access to civil legal aid, is welcome, and while there seems to be the necessary movement towards that in what we have heard today, can the Secretary of State assure us that those who need help will now get it? Historically, that has not been the case.

Dominic Raab: The proposals that we set out today apply to England and Wales—we respect the devolved competences—and we believe they will effectively address systemic issues across the justice system. I was in Belfast recently, and I have had engagement with all parties in relation to justice issues. We have a lot to learn from all jurisdictions across the UK and we will continue that two-way dialogue.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): I declare an interest as a former practitioner both as a criminal solicitor and, indeed, at the criminal Bar. I compliment and commend the former Justice Secretary for appointing Sir Christopher, who did an incredibly difficult job and did it incredibly well. However, barristers are about to do something that they do not want to do, which is to take action—industrial action—because this Government have brought the criminal justice system to its knees over a decade. The problem is that they do not have confidence in the Justice Secretary, and for good reason. The Government have already significantly underestimated their expenditure on the accelerated items of the criminal legal aid review by 80%, so how can they believe that the money will in any event come to them? The real problem is that the money is needed now—not in three months, but immediately—and that is how he will prevent industrial action by the criminal Bar.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman seems to be the shop steward for what I think is totally unwarranted industrial action, which was balloted for before we had announced our proposals. I hope the Criminal Bar Association will take the more constructive tone we have heard from the other practitioner groups, because if he commended my right hon. and learned Friend my predecessor for appointing Sir Christopher, he surely must welcome the Government's acceptance of the proposals he has made virtually in full.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

International Travel

2.1 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about international travel.

It is almost two years to the day since the country first went into lockdown—two years in which we have fought an exceptionally difficult and unpredictable pandemic, two years of unprecedented restrictions on mobility and two years that have had a drastic impact on travel and on the industry. However, we have now reached an important milestone in our journey back to pre-pandemic normality. After getting rid of testing requirements for eligible vaccinated passengers a few weeks ago, I am pleased to confirm that we are once again leading the way by removing all the remaining covid measures affecting international travel into the UK.

That means we are the first major economy to get back to the kind of restriction-free travel we all enjoyed before covid. Whether for reuniting with friends and family, holidays or business trips, from 4 am on Friday 18 March—this Friday—there will be no testing or quarantine requirements for any passengers arriving into the UK, regardless of their vaccination status, and we will go further. I have heard the calls from passengers, airlines and Members across the House that the passenger locator form is a burden that has simply outlived its usefulness, so I am delighted to confirm that, from Friday, we will be removing the passenger locator form for all passengers. No more quarantine, no more tests and no more forms—international travel is back.

It will be the first time in two years that we can enable frictionless journeys for passengers travelling to the UK, and the remaining international travel legislation will therefore be revoked this Friday—18 March—two months earlier than the original expiry date of 16 May. The devolved Administrations have confirmed that they will align on the removal of these measures, so this change will be UK-wide. *[Interruption.]* I hear the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) chuntering away from a sedentary position. I will come to the Opposition policy, which was both to have further restrictions and then to lift restrictions—often simultaneously—depending on which Member on the Front Bench we listened to.

Today's announcement is another vital step in our strategy set out by the Prime Minister last month for Britain to live with covid-19 and to manage an endemic virus. Thanks to the success of our vaccine and booster programmes in building population-wide immunity—further boosters are on the way for the most vulnerable this spring—we are in the strongest possible position to lift covid travel regulations without compromising public health.

We must of course remain vigilant against possible future variants, but thanks to the robust protective shield we have built, we can avoid simply reverting to the same restrictions we have used in the past. Even if another variant of concern emerges, next time we will react differently. We have learned a lot during this pandemic, and we will use that experience to respond in more measured ways and more flexible ways. For example, while quarantine hotels were appropriate for red-list arrivals at an earlier stage of the pandemic, we are now standing down the remaining capacity. Our default

approach in future will be to take the least stringent possible measures, avoiding border restrictions to minimise impacts on travel. So we will maintain a range of contingency measures in reserve, tailoring our response to the situation. Our first recourse will be to public health guidance, and guidance to ports, airports and operators on how passengers and staff can stay safe and protect others, and we will avoid stricter restrictions wherever we possibly can.

Although we are dropping all testing and quarantine requirements, our advice to eligible adults who have not been vaccinated stays the same: “If you’ve not got jabbed, then please get your vaccinations. If you’ve had two jabs, please get a booster. It will boost and protect your health, it will protect vulnerable people around you and it will smooth travel to other countries.” It is important to say that vaccination status may continue to be required in other countries to make journeys seamless. Passengers should continue to check travel advice on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website, before they book and travel, to see what restrictions may still be in place in the countries people are visiting.

As we better deal with covid-19 at home, we will continue to make our leading contribution to tackling the disease abroad. We are sending 100 million further doses of vaccines to other countries by this summer. More than 2.6 billion doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine have now been supplied to countries around the world on a non-profit basis, almost two thirds of which have gone to low and lower middle-income nations. We are working with key international partners to establish common rules and common contingency measures, reflecting what we have learned from this pandemic, to use in the future.

While all of these measures have been necessary, I do not underestimate for one second just how hard travel restrictions have been. They have been difficult for passengers, and damaging for travel and tourism in particular. Now that we have lifted the final covid measures on inbound flights, the industry will play a vital role in helping build back better from the pandemic. Soon we will publish our strategic framework for aviation, supporting the sector and the jobs that rely on it, and as part of that we will be considering the workforce, skills, connectivity and of course the crucial mission to deliver our net-zero commitments. I will set out more details about the strategic framework in due course.

We promised that we would keep draconian and costly covid measures in place for not a day longer than was absolutely necessary. Now we stand as one of the most vaccinated countries in the world, and we are also the first major economy to travel freely once again without restrictions. The UK has achieved many hard-won gains over the past two years thanks to the endurance and resolve of the public. Now we are seeing the long-awaited rewards for that patience and determination. The removal of all remaining travel measures this Friday will mean passengers can book trips with confidence, businesses can plan with greater certainty and Britain can continue to bounce back from the pandemic, as we learn to live with covid. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.8 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The aviation industry is a critical part of the UK economy, supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs, and we all want to see a safe return to international travel, which is why, earlier this year, Labour outlined our comprehensive plan to live well with covid and to protect lives and livelihoods.

We know that the virus will continue to change and adapt and we will need to live with it as it does, and that is critical when it comes to the travel industry. Another variant of concern may emerge, as the Secretary of State has acknowledged, and lessons must be learned from previous Government responses that damaged the industry. He partially outlined some contingency measures, but he had previously committed to publishing a full contingency strategy to deal with possible future variants. With surging cases in international hubs such as Hong Kong and Shanghai, does he agree that he should be fully transparent about his plans, and that that would boost confidence for the travelling public and the airline industry? Can we get a commitment to the publication of that strategy today?

Today's announcement, which ends restrictions for the unvaccinated, is a reminder of another stark truth: in an era of global international travel, no one is safe until everyone is safe. We in the UK have learned that lesson the hard way. The Secretary of State has confirmed that we will be sending 100 million doses to low-income countries by the summer. Will he explain how 77 million doses will be delivered in just three months, when 23 million have been delivered over the past nine? If we are to break the cycle of new variants, there is only one way to do it: to vaccinate the world.

The elephant in the room today for the Transport Secretary is the cost of living crisis about to engulf this country. The barrier to passengers booking holidays with confidence this spring and summer is not a passenger locator form; it is the historic collapse in living standards facing millions, and the Conservatives' refusal to do anything about it. The barrier will be the record rise in energy bills in two weeks' time, the brutal national insurance hike that his Government are imposing on working people, and the record prices of petrol that are swallowing up the incomes of millions of British people as we speak.

This country is facing the largest decline in living standards since the 1950s, putting a holiday beyond the reach of many, and the Transport Secretary has literally nothing to say. Indeed, the only step he has taken is to hike up rail fares by the largest amount in a decade. Today's announcement eases the remaining travel restrictions, but let us be clear: the barriers to holidays this summer are the tax rises his Government are imposing on hard-working families, the surging petrol prices, and the cost of living crisis made in Downing Street. Either he is oblivious to this crisis, or he is completely indifferent. Either way, is it not time this Government woke up?

Grant Shapps: I thought we were here to talk about releasing the final covid measures, but I am always up for the challenge and I am happy to respond to the hon. Lady. She started by talking about the importance of and costs to the aviation industry, and I have an ask for her in return. Yesterday, it became apparent that the Labour Government in Wales were less than chuffed

with the idea of removing those final measures. Indeed, they want to continue to pile on the costs, bureaucracy and red tape of passenger locator forms, even though they are past their point of relevance. That is what the Labour Government want to do in Wales, and therefore we should not take lectures on how to improve things for the industry. I would have thought that being the first major economy in the world to make travel covid-free in terms of removing those forms would have been warmly welcomed, and I think the Welsh Government could do the same.

The hon. Lady referred to the importance of vaccination and I entirely agree. Moments ago we were talking behind the Speaker's Chair about the terrible figures in Hong Kong to which she referred, and noting the fact that the deaths that are occurring from the spike in cases in Hong Kong appear to be entirely down to the lack of booster vaccinations. I know she will join me in being grateful that we in this country have managed to get those booster vaccinations to the population most at risk, particularly older people.

The hon. Lady asked about the toolkit of responses if covid comes back, and we had an extensive conversation about that with the UK Health Security Agency in our covid operations meeting yesterday. The collective decision, across all four nations, was that since we do not know the exact form that covid will take in future, rather than listing every possible measure—which, by the way, is every possible measure that has been taken in the past—it would be better and more responsible to see what we are facing in the specific when we see a variant of concern. Members across the House will already know the range of events and possibilities available, noting that vaccinations and pharmaceutical measures make those very different. *[Interruption.]* I do not agree with the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East that listing a range of increasingly draconian measures will somehow reassure the industry. I think it would be quite the opposite, and that was agreed across all four nations.

Finally, the hon. Lady went on to discuss the cost of living—a very valid subject to be discussing, although I am not sure it quite fits this debate. But briefly, I thought that the Leader of the Opposition had stood at that Dispatch Box a couple of weeks ago and acknowledged and warned the House that the cost of living would rise because of the war in Ukraine—I quote the right hon. and learned Gentleman when I say that. The hon. Lady asked specifically what we have done about the cost of petrol in tanks, but for 10 years, 11 years, we have frozen fuel duty, and for every one of those years Labour opposed that—every single year without fail. That measure saved £15 per gallon for the average family car, but what have Labour Members done? They have voted against it every time. They now have the chutzpah to come to the Dispatch Box and ask what we are doing about it. It is simply extraordinary. The hon. Lady then referred to rail fares, which have risen at nearly half the level of inflation. That represents a real-terms cut in rail fares because, as she knows, inflation is higher.

The hon. Lady mentioned and referenced employment and unemployment, and I have three facts for her. First, we have record levels of employment in this country, which are higher than before covid. Secondly, unemployment has been falling every month for the past year. Thirdly, no Labour Government in history have left power with unemployment lower than when they came to office.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee, Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was beginning to wonder which statement I had walked in on. Let us return to the theme of international travel, not least because thousands of people have worked in that industry over the past two years and have suffered greatly. It would be respectful of this place to focus on them, rather than on some of the wider issues that have just been brought up.

I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement. Over the past two years I know that he has battled hard to support this sector. These are the last barriers to be removed, and I hope the industry will now be ready for lift off. Border Force resources will be required once capacity increases in the summer. Will he do everything in his power, working with the Home Secretary, to ensure that we have everybody we need at the airports? I used the airport at the weekend. Border Force was fantastic and really efficient, but as numbers upscale, so must it upscale.

Grant Shapps: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Ensuring that Border Force and its resources are in the right place will be important, especially when our airports get busier again. I will certainly undertake to speak to my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary about those provisions. It might interest the House to know that with e-gates, not having to check a separate database for the passenger locator form—that was automatically carried out by e-gates, using both software and hardware—saves up to six seconds per passenger coming through. That should also help to relieve some of the queueing.

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

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It has become increasingly clear that the much vaunted four-nations approach often stems from situations where the devolved Governments are left with little choice, given the nature of the devolution funding settlement. Whether for furlough, community testing, or the various travel arrangements, when the devolved Governments perhaps took a different view, at least with the timing of such decisions, no public money would be made available for a different public health approach. It is not quite a “do as I say” approach; it is more a “do as we will fund” approach. Borrowed funds are obviously not available to the devolved Administrations, and as the Secretary of State alluded, the Welsh Government have said they are extremely disappointed at the dropping of testing requirements. The Scottish Government have said that they followed the UK Government to avoid the harm to tourism caused by non-alignment. Is this another example of the UK Government making a decision, and strong-arming the devolved Administrations into following them to avoid economic disadvantage?

Despite the unease that some members of society will have following these announcements, particularly given the rather nebulous commitment to continued surveillance, this is welcome news for the aviation and travel sectors, which come out of the pandemic in much poorer, smaller and less competitive shape than they entered it.

That is largely a result of the extremely poor support given to the sector, in which the UK stood out among top aviation markets for its paucity of support.

The future is far from certain with events in Ukraine and covid potentially causing disruption as well as the cost of living, as has been alluded to. So I would like the Government to commit to being a bit more fleet of foot on aviation support should the need arise. Indeed, when will the strategic aviation review be published?

The UK Government have said that the UK Health Security Agency will continue to monitor variants of concern, so, further to the concerns outlined by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), will the Secretary of State explain what measures will be part of that continued monitoring, how long it will operate for and how it will be funded? Lastly, what consideration at all did the Secretary of State give to the position of devolved Governments in reaching the decision that he has announced?

Grant Shapps: I should point out to the hon. Gentleman and the House that the UK Health Security Agency is a four-nations body made up of the chief medical officers from all parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland. Therefore, when we came to yesterday's discussion at Covid-O, which included Scottish Ministers, we could take into account the advice provided. I do not want to accuse him of being happy to see the forms and bureaucracy scrapped while still somehow opposing it, but it seems to me that if one is really serious about cutting bureaucracy, one should welcome this step.

The hon. Gentleman refers to support that he claims the Scottish Government have given to aviation, but it is worth reminding the House that that is not what Edinburgh and Glasgow airports have said. They were upset that Ministers in Scotland refused to meet them, which they said was “galling” and in “stark contrast” to the UK Government's approach. Indeed, the Scottish Passenger Agents' Association said that its industry had been “sacrificed” by the SNP—its word rather than mine. It is important to say that we are supporting the sector, not least by removing these restrictions.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the strategic aviation review. I hope he will accept that there is no point in carrying out a review during omicron and covid—we want to do it as the industry comes out—so that will be forthcoming. He asked a sensible question about continued monitoring, which will happen in two ways. First, he will be familiar with me having said many times at the Dispatch Box when we were in the midst of the pandemic that the UK was carrying out up to 50% of the genomic sequencing in the entire world. That figure is now different, because we have helped and other countries have caught up, so, although we are carrying on our programme, much of that genomic sequencing is happening around the world rather than needing to be done specifically here. Secondly, we have the programme led by the Office for National Statistics that carries on finding out where coronavirus is in the country and the extent to which different variants might be starting to take hold. We can therefore continue to monitor things comprehensively through both genomic sequencing and the covid-19 infection survey of the population.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May I express my gratitude to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for removing all covid-19 international travel restrictions

[Henry Smith]

for those coming into the United Kingdom? Will he join me in welcoming the reopening of the south terminal at Gatwick airport on 27 March and the thousands of job vacancies now available and needing to be filled as we recover our industry and our economy?

Grant Shapps: I do not think it is too much of an exaggeration to say that virtually nobody in the House has done more than my hon. Friend to promote the case of the hard-pressed aviation sector during the last two years of the crisis. It is great news that Gatwick's south terminal will reopen on 27 March; I very much hope to be there for that. I know that he shares my enthusiasm for all the work that carried on during the crisis to aim for jet zero, to help clean up the aviation sector and ensure that, by 2050, we have not only a booming British aviation sector but a cleaner one.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I am delighted that England is following Norway, Ireland, Hungary and several other countries in lifting all remaining travel restrictions. Will the Secretary of State assure me that when the public inquiry into covid happens, it will have full access to all the various and quite secretive committees that the Government relied on when they imposed those travel restrictions? Many of us believe, and growing evidence suggests, that for countries such as ours, which were never going to have a zero-covid strategy, the draconian travel restrictions did more harm than good.

Grant Shapps: For the sake of completeness, I will mention Ireland, Iceland, Lithuania, Norway and Slovenia, which have either removed or will shortly remove measures to put themselves in the same position. I say "of leading economies" because I am not aware of any other G7 economy that has gone as far as us in scrapping restrictions and making it easier to travel.

The inquiry will be there to learn the lessons from covid, and it is incredibly important that it does so not just in relation to travel but across everything that happened during covid. Of course, we want to learn the lessons because, without learning the lessons of the past, we can never improve things for the future.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I have learned from being in this House that when the Government do something good and well, few Opposition Back Benchers turn up—we have only one today—and the three shadow Ministers have heckled from a sedentary position because they know that the Government have done a good job. Is it not true that the Prime Minister's leadership by getting the vaccine and unlocking our society has allowed us to have freedom day for travel this Friday? Does the Secretary of State have to sign a piece of paper or lay a statutory instrument before the House? If he just needs to sign a piece of paper, why does he not do so tonight so that we can start tomorrow?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all remember Margaret Keenan receiving that very first properly approved vaccination in the entire world, and that happened in this country. It was not just that: we also got the vaccination programme out first and, critically, the booster programme out first and showed world leadership. Actually—this is partly in response to the comments of the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley

(Louise Haigh); I did not pick up this point—2.6 billion people have received the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccination, so we have made more of a contribution than any other country in the world. It is absolutely right to recognise all of that.

I do not know the technicalities of quite what happens—I imagine that we must sign an SI—but I do know that we need a few days to alert everyone to change the systems for Border Force and ensure that people already away can adjust to the change. However, it is only three more sleeps, is it not? I hope that my hon. Friend can contain himself.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. It is the right thing to do and, as I have said before, freedom works. However, may I press him on his answer to the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) about ensuring that, after a period of having been wound down to deal with fewer passengers, ports of entry are ready to give that warm British welcome to people either returning home or visiting for travel and leisure? I heard a horror story the other day that, at Heathrow terminal 5, e-gates were telling everybody to seek assistance but there was only one official. Will he do everything possible to support our airports and work with the Home Office to ensure that all ports of entry are ready to receive people?

Grant Shapps: I absolutely will do that. I know that Border Force has been working hard, sometimes under difficult conditions. Many people do not realise that every time there was a change in which countries were added or removed or rules changed—there were hundreds of them—that often required not just software but hardware changes. As a passenger put their passport down on an egate, it was reading not only their passport for permission to enter but checking the passenger locator form, their vaccination status and how they had filled in the form—it was doing an awful lot of work behind the scenes. Updates, unfortunately, commonly caused breaks in that system. As far as I know, we were the only country in the world to even attempt anything as ambitious on e-gates—I certainly came across no equivalent in North America or Europe. It is really important that much of that bureaucracy will be removed as that should smooth things out. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), I will discuss Border Force resourcing with the Home Secretary.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I think that everybody in the House will warmly welcome the Secretary of State's announcement about extra vaccines being distributed around the world. Will he ensure that a list of countries receiving them is put in the Library for us to check? Will he assure me that a good number of very poor Commonwealth countries are prioritised in the programme?

Grant Shapps: It is certainly the case that the vast majority of the vaccinations through Oxford-AstraZeneca have gone to mid and lower-income countries. Many will have been used by Commonwealth countries. I should have answered in detail the point made on that by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). I will place a note in the House of Commons Library to

provide a breakdown of where those have gone and answer the further question about how the 100 million is worked out. But I think all of us in the House, regardless of which side we sit on, can be incredibly proud of this country's literally global lead in protecting the world against coronavirus.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Axing all the remaining covid restrictions for outgoing travellers will be warmly welcomed by those working in the travel, aviation, airport and aerospace sectors, including my wife and many Gloucester constituents. Those are all areas of expertise and employment across the UK. Does my right hon. Friend share my pride and enthusiasm for the new record-breaking electric aircraft, the Spirit of Innovation, developed at Gloucestershire airport, and the new hydrogen aircraft developed at Kemble airport, also in Gloucestershire, showing that in a county famed for the first ever jet-engined aircraft take-off, we can now focus on an exciting future for travel and aviation at much less cost to the environment?

Grant Shapps: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I do not want to disappoint him or his wife. It is incoming traffic that will have the reduction in bureaucracy. On outgoing, we still encourage people to check with the FCDO. As I pointed out a couple of times, most other countries still have some restrictions. But is he right about that electric aircraft, which is a Rolls-Royce project—the world's fastest flying electric aircraft being produced right here in the UK? He is. ZeroAvia is producing the world's first hydrogen aircraft, which is now on its second version, a larger 20-seat aircraft. There is a lot of innovation, backed by £180 million, to assist all this decarbonisation of aviation. It is very exciting and it leads to a very strong future for British aviation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

Quad Bikes

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

2.31 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require quad bike riders on public highways to wear helmets; to make provision about the registration of quad bikes; to make provision about the dangerous and anti-social use of quad bikes; and for connected purposes.

The Bill will promote safe use of road-legal quads and reduce the number of off-road quads on our streets by making the wearing of helmets compulsory, making necessary the installation of vehicle immobilisers, making registration of all quad bikes compulsory and empowering police to remove problem off-road quads from our streets permanently. I thank the many stakeholders who have worked with me on the Bill: West Yorkshire police, the West Yorkshire Deputy Mayor for policing and crime, the Royal College of Policing, the National Farmers Union, Brake, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety.

The constant, loud, piercing drone of quad bikes is an all too familiar sound in many of our towns and cities. These vehicles have important and legitimate uses in agriculture and related industries, but they are tools, not toys, and their careless, reckless and unsafe use on our streets is a menace. My constituents have had enough. Most issues are not caused by road-legal quad bikes, which, like any road vehicle, must be registered, have an MOT and be driven by a responsible adult with a licence and insurance. Instead, our streets are plagued by quads legal only for off-road use, which do not require registration. Most off-road quads are not approved for use on public highways precisely because they do not meet road safety standards. The lack of registration also means that they are harder to trace by police.

The antisocial use of quads centres in cities and the suburbs, but the vehicles used are often stolen from farms. The National Farmers Union sees it as a particular problem and estimates that some 1,100 quad bikes are stolen from farms each year, costing farmers upwards of £3 million. If just a fraction of those end up on public roads, that is hundreds of illegal quads running rampant on our streets. These vehicles are designed for herding animals in fields, not tearing up tarmac in our towns and cities.

Data from West Yorkshire police shows that antisocial quad use is a growing problem. There were over 10,000 reports of antisocial use of quads and bikes in West Yorkshire in 2021, a shocking 42% rise on the previous year.

The problems of antisocial quads are threefold. At the most basic level, they are a disruptive and persistent noise nuisance. Just one antisocial quad rider ripping through a neighbourhood will disturb hundreds and hundreds of residents. That constant noise causes distress to residents and undermines public confidence in our police. They also damage the local landscape, tearing up fields, green spaces, embankments and parks. Only last week, a constituent contacted me about a convoy of no fewer than seven quads racing between families on park space. On more than one occasion, community sports groups in my constituency have had to cancel or

[Judith Cummins]

postpone matches and training because of damage to their local playing fields from quads. Most seriously, they are a risk to other road users, pedestrians and the drivers themselves. Only last year in Bradford, a man was killed when his quad veered and collided with another vehicle.

I recently spoke with a constituent who told me they had seen a young person on a quad weaving through traffic on two wheels on a busy A road in excess of 40 miles per hour, a danger to every road user and pedestrian nearby. What was the rider's choice of headwear? Was it a helmet to protect their life? No, it was a balaclava to protect their identity. I propose to make wearing a helmet compulsory for all quad users on public highways. In Northern Ireland, it is already a requirement. Why that is not the case in the rest of the United Kingdom is a mystery. The argument is self-evident: when the worst happens, the results are catastrophic. A quad user is twice as likely as someone in a car to get into an accident in the first place and then is 10 times more likely to be seriously injured or killed. The compulsory wearing of helmets would make the law consistent with that for other similar vehicles.

Police have powers to seize these vehicles, such as under section 165A of the Road Traffic Act 1988 for unlicensed or uninsured vehicles, and under section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 for vehicles used antisocially, but they still face an uphill struggle. The police will always prioritise public safety. Where they judge they cannot risk injury to pedestrians, other road users, the rider or their officers, they will not give chase to quads. So to take action, police must link a quad being used antisocially to an owner with an address. That can take hundreds and hundreds of hours of police time, piecing together official reports from members of the public, scouring community intelligence on social media or reviewing CCTV from businesses such as petrol stations for that one frame showing the rider's face, all to make a strong enough case to act.

That work does get results. For example, in my neighbouring city of Leeds, after a ride out involving over 100 vehicles in 2016, police were able to take action that resulted in 13 convictions, with sentences between 12 months and two years. However, it is labour-intensive and should any one link in the chain break, the police can do little. Yet effective changes can be made to help the police and will reduce the number of illegal quads on our streets. Unlike for cars, the installation of immobilisers is not a legal requirement. That vital piece

of technology has been required in all cars since 1998. The device provides an additional layer of security and makes it that much harder for opportunistic thieves to make away with them. By making immobilisers a requirement, we make theft harder and reduce the number of quads getting on to our streets in the first place.

My Bill also proposes extending the registration scheme for licensed road-legal quads to cover all quad bikes, including those allowed for off-road use only. That establishes a clear line of ownership right from the point of sale, which will help police in their inquiries when investigating reports. It means that, once seized, stolen quads can be more easily returned to their rightful owner.

Finally, police will be empowered so that, once they have taken a problem quad off the road, they can make sure it stays off the road. I was astounded to learn from senior police officers that, once a quad has been seized, police have little control over where that vehicle ends up. If it was stolen and its rightful owners can be found, it can be returned, but quads are frequently sold at auction as proceeds of crime. Because of a lack of registration and regulation, once a vehicle is sold, the police are almost powerless to prevent it from ending up right back on the very streets that it has been plaguing, starting the cycle once again. We must break that cycle. The seize and release approach is not working; police must be given the power to seize and destroy nuisance quads, taking them off the streets permanently.

We need to stop seeing these vehicles as toys. If we continue to let them slip through the cracks in legislation, we will fail to protect legitimate owners from needless theft, we will fail to protect residents dealing with chronic noise and we will fail to protect all road users and pedestrians who remain at risk. It is time we brought in measures to provide consistency, protect road users and legitimate owners of quads, and stop the blight of their dangerous and antisocial use on our streets and paths. I commend this motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Judith Cummins, Barbara Keeley, Nick Smith, Graham Stringer, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Dan Jarvis, Yvonne Fovargue, Charlotte Nichols, Kate Green, Rosie Cooper, Jackie Doyle-Price and Naz Shah present the Bill.

Judith Cummins accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 6 May, and to be printed (Bill 281).

Ukraine

[*Relevant documents: e-petition 609530, "Waive visa requirement for Ukrainian refugees"; e-petition 607314, "Pledge any necessary military support to defend Ukraine"; e-petition 609382, "Offer fast track asylum to any Ukrainians displaced due to the invasion".*]

2.42 pm

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Seven days ago, President Zelensky inspired us with his address to Parliament. This weekend, he was visiting wounded soldiers in hospital, leading from the front. We owe it to President Zelensky and the people of Ukraine to do our utmost to help them in their brave fight; we owe it to ourselves to stand up for security and stability in Europe; and we owe it to the world to keep the flame of freedom burning and to show that aggression does not pay.

In response to the unprovoked attack, the world has shown immense unity in standing up to Vladimir Putin, but we need to keep up the pressure. Our objective is clear: Putin must lose in Ukraine. We are doing this by cutting off the funding for his war machine, by providing weapons that the Ukrainians need to defend themselves and by isolating Putin on the world stage. The United Kingdom has been at the forefront of the international response, with a tough sanctions package and strong support, including defensive weapons and humanitarian aid. We will now enhance our work with allies to respond to Russia's aggression.

We need to be strong to get peace. That is why we are building on efforts to cut off the funding for Putin's war machine through sanctions. Today, I can announce that we will go further than ever before by hitting more than 360 more people complicit with Putin's regime. They range from former President Dmitry Medvedev and Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu to Putin's propagandist Maria Zakharova. After today, we will have designated more than 1,000 individuals and entities under our Russian sanctions regime.

We are using our new powers under the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 to maximise impact. That would not have been possible without the extraordinary efforts of colleagues across this Parliament to get the legislation through the House so quickly, which shows our collective determination to lead by example in punishing the Putin regime.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister is right that we are sanctioning a lot of people, but actually we name the people who are sanctioned, and then other people do the sanctioning by not engaging with them on a financial basis, not buying or selling properties and all the rest of it. At the moment, it is phenomenally difficult to find out from the Foreign Office sanctions list who is and is not sanctioned. For instance, I gather that it was announced last week that Members of the Duma were sanctioned, but they are still not on the Foreign Office website list, as far as I can see. I wonder whether there is a way of making the information far more readily available to the wider population.

We need to deal not just with the people who have £20 million houses, whom we have all heard of, but with the people who have £750,000 flats in London, bought

with Russian dirty money—the many relatives of Abramovich and his ex-partners, for instance. Each one of them needs to be dealt with, and each one of those properties needs to be seized.

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about ensuring that we give due publicity to the people, institutions and entities who have been sanctioned. I will ensure that the Department listens to his suggestion.

In December, we brought our G7 partners together in Liverpool to warn Putin that invading Ukraine would have massive consequences. We have followed through on that pledge. We have worked with our allies to cut off sectors of the Russian economy by targeting its defence companies, trade and transport sector, and by kicking banks out of the SWIFT financial system. We have led the way with our financial sanctions, targeting 10 Russian banks, and we have hit over £300 billion of Russian bank assets. All this amounts to the toughest sanctions package of any country. We will work with all our allies and encourage them to keep ratcheting up their efforts as well.

We will continue to provide lethal military aid to Ukraine. We were the first European country to send defensive weapons; we have already donated more than 3,600 next generation light anti-tank weapons and are now supplying Javelin missiles.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the lighter moments in an otherwise extremely bleak military picture in Ukraine was the destruction of Russian tanks, using—one has to presume—British NLAW missiles?

James Cleverly: My hon. and gallant Friend makes an important point. We have heard anecdotally that Ukrainians are shouting "God save the Queen!" as they fire those weapons at the tanks that have been sent to destroy them. I am very proud that we play an incredibly important part.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way; it is very courteous of him. Is it not true that part of the reason we are where we are today is the historic long-term running down of our armed forces? The situation today sits very ill with the proposal to reduce the British Army by 10,000 men and women. Finally, we have all read in today's *Telegraph* that inflation will reduce the size of the armed forces over the years ahead.

James Cleverly: The sad truth, I think, is that Vladimir Putin has been plotting this expansionist idea of his for quite some time. I do not agree that it is necessarily linked with domestic defence policy in the UK, but we can absolutely be proud that British military technology, assisted by British military training, is helping the Ukrainians in their time of need and in their ferocious defence of their homeland.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): My right hon. Friend has told us that the United Kingdom has taken the lead on our continent in freezing the assets of Russians. During his discussions with representatives of the European Union, have they been able to furnish him with an explanation of why they, as an entity, have failed to keep pace with Britain in that regard?

James Cleverly: I am often encouraged to do a “compare and contrast” between the United Kingdom and our international friends and partners, but the simple truth is that there has been greater, tighter and closer co-ordination in response to Putin’s aggression in Ukraine than I could ever have imagined, and we will continue to work together extremely closely. We are proud of the fact that the UK Government have had a dramatic and detrimental impact on Russia’s finances, choking off Putin’s ability to fund this aggression, but we intend to go further, and we will do so in close co-ordination with those international friends and partners.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): As someone who lost his guts, or at least his lunch, quite a few times when helicopters were having to jig because of the threat of Singer missiles—given to our allies at the time, decades earlier—may I ask whether the Minister can assure us that the Government’s measures are sufficient to ensure that our weapons do not end up on the black market in the hands of the wrong people at a future date? Will he also confirm that our weapons—the NLAWs and other pieces of aggressive equipment—will not end up in the hands of far-right neo-Nazis, many of whom we know to be making their way to Ukraine now from around the world?

James Cleverly: Our priority, and the purpose of the defensive weapon support that we have provided, is to help the Ukrainians to defend themselves against the attacks of Russia. Obviously we hope that this conflict will come to a swift conclusion, but until then we will continue our support for the Ukrainians as they defend themselves. What happens at the end of this conflict, in terms of securing munitions, will be something on which we will work with the Ukraine Government and our national friends and partners, but at the moment our priority, quite rightly, is to help the Ukrainians to defend themselves against Putin’s attack.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend about this distinction between defensive and offensive weaponry? The fact is that when a friendly nation finds itself under attack, all the weaponry with which we supply it is defensive. I should have thought that if we cannot intervene ourselves—and there are good reasons why we cannot—there is no reason at all why we cannot help the Ukrainians with their airspace problem by facilitating the necessary aircraft deliveries which they have requested.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend has made an important point about munitions systems being inherently defensive when a country is under attack. He has also made an important point about airspace management, and I will come to that later in my speech. I intend to make some progress now.

Since 2014, we have worked to train more than 22,000 Ukrainian troops under Operation Orbital. As well as helping Ukraine to defend itself from attack on the ground, we must help it to defend itself against attack from the skies. That is why we will be sending more supplies, including Starstreak ground-based air defence anti-aircraft missiles. We and our allies need to do everything possible, within the UN charter on self-defence, to help Ukraine to defend itself, which is why I was with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister this morning discussing with and working with our Nordic and Baltic

allies to increase defensive support as part of the UK-led joint expeditionary force. We must be robust in supporting our NATO allies living under the shadow of Russian aggression, so the UK, as NATO’s biggest European contributor, is doubling the number of troops in Estonia and Poland.

As Putin inflicts ever greater misery in Ukraine, we continue our humanitarian and economic support. We have pledged almost £400 million, which includes the supply of more than 700,000 medical items directly to Ukraine and more than 500 power generators to keep essential facilities such as hospitals running. We have also brought 21 critically ill Ukrainian children to the UK to receive life-saving cancer treatment. We are providing more humanitarian aid than any other European country. The British people have also risen to the moment by showing their own huge generosity of spirit. In the short time since our homes for Ukraine scheme was launched, more than 80,000 people have signed up for it.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): It may be helpful for my right hon. Friend to know that according to a Sky newflash, the figure is now more than 100,000.

James Cleverly: That is lovely. It is not usually nice to be wrong at the Dispatch Box, but I am incredibly proud that the figure I quoted, which was accurate a few hours ago when this speech was written, has now been made obsolete by the enormous generosity of spirit of the British people. I think that that shows us at our best. The Disasters Emergency Committee’s appeal has now reached over £150 million, which we are supporting with our largest ever match-funding pledge of £25 million.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I do not doubt the generosity of the people of this country, but I am still worried about the generosity of the Government. May I give the Minister an example? A young Ukrainian family, related to one of my constituents, have thankfully made it into Poland, but although their visa appointment was over a week ago, they are still waiting for the outcome. Meanwhile, their hotel bills are rising and they are even considering returning to Ukraine—to a war zone. How humane is that response from the Government? Can they not make these decisions much more quickly?

James Cleverly: The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and other members of the Government have made it clear that our intention is to be generous and to welcome Ukrainians with open arms. We are trying to facilitate that as quickly as possible, and the Home Secretary has spoken at the Dispatch Box about measures that she has put in place for that purpose. If the hon. Lady will pass on the details of the people whom she has mentioned, we will see what we can do to help, but I assure her that the generosity of spirit of this country will be felt by the Ukrainians who are fleeing persecution and attack from Vladimir Putin.

As well as supporting Ukraine directly, we are deploying our diplomatic efforts internationally. We are rallying the 141 countries that voted to condemn Russia’s actions at the United Nations to do even more. We have seen many of those countries support our sanctions worldwide, from Switzerland to Singapore, and we are working to draw more countries into the orbit of those that are prepared to stand up for the sovereignty of Ukraine. We are working with partners to reduce the economic

dependency on Russia across the world, from the Indo-Pacific to Africa and the Gulf, through trade and British international investment. Everything we do will further isolate the Putin regime which has made Russia a global pariah.

Ultimately, we will hold Putin accountable for his crimes. We will work with prosecutors at the International Criminal Court to help them to obtain the information that they need, and we will not relent in our mission to see that justice is done.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend seen the recent reports that the Russian navy is now massing off Odesa in a typical Russian tactical manoeuvre to open a new front? Is this not in fact a new opportunity to demonstrate to the world the unacceptability of Putin's disgusting war and to invite open and international condemnation of his actions?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We need to continue working internationally to enhance the coalition of nations that have denounced Putin's actions and to increase the pressure on him to bring this war to a conclusion rather than opening up another front and increasing the suffering of the people in Ukraine.

We must be realistic that there will be a cost to the UK and to our allies of imposing these tough sanctions, but the cost of doing nothing is so much higher. We saw what happened in 2014 when the free world did not do enough to contain Putin's aggression. He came back more aggressively, and that is why we cannot allow him to impose a settlement on Ukraine that vindicates his aggression. If we fail to stand up to Putin and fail to support Ukraine in its hour of need, we will live to regret it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): We know what a successful sanctions regime will look like: withdrawal, peace restored, etc. Who will determine—and when—whether the sanctions policy has worked, and what is the next step thereafter?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend is right to draw our attention to that. The simple truth is that the sanctions have to be successful and we have to keep applying the pressure until they are successful.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): On that point, as we mount up the sanctions, we will be freezing more and more oligarchs' and Russian assets, but we will not be selling them. We are not sequestering them, so we are going to end up with a pile of assets. Are we at some point going to use those assets for the benefit of the Ukrainian people, or are we just going to wait until the war is over and hand them back, which I do not think would be as popular?

James Cleverly: Ultimately, what we are looking to do with these sanctions is choke off the supply of funds for Putin's war machine. We have to be very focused on what the sanctions are for. This is about bringing this conflict to a conclusion.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): Just a single point on sanctions: what action will we take when people break those sanctions on Russia and take supplies? I am thinking particularly of the crude

oil being taken by India. What action should we take in those circumstances against people who are still supporting Putin, with his money flowing into the country?

James Cleverly: Ultimately, the enforcement of our sanctions regime is a task for Her Majesty's Treasury. We will of course work across Government and internationally to ensure that the sanctions packages are robust and have the desired effect of ending this war in Ukraine. That is why the UK is working so hard and that is why, together with our allies and partners, we will ensure that Putin loses in Ukraine.

3.3 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Three weeks ago, the world was changed forever. Vladimir Putin's barbaric invasion marked the start of a crime of aggression against the Ukrainian people, but it was also the beginning of an assault on the fundamental aims of post-war Europe: peace, freedom and national sovereignty. After countries on our continent murdered one another on an industrial scale in two world wars in one century, after a cold war that threatened our planet with nuclear extinction and after horrific conflicts in the Balkans, we established an era of relative security in Europe. With the vicious tyrant in the Kremlin now shaking that all about, Ukrainians have defended their homeland with extraordinary courage and determination. Russian forces, fed a diet of propaganda by their Government, might have expected to be greeted as liberators. They have instead encountered not just the dogged and skilful resistance of the Ukrainian army but the courage of ordinary men and women willing to stand in the path of Russian tanks.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I completely agree with what the right hon. Gentleman has just said, but do those on the Labour Front Bench accept that, for too long, the west has basked in the peace dividend following our victory in the cold war? Democracy needs nurturing and protecting, because sometimes it is a fragile concept. Does he therefore agree that, having taken that for granted in the past, we need to do more to build our hard and soft power to ensure that in the coming battle for democracy, it is those who believe in the concept who actually win through?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is completely right. After Georgia in 2008, after Crimea, after Donbas and after Syria, there is now deep reflection in the western community on what we could and should have done. It is important to remember that in a democracy such as ours, soft power always plays a part. That is why we should never undermine the BBC, the British Council, the role of our foreign diplomats in this endeavour or the importance of international development. We have soft power, but he is right to say that we also have armed, hard power, and we should be very cautious about the cuts that we have made to our armed defences. Sadly, Putin has deployed only hard power—or aggressive power in terms of his cyber-power—but we have the whole arsenal and we should reflect deeply on the complacency that has crept in over the last few years.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. I am grateful also for the unity that has been shown across this House in our response to what Putin is doing in

[Mrs Theresa May]

Ukraine, but I wonder, given that he referred to Syria, whether on reflection he regrets the stance taken by the Labour party in this Chamber when chemical weapons were used in Syria and Labour chose not to support the then Government's position that we should take action alongside the Americans.

Mr Lammy: I entirely understand why the former Prime Minister raises that issue. She will know, too, that there is deep reflection on Capitol Hill and in Washington on what happened at that moment in time. This is a long curve; it is one that goes back to 2008. It is not just about that singular moment, but I understand why she raises it.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Can I go back to what the right hon. Gentleman said about soft power? He said that Putin was deploying only hard power. That is absolutely true in Ukraine, but for too long, large amounts of Russian soft power, by way of cash, have been flooding into various parts of the UK—into culture, universities, politicians and businesses. Is it not the case that we should pay a great deal of attention to ensuring that that cannot happen again?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and I will certainly return to the issue of dirty money as I continue my speech.

Dr Julian Lewis: Could I urge colleagues on both sides of the House not to bring the Syria vote into this dispute? The Syria vote hinged on the fact that it was proposed to depose another Arab dictator without regard to the nature of the extremists who would have taken over. We did exactly that sort of thing when we armed all sorts of groups in Afghanistan, and that did not work out too well for America either. This is a separate issue and we should not confuse the two.

Mr Lammy: The Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee gives the right context of the debate, as I remember it, at that time.

Ukrainians have defended their homeland with extraordinary courage and determination, and Russian forces, fed a diet of propaganda by their Government, may have expected to be greeted as liberators but have instead encountered dogged and skilful resistance from the Ukrainian army. Putin's hopes for a brief campaign have crashed against the rocks of Ukrainian defiance.

That courageous resistance, however, has been met with growing brutality, with siege laid to cities, war crimes committed and civilians forced to flee, but let us look at the result of Putin's war. There have been Russian casualties on a scale Putin could not have predicted. There is horrific suffering among the Ukrainian people who Putin claims are Russians' brothers and sisters. Ukraine's President has become an emblem of democracy standing up to dictatorship. The Russian economy is in freefall, the west is united, NATO is strengthened, Germany has announced a massive and historic increase in its defence budget, and even non-NATO states such as Sweden and Finland, which I visited last week, are exporting weapons to Ukraine. Russia stands isolated at the United Nations, condemned by more than 140 nations, while thousands show great courage in protesting against this war in Putin's increasingly authoritarian police state.

This House is united in saying that defensive military support to Ukraine should continue. It is right that we help Ukraine defend itself, and the Government have Labour's full backing in providing such support, including the new anti-tank and possible anti-air weapons systems announced last week. We need to get them into Ukraine as soon as possible, as they will be essential to maintaining Ukraine's use of the sky. Last week the Government said they had taken the decision to explore a donation of Starstreak anti-aircraft missiles to Ukraine. Has that decision been made?

Mr Baron: I apologise to the House for intervening on the right hon. Gentleman a second time. I completely agree with what he just said, but there is a balance to be sought between offering essentially defensive weaponry and offering offensive weaponry, which is why some Conservative Members were concerned about talk of a no-fly zone or, indeed, the donation of Polish MiG jets to Ukrainian forces.

Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, in this age when soft power is important—the old adage is “talk softly but carry a big stick”—we should not consider any further cuts to our soft power capability, including the British Council?

Mr Lammy: I entirely agree.

From the beginning, this House has stood united in support of Ukraine's sovereignty and against Putin's aggression, so I welcome the news of additional sanctions. We support tough measures against Putin's cronies and cutting Russia out of the economic system, but let us be clear that we were promised sanctions immediately after the invasion of Ukraine. Since then the Government have been playing catch-up.

The EU sanctioned members of the Russian state Duma on 23 February. Why did the UK not do the same until 11 March? I wrote to the Foreign Secretary on 27 February calling for a ban on the export of luxury goods to Russia. Why did the Government only do that today? The United States sanctioned Oleg Deripaska four years ago. Why did the British Government catch up only five days ago?

The Government's delayed sanctions gave Putin and his cronies a get-out-of-London-free card. Roman Abramovich, who was sanctioned at the same time as Deripaska, is just one example. Because of Ministers' tardiness, Abramovich was able to fly his jet out of Stansted and sail one of his superyachts to Montenegro, with his second boat not far behind. As the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) observed, that is £1 billion of assets that have left the United Kingdom.

For too many days during this war, the Government have been behind our EU and US allies on individual sanctions. They have been behind the Opposition on sanctioning banks in Belarus as well as Russia. They have been behind us on sanctioning the energy sector and on closing the loopholes that let Putin's criminal cronies off the hook.

Alec Shelbrooke: I accept the political point that the right hon. Gentleman is trying to make, but I am sure he recognises that we were first out of the traps on banking sanctions and that we led on trying to remove Russia from SWIFT. It is simply not fair to paint a

picture that we have been following the EU and the US. There has been an international response in different areas, and it has come at different speeds.

Mr Lammy: I am not making a political point. This is a great country that typically does not follow the European Union or America but leads them. That is my point.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way.

The right hon. Gentleman is factually incorrect on the speed at which the UK applied sanctions compared with others, but does he agree that it is now important to start planning for Ukraine's reconstruction? Somebody has to clear up this mess, and it will need some sort of Marshall plan. Does he agree that the sanctioned assets are ultimately fair game to be seized and used to rebuild Ukraine? In that respect, will he differentiate oligarchs and kleptocrats? The assets of the latter are clearly fair game, and the assets of the former may well be fair game.

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point, and I refer him to *Hansard* because nothing I have said is incorrect. I will reflect on his point.

Chris Bryant: I asked the Minister about seizing assets, and this follows from the point made by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). If we do not seize assets, we will not be able to redeploy them towards the reconstruction of Ukraine. I suspect the Government will need further primary legislation to do that, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the House would stand ready to do that if necessary? There will otherwise not be a Marshall plan for Ukraine.

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend makes a good point about the historical enforcement of sanctions in this country, and of course the Opposition will stand ready to assist the Government if and hopefully when that legislation comes forward.

For more than a decade the Government have refused to clean up dirty Russian money. For any change to happen, Ministers have had to be dragged through the Lobby by Members on both sides of the House to rush through legislation that should have been passed years ago. We welcome the measures in the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022, which was passed yesterday, although many are too weak.

The job is only half done. We must complete the process of shutting down the London laundromat and ending the impunity of Russian oligarchs and the corrupt elites and criminals from across the world who use Britain as a base for hiding stolen money. That means completing Companies House reform, closing loopholes that allow overseas territories to be used as offshore tax havens to shield dirty cash from all around the world, and effectively enforcing our laws, as has just been suggested.

This war has caused the gravest humanitarian crisis on our continent in decades and the biggest movement of people in Europe since the second world war. Almost 3 million people have fled, the vast majority of them women and children, with little more than the clothes on their back.

Yesterday I met the Romanian ambassador, who told me of the efforts under way to help and support those fleeing the war. I pay tribute to communities throughout Europe, especially in Poland, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary and Moldova. Britain has a proud tradition of supporting those in need. Quite simply, we must do our part, but Government bureaucracy is still standing between desperate Ukrainians and the generosity and good will of the British public.

The war in Ukraine is a seismic shift. Our short-term responses must be components of a longer-term strategy. We must match deterrence with diplomacy, standing firm and resolute in defence of our allies while minimising any risks of a direct NATO-Russia confrontation. Avoiding miscalculation and miscommunication, we must have a clear-eyed assessment of how this war could be brought to an end so that a free and sovereign Ukraine can be rebuilt for her people. NATO is rightly avoiding direct conflict with Russia, but that means that the costs of this appalling war are being felt almost entirely by the Ukrainian people. Putin deserves absolute defeat in Ukraine and the Ukrainian people deserve absolute peace. So we must play our part in pushing for a negotiated settlement, a deal for peace based on terms accepted by the democratically elected Government of Ukraine. We must have not only strong and effective sanctions, but a clear notion of how they can be used to bring about the outcomes we seek.

While we push for an end to Putin's monstrous aggression, as well as for peace, democracy and freedom for Ukraine, we must remain open to the Russian people. They did not choose this war, so we must expose Putin's fabrications, distinguish between the Russian regime and Russia, and bolster the work of the BBC World Service and others to communicate with authoritarian states, as has been said. We must revise our defence plans for this new era, scrap the planned cuts to the Army and protect our energy security with a green energy sprint, to move decisively away from fossil fuels and on to clean, cheap, home-grown renewables instead. That will end dependency on Russia, accelerate our path towards net zero and cut off finance for Putin's war machine.

Simon Hoare: The right hon. Gentleman has mentioned a negotiated outcome. What we will all want to see is Russia withdraw entirely from all parts of Ukraine—no negotiation, just withdrawal. Will he confirm that that is his position and that of his party?

Mr Lammy: Of course Putin must withdraw, and I said that this should be based on the views of the democratically elected Ukrainian Government and their people.

It is rare that I agree with much at all that comes out of the mouth of our current Prime Minister, but I agree with the opening of his comment piece for today's *The Daily Telegraph*, as the west did make a "terrible mistake" in letting Putin "get away" with his "act of violent aggression" in Ukraine in 2014. But the Prime Minister should also apologise for his own apologetism, because in 2016 he foolishly blamed the EU for the illegal annexation of Crimea. In the absence of the Prime Minister, I am sure the Minister will agree that that was dangerously wrong, and that only Putin and his rogue regime can be blamed for these illegal acts of war.

[Mr Lammy]

The Prime Minister has made mistakes in advance of this war. He should apologise, too, for dining with an ex-KGB agent in April 2018, just two days after attending a high-level NATO summit that focused on Russia, as well as for foolishly declaring that the

“concepts of fighting big tank battles on European land mass ... are over”

as recently as November 2018. In the face of illiberalism, aggression and dictatorship, now is the time for us to reassert our belief in liberal democracy; reiterate our support for human rights at home, as well as abroad; reinforce our unshakable commitment to our NATO allies; and proclaim our belief in multilateral institutions, such as the UN, that are designed to build peace and prosperity, based on the rule of law. Because those who seek to divide us have these in their sights.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As the House can see, a lot of people wish to catch my eye during this debate, and we want to get as many in as we can. I am not going to introduce a time limit at this moment, but if everybody could focus on speaking for about eight minutes, which is generous compared with the time allowed in most debates we have, at least we will be able to give everybody a fair share. I call Theresa May.

3.23 pm

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his speech and, as I said earlier, I thank everybody from across this House for the unity we are showing in the face of the heinous further invasion of Ukraine by Russia. There is a very clear message from this House and this country: Putin has brought war to mainland Europe; he has invaded a sovereign, independent country; and he is killing innocent men, women and children whose only wish is to live in freedom and free from Russian aggression. There should also be a clear message from this House that those responsible for initiating and prosecuting this war will be held accountable for their war crimes.

As I look around the Chamber, I am sure that there are going to be many speeches on a number of matters relating to the war in Ukraine: security and defence matters, military matters, sanctions and refugees. Indeed, such references have been made in the two opening speeches. I want to focus on one issue on which light has not been shone so far and where I have a particular interest. I say to the Minister that this matter is primarily for the Home Office, but I hope that he and the other Ministers on the Front Bench will be able to take these messages to the Home Secretary and ensure that they are taken on board and that action is taken.

The issue I want to raise is that of the trafficking of Ukrainian people, particularly unaccompanied Ukrainian child refugees, at the border areas. That is happening in Poland and in other countries to which Ukrainian refugees are fleeing. This issue has been raised with me by two non-governmental organisations that work globally on tackling modern slavery: Walk Free and the Global Fund to End Modern Slavery. It is a sad reflection on human nature that at the very point where these women and children are fleeing Ukraine for their safety in

order to find refuge elsewhere, the criminal gangs have moved in to make money from the trafficking of what they consider to be yet another commodity—human beings. These gangs are attempting to make money out of this human distress and vulnerability.

The human traffickers moved in within a day or so of refugees starting to come across the borders. We have seen the photographs of the borders and we know that the numbers are such that the situation can be chaotic. It is very difficult; there are many unaccompanied children coming over. They are not necessarily orphans, but they may not have their family with them, and some of these children do not have papers. I understand that the Polish authorities are making valiant efforts to find papers and photograph children to find some sort of record of them in order to identify them. However, we know that there is no database and no real means of ensuring that identification and tracking of what is happening to those children. It has been suggested that a database is needed, and I know that efforts are being made to encourage the tech companies to help, and to do so quickly, by creating a database that can identify and track these children, to make sure that they are not unidentified and there is not the opportunity for the criminal gangs to take them away without anybody knowing that they have been there or where they are being taken. So my first ask for Ministers is whether they will now work urgently with UN agencies, the European Commission and the tech companies to find a resolution to this issue, to put in a place a system that means there can be no unidentified children left to the mercy of the traffickers.

My second ask is on the need to deal with the criminal gangs. Europol and Interpol almost certainly need to be involved, as do the various police and law enforcement agencies throughout Europe. There will be a key role for our National Crime Agency, which I believe should take the lead. I hope that if it has not already done so, the Home Office will take the issue up with the National Crime Agency and make sure that it has the resources it needs to deal with the issue. I also hope that the NCA and the Home Office recognise the urgency and importance of the issue of the trafficking of children.

My first point was on the need to reduce the opportunities for traffickers and my second was on the need to identify, catch and prosecute the traffickers, but we must also recognise that some children will be prey to the traffickers and some of them may be brought across borders and into the United Kingdom. It is possible to identify children who have been trafficked when they are brought through the border, so my third ask is for the Home Office to ensure that Border Force recognises the possibility of trafficked Ukrainian children being brought across the border and into the country, to reinforce its guidelines for Border Force staff on how to identify them, and to ensure that those staff are aware of this potential issue and are vigilant in dealing with it at the border.

As the Minister has outlined, the United Kingdom is in many ways rightly supporting Ukraine and putting pressure on Russia to stop its illegal invasion, but we have to look beyond the obvious. I suggest that the opportunities for traffickers in border areas is not the obvious but is, sadly, something that will lead to considerable further human misery. I trust that the Government will take the issue on board and act with urgency.

3.29 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Three weeks ago, when we looked at the Russian troops amassing on Ukraine's borders, none of us could have imagined the horror that we were going to witness. To see war crimes being committed, to see cities being levelled, and to see civilians being surrounded and stuck in basements without food, water or medicine—these are scenes that none of us expected. We certainly did not expect to see them in a sovereign, independent, modern-thinking country such as Ukraine.

I pay tribute to the people of Ukraine—the House is absolutely united on this. We pay tribute to President Zelensky and to the people for the bravery and resilience they have shown and continue to show in the face of the onslaught. I also pay tribute to the countries that have opened their borders to the refugees, and particularly to Romania, Hungary, Moldova and Poland. I have probably missed out some countries that are doing great work with refugees, but those are the countries into which refugees are initially crossing over.

We have to remember that this is not the first time that Ukraine has met the force of Russia. One hundred years ago, when Russia wanted to impose its will on the Ukrainian people, it enforced famine on Ukraine. Millions died during the Holodomor. We are already seeing the bodies pile up in this conflict. We need to do what we can and I fully support the lethal military aid that the UK is providing. It is crucial to Ukraine's response.

I wish to focus my comments on the refugee crisis, which is the issue in which most of our constituents feel most invested but in respect of which, in many ways, they feel most helpless. On Friday, the Home Secretary wrote to MPs about the UK's humanitarian response. Unfortunately, nothing in that letter reflected the scale or seriousness of this crisis; rather, it was a list of hoops that refugees would have to jump through. Frankly, it entirely lacked compassion. Let me read the House one sentence that stood out:

"I have two overarching obligations: to meet my first responsibility of keeping the British people safe and to meet their overwhelming demand that we do all we can to help Ukrainians."

There was nothing about our need to help Ukrainian refugees directly. Even if I take that sentence at face value, it contains this idea of keeping British people safe and supporting Ukrainian refugees—two things that are not contradictory. There is no reason why we cannot do both.

We have to be clear that it is not British people who are being bombed out of their homes, who are seeing mothers and babies killed in maternity hospitals, or who are seeing families lying dead at the side of a road. It is not British people in Mariupol who have run out of food, water and medicine; whose homes have been obliterated by the Russian bombardment; and who now are holed in, surrounded and unsure of their fate.

I am not naive, and neither are my colleagues; we know that there is a threat to the security of the United Kingdom. But the threat is not from mothers running with babies in their arms. It is not from children who have had to leave without their family. The threat is already here. It is in multi-million pound properties scattered across the City of London. It is in oligarchs funding certain members of this Government. In fact, it is sitting along the corridor from us right now. If Russia

wants to infiltrate, it already has done so, so let us get serious about our response. We need to act quickly, and quick action does not mean lengthy visa applications. In fact, I find the word "visa" particularly troubling when we are talking about refugees. Refugees do not need a visa; they need compassion.

Although I welcome the shift from the Government in the Homes for Ukraine scheme, the scheme is asking individuals to shoulder the responsibility, even to the point of identifying individual refugees—selecting the family that you fancy. This should not be up to individuals to co-ordinate; it is madness. I have been inundated with correspondence from constituents who wish to help, but how do they connect with refugees? I certainly do not know and neither do they. It has to be co-ordinated by Government, and it has to be fully co-ordinated with the devolved Governments and local authorities. It is not an individual problem and there cannot be an individual solution.

As an aside, I wish to direct my next comments directly at journalists. Disturbingly, some of us have now been asked by journalists whether we are offering our own homes to refugees. That is not appropriate. I do not put anybody on the spot, whether they be constituents, family members, or Conservative Members, to ask them what they can do to support refugees—as if it is some sort of kindness test—and neither should journalists. I do not know the personal circumstances of most Members here. I do not know whether they live in a mansion, or in a studio flat. I do not know whether they have children or caring responsibilities that would make things different. I do not know anything. It is none of my business, and, frankly, it is none of the business of journalists either. Although I might find myself on a different page to some Conservative Members in terms of the humanitarian response, I will not be asking anyone that question.

Let me also say that £350 to host someone—many people would host without money, by the way—is a cheap way of doing things. What that does not do is fund things, such as specialised trauma counselling. What it does not do is look at support services that will be required for children who have seen things that no child should see.

Simon Hoare: Up until that point, I was 110% with the hon. Lady, but my understanding from what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said yesterday was that £350 was the payment to the host family or household. All the other Departments, whether it was mental health, education, other health and so on, would all be having additional funds in order to meet those requirements. She makes absolutely the right point, but she arrives at the wrong conclusion.

Carol Monaghan: If that is the case, great, but we need to know; we need to know what the money is and how it is being given out. If a local authority is taking people on, we need to know how much they will be getting. There are many local authorities that are still not receiving money for supporting refugees, including my local authority in Glasgow. We need to know that there is money to provide specialist services as well as money for host families.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will one of the Ministers on the Front Bench help us here? My clear understanding was that Ukrainian refugees who come here will all be able to work immediately, will all be able to claim benefits immediately, will be able to have complete access to NHS services, and will all be able to get education. There is probably more to it. Would someone from the Front Bench nod, because it is really important that all our constituents understand that this is an incredibly generous package of help for people who badly deserve it?

James Cleverly *indicated assent.*

Carol Monaghan: If Ukrainian refugees have access to all those services, that is great—but those services cost money, so local authorities must be supported with the finances to provide that.

I have a list of asks. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) spoke about trafficking, which has not been talked about enough. We know where the main exit points are from Ukraine. We need to be in there, working with organisations on the ground such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Red Cross, to take people directly from those crossing points. There should be no opportunity, or at least we should minimise any opportunity, for traffickers to gain access to those who are already incredibly vulnerable. We need to transport people directly from there. It should not be a case of their having to get to Calais or anywhere else.

I ask the Government to work directly with devolved Governments to identify both capacity for supporting refugees and gaps in services. I have talked already about trauma counselling. We need to know how we are going to support properly those coming here. For example, the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) mentioned the ability to work. We must look at fast-tracking professional qualifications so that doctors and teachers can come in and work, and use the qualifications they have. In the case of teachers, in many instances they will be able to help Ukrainian children who are coming in and need language support.

Finally, we must look at examples of what other countries are doing. Let us look at what Ireland has done, for example: first, it has got people in quickly, but it has also looked at how it can utilise the skills that are coming into the country and how it can integrate people. We need to look at the best practice being displayed in other countries, rather than—as was reported—criticising their response. History will judge us on how we respond. We are three weeks in; it should not be another three weeks before we see anything.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the priority is getting people over here, and once they are here we can start looking into professional qualifications, skills and integration? We just need to get them out of Poland and Ukraine, get them over here and then we can take those things further.

Carol Monaghan: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman: we should get them here, and then in a few weeks' time we can look at the other things. However, the easiest way to get them here is to waive the visa

requirements. In the past, Britain was a haven. In the 1940s, we saw the very best of this country. Let us not find ourselves on the wrong side of history this time.

3.42 pm

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): Ukraine is Europe and Europe is Ukraine. I am under no illusion that the incredibly brave defence and sacrifices being made by the Ukrainian people against Russian aggression and barbarism is nothing less than a sacrifice on our behalf. While Ukrainian sacrifice is about defence of their land and their homes, for us their sacrifice is not about territory; it is a sacrifice being made by Ukrainians in defence of our democratic values, our peaceful existence, our western cultures and the post war non-violent settlement that we have enjoyed for so long and come to take for granted. All those things are now challenged by Russia's totally unsupportable actions.

To lay the blame at the door of an unhinged Russian President or his criminal gang is easy, but it is not adequate. The causes of this disaster are long in the making and are painful for us in the west, because they show up weaknesses in our own political systems. In retrospect, we in the free west massively misunderstood the nature and implications of the demise of the Soviet empire. We assumed that that empire and its power elites would somehow disappear—that they would jump to western values, markets and regulation, and that they would demilitarise. We relaxed and took down our guard. We demilitarised, based on some vacant concept of the peace dividend and the ultimate victory of liberal democracy, and we hoped, with little justification, that Russia would become just like us. Most people actually welcomed President Putin, who in the early days made a play against corruption—that is, until the huge scale of his own corruption was realised. Then the west adopted an apologist attitude. Little was made of Putin's viciousness in Chechnya, perhaps because that suited the western narrative at the time. The invasion of Georgia in 2008 went largely unnoticed in the west, even though it established a method of interference, fake causation and brutal attack that we have now seen repeatedly used by Russia in Crimea and in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk and Luhansk.

For those of us who have closely followed these events over the past decade, it has been a very frustrating period. Even when Russia attacked people in this jurisdiction, indeed using radioactive and nerve agent weapons, we reacted only in the most measured of ways, and yet the signs and the patterns—the lack of care for our values, the irrationality, the barbarism and the cynical geopolitical manipulation tactics—were always there. If there is one thing that comes out of this before others, it is that we must view our relationship with Russia on the basis of what it is, not what we would want it to be. Personally, I am horrified and disgusted by Russia—but I am not surprised.

We must recognise that Russia is quite content not only to use force but also to start using it on a much lower provocation level than us. So yes, even if we do not directly fight Russia, we must continue to provide the Ukrainians with all the military assistance they need. If they also need missiles to defend against planes, they should get them. If they need more anti-tank weapons, they should get them. If we need also to institute an urgent review of what military staff and

equipment we and NATO will need in the event of Russian aggression continuing in the way it has been doing, we must do it. There must be no more weakness and no more ignoring threats.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my very good friend for allowing me to intervene. The real problem the military have now is that the anti-aircraft missiles cannot go high enough, so they really need MiG-29s. There are pilots there that can fly them, and there are MiG-29s within the NATO alliance; we have seen the Polish ones. Let us do all we can to try to give them MiG-29s so that they can go up and get the aircraft that are beyond the reach of anti-aircraft missiles.

Mr Djanogly: My right hon. Friend makes a great intervention. I absolutely agree that we should be doing everything we can to assist the Poles to get those planes to our friends in Ukraine.

If Russia is not prepared to live by our western rules and actually uses them against us, then we must remove it from our economic system. It has become clear that the west acting collectively has the ability to send Russia back to the economic dark ages and a barter society, if we have the political will to do that. Recent sanctions rounds and implicit western unity in this regard, not least the banning of Russian banks from the SWIFT system, have been heartening and often indeed led by our Government.

The further list of sanctions today, taking numbers, as the Minister said, to over 1,000 individuals, is welcome and impressive. Having said that, I do feel that if we had cracked down on Russian intransigence after its invasion of Georgia—which, by the way, Russia still partly occupies—we would have stopped much later pain in the west.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I had the honour of meeting the chairman of the Committee on European Integration of the Parliament of Georgia in Paris at the conference a few days ago. Does he recall me saying that she said that Georgia has been warning about this for nearly 20 years now?

Mr Djanogly: It has indeed, as I can say from a lot of first-hand evidence.

Sanctions against individuals will play an important role here. I saw how the Government were really getting it when they extended the Aeroflot sanctions to private jets. My next suggestion, as I have told the Minister before, would be to ban Russian yachts and planes from getting insurance. Sanctioning leads to asset freezes, so the Government will be left holding millions of pounds-worth of houses, boats and other assets, but what happens next? Will these assets be sequestered and used for the benefit of Ukraine's rebuilding, or will they be held to be returned to oligarchs after the war? The latter option may not be so popular, but it might be legally correct if we do not legislate further on this matter.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument on the use of sanctions and their importance abroad. Does he not agree that their use is also important at home? We are seeing dirty Russian money stolen off the Russian people being used by Putin in deliberate acts to undermine our national security, to silence voices in our country, to

intimidate journalists and to disrupt the procedures of our courts. Does my hon. Friend not see that as a direct assault on the British people, being brought and paid for by Putin's friends, with money stolen off the Russian people?

Mr Djanogly: Yes, indeed, and in every regard. I am very pleased that we are now addressing that. Many have addressed the question of helping Ukrainian refugees. I do not have time to go into that in detail today, other than to say that we need to be generous to these poor souls to the greatest extent that we can.

Finally, but no less importantly, we should now be preparing a significant Marshall-type plan for Ukraine. Once Russia is out of Ukraine, which must be the only outcome we can believe in, Russia should know that as much as it will be humbled by our sanctions, we shall also help to rebuild Ukraine and to put Ukraine into a better economic situation than it is in now. The days of pandering to Russia are over. The suffering of the Ukrainian people, of the Georgian people and of others, including Russians demonstrating on behalf of us all, must not go unrecognised. We must keep up this action.

3.51 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Nobody could fail to be moved by the images of Ukraine that we have been seeing on our screens for days now—the destruction, the death and the millions of refugees. It is right that we are in this Chamber discussing Ukraine at further length. None of us can know how long this conflict will last, but we do know that there is already a severe refugee crisis with the potential of literally millions of victims.

A number of Members on both sides of the House have already given vent to their frustrations at the Government's response. Members have spoken about the Calais visa processing centre, which does not exist, and the Lille processing centre, which may as well not exist, because its whereabouts cannot be divulged. Instead, I will focus on the Government's new scheme. The shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy) yesterday called it a "DIY asylum scheme", and she is right. It is the responsibility of Governments and states to ensure that the legal rights of those seeking asylum are upheld. It should not be dependent on the generosity of the people of Britain.

The scheme that has been announced is something of a curate's egg—good in parts. Let me begin by praising those parts of the scheme that are commendable. The Secretary of State told the House yesterday that the scheme would begin with people with known connections to Ukraine and then be widened out, and that is sensible. There is a stipulation that accommodation is made available for at least six months. On the face of it, that is a sensible precaution—nobody wants to see vulnerable refugees moved from pillar to post—but it does highlight a structural problem with the scheme to which I will return.

It is a very good thing and correct that under this new scheme, refugees will be allowed to live and work in the UK for up to three years and receive full and unrestricted access to benefits, healthcare, employment and other support. Some of us have long argued that that should be the position for all refugees and asylum seekers, wherever their country of origin. The current position,

[Ms Diane Abbott]

where some of the most vulnerable people in this country are kept dangling with vouchers and minimal income, is itself inhumane and a recipe for exploitation of all kinds. It is costly and bureaucratic to run, and it demeans those we are supposed to help. The arrangements for the Ukrainians should be a precedent for the treatment of all asylum seekers, not an exception.

Clive Lewis: Does my right hon. Friend have any idea why Conservative Members might want to have a different approach to refugees fleeing Ukraine and refugees fleeing Afghanistan, Syria and other countries?

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend tempts me; perhaps it is the case that it is easier to be humane with refugees who look like us.

In the first instance, the Government tried to apply the visa system to refugees, which is wrong in principle. Visas are discretionary for any Government and any Government are within their rights to limit or withhold visas, but that is not the case for refugees who have a right to seek asylum under international law. It is a category error to treat, or attempt to treat, refugees in that way because it breaches international law in principle and it is unjust. Yet with the new scheme, we have an asylum system in which, essentially, the responsibility for refugees has been outsourced; it is a DIY scheme, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan put it. That cannot be right. It is one thing to harness the generosity of the British public but quite another to leave vulnerable refugees waiting and hoping because their only chance of a decent life here depends on private generosity.

I remind the House that that model of community sponsorship has been used before for the 2014 group of Syrian refugees. By 2017, however, there were only 12 schemes across the whole country, six of which were in London. We know from the attempt to use community sponsorship for Syrian refugees that there are issues that need to be resolved: there needs to be strong local authority support, because when the community sponsorship ends, the local authority will have to provide housing and support; we need a better structure than we had in relation to the Syrian refugees; we need better planning and funding; and we need to be clear what happens when the community sponsorship comes to an end. It is not clear to me how outsourcing the reception of asylum seekers in that way meets our treaty obligations or whether the Government could be suspected of trying to shirk them.

I will also mention the contrast between the stated willingness to help Ukrainian refugees fleeing war and the approach to no less terrified victims of other wars, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. They were wars and conflicts that the Government and their allies had a role in and that caused vast destruction and loss of life. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says that there are still more than 9 million Iraqi refugees worldwide, yet there are currently only 20,000 in this country. Whatever the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities may say, that is not generous and it is not even close to being proportionate.

The Government need to think through their proposals. They need to do more and much better and to abandon the notion of visas for refugees. There may have to be

rudimentary security checks, but to make refugees, to whom we have a legal obligation, go through all the red tape of a visa application is wrong and does not meet the Government's responsibilities in principle. The Government need to do more and do better. The British people have shown the way with their generosity and the Government need to step up and meet their responsibilities to refugees, not just in words but in practice.

3.59 pm

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): The situation in Ukraine is terrifying and alarming. This appalling assault on a democratic sovereign state must end in failure for President Putin, but I fear there is much worse to come.

Success or failure for Putin could leave us with an unprecedented series of risks. He would become emboldened from a successful campaign that would give him confidence and expose other neighbouring states to the same fate. The risks that stem from failure for Putin are also frightening, as his frustration at the heroic bravery of the Ukrainian forces could lead to an escalation of the conflict to terrifying levels. We are aware of President Putin's record with chemical weapons in Syria, we have seen his attack on Europe's largest nuclear power station, and two days ago we saw the use of stand-off munitions landing less than 20 miles from the Ukrainian border with Poland.

The situation is set to get worse. The west needs to respond to the fast-moving picture with whatever intervention is necessary and be prepared for the domestic challenges that will ensue. United and severe action taken by allied nations will make a significant difference over time. Each country has played a major part in the areas where it can have the greatest impact. The UK's contribution has been significant, particularly in providing necessary arms, but more work can be done in that area.

The scale of the UK's sanctions, freezing of assets and financial penalties is among the most severe of any nation, with more than £250 billion of bank assets frozen—more than by any other country in the world—as well as action on the international payment facility, SWIFT. Some 500 of Russia's high-value individuals have been sanctioned, in addition to scores of oligarchs, and their homes and other luxury assets seized. Although we use only a small amount of Russian oil and gas, it is right that they will be phased out as soon as possible, along with bans on technical goods, the sale of assets owned in Russia and the sanctioning of Russian politicians. The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act will make it easier to intervene and yesterday the Secretary of State announced the welcome, limitless sponsorship programme to enable more refugees to come to the UK—I will return to that.

All these measures are important and will make a significant difference over time, but we must recognise that doing the right thing—offering support over time and in the long term—will have a domestic impact in the UK and around the world. Nothing compares to the experiences felt in Ukraine, but we will need to be ready for the consequences in access to food and supplies, higher inflation and a significant hit to our living standards in the United Kingdom.

I believe the public are ready for that. The generosity shown in offering accommodation to Ukrainian families is a heart-warming example of the nation coming together

in response to a crisis in Europe. During the second world war, major sacrifices were made domestically, in addition to the direct war effort. Thankfully, the impact of the conflict in Ukraine will be less severe in the UK, but there will still be an impact. We need to be straight with the public and come together as a nation, as we have at other times of crisis.

I ask that the Prime Minister consider making a statement to the nation to highlight our need to act internationally, to prepare us for the potential impact locally and to say that we have to come together. We should not underplay the very real challenges and sacrifices ahead of us, but as we meet them we must consider that we are very lucky compared with people in Ukraine who face grave risks.

My final comments relate to the excellent sponsorship programme that was announced yesterday. The delays have clearly caused challenges and frustrations, but the scheme's implementation must be our focus, and I hope the Opposition will recognise that we are in a time of crisis and need to come together. The public response has been humbling and quite fantastic. We need to prepare for the fact that Ukrainian families could be with us for some time, and we will rightly continue to give them all necessary support.

The only experience we have had in recent times has been of supporting Syrian refugees, but I want to highlight, among all of the well wishes and positive statements made by local authorities and individuals in this House and beyond, an example in my constituency. Two brilliant community groups, Croeso Cowbridge and Croeso Llantwit—Welcome Cowbridge and Welcome Llantwit—came together to sponsor families from Syria. This was done in response to local political leaders calling on people to come together, but the preparation, along with the need to win support from the local authority for every aspect, took four years. So far my local authority has only accommodated two families. We do not have four years to prepare. We do not even have four weeks to respond, but that demonstrates the scale of activity that needs to take place within the coming days.

The Ukraine families need to be at the centre of our consideration. The last thing any family need, as has already been suggested, is to be moved from pillar to post. As hosts, we need to recognise that we may need to support them for an extended period. Even if the conflict ended quickly, there has been so much destructive activity in Ukraine that many homes and communities do not exist any more. So I say to Members on the Government Benches, but particularly to Members on the Opposition Benches, that if there has ever been an occasion to come together, definitely call on the Government to support and to act, but do that in a positive spirit, because other people are watching and many of these families deserve the warmest welcome that we can provide.

4.6 pm

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak after so many interesting and varied speeches so far. Let me start by saying unequivocally that the Ukrainian Government and their people have every right to wage armed resistance against this unmentionable Russian invasion, which I believe is included under the UN charter. That is the first thing I wanted to put on record, but from now on some of my speech may find disagreement

with Members in this place. I support the Government and their arming of Ukrainian resistance but, as I mentioned in an intervention, I also have questions. One of the roles of the Opposition and one of the roles of us in this place is to ask the questions that we think the Government are not asking or do not want asked. That is our job here and that is what I want to do today in my speech.

In my intervention, I asked whether we were doing enough to put in place precautions about the billions of pounds of arms that are going into Ukraine. Some of them—Stinger missiles and anti-tank weapons—are quite lethal. We know from our recent history that those weapons can be turned against us. I can go into a shop and find a tracking device to follow my bike, my iPhone or any device I have. There is software that can be shut down with kill switches. The more lethal and complex the technology, the easier it is for us to do that. I do not need the details—we do not need the details in this House—but I want to know that the Government are thinking a few moves ahead and that is what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about thinking beyond the immediate, trying to be strategic and thinking about the consequences of our actions now. Those actions are right—arming the Ukrainian people is right—but there are other actions that will come from this, so how do we make sure we learn from the lessons of the past?

I think it is time to pause and reflect: where do we want to be in six months, in a year, in 10 years? I want to ask some questions that have been raised by an organisation called Rethinking Security. I will quickly go through them now; there are about seven.

Do we see military might as inherently wrong, delegitimised because of Russia's actions in Ukraine, or do we merely see it discredited in the wrong hands and validated in the form of our valiant allies and armed forces? Do we recognise the horror of all humanity caught up in war, or do we decide that, like malaria and cholera, this is some African or Asian malady that intrudes intolerably into safe, civilised Europe? Do we recognise that oligarchic interests have captured and corrupted our own political, economic and media structures, or do we make examples of a few Russian playboys and declare mission accomplished?

Do we really want to break our easy addiction to imported carbon, or do we just want to find a new dealer? I say that noting that the Prime Minister is on his way to Saudi Arabia, a country that has just executed 81 people and is conducting a brutal war in Yemen—I am smelling some inconsistencies here. Do we believe that Ukraine, Belarus and Russia are all integral to Europe, and commit to their eventual inclusion within a secure and just peace system, or do we decide that a new iron curtain is the best way to divide and subdue a continent at arms? Those are the questions we need to be asking, beyond the immediate.

I want to come now to the role of the oligarchs and their interests. This is the rot that is at the heart of our politics and economy. We have heard repeatedly how the Benches opposite are bankrolled by the richest, including oligarchs. That is who they represent. This is writ large in their policies and policy choices. But do not take my word for it. An investigation by openDemocracy in 2019 revealed that, in a decade of austerity, the Conservatives took £130 million in donations and 80% of their 2019 general election funding came

[Clive Lewis]

from the elite Leaders Group, with exclusive access granted to group members for a fee of £50,000. There are other examples. Overseas territories, British tax havens, are responsible for 29% of the £245 billion in global taxes that the world loses to corporate, according to the Tax Justice Network. We know that donors and elites can essentially purchase a permanent seat in the House of Lords. Look at the owner of the *Evening Standard*, who, I am pleased to say, our own leader refused to be photographed with. We know that elites in our own media own 90% of UK-wide media and print and it is controlled by just three companies.

Richard Graham: This is an incredibly important debate for us all. Feelings are very strong and a massive amount is being done by our constituents and by the Government in a series of different sectors. The hon. Gentleman has so much to contribute and so many valuable thoughts. I wonder whether he really needs to focus on an argument about the funding of different parties as his key contribution to the debate.

Clive Lewis: I think the reason many of us on this side want to focus on this is because, at the heart of what is going on, we understand that, for many years, Putin—the same man, the same circle that devastated Russia and asset stripped it—planted that money into the City of London. This was their city of choice. That happened on the watch of successive Governments, but the hon. Member's Government as well. I think it is critical that we understand Putin and the people around him, and how they have enriched and engorged themselves and made themselves powerful. We have to understand how that has happened if we do not want it to happen again. We also have to understand how our democracy is being corroded by interests similar to those of the people in control of Russia.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the £30,000 accepted by the Conservative party from the wife of a Putin ally, Lubov Chernukhin? Let us be clear, in answer to the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham): Lubov Chernukhin is married to the former Deputy Finance Minister, Vladimir Chernukhin. At that time, the then Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson), was warned about cyber-attacks from Russia. We had the absurd situation where he himself took that woman around Churchill's war rooms on a private guided tour. That is the point my hon. Friend is making. The Conservative party is steeped in Kremlin money.

Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—[*Interruption.*] I can hear chuntering. I am sure Conservative Members do not want that mentioned. They want us to focus merely on what is happening in front of us. That is right, and much time will be devoted to it, but it is also important that we see the underlying trends and conditions that have in part enabled people such as Putin and the circle around him to come to power. [*Interruption.*] The right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) is chuntering from a sedentary position. He can make a point if he wishes to.

Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Gentleman just said that the Conservative party brought Putin to power. Will he remind me who was in government in the year 2000?

Clive Lewis: I will give the right hon. Member a quote—it will make the point very clearly:

“When confronting oligarchs and corruption, we need to look well beyond Russia, and not just at other autocracies but at our own national elites and the control that they have over politics and the media. It is too easy to blame Russia and some campaign of foreign subversion. The truth is that we have also been subverted from within and allowed our institutions to be captured and sold. Our media is oligarchic and so, increasingly is our politics. Whether Russian, Australian or British, such concentrated wealth and power is detrimental to our freedom and security.”

James Gray: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way in the middle of his rant. Supposing that his absurd conspiracy theory were correct, can he point to one single policy decision by the Government—any Government—made as a result of his alleged corruption?

Clive Lewis: I am pleased to see the hon. Member here and not in his Caribbean home—[*Interruption.*].

James Gray: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. May I make it absolutely plain to the hon. Gentleman that I have a flat in Westminster, that I have no Caribbean home and that it is simply an absurd allegation to suggest that I do?

Clive Lewis: I take that back—I have the hon. Member confused with someone else, but don't worry about that. He does not have a Caribbean home, and that is fine, but one of his colleagues does and he spent a vast deal of time during lockdown defending the interests of oligarchs in this country. We will move on. [*Interruption.*] The Minister is chuntering from a seated position—would he like to make a point?

James Cleverly indicated dissent.

Clive Lewis: No? Thank you. Good. [*Interruption.*] You can bury your gold in there. Let us move on.

Simon Hoare: Will the hon. Member give way?

Clive Lewis: No, I will make some progress. [*Interruption.*] I am sure that there will be plenty more for the hon. Member to come back on.

I will move on to military spending. I hear Government Members making—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that I have not put a time limit on speeches, but I have asked people to keep to around eight minutes and he is way over that now.

Clive Lewis: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I appreciate your generosity.

In terms of increasing expenditure on defence, we must first ensure that what we already spend is spent properly and efficiently. I do not think we can say that about the Ministry of Defence's procurement, which is known across Government to be ineffective and inefficient—I need only mention the Ajax armoured vehicle to make the point that billions have been misallocated and spent inefficiently and ineffectively. Before we start talking about spending more, let us not forget that we are one of the biggest spenders on

armaments in the world, dwarfing Russia—we spend more than Russia every year—and that global spend on armaments is approaching \$2.5 trillion, which is 20 times larger than what we have pledged to spend on the climate crisis, the biggest existential threat facing humanity. I understand that all eyes are on Ukraine and Putin now, but we must understand that poverty, inequality and the climate crisis are the biggest drivers of global insecurity, and, while spending money on weapons and warfare is right and appropriate, we must put that into the context of appropriate spending on other areas.

We already see right-wing Tory outriders such as James Forsyth saying that money will have to come from other sectors of Treasury spend to pay for defence increases. I and—I think—many Opposition Members feel that if there is to be extra spending on defence, that needs to come from the rich, not the public, the poor and my constituents, who have spent the last 10 years under austerity, just come through covid and now face a cost of living crisis. They should not be paying the extra for defence spending. If there are to be sacrifices, let them be made by the rich, not the vast majority of my constituents.

I will finish with a quote. You have been very generous, Mr Deputy Speaker. If the answer to the questions I asked earlier

“is not to defend the status quo by investing our common wealth into more arms, border walls and imported fossil fuels, then we have work to do. The first step is recognising how perilous the current order is and acknowledging the culpability of our own actions and those taken in our name. Solidarity with a common humanity deserving of a common security is the next step toward taking action to change the international system towards one genuinely opposing the threat and reality of war. The challenge then is to build-back-better a new international order supportive of human development, human protection and human security for all.”

4.20 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I disagree with quite a lot of what the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) said. However, I acknowledge the fact he served on the frontline in Afghanistan in the armed forces of the United Kingdom and that it takes a degree of moral courage to speak out against the overwhelming views of an audience. I am sure that he would acknowledge, however, that whatever courage it took for him to make that rather unpopular contribution—I dare say his contribution was possibly, in some respects, inaccurate—it took a lot more moral courage for Marina Ovsyannikova to speak out as she did on Channel 1 Russian TV. I wish to put on record in this House—I do not think it has been done yet since she did so—what her placard said:

“No war. Stop the war. Don’t believe propaganda. They are lying to you here.”

Because she knew the sort of society in which she lives would have her arrested and locked away for what she had done, she had pre-prepared a video which concluded as follows:

“Now the whole world has turned away from us”—meaning the Russians—

“and the next 10 generations of our descendants will not wash away the shame of this fratricidal war.”

As a young mother with one Russian and one Ukrainian parent, who is better qualified than she to judge?

Daniel Kawczynski: My right hon. Friend is making a brilliant point. Is he aware that this lady now potentially faces a prison sentence of 15 years, because of the new legislation introduced by Putin to try to suppress freedom of speech?

Dr Lewis: Yes, I am aware of that. And I feel that the more attention we draw to her courage and bravery in showing up the ruthless nature of the regime which Vladimir Putin embodies, the more likely it is that perhaps Russia will think twice before it goes even further than it already has.

James Gray: Will my right hon. Friend and the whole House join me in also paying tribute to the American Fox News cameraman Pierre Zakrzewski, who has been killed outside Kyiv?

Dr Lewis: Yes, indeed. Politicians often have harsh words to say about journalists, but I wonder how many politicians would put themselves at risk in the way in which so many journalists—American, BBC, Sky and all the other British journalists—are doing. Let us remember that when we are listening to reports about incoming missiles, those brave men and women are reporting from the very targets on which those missiles are ranged.

Near the end of the second world war, the joint intelligence sub-committee of the British chiefs of staff produced a report entitled “Relations with the Russians”. From years of experience of the Anglo-Soviet alliance against Nazi Germany, the JIC concluded that Russia would respect only strength as the basis for any future relationship.

According to the sneering psychopath Mr Putin, what his country is engaged in at the moment is a holy war against Ukrainian neo-Nazis. What he fails to remind people is that the second world war, with which he presumes to draw comparisons, was enabled only by the vicious agreement between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia to carve up Poland as a result of a secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. When people in this country ask which event started the second world war, it is not enough to say that it was the Nazi invasion of Poland. It was the Nazi-Soviet agreement to invade Poland 16 days apart: Nazis from the west and Soviet Russia from the east.

Vladimir Putin is a product of that history and of that system. He earned his spurs in the KGB, schooled in the suppression of captive countries, steeped in the culture of communist domination and filled with regret that the Soviet empire imploded. According to him, its break-up was the greatest disaster of the 20th century—a revealing and curious choice when compared with the millions killed in two world wars, in the Russian civil war and in the forced collectivisations, the mass deportations and the hell of the Soviet gulag. Until the Bolshevik revolution came along, there had been a significant chance of Russia evolving along democratic lines, but then the cancer of Marxism-Leninism gave cynical psychopaths like him their ideological excuse to seize total control. Their opponents were denounced as enemies of the people and were put, or worked, to death with no semblance of due process.

Now that ideology has gone, but the ruthless mindset remains. Russian leaders no longer claim to be building a workers’ paradise, but they still believe that western capitalists will sell them the rope with which to be hanged.

Alec Shelbrooke: May I draw on my right hon. Friend's point about the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact? I am sure that he has seen the Putin essay. Paragraph 38 is really frightening for European security:

"Under the 1921 Treaty of Riga, concluded between the Russian SFSR, the Ukrainian SSR and Poland, the western lands of the former Russian Empire were ceded to Poland."

Does that not make it clear that Putin's intentions do not stop at Ukraine?

Dr Lewis: It makes it absolutely clear. That will be the very next point that I address.

Whereas Russia previously infiltrated by ideology, its leaders now bribe their targets with high-spending oligarchs and the temptations that they place in the way of western politicians. Gerhard Schröder, a former Chancellor of Germany, is the prime example—a man who has been chairman of Rosneft since 2017 and has recently, I believe, been a director of Gazprom as well. He has been at the heart of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, which my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) did so much to warn this House against when people were somewhat complacent about it.

For 40 years from 1949, two factors ensured the containment of Russia and the maintenance of peace: the deterrent power of western nuclear weapons and the collective security provided by article 5 of the north Atlantic treaty. No longer could an aggressor attack small European states that belonged to NATO without the Americans immediately entering the war. We know that it is Ukraine's misfortune not to belong to NATO, and we can argue about whether that should have been permitted. I simply say what I have said all along, which is that if NATO over-extends the guarantee of article 5 to the point at which it ceases to be credible that the major NATO countries would fight world war three to defend the country in question, it undermines the credibility of the guarantee as a whole.

I will conclude by referring to what the former President Petro Poroshenko said on Sky TV at 1 o'clock today. He made a more appropriate parallel with world war two than Putin could ever make when he referred to what we called "lend-lease", which was the decision taken and signed into law by President Roosevelt in March 1941 to give all sorts of high-value equipment and support to those countries that were fighting for democracy, even though America was not then in the war itself.

Former president Poroshenko quoted Churchill's words:

"Give us the tools, and we will finish the job."

He also said, "Don't trust Putin...if you try to compromise with Putin he will go further."

This relates to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke). There is no doubt at all that the battle that Ukraine is fighting now is the frontline of the battle that would face NATO if NATO's credibility were undermined.

So it is quite simple, and I think that the Government could go further in terms of this rather artificial distinction between "defensive" and "offensive" weaponry. I believe that fighter jets—provided that they are crewed by Ukrainians and not by people of a NATO nationality—are a defensive weapon, and that we should operate according to a single practical slogan, namely that we will support

Ukraine in its fight for democracy by all means short of war; and that means supplying them with the tools so that they can finish the job.

4.31 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): For over two weeks, we have witnessed the most profound threat to democracy in Europe since the second world war, and the humanitarian crisis that followed unfolding before us. When the time came for us to respond, in the first instance Ministers of this UK Government were once again out of kilter with the strong public opinion on how they should treat refugees fleeing war. We must remember that this is a Government who not only came to power on the basis of a Brexit promise to limit migration from eastern Europe, but have allowed an influx of Russian agents and oligarchs to feed dirty money into once respected institutions. The Prime Minister himself was at one time deemed a potential security risk owing to his cosy relationships with certain individuals.

More than 300 constituents have contacted me to express their anger at the pitiful response—in our name—from this Government. Mr Chambers from Bargeddie wrote:

"Steven please press this heartless Government into being more accommodating of these poor refugees."

So far 2.5 million refugees have fled Ukraine, with the United Nations estimating that the number will double by the end of this week, and what have this Government actually succeeded in doing? They have created barrier after barrier and piled confusion on top of misery, using excuse after excuse and exploring any possible way in which they could avoid playing their full part in this European humanitarian crisis. The solution was staring them in the face all the while: waive visa requirements for Ukrainian women and children desperately fleeing war and in need of sanctuary.

Countries with far lesser economic output than the UK can go above and beyond to waive visa restrictions for migrants from Ukraine, so why can we not do the same? The answer is the lack of political will. Scotland and Wales have already committed themselves to becoming "super sponsors" for Ukrainian refugees, but the power to make such a decision lies in the idle hands on the Government Benches. If the shackles of this place—the shackles of Westminster—were not upon them, the devolved countries would have already become champions of humanity.

Alun Cairns: The hon. Member will have heard the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations yesterday show complete willingness to work with the devolved Administrations, the Scottish and Welsh Governments, in the warmest way possible. Has the hon. Member looked at the data on the performance by the local authorities in each of those nations in receiving Syrian refugees? There may be an awful amount of rhetoric at the moment, but the activity is very different.

Steven Bonnar: I thank the right hon. Member for his contribution, but the political point that he makes does not stand up to any form of scrutiny. Scottish councils stand ready to accommodate refugees. We did the same in the case of the Congo and Syria. It is up to the Home Office and this Government to provide the funding to allow Scottish local authorities to play their part.

Carol Monaghan: My hon. Friend will also be aware that in Scotland we have taken more refugees per head of population than anywhere else in the UK since 2017—so for the last five years.

Steven Bonnar: My colleague makes a fantastic point, and I am sure that the House will take it on board.

Another constituent of mine, Mrs Fuller from Bellshill, wrote:

“Steven, we have tried to help in any small way we can through donations but this is a drop in the ocean of what is required when the real power lies with this Government.”

My constituent is absolutely correct, but what have this Government done with their power? They have limited family reunification, cut foreign aid budgets and denied women and children immediate entry. They are consumed by the idea of denying any prospect of residency. This Government should have shaped an immediate humanitarian response that went beyond warm words—something befitting the attitude of the general public across these four nations. Germany, for example, has already given all arrivals the right to work and children access to education immediately. The French have offered free train travel from Poland to France, with more than 100,000 refugees expected in the next couple of weeks. The Irish waived visa requirements immediately. And to the Polish, we must say *dziękuję*—thank you. We watched as they opened their borders, their homes and their hearts. We also watched as the UK dragged its heels as it amplified a post-Brexit state that contrasts starkly with the compassion shown by our EU counterparts.

Stewart Hosie: We tend to forget Moldova, but it is always worth remembering that the poorest country in Europe has taken in a quarter of a million refugees. A quarter of a million! Does not that make it doubly shameful that what we are told is one of the wealthiest countries in the world has so far done so little?

Steven Bonnar: I agree completely with my right hon. Friend.

Another of my constituents, Mr Strachan from Viewpark, wrote:

“As like many others, myself and my wife are disgusted at the UK Government’s failure to bring many more Ukrainian refugees to the UK. Ukrainians, and all refugees, are welcome in Scotland.”

That point about all refugees sends an important message, because we must not lose sight of all other atrocities that continue across the globe as well as the war in Ukraine. The conflicts in Palestine, Yemen, Sudan, Iraq and Kashmir are all ongoing, but without much concern or support from this Government. We all remember this Government announcing an Afghan resettlement scheme, yet almost six months later we are still no further forward with a solution for those who remain in the midst of a relentless Taliban regime.

This Government are all talk but no action, unless that action is to continue to arm the perpetrators of such conflicts. The UK sold £15 billion-worth of weapons to Saudi Arabia last year—the very same weapons that are now being used to terrorise the Yemeni people—and British-made bombs rain down on Palestine. How can we claim to be against such atrocities when this very Government are responsible for selling the arms that

enable them? This UK Government cannot sit back and allow history to judge their actions. If they do, history will not be kind.

I hope that the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill have, through me, made their feelings quite clear: the Prime Minister’s and this Government’s response is inadequate. The Prime Minister must ask himself: what is the price of compassion? Bureaucracy can no longer trump humanity when kindness and decency are required, and I sincerely hope that this Home Office and this Government will enact some decency and humanity in its operations, not only for Ukrainians but for all those suffering in conflicts across the world.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There will now be a six-minute limit.

4.38 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): This will be a shorter speech, but I am afraid that we have to prepare for a long war. There will be escalation. We are seeing the build-up of the Russian navy ready to attack Odesa, there is a threat to Moldova, and in the western Balkans the Russians have been restocking that old conflict ready to make it explode once again and opening another front. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Europe and North America hoped that sanctions would bring this to an early conclusion, but I am afraid that they will not. Sanctions will take a long time. The Russians have a long history of bearing hardship, and it will take a long time before they blame Mr Putin for those hardships. We will have to bear the sacrifices that the sanctions will cause for our own people, but we can and must win this conflict.

What matters above everything now is the resolve and determination of our NATO allies that, however long it takes, freedom and democracy will prevail. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is fond of saying that Putin’s invasion must fail, but we can show more confidence than that: it will fail and Putin will fail. Dictators and despots who mount illegal foreign wars all fail in the end. Hitler, Mussolini, Galtieri and Saddam Hussein, they all failed.

However many die in this struggle, whatever the cost in the mangled bodies of innocent civilians and however many cities are flattened to compensate for Putin’s real powerlessness, he will fail. The wars of dictators always fail and will always fail. The whole evil edifice of the old Soviet Union, even that failed in the end. The lies, the corruption, the self-deceit, the lack of consent and the inability to inspire—Putin’s invasion is built on the same rotten values.

Democracy and our elected politicians are riven with imperfections, but our fundamental values shine across the seas and continents to illuminate the darkness. They inspire those who are fighting the invaders now, and they must inspire us also.

Ukrainians will never surrender, as President Zelensky told this Parliament last week, and we should not consider surrendering anything on their behalf, not their freedoms and not their territory. We never accepted the Soviet occupation of the countries of eastern Europe as a permanent settlement, and today those nations are free. We know that one day Ukraine will again be free, but to give our resolve meaning we must do more to support the fighting morale of the Ukrainian forces, as their morale is their vital component. They have, so far,

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

surpassed the expectations so many had of them, they have humiliated Putin's army and they have destroyed the fake aura of his invincibility. We must arm them in every way we can short of war, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) said. We must provide more ammunition, more ant-tank weapons, more anti-aircraft weapons, more humanitarian and military training and more humanitarian aid, and we should find a way to get them the MiGs.

We must not be intimidated from doing what is right to help another nation defend itself, but we must avoid overreacting to Putin's escalations and provocations. There must be a clear distinction between the measured way we act and our iron will and resolve to win in the end. What we must not do is accept a political defeat while the military battle is turning against Putin's army. In fact, the danger today comes from those who want to negotiate on Putin's terms by inviting political defeat at the time when Putin's war is going so badly for him.

There will be more destruction, more death, more indescribable horrors, more tragedy and more blood. That is the pity of war, as Wilfred Owen described it. We should pledge to rebuild Ukraine and pledge that this invasion will not stand, or the whole free world will pay the price for such a defeat for decades to come. We must rebuild our strength. We enjoyed a 30-year peace dividend, but the peace is over and the dividend is cancelled. NATO must rebuild the strength and deterrence upon which our security depends. The price of peace is eternal vigilance, a lesson we must never again forget. We will rebuild peace only through strength. Let us never again forget that we can have peace only through strength.

4.43 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I agree with every word spoken by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin).

All this was not only predictable but predicted repeatedly in this House by some of us, and we were shouted down for saying it. I said in 2014:

"We know how Putin reacts in a crisis... We also know about his territorial ambition."—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2014; Vol. 577, c. 677.]

In that debate, hon. Members repeatedly trotted out the Russian line about the annexation of Crimea.

The Daily Telegraph, from 2007 to 2017, received £40,000 a month for "Russia Beyond the Headlines", which was paid for by the Russian Government—it was Russian propaganda.

I am delighted that we now have a proper list of sanctions against people such as Nikolai Patrushev, Igor Sechin, Sergei Shoigu and Sergey Naryshkin. They should have been on the list right from the very beginning, as they are the very closest people to the Russian Government and they are completely entwined in the decision to invade Ukraine. But I am mystified at why some people are still missing from the list, including some of the broadcasters. Sergey Brilev regularly reports on the war in Ukraine for Rossiya 1 and always touts the Russian line. He has a £700,000 flat in Chiswick and a British passport, as well as a Russian one. Why on earth is he not on the list? Vladimir Solovyov, a 58-year-old who is also on Rossiya 1, is on the EU list but not on the

UK one. Olga Skabeeva, a 37-year-old, is also on the EU list but not on ours. She is another person trotting out the Russian propaganda.

I do not understand why the former MP Rinat Khayrov, who is very close to the Defence Ministry, is not on the list. I do not understand why his close associate Rustem Magdeev is not, and neither is Khayrov's daughter, Elsinia Khayrova, who is unemployed but manages to have a £22 million mansion in Surrey, a £10 million art fund and £25 million spent on other properties around the UK. I do not understand why her husband, or perhaps soon to be ex-husband, Dmitry Tsvetkov is not on the list, and neither are so many others involved in Gazprom contracts. I do not understand why Abramovich's properties that are owned through his "subsidiaries", or rather by members of his family—Irina, Anna and Sofia—in Chester Square, Ebury Mews, Eaton Square, Cadogan Place, Hornbury Crescent, Tor Gardens, Fyning Hill and Goldring farm are not on the list. I do not understand why those have not yet been frozen as assets.

I do not know why Arron Banks is not on the list, either—even Isabel Oakeshott now thinks that he is an agent of influence for the Russian state. I simply point out that Nigel Farage received £548,573 from Russia Today in 2018 alone—this is from the Russian state.

We should not just be freezing assets; we should be seizing them. I do not think the Government have the power to do that. In normal times, we would not want them to be able to seize assets, but we need to have that power now. If we look at Chelsea football club, we see that it is in a kind of limbo at the moment. It ought to be able to flourish. I have no ill feeling against Chelsea football club—I am Welsh and I do not really care about football much. What I do care about is that the asset should be seized by the Government so that it can be spent on the reconstruction in Ukraine. If the Government do not take that power, they are not going to be able to do that.

That takes me to a point that I do not think the Foreign Secretary fully understood when she appeared before the Foreign Affairs Committee last week, which relates to the issue of war crimes. We have undoubtedly seen war crimes committed in Ukraine already: the bombing of civilians when they are trying to escape as refugees through ceasefire corridors, the bombing of civilian and residential areas where there are absolutely no military installations, and the use of phosphorus weapons. I would argue that nowadays we should also be considering the use of cluster munitions as a war crime.

Many of those issues will be addressed by the International Criminal Court, but the one issue that is more difficult for it, because it is not a part of international criminal law at the moment, is the initiating of a war of aggression. In the Nuremberg trials, the British deputy judge declared that it was not just an international war crime but the ultimate international war crime, because it encompassed all the other crimes inside it. The danger is, of course, that the President, the person who makes the final decision—the ultimate decision—the person at the very apex of the decision, is the one most distant from the individual decisions that may be made. I hope that all the people I mentioned earlier as the main elite in the Russian Government, and Lavrov as well, will be held to account at the ICC, but we may have to change the law to make sure that Putin himself is brought to justice, and that is what we must do.

4.49 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): History does not so much repeat itself as do human nature and nationalistic ambitions, despite decades of protestations of European peace and harmony. The current crisis goes back even further and with even deeper roots than are currently understood. We should never forget Bismarck's warning that whenever he heard the word "Europe" on the lips of his fellow statesmen, he began to worry.

Central to the accumulating current Ukrainian situation is the fact that both Chancellor Kohl and later Angela Merkel, not to mention Gerhard Schröder and strategists in the European Union, contributed profoundly to the overwhelming strategic failure that we face today. This can be traced back to the bilateral treaty, underestimated by most at the time, between Gorbachev and Kohl in November 1990, with the wall having come down, as Maastricht loomed and as Margaret Thatcher fell. The treaty led to a massive shift in the balance of power in eastern and central Europe. By signing this bilateral treaty, they put Germany and Europe into a continuing state of dependency on Russian energy and in respect of related matters. We continue to pay the price.

In 1990, Chancellor Kohl was convinced that there had been a seismic shift in favour of Germany's leadership of Europe. In a 2001 article in *The European Journal*, I argued that the situation was then coming to a head, with grave implications for the future geopolitical stability of Europe. I pointed to the inextricable relationship between Germany and Russia, embedded in Germany's strategy, and to the indebtedness of Russia to Germany and therefore its dependency.

Russia's debt, 40% of which was owed to Germany alone, was accompanied by a debt rescheduling agreement signed in Berlin in July 2000. The agreement was complemented by contracts for export credit guarantees provided by the German state-owned company Hermes. I emphasised my concern that Germany was then agreeing in principle to convert Russian debt into equity in Russian companies—in which Gerhard Schröder, the ex-Chancellor of Germany, became a major player. I believe that even now he is still the chairman of Rosneft, is on Gazprom's board of directors and is chairman of the Nord Stream shareholders committee. Is that still so? Has he been sanctioned?

I warned then—in 2001—against German firms increasing their stake in Gazprom. At that time, natural gas exports from Russia to Germany amounted to 35% of Germany's annual consumption. I argued that Vladimir Putin, scarcely heard of at the time, was a Russian nationalist who bitterly resented being dependent on America and who had a choice between building an alliance with China or with Europe. I argued that Russia's dependence on Germany had within it the seeds of self-destruction and represented severe dangers to our future geopolitical stability.

By the arrangements I have described, Russia was enabled to weaponise its energy against the west in return for short-sighted hubris and self-interested greed. We live today with the consequences of those mistakes; therefore arises the tragedy of Ukraine. Nord Stream 2—let alone Nord Stream 1—bypasses Ukraine, so it remains one of the greatest strategic mistakes of our time, conceived all of 20 years ago or more. It created Europe's dependency on Russian gas and oil supplies, which must be totally ended now.

When we reflect on the fundamental shift represented by Olaf Scholz's reversal of Germany's defence policy and its increase in defence spending, let us remember that two swallows do not make a summer, and that it was a mere three weeks ago that I wrote an article in which I pointed out that Germany was providing only a few thousand helmets to Russia's eastern European neighbours and merely pausing Nord Stream 2. It is now not a question of merely learning lessons with the benefit of hindsight: the real point is whether we will ever learn the real lessons of history and of human nature that need to be learned for the future. As I speak, Germany still depends on Russian oil and gas and Nord Stream 2 has only been paused, not yet completely abandoned.

Regaining our self-government has enabled the UK to become self-sufficient in deploying our new resources from the North sea licensing regime, as the Prime Minister has indicated. It has given us the ability to rely on, among other things, our own domestic nuclear industry—I pay tribute to the nuclear delivery group, of which I am a member, for all the work that it has done over the past six months—and, hopefully, sensible and balanced renewables. We must accelerate this programme at once as a matter of national interest. We must also encourage the European Union to do the same, and we must never forget that domestic national energy requirements and self-sufficiency are at the centre of gravity of economic and, therefore, political independence. We are part of an alliance. We will work in alliance with Europe, in alliance with the United Nations and in alliance with the United States and the rest of the world against Putin. We must never forget that we are in peril and that we have to fight back.

4.55 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Let me start by echoing the fine tribute that the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) gave to Marina Ovsyannikova. Her bravery yesterday was extraordinary, as it has become so deeply dangerous in Russia to tell the truth. Her act of courage has inspired us all, and we wish her all the safety that she can possibly have right now.

I am proud that this House stands so united against the tyrant Putin and his murderous regime, and in support of the determination and extraordinary bravery of the Ukrainian people who face a level of horror and devastation that many have rightly said amounts to war crimes. I want to put on record my support for the many hon. Members who have spoken eloquently about the urgent need for Ministers to waive visas for refugees and to match the compassion and generosity of other EU countries. I share the concerns that have been raised about the lack of speed and scope of some of the policies on sanctions.

I want register my thanks to all those hon. Members who are working with me to put pressure on our own parliamentary pension fund to divest from Russian assets, including from companies such as HSBC which, according to Bloomberg data, owns equity stakes in five of the biggest Russian oil and gas companies.

In the short time available to me, I want to take a step back and focus a little more on what got us into the situation in which we find ourselves and on the action that is needed to tackle Putin's long-running hybrid war

[*Caroline Lucas*]

of both violence and disinformation, which has long been in force, including here in the UK. It is an insidious strategy that deliberately undermines our public information sphere and our political institutions, and that deliberately seeks to divide the democracies that might stand up to him over Ukraine.

On disinformation, I suggest that we look no further than what is revealed in the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report, which warned that there was credible, open-source evidence of attempted Russian interference in UK elections. It painted a picture of how Russian state influence in the UK is the new normal, with deep links between the Russian elite and UK politics, and how, crucially, the intelligence community had, in its own words, taken its "eye off the ball" on Russia.

It gives me no pleasure to observe that the Prime Minister is personally responsible for delaying, suppressing and then failing to investigate the Russia report. MPs, including myself, are now having to resort to the courts for a second time to try to get the Prime Minister finally to investigate. We are now going to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, alongside the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and representatives from the other place. This curious lack of interest in evidence of Russian state interference in our electoral processes is, frankly, extraordinary, and stands in stark contrast to investigations undertaken in the US.

Then we come to the violence. As the news about Ukraine darkens even further, increasingly we think the unthinkable—would Putin, for example, use chemical weapons? The answer has to be yes, because he has already done so here on UK soil in 2018. The Salisbury nerve agent attack was part of Putin's long-term strategy, message and hybrid warfare. The amount of nerve agent found in the bottle that was used against the Skripals and that killed Dawn Sturgess was enough "to kill several thousand people",

according to a recent interview with Fiona Hill, a former US national security adviser on Russia. Putin wanted us to know that he is prepared to use any weapon.

When Putin sent a weapons-grade nerve agent to Salisbury, it was a military operation and seen as an attack on NATO. As a result, there was far-reaching international co-operation, including sanctions. Our then Foreign Secretary, now Prime Minister, met NATO Foreign Ministers in Brussels for a crucial, highly sensitive meeting about Russia in the wake of that chemical attack on UK soil.

However, we have since learned the shocking news that, immediately following that meeting, the then Foreign Secretary ditched his security and travelled directly to the Italian villa of Evgeny Lebedev, the person with the life peerage who is now under so much scrutiny—the person who, as long as a decade ago, Sir John Sawers, then head of MI6, made clear was not deemed a suitable person to meet. While he was there, the Foreign Secretary also met Evgeny's father, ex-KGB agent and oligarch Alexander Lebedev.

That raises crucial questions. Did the then Foreign Secretary inform the Prime Minister, the Foreign Office and the security services that he was going to fly from the NATO summit to meet an ex-KGB agent? If so, why

was he travelling alone, without his security detail? Did he take classified documents with him? Did he inform the Prime Minister and the security services about the meeting after the trip? Was he debriefed? Did he provide a list of contacts?

Let me be clear: Salisbury was the first use of a chemical weapon in Europe since world war two. It was an attack on NATO soil and, as the Minister responsible for overseeing the British response, our now Prime Minister went straight from a classified meeting with NATO's Secretary-General and alliance partners to meet a trained Russian intelligence officer. That is surely a national security breach of the highest possible order. That is why investigating that incident, the Russia report and every part of Putin's arsenal—how he and those linked to him have created dependence and compromise via sports, finance, property, land and energy—is so urgent.

I say that not to score points, but because undermining democracy in the US and Europe was part of Putin's strategy to divide and confuse the world as he prepared to attack Ukraine. We must be thorough. When the people of Ukraine are dodging bombs and bullets, we should not be dodging the truth.

5.1 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Kremlin must be reeling in shock. President Putin was no doubt briefed that a simultaneous rapid blitzkrieg into Ukraine on at least three axes would result in Russian forces triumphant in Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities. The briefings were wrong, and the envisaged three-day rapid campaign has been ground into a humiliating slogging match, in which Ukrainian forces often give Russian troops a very bloody nose.

It is clear that Putin fully expected Ukrainians to show weak resistance, and at the same time to welcome their fellow Slavs with joy, flags and flowers. Wrong—very wrong. Ukrainians may be Slavs, but they now look much more to the west than the east. They do not want Mr Putin's version of tyrannic government.

Putin is most certainly a tyrant, and one who has few inhibitions when it comes to those who disagree with or fail him. Since the third Russian major general was killed—apparently there are about 20 of them in Ukraine—Putin has sacked those in the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, the FSB, who provided intelligence briefings on what the Russian forces could expect on entry to Ukraine.

Putin, an old KGB officer himself, will be under no illusions about the dangers he faces even at home. We have all seen, and my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) have mentioned, the incredible display by a placard-bearing TV editor, Maria Ovsyannikova, who appeared on the Russian state television Channel One news programme. That went right the way across Russia and would have made her point vividly. What an incredibly brave person.

Naturally we all hope that Putin's premiership could be on an increasingly slippery slope, so as to get him out of power, but we should not bet on it. A huge percentage of the Russian population will still be with Putin—will believe what he is putting out—but hopefully the slow drip, drip, drip of resistance will eventually reach a

tipping point, and the grey suits in the Kremlin will tap him up and suggest, "Time to go." We all hope that, but we cannot guarantee it.

In the meantime, we in the UK must do all we can to support the Ukrainian people, who, I gather, are increasingly demanding that the Russians are convincingly defeated. Their anger at what Russia has done is growing daily as casualties mount up, homes are destroyed, and cities are wrecked. Russia has failed to establish total domination of the air—and that, by the way, is because of the considerable help that we the British have given the Ukrainian armed forces by means of training and anti-aircraft missiles. May I remind the House that we trained 20,000 Ukrainian soldiers prior to the war, especially in the use of anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons? Speaking as an infantry officer for a moment, those are perfect weapons in the kind of conflict we see in Ukraine. Held by single men and women, they are really effective in built-up areas.

My contacts who have good sources in Ukraine tell me that we the British are considered to have been an incredible friend to the people there, and our stock is very high because of the support we have given throughout the crisis. So we must continue to do everything we can to help Ukraine. First, obviously, we are going to give as much shelter and support to those poor people that come to our country. Secondly, we are going to continue to use every instrument, and even more instruments, to get to punish the people in charge in Russia—

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): From my right hon. Friend's own experience as a former serving officer, what more military assistance does he think the UK Government could give? Must we mindful of perhaps stoking an escalation?

Bob Stewart: I am very mindful of an escalation, because I am really concerned that Putin might start using chemical weapons when he fails to get into the centre of towns, as he did in Aleppo. The answer to the question is to provide MiG-29s from other countries to be flown by Ukrainian pilots, so that they can take on high-level aeroplanes.

Thirdly, we have to provide money—DEC is doing really well there—as well as weapons and ammunition, and frankly anything that will help the Ukrainians to maintain their incredibly plucky defence of their country. God bless Ukraine!

5.8 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): It is indeed an honour to follow the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and other Members who have spoken here today. It is a huge privilege and honour to sit among so many people who hold democracy so close to their hearts in supporting the Ukrainian people.

Ukrainians and President Zelensky have displayed the highest level of bravery in the face of brutal Russian aggression. In the eyes of Vladimir Putin, Ukrainians have made an unforgivable choice: they decided to be an independent and democratic country. Like all dictators, Putin is terrified of losing power. He is fearful of having a partially Russian-speaking nation on his border succeed as a democracy. In Putin's eyes, Ukraine has to fail, or the Russian people will see that there is a better way.

Ukrainians have made their choice. They want to be a European country. They want to become a member of NATO. They want to be free to make their own choices. Make no mistake, Ukrainians are fighting this war on behalf of all of us who are part of the free and democratic world. We must support them as if the future of our country and our way of life depends on it, because quite frankly, it does.

Ukrainians are asking for more support. They are asking for surface-to-air missiles capable of protecting their cities. They are asking for the Soviet-era MiG-29 jets that so many have mentioned today. Each day, these decisions are deliberated over instead of acted upon. They are asking for the missiles and the jets, not the pilots. More Ukrainian men, women and children will die. NATO members are already providing weapons and ammunition. Eastern European countries providing jets is no different.

In 2014, we let Putin take Crimea without any real consequences. Putin is a man who orchestrated the bombings that resulted in the deaths of 300 of his own people to help start a war to take power. He is a man who had his political rival shot for opposing war. He is a man who approved a poisoning on British soil that resulted in the death of a British citizen. He is a man who pre-recorded his declaration of war on Ukraine, after which he pretended to be open to diplomacy. Putin will not stop until he is stopped.

I understand why NATO cannot get involved directly, yet short of that, we should be doing absolutely everything possible. That means supporting eastern European countries in their efforts to send jets to Ukraine; sanctioning and cutting off all remaining Russian banks from SWIFT; and seizing the empty homes and yachts of Russian oligarchs in British territory, including overseas. Putin cannot be allowed to win this war. If he does, it will not just be the Ukrainian people who suffer the consequences; the world will suffer them as well.

5.12 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my outside interests as set out in the register.

It is a huge pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) and the very sensible speech she has just made, which underlines the unity across the House in facing this extraordinary and unjustifiable aggression by a member of the permanent five at the United Nations, tearing up 75 years of the international rules-based system and in contravention of everything that the UN has said and stood for and of the growth of international law.

Everyone in the House and the country will be haunted by the plight of the refugees. It is impossible to find words to set that out or explain it, but for many of us it will be the little girl, aged 10, terrified, her eyes wide with fear, clutching her cat as she came over the border from Ukraine. We must hope, as William Hague so eloquently said in *The Times* today, that

"a hollow structure...will lose its reputation and respect very quickly when its thieving and selfish reality is revealed to its own people. That may take months or years, but Putin's henchmen would be well advised to start thinking about their escape route to Pyongyang."

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

The whole House will agree with our former colleague. The Chinese today referred to the invasion as an “irreversible mistake”, and many of us this afternoon have saluted the extraordinary bravery within Russia of ordinary people standing up to this bullying maniac. I strongly support and congratulate the Government, particularly the Ministry of Defence, on giving the Ukrainians hope and some military muscle without starting world war three and on co-ordinating economic sanctions and the economic isolation of Russia across the western world and across European states.

I mainly want to talk about the humanitarian position, on which there is no need to look in our crystal ball; we can read the book of what happened in Syria. The House may recall that Jo Cox and I co-chaired the all-party parliamentary group for friends of Syria and held more than two emergency debates in the House.

If we want to know what the Russians will do to those cities in great peril in Ukraine, we need look no further than what they did in Aleppo, one of the great cities of the world, which, as the Nazis did in Guernica in 1937, they bombed back to the stone age. There were also indiscriminate attacks on hospitals. Let us imagine the bravery of the men and women, doctors and clinicians, who are working in hospitals in Ukraine and who know from Syria exactly what fate may await them. There were also massive breaches of the rules of war and of international humanitarian law.

Let us make no mistake about the danger of the use of chemical weapons, which was greatly enhanced when President Obama told the Russians that, if they used chemical weapons, they would cross a red line and action would be taken yet, when they did cross that line, no action was taken. Let us also remember the sheer numbers of people who were on the move. In Syria, 5 million people were internally displaced and 5 million people were outside in the surrounding countries—that is 10 million people out of a population of 20 million. That shows the scale of what may now face us.

The critical thing in humanitarian terms is that there should be a seamless approach where all of Europe and NATO share the burden fairly with the frontline states, whether they are in or out of the European Union.

Bob Stewart: Speaking as someone who has dealt practically with refugees and displaced persons, we should put our bureaux and our offices right at the border with Ukraine, perhaps in Poland. As people come across, we should be guiding them, helping them, protecting them and perhaps giving them some help to get to the UK or elsewhere. The European Union should be doing that—we should all be doing that—with the International Committee of the Red Cross and the UNHCR.

Mr Mitchell: My right hon. and gallant Friend, who made such a great speech earlier, is absolutely right. There should be total solidarity with the frontline states and our European friends and partners in tackling this extraordinary crisis.

My second point on the humanitarian position is that we must also underline that there will be no impunity. I remember that, in a National Security Council meeting on Syria, the Foreign Office committed to collecting evidence of war crimes and crimes against humanity by

individual Russian and Syrian soldiers inside Syria. We must go after all those not only who fire on civilians but who give the order to fire on civilians, no matter how long it takes and wherever they hide. In Bosnia, we showed that we could go after those murderous people. They must be caught and put before due process. The use of social media, of course, will make it much easier to get the evidence that will then defy impunity and to get the message across to ordinary Russian conscripts serving there—those who give the command and those who exercise the command—of the deep jeopardy that they will be in, no matter how long it takes, when this is all over.

My final point is to caution the House against any sense that the humanitarian corridors are likely to be much of an answer. I am afraid that, too often, they are not what they appear. There are huge dangers in apparently separating humanitarian from non-humanitarian space. By definition, they are geographically limited and they undermine obligations under international humanitarian law to allow civilians to reach safety from areas of fighting and the ability of aid to reach those in need.

We learned in Syria that Russia uses humanitarian corridors to advance its military strategy: it uses them cynically to distract and manipulate, and to empty an area for military gain rather than for humanitarian support. They create an illusory sense of security and should, in any event, be run by the ICRC. They are used as an instrument of public relations and not of humanitarian support. I caution hon. Members that they are not safe and are only a very small part of the answer.

We have heard calls this afternoon for NATO to be rejuvenated, and it is being. We have heard about the increased necessity of defence expenditure, which I entirely endorse. The words of the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), at the weekend were absolutely right. This is a terrible crisis. We must stand together on the economic sanctions and on the support for the Ukrainians, and we must hope that our former colleague, William Hague, is correct.

5.20 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): The world and all of us across this House have watched in unity the horrors of recent weeks, as Ukrainian civilians and thousands of soldiers have been killed in this predicted and premeditated invasion. For perhaps the only time in the next couple of months, I sat on the Conservative side of the House to watch Zelensky give his powerful speech, as we showed unity, with party differences put aside for that day.

The ongoing war has forced more than 2.5 million people, mainly women and children, to flee their country and face the prospect of many months of uncertainty in refugee camps across Europe. Indeed, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has called it the “fastest growing refugee crisis in Europe since World War II”, with many predicting that numbers could exceed 4 million people in the months ahead.

While many of our European partners have scrapped their bureaucratic red tape to enable hundreds of thousands of people who are cold, hungry, grieving and desperately in need of support to seek sanctuary in their country,

our Government have offered little more than hollow promises until this day. Despite the Prime Minister last week offering hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians sanctuary in the UK, the Government were shamefully forced to admit that only 1,000 people have been admitted and given refuge on our shores. The visa processing centre that the Home Office set up in Calais was little more than a single desk that failed to offer desperate Ukrainians either appointments or walk-in access. Inexplicably, it was not even made public as tens of thousands of Ukrainians streamed across France in search of safe passage.

The reality is that this is the culmination of more than a decade of this Government's hostile environment policy that, as everyone knows, is nothing more than a dog-whistle, anti-immigrant, racist agenda that prevents some of the most vulnerable people on Earth from seeking sanctuary on our shores, and has perhaps been too successful by far. On top of this, the Government have continued to push their inhumane Nationality and Borders Bill through this House. I believe that the Home Secretary should hang her head in shame and explain why we are the only country in Europe that has failed to offer an accessible route to reunite refugees with their families. By comparison, our partners across Europe have thrown open their borders, slashed red tape and taken countless vulnerable families.

In their hour of need, we can and must do better for millions of Ukrainians. It is completely unacceptable that already exhausted people, who have travelled hundreds of miles, women and children, are being asked to jump through multiple arduous and unrealistic hoops, while they wait nervously for weeks to find out whether they will be admitted. The best our Government appear to be able to offer is a do-it-yourself asylum scheme, where UK householders are asked to name refugees they wish to sponsor, which would suggest we are asking Ukrainian refugees to essentially crowd source their own asylum applications.

That is why we in the Labour party are calling for emergency protection visas for those fleeing Ukraine who wish to reach the UK. This would lift normal visa requirements other than biometrics and security checks, which can be swiftly done en route. That would provide a quick, simple and safe route to sanctuary for all who need it.

It will have escaped no one that, despite so little being done to help Ukrainians as they face the horrors of war, it is still far more support than was offered just months ago to those who were fleeing the brutal horrors of the oncoming Taliban regime in Afghanistan. In my Ilford South office, we still have more than 220 active cases of Afghan refugees, some of which are still receiving boilerplate responses from the Home Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Many are of people trying to flee Afghanistan because they continue to face oppression and threats to their lives; they are often people who worked directly with the UK Government. That is totally unacceptable. The promises we made at the time to take only 20,000 people over the next four years were deplorable, but showed the true face of our immigration and refugee policy.

On the issue of sanctions against Russia, it is clear we must go far further to cut out the rot of dirty Russian money in our political system. Despite repeated warnings over many years, our Government, far from failing to

act, have openly embraced the oligarchic wealth that was stolen from the Russian people after the fall of the Soviet Union, and made Britain the destination of choice for kleptocrats, who hide their loot under our noses, not far from the very building we sit in. It should not have taken the invasion of Ukraine for the Government to take action. The moves to sanction individuals and freeze assets are long overdue, after repeated calls by Members on both sides of this House.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Did my hon. Friend watch the coverage of the occupation of Mr Deripaska's mansion yesterday? None of us condones that kind of behaviour, but there were more Crown servants there yesterday than there are in the Treasury asset freezing team. Surely, for too long now, we have been soft on oligarchs and soft on the causes of oligarchs, and what we now need are proper sanction powers to go after the properties and to actually seize, not merely freeze, the assets.

Sam Tarry: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention, and I see the frustration that people have felt that has led them to take direct action to make the point he makes.

That nicely brings me to my next point, which is about how unsurprising it is that the Conservative party has been so reluctant to crack down on these individuals as it would mean biting the hand that feeds it, whether that is our own Prime Minister ignoring the warnings of our security services before ennobling Evgeny Lebedev, the son of a billionaire Russian banker and former KGB officer, or as I said earlier in the debate, accepting £30,000 from the wife of a former crony of Vladimir Putin so they could dine with a former Defence Secretary and be given a private tour of the Churchill war rooms. That is unacceptable. These people walk in the same circles. This is the problem we see today.

Given that the Conservative party is so easily bought, major questions over Russian financial influence need to be addressed. That has potentially jeopardised our national security and corrupted the very politics and democracy that we seek to uphold. If Britain is to be seen at this moment as taking a new approach of compassion—genuine compassion—towards refugees, we should also take this moment to root out that dark money and truly defend democracy by cleaning up our politics, so that we can look Mr Putin and the people in the Kremlin in the eye with democracy in our hearts and defiance against totalitarianism in our eyes.

5.26 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry). I am not going to make a party political point, I hope, but I would just gently remind him and the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) that it was in 2008 that the golden visas were introduced—2008—and who was the Prime Minister then?

Can I begin by thanking all those across my North Dorset constituency who have helped, donated goods or raised money for the people of Ukraine? Svetlana Parkinson is a volunteer who has galvanised a whole army of people operating out of the Exchange in Sturminster Newton, Shaftesbury town hall and Blandford Forum's Ginger Viking. Tonnes of aid are coming through,

[*Simon Hoare*]

with Johnson's of Gillingham, South West Packaging, Dike & Son, Dorset Council and everybody rallying to help. I think this is important, and we will all have stories such as this in our constituencies. As Russia shows us the worst of mankind, we show our best and others show their best.

A lot of colleagues have spoken about the history of Ukraine, and many of us will recall the dead hand of Russia and its influence over its then satellite states and empire. When I was a young boy growing up in Cardiff, we had a large Polish Catholic community, and I share their faith group. The only time I ever raised money for a trade union was when we had bring and buys or jumble sales for Solidarity, which fought against Russia to bring democracy and liberty. Many of us will remember the moving scenes at Mrs Thatcher's last party conference as Prime Minister when lots of leaders of newly liberated countries hugged her in thanks for the sterling work that she and Ronald Reagan did in pointing out to people that the flame of human liberty was still alive, and would never and could never be extinguished. The challenge we have with Ukraine today is that we cannot see a resurrection of that Russian empire.

I am principally motivated in my political life by Stefan Terlezki, who, as you will remember, Mr Deputy Speaker, was the Member for Cardiff West. His story was the story of the tragedy of Ukraine during the war. As a young man, he was sold into slavery by the Germans and the Russians, and then back again, but went on to become a Member of Parliament. I remember him telling me the horror stories of that time, and we should never allow Ukraine to go back to that.

Let me say a few words about refugees. I welcomed yesterday's announcement. The scheme needs to be safe and swift, kept under constant review, and tweaked to meet new demands. The Home Office now needs to change its response attitude and its mindset. Hitherto, it has been trying to make peacetime rules serve wartime needs. That will not work; it has to change, and it has to show flexibility. I would much prefer it that we mirrored what the Republic of Ireland has done, rather than criticise that.

I hear Ministers talk about security. Nick Bailey, my constituent, nearly lost his life because of the Salisbury poisoning. My constituency is close to Salisbury, and many people go there. I cannot believe that we are the only country that takes the security of our nation and people seriously. We all do, and I urge that even at this stage, we give serious consideration to waiving visas. Principally, we are taking in only elderly men and women, and women with children.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is doing a fantastic job in rallying and corraling the international response. However, some of the narrative suggests that it is a competition of league tables about who is doing best and who has done more. We are all in this together, because politics, when it is at its best, is values-based. Actions and inactions have consequences, and we need to pull together.

Bob Stewart: I want to place on record something about which I think the House will agree, which is that our Defence Ministers were far-sighted in the way they helped Ukraine. They gave Ukraine the means to fight

back, and the training to help it, and some percentage of the success is down to what the Ministry of Defence in this country did to help our Ukrainian friends. Thank you, Defence Ministers, all of you.

Simon Hoare: I agree with my right hon. Friend, and if our MOD ministerial team did not exist, we would have to create them. They have done a sterling job, and thank heavens for the Secretary of State.

Actions have to have consequences, and not just for Russia. The Government should enter into no free trade agreement, or indeed free trade agreement talks, with any country that is either supporting Russia or being ambivalent in resolutions condemning it. If the Commonwealth is anything, it is a Commonwealth of values, and those who are not prepared to step up to the plate and champion those values collectively should probably see their membership suspended. I was a rebel on what the Government wanted to do with aid. I am a firm supporter of overseas aid, and I voted against the cut. However, aid should not be given to those countries that will not stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the international community and ensure that our values are defended. It is an outrage that Russia still has a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. If we are not seeking ways to remove it, we jolly well should be.

I have mentioned values-based politics, and in my judgment, NATO can and indeed should be a values-defending organisation, as well as defending the physical territory of member states. NATO could act now in a far more robust way than it is doing. I urge our American friends to understand that leadership of the free world is more than a lapel badge, and that it carries responsibilities to act in defence of those values. I hear people say, "Ah, but Russia has got a nuclear deterrent. That has to constrain our response." Well Russia is always going to have a nuclear deterrent. What happens if Russia moves into the Baltic states, or others? It will still have a nuclear deterrent, and Putin is still unstable enough to wish to use it. We need the international resolve that we rightly deployed in Kuwait—a sovereign country was invaded aggressively and unnecessarily, and the international community rallied to defend it. We have to defend Ukraine. We have to do as much as we can, whatever and however it needs to be done, and pray God we do it quickly. Ukraine will prevail. We can envisage no other finale.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Member for mentioning Stefan Terlezki. He was a man of true spirit and full of enthusiasm who gave me massive support as a young Conservative to enter politics.

5.34 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a genuine pleasure to be part of this instructive and informative debate. We have had excellent contributions from across the House, reflecting how the House is united in standing with Ukraine. The integrity and resolve of both the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people have awakened and unified the world. We were all inspired last week by President Zelensky's address to the House. We stand with Ukraine and are determined to do all that we can to defeat Russia. As has been said many times, Putin cannot win.

I want to reflect, as other hon. Members have, on Marina Ovsyannikova's incredible protest yesterday on Russian television. We must not forget that Putin does not act in the name of every Russian, so I want to take the opportunity to express solidarity with those Russian people fighting within Russia against the oppression that they face.

I will reflect on what my constituents have been saying to me and raise refugees and visas. In particular, I will talk about constituent casework from people who have been trying to get family members out of Ukraine. Charlie Hewitt and his Ukrainian wife Olga have been trying to get family members over, but they have battled and battled with UK visa processes. Charlie told me that he felt "baffled, ashamed and insulted". He has taken his wife and her relatives to his second home in Spain, which does not demand visas from refugees.

Emma Truman raised the case of a friend of hers, who is another constituent of mine. He travelled to Ukraine to collect his elderly father. His father was forced to travel from Warsaw to the British embassy in Italy to collect his visa and, having travelled there the week before, could not get an appointment until Friday 11 March, so my constituent had to leave him there. Now he has to wait another five days while his elderly father is alone in Italy.

Tanya Luczkiw contacted us about her family members who had applied for visas. She has paid over €1,000 for visas, including for Valeria, an unaccompanied minor who turned 11 years old yesterday. Again, we see backlog, delay and difficulty. I am offended on behalf of my constituents that they are struggling with the system. So many of us have stood here so many times and said that we stand with Ukraine, but we are not standing with these Ukrainians. We are not making it easier for them. We are not helping them in their battle against the Russian state.

I welcome yesterday's announcement by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, not least because nearly 100 constituents have contacted me to say that they are desperate to help, have space in their homes and want to accommodate Ukrainians. I was really pleased to hear that announcement, but I am anxious about us having to find our own refugees and name them before they can come here.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Most of us will have similar cases of both those who want to help and those who need help with family members. Does the hon. Member agree that that Government ought, as they did over covid, to start taking out massive advertisements in local newspapers to explain to people how the system is adapting and how people can help or get help?

Sarah Olney: I agree. I am also getting an awful lot of inquiries from people who do not have rooms to offer but want to help in other ways, so I would really like to see a co-ordinated campaign to harness all the good will that people have towards the people of Ukraine and what we can do practically to support them.

The Government are not providing people in this country with a way to identify refugees whom they can sponsor—they have outsourced that or said that charities could provide it. It is really important that we can match

the incredible good will and effort with those people who really need it. The Government must do more to match refugees in Poland or other countries who need shelter with people here who are willing to help. Just saying that people can sponsor a refugee is not good enough if they do not know how to find or help them.

I am really grateful to a charity in my constituency called Refugees Welcome in Richmond, which came to see me on Friday. It is very concerned that the renewed focus on Ukrainian refugees will obscure the effort that is still going on to rehome our Afghan refugees. So many of them are still in hotels and I would really like to see a renewed focus on getting them resettled. I think the situations are different: we need immediate, potentially temporary shelter for women and children fleeing Ukraine; and our Afghan refugees—whole families—need permanent resettlement. The requirements are different. The effort to resettle one group does not need to take up the efforts already employed in resettling the other.

I want to talk a little about energy supply. The current crisis has focused everybody's minds on where we get our energy from. I welcome the moves, not just from the UK but across the EU and elsewhere, to reduce dependence on Russian oil and gas. That will be a pivotal part of our sanctions. The transition away has to be a green one. We have to focus on investing in renewables and a comprehensive retrofitting scheme to improve energy efficiency and reduce demand. As well as helping us to achieve our net zero goals and reduce dependence on Russian oil and gas, it will be a huge help to low-income families in the face of rising fuel prices. I want to see a replacement for the green homes grant, which failed so desperately to deliver the commitment to insulation, in particular for low-income families.

I worry about our Prime Minister's visit today to Saudi Arabia. My understanding is that he has gone to speak to the Saudi regime about increasing its oil output. I worry he has taken the wrong lessons from the past few weeks, if he is cosying up to another autocratic regime who, let us not forget, executed 81 people last week. If we are merely reorienting the supply of oil to us from Russia to Saudi Arabia, that is not sustainable and that is not the way forward.

I reiterate that if we are standing with Ukraine, we are standing with Ukrainian refugees. We must do more. People in this country want to help them, identify them and bring them over. I really want us to use this moment to recommit to renewable energy and an insulation revolution right across this country, starting with our low-income households, so we can provide them with real support in reducing their fuel bills.

5.42 pm

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): Poland is playing such a critical role at this juncture in helping her neighbour to the east, I just want to say a few words as the only Polish-born British Member of Parliament in the Chamber and as chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Poland. Some 84 Members have joined our group, making it one of the largest. If any colleague wishes to join, we would welcome them with open arms.

I remember 40 years ago being at school in Buckinghamshire when martial law was declared in Poland. The Russians, 40 years ago, were threatening an invasion

[Daniel Kawczynski]

of Poland to suppress and destroy the Solidarity movement and Lech Wałęsa, who were fighting for their freedom to escape the clutches of Soviet oppression and get out from behind the iron curtain. One of the most emotional things I experienced as a child was coming to school one day in 1982 and seeing huge numbers of lorries parked outside. Every child had brought food parcels to the school to send to Poland, because they saw on their television screens how the economy had disintegrated, and how martial law and the brutal communist dictator Jaruzelski had created food queues. Nothing was actually functioning. Now, 40 years on, I am very proud that the Polish diaspora here in the United Kingdom has played a tremendous role in gathering food, medicines and clothing to be sent to Poland to help Ukrainian refugees. The Polish community in this country is now almost 1 million strong. I pay tribute to my close friend Anna Buckley, who runs a Polish school in Wrexham, and to my friend Bogusław Malinowski, who is a member of the Shrewsbury Conservatives; they and many other Poles have been in touch with me and have been organising deliveries of food, clothing and medicine to Ukrainians. Poland has taken in more than 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees, and the figure is rising all the time. Polish people understand how interdependent they are with their eastern neighbour and how important it is to help at this time.

I have got to know the Ukrainian ambassador, my friend Vadym Prystaiko, over the past few years in my campaign against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which many of us see as a tremendous threat to Ukraine and to our NATO partners in central and eastern Europe. I bowed my head to him and apologised that so many of us did not fully come to terms with or recognise the step-by-step salami-slicing tactics of the Russian Government. We should have realised that South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Donetsk, Luhansk and Crimea were major warning signs that this lunatic was starting to get out of control and would cause a major conflagration on our continent. When I was on the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, we visited Donetsk and Luhansk, but even then, when we saw the tremendous destruction, I was not fully cognisant of the potential dangers ahead, so I have apologised to the Ukrainian ambassador.

Putin is trying to ethnically cleanse Ukraine. He wants to target civilians and destroy residential areas because he wants to ethnically cleanse that beautiful country and Russify it. That is why it is essential for Britain to take a lead in creating a Marshall plan to help countries such as Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Moldova, which between them have taken more than 95% of all Ukrainian refugees. Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania have the comfort of being NATO partners, so we know we stand by them under article 5—if the Russians cross that fence, both sides know what the ramifications will be for both sides—but Moldova does not have that protection. Just yesterday, the Prime Minister of Moldova, Natalia Gavrilita, said that her country is really struggling to cope with the 200,000 refugees who have poured across the border.

I recognise the need for us in the United Kingdom to support Ukrainian refugees coming to our shores, particularly those who have family already here; I have reached out to my Ukrainians in Shrewsbury. I appeal

to the Opposition: if you want to hold the Government to account, as we do, please focus on how they are going to take a lead on our continent to create a Marshall plan in conjunction with the European Union and America to help our NATO partners such as Poland. We do not know how long this war will go on. We want to stand by them financially to give them the support they need to sustain looking after the Ukrainians, so that the Ukrainians are never ethnically driven away from their region by this brutal dictator.

5.48 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): This week marks eight years since the late, great Tony Benn sadly passed away. In one of his most famous speeches in this House, he recounted living in London during the blitz. He spoke of huddling in bomb shelters each night and of awaking each morning to a city on fire. Speaking to oppose military intervention in Iraq, he recounted the horror that he had felt as Nazi bombs rained down on London. With plans to give the green light for British bombs to fall on Iraq, he asked Parliament to see Iraqis' humanity too. "Don't Iraqis feel terror?", he asked. "Don't they weep when their children die?"

Benn's speech has become a universal anti-war statement and is just as relevant today. Today, it is Ukrainians huddling in shelters each night and seeing their cities on fire each morning. Today, it is Ukrainians who live in terror as Putin's bombs rain down on them, and who weep for their murdered children.

Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine has rightly been unequivocally condemned throughout the House, and I join colleagues in calling for an urgent ceasefire with every effort made to reach a diplomatic end before more lives are lost and an even more terrifying wider European war is triggered. However, amid the darkness we have seen extraordinary bravery and humanity, and not just from the Ukrainian people themselves—from the courage of Russian anti-war activists risking repression to speak out against the war, such as Marina Ovsyannikova, who last night protested live on national television, to the compassion of the British public who have opened their hearts to the Ukrainian people. I am proud that in Coventry, a city of sanctuary, local groups have been collecting donations for refugees. Across the country, more than 100,000 people have signed up to welcome Ukrainian refugees into their homes.

This is a testament to the common decency of the people, but, for all their talk, the Government have not matched that decency. Their DIY asylum scheme passes the buck, individualising a problem that demands a collective solution. Refugee groups warn that it does not go far or fast enough, with the most vulnerable, such as unaccompanied children, the most likely to be left behind. I therefore join the likes of the Refugee Council in calling on the Government to follow the example set by our European neighbours and waive visas for Ukrainians seeking sanctuary.

This brutal war has exposed some uncomfortable truths. Each night on TV we witness new horrors befalling the people of Ukraine. We hear the terror in their voices, and see the tears as they weep for their children. We rightly stand in solidarity with them and welcome Ukrainian refugees, but the Government should not limit that solidarity. This month marks eight years since

the beginning of the Saudi-led war on Yemen, which has claimed more than a quarter of a million lives and pushed 20 million people to the brink of starvation. As experts have made clear, that war would not be possible without the Government's support and the £20 billion-worth of arms that they have sold to the Saudi regime since it began.

Like Tony Benn, I ask, "Don't Yemenis feel terror as well? Don't they weep for their children when they die? Do we not owe them solidarity too?" From Putin's slaughter in Syria, where he aided and abetted Assad in war crimes, to the bombs dropped in the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, events make us ask, "Don't they feel terror when bombs are dropped on their homes? Don't they weep when their children die? Do we not owe them solidarity too?" But instead, our Government respond with laws such as the Nationality and Borders Bill, dubbed the anti-refugee Bill because it will break our 70-year-long commitment to the 1951 refugee convention.

In that speech, Tony Benn brought to light our shared humanity and the horrors of war. As Putin's bombs rain down on Ukrainian cities and destroy them, it is as clear as ever that that lesson still applies today. We must stand firm against wars of aggression, and in solidarity with all who flee their horrors.

5.52 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): My constituents and I have watched the plight of Ukrainians in horror. We have witnessed the appalling actions of Putin and Russia, the murder of civilians, senseless bloodshed to satisfy a man's historical grievance. People often try to make sense of evil actions by ascribing them to some form of mental illness—lunacy, insanity, not thinking rationally—rather than confronting the sad truth that evil actions are performed by evil men. Levelling cities, forcing women and children in their millions to flee, lying and lying while watching one's own country and its citizens become impoverished—that is not insanity; it is evil. It is often said that liberty is not free and peace comes at a price, but central to peace is a commitment to the rule of law. Evil men and evil deeds must be countered, condemned and criminalised, and the perpetrators must be convicted.

I strongly support the UK's approach in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine—the supply of defensive weapons, the sanctions, the humanitarian aid and our refugee response—and I want to speak briefly about the last two of those.

I support the UK embargo on Russian oil and gas. It cannot be right that as we heat our homes and fill our cars and trucks, we are bankrolling the Russian war machine, but we need to go further and faster: we need to stop dead the imports of Russian war fuel. Someone said that the current situation demonstrates why we cannot pursue net zero. I strongly believe that it shows the opposite. Never has it been more important to have clean, domestic energy and to be dependent on no one else but ourselves. Imagine if we had that now. I am reminded of the saying that the best time to plant a tree is 50 years ago, but the second best time is today. This is why we need to crack on with expanding renewables and nuclear and supporting UK gas and oil during this transition period to clean domestic energy production.

Turning to the humanitarian response and our support for refugees, the people of Runnymede and Weybridge stand ready and willing to help. As always, our community response and the incredible offers of help have been amazing. It is not surprising that my constituents have come forward in such a way to support Ukrainians, as was seen just a couple of weeks ago at the "Stand with Ukraine" rally in Weybridge. I welcome the recent Homes for Ukraine announcement. I am concerned however, that the most vulnerable refugees may end up being disenfranchised. It strikes me that there is a danger that the system may be easier to go through for Ukrainian refugees who are more internationalist or who speak English. It is important that the scheme is monitored carefully as it is rolled out, enhanced and changed, to ensure that we support all refugees, not just people who have particular strengths in personal advocacy.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. On that note, we have heard throughout this debate that the Ukrainian refugees coming to the UK will be some of the most vulnerable, including older people, children and, especially, unaccompanied children. Is it not important that we ensure that the people offering their homes are fully vetted to ensure that they are providing a genuine safe haven for people fleeing a war zone?

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Just yesterday, I asked the Secretary of State to ensure that there was not only historical vetting but ongoing support for the people and the families who open their homes, to ensure that no one takes advantage of people's vulnerability. Of course, there is always going to be a balance, and we need to crack on and get people over here as soon as possible, but the hon. Lady is right to say that ongoing safeguarding is a critical issue.

I worry that we will see even more huge movements of people. That is inevitable, and we need to strongly support dispersing people from Poland, where they are struggling. I repeat my call to work with our European allies to do this and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, to tackle the people smugglers and support the most vulnerable refugees. As we watch the horror and bloodshed in Ukraine and the murder of our fellow human beings, our brothers and sisters, we are all hurting. We want to do more and we want to see it stop, but the future is murky. Each path forward is beset with challenge and danger. Where is the golden bridge for Putin and Russia? I hope and pray that it is found soon, but if anyone can find it, President Zelensky can.

5.58 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): As Russia's unjustifiable assault continues, it is important that we in the international community do everything in our power to bring this unprovoked invasion to an end. Equally, while we wait for that time, we should be doing all we can to support those most affected—those who are fleeing. We have heard a great deal of criticism of the Government's response to the Ukrainian refugee crisis. Unfortunately, the overwhelming bulk of that criticism is fully justified. The Government's response has been late, half-hearted, partial and discriminatory. We can rightly be proud of the response of the British public to the crisis, however. So many of them have opened their hearts and their purses, and now we hear that hundreds

[Bell Ribeiro-Addy]

of thousands have even offered to open their homes. The response of the Government in no way reflects this generosity of spirit or this international solidarity. Worse, Ministers seem to believe that the appropriate response to justified criticism is to attack, or that the response to serious shortcomings is self-congratulation. It is simply not enough compared with our counterparts across Europe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), the shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, was right to be critical of the latest Government plan. As she said, it is not a plan but a press release. It is a DIY refugee scheme. I remind Ministers that we are a signatory to international treaties governing the treatment of refugees. None of them states, "You can let in some people who want to come, depending on the generosity of your own citizens." That is not international law. The legal position is that refugees have the right to seek asylum and that states are obligated to grant it, where appropriate. That does not mean directing people to non-existent processing centres in Calais or to a secretly located centre somewhere in Lille. It does not mean denying refuge to people from a war-torn region because they do not have relatives here. I know the visa scheme has since been extended, but it is a visa scheme, which is not how the asylum system has worked.

I am sorry to say these failings have become customary under this Government and their predecessors. The Government have failed to meet either their legal or moral obligations since they took office in 2010. There have been attempts to push back refugees in the channel, refugees have been kept in buildings that are not fit for habitation and some have contracted serious disease in unsanitary conditions. We have seen others, including British citizens, wrongly deported from this country.

It should never be forgotten that this Government and their predecessors are indelibly stained by the continuing Windrush scandal. They are also yet to provide an adequate response to the many hon. Members who have raised the situation of African and Asian students in Ukraine who face discrimination while fleeing the war. Many might ask what that has to do with us, but this Government would surely like to send a message that no race or nationality is more worthy of safe passage or refuge than any other. The Government's responses to date are woefully lacking.

Even in the light of all that, the Government persist with their anti-refugee Nationality and Borders Bill. We have to conclude that, like Pavlov's dog, Ministers' reflexes take over when they hear the words "migrants" and "refugees," and their reflexes are distasteful and objectionable. They are not the reflexes of the people of this country, who are empathetic, charitable and giving.

As we have already heard, yesterday we marked eight years since the death of the late, great Tony Benn. Whenever I speak about this Government's treatment of refugees, I am reminded that he said:

"The way a Government treats refugees is very instructive because it shows you how they would treat the rest of us if they thought they could get away with it."

My advice to this Government would be to be more like the British people in their treatment of refugees, before the British people see them for who they really are.

6.2 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): This has been a fascinating and wide-ranging debate. The hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) made an incredible speech. It was one of the best, and it got to the nub of the military side. It was a fantastic speech.

I was at the Rose-Roth seminar of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Kyiv in 2016, and it was noticeable that a Ukrainian former member of the Minsk group said:

"Appeasers of Russia must go."

He called it a "Chamberlain complex" and believed it was

"a fundamental failure that people feel they can work with Putin. He gets away with it. The international community must recognise that Russia's actions are not against just Ukraine, but the whole world."

That was in relation to the invasion of Crimea.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) had a Backbench Business debate in our first week back this year on the Russian threat, and at the end of my speech I made the point that we have to accept that we are back in a cold war situation and that we must adopt a cold war mentality again. That includes increases in defence spending, on which we have seen an incredible and welcome change in position—I do not call it a U-turn—from the German Government, who have said they will spend 2.2% of GDP on defence, as laid down in the 2014 Wales summit. That is indeed welcome in bolstering NATO, because people are now recognising that whether we like it or not, we are back in a cold war scenario, which means that we have to get the playbooks back out. They are about standing up and pushing back. I have often spoken in the House on various issues about countermeasures and counterbalances, and this situation is about counterbalances. This is about saying to Russia, "Don't try to push the envelope, because we will push back."

People who are trying to be apologists for Putin have said, "It was the NATO expansion to the east." NATO did not expand to the east; the east wanted to join NATO. That is a very subtle difference. The people of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are jolly well grateful today that they have got the backing of NATO, because I do not think they would be sleeping easily in their beds if they felt that Russia may be able to just walk through.

Dr Julian Lewis: Does my right hon. Friend agree that Mr Putin's claim that he is worried about having a NATO country directly on his border if Ukraine joins NATO is rather given the lie by the fact that if he occupies Ukraine, he will have several NATO countries on his border?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for that, because he touches on something very important. The drive to NATO membership accelerated substantially after Russia had invaded Crimea. Putin invited that move of the Ukrainian Government to look further to the west, as they saw their security threatened. A real analysis could be done of what Putin was doing in and around Ukraine three or four months ago. Was he probing to see what the reactions of the west would be? Was he thinking, "What could happen here? Perhaps I will focus my attentions elsewhere, in the 'Stans or

areas like that.” We have merely to read or analyse the Putin essay for it to become apparent how far this Third Reich mentality of his goes. He makes clear in that essay the centuries-held hatred towards the sacking of Kyiv, the capital of Rus. He also makes clear in that essay the countries he is going to go after—Lithuania, eastern Poland, Belarus; he basically names them. He uses the phrase “Russia was robbed”.

Simon Hoare: My right hon. Friend is hitting the nail on the head, because we know where this ends. Adolf Hitler did not accept the settlement at the end of the first world war and sought vengeance, and Putin has never taken the almost self-inflicted degradation of the Russian empire internally. He is like a bear with a sore head and that is potentially dangerous for a large number of people on the European continent.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that, as it leads on to what my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) was saying—that the analysis that Putin has gone mad, has a terminal disease or is suffering as a result of steroids is probably just our trying to understand the reasoning of an evil man. There are more history books that analyse Hitler’s motivations and what happened than are written on anything else. There are so many parallels to be drawn with the situation we find ourselves in today, because Putin has kept testing and pushing. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said, when the chemical weapons were dropped in Syria it was a huge mistake that nothing was done, purely because President Obama had said that it was a red line that would not be tolerated. If we are going to tolerate it, we should not say that in the first place, because we can now draw a chronological line from that moment to what has happened.

Let us remember that Putin has caused the assassination of people in Berlin, and the Russians have blown up a NATO arms depot in the Czech Republic and launched a chemical weapon attack on the UK. All those things happened in NATO countries and all were met with a limited response, although it was notable that after the Salisbury attack allies from countries outside NATO also got together to remove diplomats from their embassies. Nevertheless, Putin has disregarded the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty, used Syria as a training ground and is agitating the situation in the Balkans.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has said that we must be responsible to ensure there is not an escalation, but if we do not stand strong, we invite that escalation. As I have said, we have to take a cold war approach, which means doing things that, quite frankly, will probably frighten us all, but we must make sure that the message is clear: our NATO nuclear arsenal is on the same stand-by as the Russian nuclear arsenal. We do not have nuclear weapons in order to use them; we have nuclear weapons to ensure they are not used. That is why Trident is described as a nuclear deterrent: it is a weapon used every day to prevent it from being used. If it is used, it is a complete failure of everything—but frankly we will not be here to have that argument. It is a weapon used every day to keep the peace.

Every day, we are seeing murder take place on a wide scale, at the hands of an invading country. We have not yet seen the destruction of Kyiv, as Putin did to Grozny, or the use of chemical weapons. If those things happen,

there will be huge demands for intervention—not necessarily from NATO but from countries that want to help with air support. Please let us not get to that stage. As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, let us make sure that the MiG fighters can get to Ukraine. They do not have to match in numbers the Ukrainian air force because—I remind everybody—in the second world war the Luftwaffe considerably outnumbered the RAF, but that absolute determination to defend our homeland came through.

6.11 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): My thoughts and prayers and those of the constituents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West remain with the people of Ukraine throughout this time of hardship. Their bravery in the face of this conflict is admirable.

There have been times in recent weeks when the Government’s humanitarian response has been somewhat lacking, but I thank the FCDO for its daily briefings and the Secretary of State for Defence for his considered and informative updates to the House. I am also grateful for the meetings and work that goes on behind the scenes, which our constituents do not see.

The outpouring of generosity across the UK has been extraordinary, and my constituency has been no exception. I mention in particular Rain or Shine in Cambuslang, which has co-ordinated at great speed an overwhelming response from the community and organised getting the many, many donations to where they are needed. The UK public has shown beyond doubt that we stand with Ukraine and do not accept the illegal and reprehensible actions of President Putin.

In the January debate to mark Holocaust Memorial Day, I said that we might take for granted the privilege of freedom that we have if we cannot imagine the atrocities of the war occurring now on UK soil. The escalation of events in Ukraine since January have brought that sentiment into much sharper focus. I am sure none of us imagined that a war of this scale would be seen in Europe in modern times.

Putin’s invasion is not just illegal, or immoral: it is an affront to democracy and to the values of Europe and its people. It is the oppression of the freedom of hundreds of thousands of innocent people to feed the ego of one man. It is imperative that we all bear in mind that this is not about the millions of ordinary Russian citizens, both those still in Russia and those here in the UK. The huge number of Russians who put themselves at risk by going out to protest against this war perfectly illustrate that. We should condemn Putin and the enablers who surround him, but we must not allow a generalised anti-Russian sentiment to grow. Not only are ordinary Russians not responsible for this conflict, but so many of them fundamentally disagree with it.

Like all Members, I have been inundated with emails from constituents sharing their thoughts on the conflict. Although our individual and personal power to do anything might be limited, there is power in numbers. By far the most common issue that my constituents want to see addressed is visas and our offer to Ukrainian refugees. There has been some movement on that. I spoke in yesterday’s Westminster Hall debate, so I will not labour the point. I will, however, reiterate that the Government must do all they can to remove the red

[Margaret Ferrier]

tape and now move at speed to ensure that Ukrainians can access sanctuary in the UK. The Scottish Government have been vocal about their intention to take in as many refugees as they can under their super-sponsor status. I hope that the UK Government will enable them to do so as swiftly as possible.

My constituents would also like to see the Government providing substantial humanitarian aid to the countries neighbouring Ukraine, such as Poland, Romania and Moldova, which are on the frontline of the refugee crisis and taking the lion's share of the humanitarian response right now. I have also seen a huge number of constituents extremely concerned about the measures in the Nationality and Borders Bill, which will come back to this House soon. That is not by any means a new concern, but this new context has renewed the strength of feeling, and the calls in opposition, to legislation that is in direct contrast to the UK's proud history of providing safety to those who need it most. The Bill fails to make the essential distinction between refugee and migrant and my constituents have highlighted the need for more safe routes to the UK and the removal of the criminalisation of refugees.

At the heart of any war are the people. Ukrainians have shown pride in their country and have fought back commendably. Most refugees are only looking for a brief reprieve and a safe house until it is safe to return home. My constituents and I wholeheartedly support any measures that will provide that. Imagine having suddenly to flee your home and leave the life you knew behind, with only a few belongings to your name, not knowing if your home will still be standing, if and when you are ever able to return, and knowing that you are unlikely to be able to communicate effectively and ask for help because you do not know the language wherever you first land.

That applies even more so for children, the elderly and the vulnerable who do not have the same autonomy as a healthy, able-bodied adult. They may not even grasp what is happening when they are having to leave. Any one of us would be frightened at the very thought of it, never mind the reality. Any assurances or comfort that are within this Government's gift must be freely given to alleviate whatever small part of that fear we can.

6.17 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): First, I wish to send my solidarity to all the victims of Putin's invasion. Thousands have lost their lives, so many have been injured, many more have been forced to flee their homes or now face a humanitarian crisis. We need an immediate end to the loss of life and suffering. That means that the Russian state must call a permanent ceasefire and withdraw its troops. As the United Nations General Secretary has repeatedly said, instead of more war, there must be a diplomatic solution to this dangerous crisis, one that respects the UN charter and delivers peace, security and human rights. Reports overnight, including from President Zelensky, suggest a glimmer of hope on that front. We must do all we can to support such efforts.

No matter how quickly this horrific situation ends, it will take years for Ukraine's economy to recover and for lives to be rebuilt. So Ukrainians should not be forced

to divert desperately needed resources to debt repayments. Ukraine faces debt payments of \$7 billion this year alone and, so far, there has been no offer of suspension or cancellation of debts. The vast majority of emergency funding has been new loans, so Ukraine's debt is ballooning. Surely, as an act of solidarity, all of Ukraine's debts should be cancelled.

I want to put on record my utter shame at the way our Government have delayed and restricted those fleeing the war in Ukraine from seeking sanctuary here. The Government should have waived all visa restrictions, as other countries have, and that should still be done. Let this be the moment when, after years of the hostile environment, we say with one resounding voice, "Refugees fleeing war, torture and persecution are welcome here. Refugees from the world over are welcome here." Let us remember, too, the refugees fleeing conflicts that are often driven by our Government's selling weapons to tyrants who then create humanitarian catastrophes, as we have seen, and as we see with horrific consequences in Yemen.

The people in our country have been so generous in spirit and have shown such practical solidarity, in contrast with a Government who have not gone far enough. Only the other weekend, I went to the Polish Catholic Centre in Leeds. People from all backgrounds across our community were arriving there in huge numbers to donate toothpaste, sanitary products, clothes and so many other things needed by people fleeing from Ukraine to Poland.

Beyond the immense suffering in Ukraine, however, this is a dangerous moment for the wider world. We must do all we can to ensure that this war does not spiral into a wider one, creating even more bloodshed. For example, a no-fly zone could lead to the nightmare scenario of direct conflict between Russia and NATO countries, which in turn risks a nuclear war between the two biggest nuclear powers on earth. Everything must be done to avoid that.

Finally, I extend a hand of solidarity to the brave protesters campaigning in Russia for an end to the war. Already this century we have seen too many wars. The example that Russian citizens protesting Putin's war are setting us is truly inspirational. Who could not be moved by the recent scenes of the arrest of 76-year-old pensioner Yelena Osipova for opposing the war? Yelena survived the siege of Leningrad that killed an estimated 800,000 Russians in the second world war. Yelena knows the horrors of war and bravely opposes her Government's adding to that suffering.

We must be clear that ordinary Russian people, whether in Russia or this country, are not to blame for the actions of their Government. It is a Government of kleptocrats, representing the interests of the billionaire robber barons, with their palaces and yachts paid for with the wealth stolen from the Russian people—so solidarity with those anti-war protesters. Already this century we have seen too many wars, and "Not in my name" has been the call of peace movements worldwide against them. Today, brave protesters in Russia are saying, "Not in my name." I stand fully with them.

6.22 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is an honour to speak in this important debate. I begin by paying tribute to President Zelensky, to the heroic men and women of

the Ukrainian armed forces and to all the people of Ukraine, whose grit, resolve and courage in the face of this war and this bully are an inspiration to us all. I also commend our own excellent armed forces for the support they have given the Ukrainian army.

Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine is a grave attack not only on the Ukrainian people, but on sovereignty, democracy, freedom and the rule of law. I welcome the aid promised by our Government, but I have some questions about it. Can the Minister tell us how much has already been disbursed and where the aid will be disbursed to, and can he give us an assurance that projects for building peace in other areas around the world will not be displaced by the money being given to Ukraine? It would be not only morally wrong, but a false economy to stop peace and development in one region for Ukrainian aid in another. I hope he can give us assurances of that today.

I echo the sentiments of so many hon. Members and so many of my Putney constituents: refugees are welcome here. Too often until now, in their hour of need, desperate Ukrainians have been met with chaos, confusion and bureaucracy by the Home Office. We have been letting them down. I am pleased to see the improvements in the visa process, but I call on the Government to introduce an emergency protection visa for those fleeing Ukraine, who need to reach the UK as soon as possible. That would lift normal visa conditions, other than biometrics and security checks that can be swiftly done en route, providing a quick, simple and safe route to sanctuary for all who need it. They must also accept the Ministry of Defence's offer of assistance to speed up the system and set up emergency centres, with information in Ukrainian about projects that we have here—the Homes for Ukraine project and others—so that people who are fleeing Ukraine can find out what they can do straightaway.

In my own constituency, I have been overwhelmed by the support and generosity of the people of Putney, who have written to me offering essential items and their spare rooms. I have spoken to churches, my local synagogue and local charities, which are unanimous in their belief that the Government must do more and which are ready to step up when called on.

One brilliant local charity, Refugees at Home, has already been working hard to pair residents with refugees. Its members have been finding host families for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK since 2015. They really are experts in the field of pairing refugees with homes. However, they are frustrated that better use is not being made of experienced schemes such as theirs. I seek assurance from the Minister that experienced local organisations will receive the support they need to contribute to making this scheme work and that it will not be set up to fail. Refugees at Home has said that

“matching hosts to guests requires sensitivity and experience, and it is important that homes are properly assessed prior to a placement being made. A simple DBS check is not enough. A proper home visit needs to be undertaken”,

there needs to be “follow-up support”, and

“move-on plans must be put in place”.

I call on the Minister to tell us how the pairings will be made. When I was an aid worker in Bosnia, I saw a lot of things during the war and after it, but the thing I most remember and most haunts me is the times I had to turn away people who were seeking aid—I had to make choices about whose home I could rebuild and

not rebuild, the people I could give a food package to and not give a food package to. I will never forget that. We cannot put British people in the situation of having to do that. If they hear of a family desperate to come here, we cannot ask them to choose who they will pair with—who they will have in their home and who they will not—because that will be a decision they will never, ever be able to forget.

I would also like to highlight the risk to peace in the western Balkans. The violence in Ukraine makes clear Putin's intention to fuel instability and division across the whole region, and the Balkans is no exception. Given the growing concerns about war in Bosnia, I hope that there will not be any destruction and that efforts for peace are redoubled. A good start would be a smart and creative sanctions policy on leaders in the western Balkans such as Milorad Dodik, who has already been sanctioned by the US and the EU for destabilising and corrupt activity and for attempts to dismantle the Dayton peace accords. Should we not consider sanctioning him and others, and not wait until it is too late to start talking about sanctions, as we did with Russia?

We can see the threat to peace in the western Balkans now and work with civil society organisations on the ground. The biggest threat to peace is to not have civil society organisations—the ordinary public—working for peace, and we can play our part in working with them. I have recently spoken to many that are doing fantastic work and they can do so much more with our support, as well as bolstering our NATO base there. There is not a moment to lose. It is not too late to take action for the western Balkans and we should act now before it is too late.

6.28 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): A week ago, this House stood as one to salute President Zelensky, who told us:

“We will not give up and we will not lose.”

His address, like his leadership, was deeply moving and deeply inspiring. Our Parliament, that day, truly spoke for the British people. The House has done so again today, with 26 speakers making a wide range of points. But at the heart of what every speaker has said is that we in this House, and in this country, are unified in our solidarity with Ukraine and in our condemnation of President Putin's invasion.

The Ukrainians are showing massive bravery—military and civilians alike. We must do all we can to support their resistance, and the Government have Labour's full backing for military and intelligence assistance to Ukraine to defend itself. We welcomed the delivery of more than 3,600 NLAW anti-tank weapons. I hope that the Minister this afternoon will be able to confirm that the Starstreak missiles that the Ukrainians need to defend against Russian air attacks are also now being delivered.

It is clear that President Putin miscalculated on the resolve of the Ukrainian military and on the strength of his own Russian forces. Three weeks in, his forces are still only making limited progress. They have still only taken three cities, all in southern Ukraine. However, Russia has such crushing firepower and Putin has such utter ruthlessness that we must expect more of their military objectives to be taken in the weeks to come. Whatever the short-term gains Putin may secure, we must ensure that he fails in the long run through Ukrainian

[John Healey]

resistance, tougher sanctions, more humanitarian help, wider international isolation, justice for war crimes being committed and, above all, long-term western unity and NATO unity.

More immediately, I fear that we must expect further escalation in Kremlin rhetoric and in the merciless attacks on civilians, yet these are the very tactics that are hardening resistance in Ukraine, and leading to protests in Russia and unified opposition in the wider world. Putin will have to negotiate, perhaps from a position of weakness, rather than strength, but certainly we must make that happen sooner, rather than later. All diplomatic efforts are needed to secure a ceasefire, negotiations and a full Russian withdrawal.

When Britain was one of the original guarantors, alongside Russia and the US, of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest agreement, it is deeply disappointing that today our British Prime Minister is playing a bit part on the margins of international diplomacy as France, Germany and the US—not Britain—lead the way.

James Cleverly *indicated dissent.*

John Healey: The Minister shakes his head, but let me ask about China. China called yesterday for maximum restraint in Ukraine. Has the Prime Minister spoken to President Xi since the conflict began? When did the Foreign Secretary last speak to her Chinese counterpart? Was that since or before the invasion?

I turn to the contributions from many Members, which I think were in four sections and had four hallmarks. The first was great insight and expertise, and I will only recognise those Members who have returned to the Chamber for the wind-ups.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am checking on that, and it is somewhat disgraceful that there are Members who have taken part in this debate who are not here for the wind-ups. I am saying that as loudly as I can in the hope that it will be heard across this building. The right hon. Gentleman is right to make that point. As a matter of courtesy to him, those Members ought to be here.

John Healey: I am less concerned about courtesy to me; I am concerned about courtesy to the House and the public, for whom we speak and are here to represent.

Turning to the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), when I talk about great expertise and insight, no one has done more about and knows more about human trafficking, and her warning about traffickers operating from day one among the refugees fleeing Ukraine is a serious wake-up call. She urges work with the UN agencies, tech companies, refugee groups and law enforcement agencies. She urges the Home Secretary to act, and I hope she gets more of a response than we have seen to date.

Turning to another true expert in the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is an expert on Russia, with a long track record of exposing Russian corruption and urging action on the dirty money that keeps Putin in power. He has worked hard to get the Government to this point, and he is clearly not going to give up.

I will pass over my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), as he is not in his place. [HON. MEMBERS: "He is!"] I beg your pardon; he has moved. Hon. Members have talked about defence spending, but he made the important point that it is how well, not how much that matters. Bearing in mind that the Public Accounts Committee report on the Ministry of Defence, published just before Christmas, described its system for delivering major equipment capabilities as "broken", that may be a message that the Chancellor wants to hear and he may be wary of throwing good money after bad. The right hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns) is not here so I will move on.

The right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) said that we are back in a cold war scenario. I am not sure that he is right; the circumstances are new but some of the old determination on deterrence will certainly be required.

The second hallmark of the debate was the profound gravity with which hon. Members spoke about Russia invading and killing people in that sovereign country. I am disappointed that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) is not here because he rightly said that Russia is a member of the UN Security Council and is tearing up 75 years of international law.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) said that he was making a short speech but rightly warned us to prepare for a long conflict. He said that securing long-term peace will require resolve and strength. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) treated us to a history of European treaties, including Maastricht, that have taken for granted our geopolitical stability in Europe over recent years.

The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) was passionate and profoundly expert. He, my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) all spoke about the protest and bravery of Marina Ovsyannikova on Russian state TV yesterday. That is a clear image that Putin is fighting not just in Ukraine now—this is his new front. Domestic doubts about the invasion, protesters on the streets and western sanctions are all putting pressure on him. This must become his costly failure. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) was right to remind us of, and to offer the solidarity of this House and Britain to, the brave anti-war protesters in Ukraine.

The third hallmark of the debate was great emotional power and passion. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) said that the Ukrainians are fighting this war for all of us and we must do everything possible, short of NATO involvement. She is right. I pass over the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly), who is not in his place.

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) rightly said that an attack on Ukraine is an attack on democracy, on peace, on freedom and on the rule of law. She pointed out what is at stake in this war. The hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) warned us never to allow Ukraine to go back to the horrors of the Soviet era of control, and he is right. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) reminded us that ordinary Russians are not responsible for this conflict. It is President Putin's war and it must become President Putin's failure.

The fourth hallmark of the debate was the strong solidarity that the House expressed with Ukrainians, led by the right hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who said that Ukrainians look to the west, not to the east. That is what they are fighting for: the right to determine their own future as a democratic sovereign nation. He had the whole House behind him when he said that. I pass over the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski), who is not here.

The sense of solidarity with Ukrainians was particularly strong in several contributions about the Government's response to refugees, which, honestly, has been shameful and shambolic. They used the Home Office's existing systems as a starting point, but they are simply not suitable in a period of war with almost 3 million refugees in three weeks. My hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) rightly made the point that the system is not suited to the emergency. She said that the Government must be more like the British people with refugees.

I hope the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), gets her answers from the Minister about the support to local authorities that will accompany the DIY refugee scheme announced yesterday. Her hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) described the Government's response on refugees as "pitiful", although I thought my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) was more balanced and made a better case. She quite rightly said that in having a DIY asylum scheme, as announced yesterday, there is a risk that the Government are absolving themselves of the proper responsibility of the state for refugees.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Sam Tarry) took the Government to task for failing to provide what is needed most—a simple sanctuary route. He said we can and must do better for Ukrainians, as did the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who was asking for answers and for a better system for her constituents.

It is clear that Putin has miscalculated not just on the strength of the Ukrainian resistance and the weakness of his own forces, but on the international resolve to isolate Russia and on the strength of western unity and NATO unity. Our Labour commitment to NATO is unshakeable. The Government therefore have our full support for reinforcing NATO nations on the alliance's eastern border with Russia. The Labour leader and I were able last week to fly to Tallinn and Tapa in Estonia to reassure Estonia of the united UK determination to defend their security and to thank our British troops deployed there from the Royal Tank Regiment and the Royal Welsh battle group.

Let President Putin be in no doubt that our commitment to article 5 is absolute. Let him not mistake NATO's restraint for any lack of resolve. When Defence Ministers go to NATO tomorrow for the NATO meeting, we want the UK Government to demonstrate a leadership role in NATO again; to further reinforce the eastern flank of NATO; to encourage the nations to take a decision on an initiating directive to SACEUR, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe; and to argue for new priorities in the NATO strategic concepts to be agreed in June, for

closer co-ordination with the European Union, and for greater collaboration with the countries of the joint expeditionary force.

As we strengthen our defences abroad, we must also strengthen our defences at home. We need the Government to publish the national resilience strategy they promised a year ago, and to halt further cuts to the Army. We need the Government to reboot defence spending to respond to new threats that the UK and Europe face. Labour in government did exactly that, with a big boost to defence after the 9/11 terror attack on the twin towers. We introduced the largest sustained real-terms increase in spending for two decades. If the Government act to boost defence as Labour did after 9/11, the Government will again have our full support.

When he opened this debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), the shadow Foreign Secretary, said that three weeks ago the world changed. Putin's invasion was a grave violation of international law and UN conventions. It was also the start of an assault on the fundamental aims of post-war Europe: peace, freedom, democracy and national sovereignty. We have taken peace and security for granted in Europe since the end of the cold war. We have failed to confront Russian aggression. We must now be ready to deal with the consequences of this Russian invasion for years to come.

6.44 pm

James Cleverly: With the leave of the House, I would like to conclude this debate on behalf of my hon. and gallant Friend the Minister for the Armed Forces, who was unfortunately detained in his Department at the opening of this debate. He has apologised to the Chair, and he has asked me to put on record his apologies to the House.

Earlier I outlined the Government's main objective in this conflict, which is for President Putin to fail in Ukraine, and I set out the means we are employing to ensure that this is the case. With the addition of 360 people sanctioned today, the United Kingdom has now taken action against over 1,000 Russian individuals and entities. The new powers afforded to the Government under the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 have been put to use and will continue to be used over the coming weeks and months. Bank assets worth over £350 billion have been frozen. We have cut off key sectors of the Russian economy, including those essential to the Russian war machine, and we have rallied allies to remove Russia from the SWIFT banking system.

These sanctions are already biting. The Russian stock market has not opened since the start of the conflict, which I understand is the most prolonged closure of the Russian stock market since the Bolshevik revolution. The Kremlin is desperately trying to hold back capital flight, even from its sovereign wealth fund. Putin's economy is now desperately exposed, and the elites around him feel the pain. They must tell him to stop the war, because the international consensus that now threatens their wealth will not be broken. This conflict stops when Putin decides it stops, and he should realise that it should stop now.

The international community has also moved to ostracise Russia from international sporting and cultural events. Russian and Belarusian athletes have been blocked from

[James Cleverly]

the Paralympics, and they are out of the World cup. Major western corporations are ceasing business in Russia, and the Bolshoi ballet will not be coming on its planned tour of the UK. Russian sports fans are left without international games to watch. The artists, athletes and performers blocked from performing overseas and the hundreds of people queuing in recent days for their last McDonald's must be dismal signals to all Russians that Putin is damaging their country.

In his desperate attempts to control the news, Putin has inflicted on his own people the blocking of western social media platforms, and the highly connected and often influential Russian influencers must be devastated. As trivial as their tears may seem in the face of the suffering in Sumy or Kharkiv, their tears reflect the anger of a generation of young Russian people whom Putin does not understand and does not represent. They do not want the digital and cultural isolation from the west that he is now inflicting on them, and they should follow the brave example of Marina Ovsyannikova in challenging the repression of free speech and access to the world of online information. Putin is inflicting on this generation of millennial Russians a complete and total change of their way of life, and I have no doubt that they will want to push back.

Chris Bryant: I am full of praise for the Government for now being able to sanction 1,000 individuals, but will the Minister confirm two things? First, can he confirm that a large number of them can be sanctioned for only 56 days under our rules, because it depends on the Act that we passed yesterday? Secondly, can he confirm that we will proceed with many more sanctions? The tiny number of people around Putin may not be moved by all of this, but the people who have £750,000 tucked away here as their possible bolthole are terrified of what may happen, and we need to get to them as well.

James Cleverly: I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that we will continue applying sanctions to the Russians to continue the pressure on Vladimir Putin and to choke off the supply of money to his war machine.

The Government have announced nearly £400 million in both humanitarian and economic support to Ukraine. We are providing medical supplies, generators and other essentials. We are bringing Ukrainian children to the UK to continue their cancer treatment, and we have made the offer that the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine and other UK military medical facilities will be made available to injured Ukrainian service personnel. We will also welcome here Ukrainians fleeing from the conflict. We have put no cap on that number, and we have already seen that over 100,000 British families have offered to make their homes available to the refugees.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I appreciate that there might be difficulties with this, but would the Minister consider whether our offer should be open to injured Russian military personnel as well? If they are captured on the battlefield and they are injured, we should show them the humanity that we are obliged to under the Geneva conventions.

James Cleverly: I will listen to what my hon. Friend has said. As with all military conflict this is based on medical need, but I will take the point he has made.

I feel that a number of Labour Members sought to create a grievance where I do not think there should be one. It is important that people recognise that the £350 some hon. Members have mentioned will go to the householder, but more than £10,000 of support will be made available to local councils for those being housed in the UK. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) made an incredibly important point—I am glad it was recognised by those on the shadow Front Bench—about the risk of people traffickers taking advantage of those who have been displaced by this conflict. We know that bad people take advantage of good people in times of difficulty, and that is why it is so important that we remain observant and vigilant, and that we prevent those evil people from prospering through the hurt of others.

The shadow Secretary of State for Defence was assiduous in reflecting the comments made to the House today, and rather than repeat the names of the right hon. and hon. Members he mentioned, I wish to put on record my thanks for their contributions. We heard from Opposition Members a commitment to the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and a commitment to collective defence. It is great, once again, to see Her Majesty's Opposition being the true heirs of Attlee. It is incredibly important that at times such as this, although we may have differences, which have been aired today, the message sent out to our friends and adversaries alike is that we stand united as a House, and we stand in solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

We recognise that Ukrainians do not want to be refugees. They want to get home and back to the country that they love and are defending with such passion. We are keen to help them do so, which is why we will continue to provide the military aid they need. At the international donor conference, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary two weeks ago, there was a commitment of 4,241 next-generation light anti-tank weapons—NLAWS—which have been delivered. Other countries will also make donations. Thousands of sets of body armour and helmets, and a huge volume of small arms ammunition, rations, and communications equipment have been flown forward and moved onwards into Ukraine.

The shadow Secretary of State asked specifically about the provision of Starstreak high velocity anti-aircraft missiles. Those are being delivered, but he will understand that we wish to keep the timing, location and nature of that discreet. I assure him that we will help the Ukrainians to defend themselves against attacks from the air. The donor community grows because of the intervention of the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, and others.

Bob Stewart: May I press the Minister on MiG-29s, and trying to get them to Ukraine? They could be picked up by Ukrainian pilots and flown in.

James Cleverly: My right hon. Friend is running ahead—he can clearly see the next page of my speech.

Through the work of the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and others, the donor community grows all the time, and a further donor conference will be convened by the Defence Secretary in the near future. We will

push for more, just as the Prime Minister did with member states of the joint expeditionary force, a meeting of which he hosted this morning at Lancaster House. Countries that have not had appropriate weapons in their stockpiles have sent cash; others have provided transport planes to work alongside the RAF in making deliveries. All of that is co-ordinated thorough the fantastic work of the international donor co-ordination centre led by the UK's 104 Theatre Sustainment Brigade, who are now established in Stuttgart alongside the US European Command.

Many colleagues on both sides of the House asked for more support for the Ukrainian armed forces and for more complex weapons to be made available. We speak regularly—every day—with our friends in Ukraine and are working day and night to deliver on the requests that they make of us. My right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) asked in particular, as others have done, about the delivery of MiG-29s from Poland and other western countries who operate those jets. The delivery of those jets to Ukraine is a matter for those donor countries, each of which will need to make its calculations about the risk of donating weapons, as we do when we donate ours. Whatever they decide to do, we will of course support them.

Many colleagues also focused on the work of our armed forces. Yes, I am biased, but we know, because the Ukrainians tell us, that both the equipment and training support that the UK armed forces have provided them over a number of years through Operation Orbital has been incredibly useful to them. We should all be proud of our armed forces personnel's work in support of the Ukrainians. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary and others are all determined that the UK's foreign and security policy reflects the threat that we face in the world today and that we have the opportunity to project UK influence. Despite the Opposition's habitual narrative—I understand that Oppositions have to oppose—I assure the House that the UK is still a significant influencer on the world stage and a force for good in the world.

We are determined to support the Ukrainians. A number of right hon. and hon. Members spoke passionately—they were right to do so—about the bravery and resilience of the Ukrainians that we have seen, both in the military and civilians who have taken up arms in defence of their homeland. We are also witnessing incredible bravery from protestors in Russia. That brave resistance to Putin and the elites around him inspires us all. The UK and the world stand with Ukraine.

But for all the hubris in Putin's planning, for all the incompetence in the execution and for all the lies told about the losses suffered, the Russian army remains a formidable foe. We must therefore recognise and, I am afraid, prepare ourselves for the potential of worse than what we have already seen. But the Ukrainian people must not give up hope. They are fighting heroically and holding back an invading armoured army.

Putin may feel that he has overwhelming power at his disposal, and he may feel that a decisive victory is still in his gift, but the Ukrainians are proving him wrong. He has already failed in his strategic objective. The international community has pulled together. The Ukrainians have pulled together and have fought like tigers. The international

community and the Ukrainian people have seen him for what he is, and increasingly the Russian people are seeing it, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the situation in Ukraine.

Business without Debate

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we will take motions 3 to 5 together.

Ordered,

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

That Duncan Baker and David Johnston be discharged from the Backbench Business Committee and Chris Green and Jerome Mayhew be added.

EDUCATION

That Brendan Clarke-Smith and Christian Wakeford be discharged from the Education Committee and Caroline Ansell and Anna Firth be added.

HOME AFFAIRS

That James Daly and Laura Farris be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Lee Anderson and Matt Vickers be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 6 to 8 together.

Ordered,

JUSTICE

That James Daly be discharged from the Justice Committee and Matt Vickers be added.

PETITIONS

That Taiwo Owatemi be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Marsha De Cordova be added.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

That Mr Richard Holden and Gareth Bacon be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Mr Louie French and Angela Richardson be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITIONS

236 bus between Glossop and Ashton

7 pm

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): The loss of the 236 bus service between Glossop and Ashton has left people in Glossop, Hadfield and Gamesley without a direct bus route to Tameside Hospital or Ashton College. I fought hard to try to save this service and 750 local bus users have signed my petition to reinstate this vital transport link, which I am proud to present to Parliament today.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that, as a result of the loss of the 236 bus, Glossop has no connection and no direct bus route to Tameside Hospital and Ashton College.

[Robert Largan]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to note this loss and, in light of the recent outcome of the Judicial Review into bus franchising in Greater Manchester, urge Derbyshire County Council and Transport for Greater Manchester to work together to restore the 236 bus service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002718]

Great British Railways headquarters

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): The petition is supported by the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who is in her place.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Carnforth would be an ideal location for the new headquarters of Great British Railways; further that the creation of the headquarters would bring additional jobs to the community, as well as encourage new investment; further that Lancashire County Council should note the importance of this proposal; and further that an initial petition organised by Lancaster Civic Vision gained over 500 signatories from the whole community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to note the nomination of Carnforth to house the new headquarters of Great British Railways.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002719]

Physical Activity and Health Outcomes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Gareth Johnson.)

7.3 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am very grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me this debate.

For many years, I have championed the issue of supporting as many people as possible to achieve a healthy weight, an important issue in health prevention which matters today more than it ever has. It is also so important to remember that even if achieving a healthy weight is a real challenge and our body mass index is not yet as we would want it, the more physical activity we can do the better. Tonight, I want to issue a call to arms on the related issue of being sufficiently physically active to help us all lead healthy lives.

I start by paying tribute to Peter Walker, a parliamentary correspondent who works in this building, for his outstanding book “The Miracle Pill”. It was published last year and it should be required reading for everyone working in health and social care, everyone who cares about the NHS, and leaders across central Government and local government, as well as in business.

Let us look at the health benefits of regular physical activity. If we could achieve those outcomes with a pill, it would indeed be the miracle pill. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of breast cancer by 20%, the risk of dementia, depression and colon cancer by 30%, the risk of cardiovascular disease by 35% and the risk of type 2 diabetes by up to 40%. Hip fractures, which are so often catastrophic in their consequences for the frail and elderly, are reduced by up to a whopping 68% by regular physical activity. Those are all NHS figures.

I am grateful for the good work of the Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine UK on its Moving Medicine programme, which is designed to promote a person-centred approach to physical activity in health, and its Active Hospitals programme, which focuses on delivering physical activity through secondary care. Both programmes have won awards from the Royal College of Physicians and have now been adopted in Australasia and the United States. Active Conversations is also an excellent training course to increase physical activity for all health and social care professionals, social prescribers and the fitness industry.

It is good to see that the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, a very important new part of the Department of Health and Social Care, has a number of important online resources on physical activity and health, including on the treatment of long-term conditions. As a leading academic in the area, Ralph Paffenbarger, said, “Anything that gets worse as you grow older gets better when you exercise.” As another public health expert put it, slightly more bluntly,

“being active throughout your life is about being able to get to the loo on time in your old age”.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am not someone who has to get to the toilet early, but I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate; I spoke to him beforehand.

I make a plug for children to take action early against physical and health conditions. In Northern Ireland, 20% of children are classed as overweight and 6% are classed as obese, and I understand that those figures are reflected on the mainland. The need to change our way of doing things is very clear. Targeted funding for children in schools, which has fallen by the wayside as a result of covid, must be re-established, as I think the hon. Gentleman will agree. The importance of daily mile walks must be promoted in every region of the UK. Start it early—and at a later stage, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will not have to run to the toilet.

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the daily mile. I thank him for championing it in Northern Ireland. It will absolutely make a difference; I hope he will encourage all schools in Northern Ireland to take part.

How are we doing as a nation in achieving the necessary levels of physical activity? The answer, I am afraid, is not very well at all. According to a briefing that I have received from the Royal College of General Practitioners, 34% of men and 42% of women in the UK are not active enough for good health, and physical inactivity is responsible for one in every six UK deaths—the same proportion as is caused by smoking. Some 27% of the population are classified as inactive, meaning that they do less than 30 minutes of moderate physical activity, such as walking, each week.

It is getting worse. By 2030, we are on track to be 35% less active than we were in 1960. Most shockingly of all, a third of children do less than half the recommended physical activity for their age. The findings of the 2015 NHS health survey for children are even worse: they show that fewer than a quarter of children reach the required minimum of one hour's moderate to vigorous physical activity every day on average. It is worth pausing to consider what to do about that. The curriculum is very full and the Department for Education is reluctant to mandate physical activity, while the Department of Health and Social Care's remit does not extend to ordering the school day. Do we need the Cabinet Office to start taking a serious cross-Government interest in the issue for children, and indeed throughout later life?

What will happen if we continue on current trends? Justin Varney, who was formerly the head of adult wellbeing for Public Health England and is now in charge of public health in Birmingham, says that

“the whole concept of an NHS and welfare state, in whatever form we have it, is completely unsustainable if a third or more of the population remain physically inactive.”

It is not as if we have only just realised the importance of sufficient physical activity to our health. Back in 1948, Dr Jerry Morris was appointed the first director of the Social Medicine Unit, a Government body tasked with examining the way in which health issues interacted with people's circumstances. His major initial research involved looking into why the drivers of London's double-decker buses had significantly higher rates of heart attacks than their conductor colleagues. His conclusion was that the only real difference between the groups, who were from identical backgrounds, was that the former spent their days sitting down, while the latter were constantly on their feet going up and down flights of stairs. The hard facts are that for many of us, the way in which we work and the way in which we travel are

taking years off what should be our healthy life expectancy. This is a big issue, but it is not remotely getting the attention that it deserves.

What can we do about it? The answer is a very great deal, if we have the political will and really value our NHS rather than just paying lip service to it, and if we follow the academic research and learn from existing best practice around the world. Making active travel possible is the single biggest health intervention that the Government could make. Walking and cycling are the easiest ways to integrate physical activity into our daily lives. Two thirds of journeys in the UK are under 5 miles and could be cycled in half an hour by those who are capable, but only 2% are cycled. E-bikes, of course, help the elderly and those in less good health, and make cycling much more inclusive. Staggeringly, 1.5 billion journeys of less than a mile are made in cars every year, so there is an enormous potential to do better. Active travel can meet 23% of the moderate-to-vigorous physical activity needs on school days for primary-age children and 36% for secondary-age children. People who cycle to work take fewer days off sick than their car-driving colleagues, so cycling is good for the economy.

Those who are not so far tempted to consider a daily commute by bicycle should read a 2017 *British Medical Journal* article by Carlos Celis-Morales, which used UK Biobank data to follow 250,000 people over five years. It showed that people who commuted by bicycle had a 40% lower chance of dying during the study period. I am among those who want cycling to be for the many not the brave, and we need our roads to be safe, but the statistical reality is that for many of us, it is far safer in health terms to be on a bicycle than in a car or on the sofa.

I support the work that the Department for Transport is doing to deliver the Prime Minister's vision in which half all journeys in towns and cities will be cycled or walked by 2030. This plan is backed by a £2 billion package of funding for active travel over five years under the inspirational leadership of Chris Boardman, the interim active travel commissioner for Active Travel England. The plan includes delivering safe routes for cycling and walking, cycle training for all children and adults who want it, and creating active travel social prescribing pilots. Employers who care about the wellbeing of their staff as well as the productivity of their businesses should be right behind that. I also look forward to the publication of the second four-year statutory cycling and walking investment strategy this spring to reflect the new policies in “Gear Change” and the multi-year funding settlement from the spending review.

This is not a pipe dream. It is happening now in Copenhagen, where 40% of commuting trips are made by bike, and I suspect that the rate is not much lower in Amsterdam. That did not happen by chance in either of those cities; it happened because of visionary leaders who cared about the wellbeing of their residents and pursued this policy over decades.

We can do more in the workplace as well. The Googleplex offices in Mountain View, California, are designed to encourage as much physical movement by staff as possible. That includes using nature between buildings as well as what happens in them. Most of the workspace is on the second storey, and all the meeting rooms and cafés, and every single toilet apart from the accessible ones, are on the ground level, connected by courtyard-style staircases.

[Andrew Selous]

So, what are UK businesses doing to build some mobility into what has become an excessively sedentary culture? Sitting still for too long is not good for us. I have come across one Defence Minister, one female general, one House of Commons Clerk and one *Hansard* recorder who conduct meetings standing up or who have a standing desk. It is the exception rather than the rule, and when I had the pleasure of discussing Peter Walker's excellent book with him recently, I made sure we did so while walking around St James's Park. I wonder whether the Department of Health and Social Care and the House of Commons Commission have looked at the BeUpstanding programme, a free world-leading project that improves the health and wellbeing of desk-based workers? If not, why not?

I mentioned earlier that only between a quarter and a third of UK schoolchildren were undertaking the recommended amount of physical activity. I am a huge fan of the daily mile initiative, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referred to, where children run or walk a mile at the start of each day. There are 7,289 schools in England and 1,191 in Scotland doing this, which is commendable. I would like to see that number grow substantially, including in Wales and Northern Ireland.

There is another country in Europe, however, that is doing even better. The global report card shows that of the 49 countries covered, Slovenia has the best results for activity levels in children, with more than 80% of those aged six to 19 meeting the one-hour-a-day threshold for activity. Frankly, that puts the United Kingdom to shame, notwithstanding the tremendous daily mile initiative. Again, this did not happen by chance. It was a conscious decision that equipped every school with two gyms and an outdoor play area as well as track and field facilities, and with five sports days per year and another week off for outdoor activities.

I wonder whether we fully use the fantastic expertise of our diplomatic network to really understand the best practice in public health around the world. If the Department of Health and Social Care is unaware of the level of commuting in Copenhagen or the outstanding physical activity achievements of Slovenian children, I would urge the Minister to speak to her colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that the relevant briefings are provided to her and her officials so that we can copy what is working well elsewhere.

It is really important to emphasise that even if we cannot do our 10,000 steps every day or, as adults, 150 minutes of moderate exercise or 75 minutes of intense exercise a week, every little helps. It is also really important to understand the difference between formal activity and incidental activity. Sport is brilliant and I want to see as many people as possible of both sexes and all ages participating, but the evidence suggests that the biggest gains will be from the minor adjustments we make in our everyday lives, such as using the stairs rather than the lift, getting off the bus one stop early, finding a parking space some way away from our office or meeting, or taking up a hobby we enjoy such as dancing. One of the best things that the Whips Office has ever done for me is to put me on the fifth floor of Portcullis House, giving me the opportunity to climb

the 137 steps to my office on a regular basis throughout the day. I am not sure it was meant as a favour, but I am genuinely grateful.

I implore the whole of central and local government to wake up to the importance of this issue and all of us to play our part in keeping as active as possible in every way that is open to us. With good policies and the political will, we can make the right thing to do the easy and affordable thing to do for more and more people.

7.17 pm

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on bringing forward today's debate on this important topic. In his excellent speech, he has outlined the many benefits of physical activity, and I am grateful for his challenge on what more the Government need to do to address the critical health issues of inactivity, poor diet and obesity. I would like to put on record my thanks to all those who work in our local authorities, in the NHS, in our schools, in voluntary and community organisations and in the fitness and leisure sector for their efforts in supporting people of all ages and abilities to stay active, particularly during the pandemic, which as we know, was very challenging.

As my hon. Friend so eloquently outlined, physical activity can contribute to reducing the risk of many chronic health diseases, including some cancers, heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Being physically active can also help to improve our mental health and wellbeing and help to keep people, friends and communities connected. Before the pandemic there were disparities in physical activity levels, but we were seeing some improvements. Those gains have diminished. The people most impacted by the pandemic were those we most need to support, including older adults, those in more deprived areas, those with a disability, those with long-term health conditions, those who were asked to shield and those from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups. We need to do more to achieve a level playing field and to create local places where everybody, no matter their age or circumstances, can find safe, accessible ways to be active every day and to stay fit and strong. Indeed, active travel is an important part of that.

I will shortly reflect on some of what the Government are doing to help, but first I stress that scientific evidence underpins what we and the NHS are doing to support and promote a more active nation, and advice from the UK chief medical officers is at the heart of our physical activity policies. The guidelines published in 2019 set out the types and levels of activity that are most likely to provide physical and mental health benefits for children, young people, adults, older adults, disabled adults, disabled children, disabled young people, and women during pregnancy and after birth.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are supporting primary schools with £320 million a year through the physical education and sport premium. We have also funded the school games network. This enables schools, through the school sport and activity action plan, to deliver a whole-school approach to physical activity, and many of us have seen the successful daily mile programme in our schools on our Friday constituency visits.

The plan, first published in 2019, is a joined-up approach by the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and it has provided the blueprint for cross-Government working on physical activity. This plan has enabled a range of non-competitive opportunities to engage the least active groups. To tackle gender disparities, the plan has enabled nearly 9,000 girls to take part in competitive sport.

Our work to promote physical activity does not stop at the school gates. Through the world-beating “Better Health” social-marketing campaign, we will continue to provide digital resources, such as the popular Couch to 5k and Active 10 applications, and to signpost people to local opportunities to get active. Our commitment to exploring new ways to help people get active is demonstrated through the health incentives pilot, which will take place in Wolverhampton with the support of the local authority, the NHS and the local community.

Birmingham will host the Commonwealth games in summer 2022. Such sporting events provide moments of inspiration, and the Government, Birmingham City Council and others are investing in providing local communities with opportunities to participate in sporting activities.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the contribution that an active, fitter nation could make to helping to protect the NHS and social care. The Department, through the work of the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and in partnership with Sport England, has been working across the NHS to deliver the moving healthcare professionals programme. This work enables healthcare professionals to increase their awareness, knowledge and skills in promoting physical activity to patients, managing ill health and reducing inactivity.

The Government’s health promotion taskforce is bringing Departments together to develop actions that will deliver on our ambition to get the nation more active and provide equitable opportunities to those who will benefit most. The Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that everybody can lead more active lives, and my hon. Friend mentioned the work of my colleagues in the Department for Transport and their vision for active travel. There is unequivocal evidence that physical activity has a role to play in enabling people to live healthier, longer lives. As the Minister responsible for dementia and the dementia strategy, I know how critical physical activity is to diseases that people might not imagine have a link to it. It really is the answer to almost any health question.

As I mentioned, we remain committed to introducing actions that will help current and future generations to access, participate in and enjoy all forms of activity, play and sport and, as my hon. Friend said, to integrate them into their daily life. We understand there is still a lot of work to do to create equal access for everybody and to address disparities. We will need the help of every single local authority, school and community and a truly collaborative cross-Government and NHS approach. I genuinely believe that, by working together, we can make a huge difference to the health of our nation.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate on such a vital issue.

Question put and agreed to.

7.24 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 15 March 2022

[GERAINT DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Commonwealth Day

9.30 am

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Commonwealth Day.

I am delighted to work under your chairmanship again, Mr Davies. We have, for many years, worked together on various things, both here and in Europe. I am delighted also to see so many colleagues joining us to celebrate the Commonwealth.

If I may, Mr Davies, I will start on a sad note. Emilia Monjowa Lifaka, chair of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, unfortunately passed away, as you know, in sad circumstances. She was from Cameroon—a remarkable lady who was one of those people who go through life setting the room alight. She was absolutely sweet. Her death caused a vacuum, which has now been filled temporarily by me.

I am delighted to introduce the debate for a load of reasons. First, the Commonwealth, as my colleagues know, is 111 years old. It is one of the oldest—dare I say it?—non-governmental bodies in the world, and it has enormous respect. For the record, 17,000 parliamentarians, 180 Parliaments, 54 countries and 2.4 billion people are part of the family that we call the Commonwealth.

This week is very pertinent because yesterday we had the Commonwealth service in Westminster Abbey, which is always interesting. I am sitting next to a couple of my friends—my right hon. Friends the Members for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell)—and we are delighted that this week we have the Westminster Seminar, which is ongoing, as we speak, in the Attlee suite. That seminar is 70 years old this year. The Commonwealth, as a family, has shown time and again that it breaks every record.

As chairman of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and international vice-chairman, I am always grateful for the support that the House and the other place give. Every party in the House, and every Member, is an enormous supporter of the Commonwealth, and I am grateful for all the work that colleagues do—not just here in the United Kingdom, but overseas—in welcoming delegates, wherever they come from across the Commonwealth, and going on trips, sometimes at short notice, which can be fairly onerous as we know. You, Mr Davies, have been involved, and I am grateful for the time and effort you have put in over the years.

Was yesterday's Commonwealth Day just a symbol or an annual occasion? Some people may think it was a bit of both, but let us put the matter in perspective. The world is watching in horror and disgust as the tragic death and destruction in Ukraine unfold. That is why the peaceful symbolism of the Commonwealth has become more important than ever. For anyone who saw the moving service in Westminster Abbey yesterday, or was lucky enough to be present, as I and colleagues here were, the true meaning and the lasting value of the Commonwealth shone through.

It was terribly sad for us all that Her Majesty the Queen, in her 70th year on the throne—she has provided enormous support, stability and guidance over all those years—was not able to attend the service. We were obviously delighted to see His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Cornwall, and Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. That was very special indeed, but I know that we all send Her Majesty our heartfelt wishes to get better soon.

In normal circumstances, the Queen is an absolute stickler for duty. I suspect her doctors probably said, “Look, stay at home,” but I know one thing: she does not give in easily. However, the decades of loyal service are catching up with her, and because she has only recently recovered from covid, I think she has, more than any other person, an excuse for saying, “I can't attend.” I am convinced, however, that she can play, and will continue to play, a highly influential role in the development and success of the family that we call the Commonwealth. I hope colleagues will join me in that, for that is what the Commonwealth really is—a family. It is no cosy club, let alone, God forbid, a political movement.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. My hon. and gallant Friend has alluded to the fact that the Commonwealth can be regarded as a family—I have two brothers, so I know that, occasionally, there can be tension in a family—and I applaud him for his excellent work with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, of which I have some direct experience. I know that people get more out of the Commonwealth than they put in.

Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that the jurisdictions that we are able to help from this place find it immeasurably helpful to share not only democracy, but also the same values, legal system and language, to the benefit of what was once the British empire?

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I would like thank my hon. Friend on three counts: first, for his courtesy in intervening, as he raises a very important question; secondly, for all the work he has done on behalf of the Commonwealth; and thirdly for the overseas trips he has undertaken very nobly.

The point my hon. Friend makes is absolutely right. There are hiccups; in any family, there will be hiccups. Hopefully this year we will welcome back the Maldives and Zimbabwe. We resolved an issue with Fiji, and they came back into the Commonwealth. We do not like to exclude anybody, as my hon. Friend alludes to. We try to work with any country that has an issue to make sure that they understand what we can do to help them, and maybe how they can help us. It has been a very successful formula; we have never completely excluded anybody. Even in the worst days, with some of the things we have seen over the years—I am a little older than my hon. Friend—we have never done that. We have kept things going. Therefore, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that this is an amazing organisation, based on mutual trust as much as anything.

The Commonwealth is a genuine association of nations with worthy aims and the mission to improve the lives of all its members and their citizens. We are talking about very big numbers across the world. Commonwealth

[*Mr Liddell-Grainger*]

Day was observed and celebrated by people in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, the Americas, the Pacific and, of course, here in Europe.

The Commonwealth of Nations, which is its proper title, has 54 nations. It is impossible to open an atlas without finding somewhere the footprint of that extraordinary organisation. On the continent of Africa are Botswana, Cameroon, The Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, the Kingdom of Eswatini, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Uganda, the United Republic of Tanzania, and Zambia. To the east, we have Bangladesh, Brunei, Malaysia, Maldives, Pakistan, Singapore and Sri Lanka. In the opposite direction, over the Atlantic, there are Antigua, Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Canada, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, not to mention, of course, Trinidad and Tobago. Across the other way, towards the Pacific, we have Australia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. It is a really incredible worldwide membership.

Some of us may be very lucky and hopefully get away to the beaches of Cyprus and Malta this year, provided there are no further problems. Both of them, which comes a surprise to some people, are members of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth occupies one quarter of the world's landmass, and is home to 2.6 billion people. To put that vast figure into perspective, here are some timely comparisons. Russia has a population of 146 million. Even the former Soviet Union, which Vladimir Putin wants to put back together, apparently, would only account for 300 million people. The Commonwealth is enormous: big not only in size but, I am glad to say, big in ideas.

We are committed to the institution of world peace and the promotion of representative democracy. We stand for individual liberty, the pursuit of equality and the opposition of racism. We only fight discrimination, poverty, ignorance and disease—I want to get that message across. We want a safer planet. A democratic planet. A free world with free trade and the freedom to express ideas and the pursuit of common goals.

At this stage I would like to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke and her phenomenal work with the Women and Equalities Committee across the world. I am so grateful for all the work she has done. I have a feeling, if I dare say this, that the Kremlin would not understand a word of this, and I also have the feeling that they should learn.

The Commonwealth is far more than a throwback to the days of the British empire—that is a silly myth. Although it is perfectly true that many of the great Commonwealth countries were once British colonies, look at them now: independently governed, democratically elected, not owing their lifeblood or their existence to a long-gone empire. Thirty-four of its countries are republics; 15 others are Commonwealth realms where our Queen, the Head of the Commonwealth, is also the Head of State; and five countries—Brunei, Eswatini, Lesotho, Malaysia and Tonga—are monarchies, with kings and queens in their own right.

Mr Mohindra: My hon. and gallant Friend is making an excellent speech; those who have heard him speak before will not be surprised by that. Does he agree that there is quite a young population within the Commonwealth? From my understanding, about 60% of people in the Commonwealth are below the age of 29, and therefore the next generation has seen the benefits of being a partner within the Commonwealth family.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank my hon. Friend again, because that is a very good intervention. He is absolutely right: this is a very young organisation. If we take India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and a lot of Africa, these are very young people. As you well know, Mr Davies, the younger you get people, the more you can influence them, and democracy is something we fight for and live for. We want to foster that, and it is taught in schools. I have just come back from Pakistan, where I was with Stephen Twigg, the secretary-general of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. We went to see schools where they teach children of six and seven about what it means to be part of Pakistan, and about democracy and the way it works. We were surrounded by MPs from Pakistan who came out to talk to the kids as well. It was a great thing.

Saying that we are a family takes in every age group, ethnicity, colour, creed and religion, and that is the beauty of the Commonwealth: it is all-encompassing, and age is just one facet that we love to deal with. I am very grateful to colleagues that the Westminster Seminar series is looking at this part of it. We sit there in the Attlee suite, and one of the things we embrace is the ability for young people to aspire. Nothing gives me more pleasure than to find somebody from Tonga who has gone to Canada, somebody from Canada who has gone to India, somebody from India who has gone to New Zealand, or somebody from New Zealand who has gone to South Africa to work within our family. Our scholarship and fellowship schemes are quite remarkable.

As I say, these countries all do their own thing, but they prefer to stay signed up to the ideals of the Commonwealth. Any Commonwealth country can leave. We started with eight countries when Her Majesty came to the throne; we are 54 now. Nobody leaves—they join. Why? Because they know what they are getting. What is on the tin is in the tin, and they understand that. It is funny how many countries want to join us. Sometimes, like with Mozambique or Namibia, people might say, “Well, it is a bit tenuous.” Rubbish! We are delighted for countries to join whose creation Britain has had a part in—probably not quite the part they wanted, but we had a part in their creation, and they want to join us. That is important. There are only two Commonwealth countries that did not have any connection with the empire. Namibia is one; the other, of course, is Rwanda, which has gone through a frightening history and is now an enormously valued part of the family.

Slowly, patiently and effectively, the family of the Commonwealth is spreading the doctrine of parliamentary democracy across the world. It works at different speeds in different places, understandably, but there is no doubt in my mind—or, I hope, in the mind of any Member of either House—that it does a good job. We reject dictatorships. We seek agreement through debate, with the active participation of the people via the ballot box.

That is what we do as an international parliamentary association and as its individual nation branches, including the one right here in Westminster, which is phenomenal: I thank my colleagues and Members of the other place so much for the work they do. The network is registered throughout the world, and recognised throughout the world as an invaluable source. It brings people together and nurtures co-operation. If it did not exist now, we would certainly never invent it.

But there is a problem—one that, sad to say, the Government at the moment have not been able to address or recognise. For reasons that make little sense to me, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is a registered charity. That goes back into the mists of time; I do not know why it was set up that way in the first place. That would be fine if the CPA were purely in the business of raising funds for worthy causes, but we do not need the sorts of tax breaks that go with charitable status—it is not what we do. We are serious players in a serious process of effective diplomacy across the world. We have something to offer that is proven, practical and effective. We help all parliamentarians in the Commonwealth. We aim for best practice; we teach best practice; we want good governance and know how to get it. That is our strength. It is surely high time that the CPA is given the status it richly deserves.

All we are asking for is legal status in the UK similar to that enjoyed by comparable organisations. We do not want to be any different from them. We just want it changed so that we are comparable, for example, with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie, a group of parliamentary nations that share the French language—Belgium, Canada, Belize, Cambodia—in a mini Gallic commonwealth. Such legal recognition would enable the CPA to have more positive influence.

I do not think that is much to ask and the time has come. The former Lord Speaker, Baroness D'Souza, introduced a Bill in the other place, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Status) Bill, which is working its way here. A few weeks back, I launched a ten-minute rule Bill, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (Status) (No. 2) Bill, with exactly the same wording, to get the legal status recognised. The enthusiasm for change unites all parties throughout both Houses of this Parliament. Mr Speaker is an enormous advocate of the Commonwealth, as is the Lord Speaker, who spoke at the Westminster Seminar yesterday. I am very grateful to Mr Speaker, who has been incredible in the past 24 hours, appearing at almost every event. It would be fitting to pay tribute to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in Her Majesty the Queen's jubilee year. She has presided over the incredible growth of the organisation.

I know that Ministers have so far reacted to the idea without enthusiasm, even though it will not cost a penny. It will make no fundamental change to this place and no difference to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. It will make no difference to the way we operate. We will operate in exactly the same way, but it will make a massive difference to the way that we are seen in the world, and the organisations we can become part of. I say gently to the Minister that I sincerely hope we can help change the Government's views on a fairly small but fundamental change. These are very dangerous days for world peace. We should show leadership as a nation and support all efforts to

promote democracy, not just in the Commonwealth but obviously elsewhere. The alternative is as brutal and deadly as Russia proves hour by hour. That is what we do not want to see.

The Speaker, for the first time, is leading his own delegation to India in a couple of weeks, about which we are absolutely delighted. It is right that the Speaker of the House of Commons should be able to lead delegations, and I hope colleagues agree that is a welcome change. I know colleagues will join me in thanking the CPA team in the House, led by chief executive Jon Davies and Helen Haywood, which looks after CPA interests in this country and across the world.

I would also like to thank Stephen Twigg, who is the secretary-general of CPA international, based across the road from here, for the work that he and his team have done. It has not been easy for either team over the past two years. We have had to keep everything going and keep in touch with everybody round the world, when we could not go anywhere. The frustration for me and Stephen was that we could not send colleagues or get into delegations, with everything done by Zoom. Last week in Pakistan we met a female MP who said to Stephen:

"Gosh! You are a lot taller than you look on Zoom."

That probably summed up the past two years. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke knows, that was Shandana, who is chair of the women's caucus and forum, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians.

Lastly, it has been a great privilege to be part of the CPA for a decade. I follow on from a line of very noble people who have led the CPA UK branch, and it has been a remarkable experience for us all. One thing I will never cease to be amazed by is that, everywhere I go in the Commonwealth, I realise that people are truly grateful for the work we do on benchmarking, for the way that we do our academies, and for the way we work with other Parliaments through Clerks, through *Hansard* and through all the other things that we take for granted but which so many other places do not. It is what gives us our strength. It means never resting, never stopping, growing the Commonwealth, and making sure we do it in the name of democracy and in the name of the people whom we represent: the people of the world.

9.50 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) on setting the scene so well. His deep interest in this subject is apparent from his comments, and I thank him for all the hard work he does.

The hon. Member referred to the work of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I endorse his comments about what the CPA does and the importance of having it in place. He also referred twice to parliamentary democracy and how important it is to set an example, which the Commonwealth clearly does. As we are all reminded every morning and night on our TV screens, some parts of the world are fighting for their democracy; we think of Ukraine, as the hon. Member rightly said at the beginning. We concur with his comments about Russia, but we are greatly encouraged by the Ukraine military's spirit and the courage that people are showing against Russian aggression. We are proud of that.

[*Jim Shannon*]

We are also very proud to be part of the Commonwealth of 54 nations. The Commonwealth spans 54 independent countries, and about 2.6 billion people—out of some 7.9 billion globally—live in the Commonwealth. That tells us about the size and importance of the Commonwealth, and about what it does. I share people's adoration of the Queen, who by her very Christian faith and life sets an example for us all in this House and across the world. She is also the Queen of 15 Commonwealth nations, whereas five other countries have their own monarch and 34 are republics. The Commonwealth makes up a quarter of the world's landmass. Such stats illustrate the importance of the Commonwealth, its size and the role that it plays across the world.

Along with India and Australia, the giant of the Commonwealth group is Canada. I well recall emigrating to Canada as an 18-year-old—it was not yesterday. Canada was the country where I was a landed immigrant for a year. I was a bricklayer there; it was good to experience, as a young person, what the Commonwealth has in Canada and what it can offer. One of the great things about the Commonwealth is being able to enjoy that. Canada is the world's second largest country by area, but the beauty of the Commonwealth is that we also embrace the smaller states to which the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset referred—states such as the Pacific islands of Nauru, Samoa, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, as well as Dominica, Antigua and Barbados in the Caribbean. This great Commonwealth represents a cosmopolitan world through countries large and small.

As a Commonwealth of nations, we believe in democracy, freedom and a common purpose to extend the arm of friendship to many countries across the world. It is mutually beneficial to be a member, and the combined GDP of the 54 countries is some £7.5 trillion—twice the size of Japan's, but some way behind that of the US. Trade with the Commonwealth accounted for some 9.1% of the UK's total trade in 2019, and UK exports to the Commonwealth were worth around £65 billion. That tells us that the importance of the Commonwealth lies in our trade and in nations coming together. Imports from the Commonwealth were worth around £64 billion, so the value of what we sell them is comparable to the value of what they sell us.

It is clear that it is a good thing to do business with friendly neighbours. Although this is not a Brexit debate, it has always been my hope that we can be separate yet distinct in Europe with our friendship. The despicable treatment of my country, Northern Ireland, as a political football has disabused me of that notion. Were we to treat one of the Commonwealth countries with such malice and contempt, the world would rightly call us out. Unfortunately, Northern Ireland's treatment by Europe has been widely accepted and continues—but that is a discussion for another day as it is not the subject of this debate, although it is important to put it on the record.

Now, more than ever, the arm of friendship should be extended within our Commonwealth family to ensure that we are getting and giving the best of those with whom we share the commonality of the Commonwealth. We share many cultures, much history and even, in many cases, the same language. We must also use our

position to encourage members that do not allow religious freedom to do so. The Minister knows that I often speak about that and although I suspect that she has already prepared the answer to the question that I will ask, it is important to put it on the record.

According to the Pew Research Centre, 70% of people who live in Commonwealth countries face high or extremely high Government restrictions on their right to freedom of religion or belief. Worse still, some 88% of those people face high or very high social hostility simply for holding minority beliefs. I declare an interest: I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief. As we celebrate the Commonwealth, will the Minister tell me, the House and those watching the debate what has been done to address the persecution of those in this great Commonwealth who have Christian beliefs, other beliefs and, indeed, no beliefs? I would like there to be freedom of religion for all—and I know, without even asking, that the Minister does as well. It is important that one of our pleas should be for that to be improved, and I hope that it will be.

I will also make another honest plea. As we approach St Patrick's day on Thursday, I am ever mindful that the Republic of Ireland is not part of the Commonwealth. Would it not be great if they were? It is not too late to ask them—we ask them regularly. We want them to consider that gently but honestly, as friends. I see membership as something that could be advantageous to them and to us. Their inclusion would make the Commonwealth bigger, greater and better. I ask the Minister this: has there been any opportunity to see whether the Republic of Ireland would join the nations brought together by this great multicultural Commonwealth and by a common desire?

This great challenge must be met head on. I urge the Minister to take the baton of that challenge and work sensitively and effectively with all our Commonwealth brethren to bring about religious freedom for all. Trade is a wonderful positive point, but we must all ensure that we exert any positive influence that we can, at any opportunity, to bring about change.

I am eternally grateful for the leadership of Her Majesty the Queen in matters of faith—I know that those are a priority for her. We can and should follow the example of that wonderful lady by pressing for religious freedom for all. We can do more with the body and the mechanism of the Commonwealth to improve lives, but we must also take the opportunity, in this dark world, to shine a light at any and every opportunity. The goodness of the Commonwealth, in what it does and what it can do, can help this country to be a brighter shining light for all.

9.58 am

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am delighted to have co-sponsored the debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), and I congratulate him on securing it on Commonwealth Day.

As a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, I appreciate the importance of the interconnected nature of the Commonwealth and the need to keep and strengthen the strong cultural, trade and diplomatic relationships between the countries of

the Commonwealth. I am looking forward to strengthening our sporting ties this summer, when we will welcome people from across the Commonwealth to Staffordshire, particularly the west midlands, for the Commonwealth games. I welcome the Minister to her place. I know that she shares my enthusiasm for the games, as the mountain-biking event will take place in Cannock Chase forest, which borders our two Staffordshire constituencies.

I am honoured to have been appointed as the Prime Minister's trade envoy to Kenya, one of the leading Commonwealth nations in east Africa. The close Commonwealth connections between the UK and Kenya mean that it is one of the first countries that the UK has done a trade deal with in this area following our exit from the European Union. I was pleased to be at the signing of the UK-Kenya economic partnership agreement, which I believe will provide continuity for UK businesses and help to create more jobs, both at home and abroad. From my recent visits to Kenya to meet British businesses working in east Africa and Kenyan Government Ministers, the importance of this trade agreement for our mutual prosperity is very clear. Such trade deals are being replicated across the Commonwealth, increasing economic prosperity for all Commonwealth citizens.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset, I attended the Commonwealth service at Westminster Abbey yesterday with the Prime Minister and the royal family. I sat alongside a number of African MPs who were here this week in London to attend the Westminster Seminar. I was struck by how united the Commonwealth is in its aims for the future and how immense the potential is to tackle the great global challenges we all face, including one of the biggest threats to our current way of life: climate change.

I attended the COP26 summit last year in Glasgow to meet with parliamentarians from around the world who are all so dedicated to delivering sustainable development goals and looking at ways to promote international conservation. It was clear from talking to those MPs that there is international will to tackle climate change. In particular, there were strong commitments from Commonwealth nations. I welcomed the Glasgow Climate Pact, which includes a plan to phase down the use of unabated coal power, as well as the Global Methane Pledge, which was signed by over 100 countries, committing at the summit to cutting their methane emissions by 30%. These steps will lower greenhouse gas emissions and help to reduce the use of fossil fuels, which ultimately will help us tackle climate change.

As ever, it is vital that these agreements are what make a real difference on the ground. I note that the COP26 President, my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), recently said at COP26,

"This is our last hope...Our best chance of building a brighter future."

I welcome the fact that he retains the COP presidency until November this year, so that we can continue to make progress on tackling climate change. I believe this is a real opportunity to build on the plans to reach net zero by 2050; as a global Britain, we should continue to use the COP presidency as a platform to protect our planet further.

Climate change and damage to the environment are occurring now as I speak here in Parliament. In the last minute alone, we have lost 30 football pitches of forest

and at present, over 1 million species are facing extinction. Those are staggering figures. The reality is that climate change is not just about statistics or abstract concepts of temperature modelling: it impacts the lives of people every day living in the Commonwealth. Sadly, it is only set to get worse in the future if we do not work together to tackle it.

I am sure that, like me, many Members saw Tuvalu's Foreign Minister Simon Kofe's very emotive speech at COP26. He said, "We are sinking." The camera then panned behind him to show that the island where he was standing was actually under water. As they say, a picture really does speak a thousand words. Climate change and rising sea levels are a problem not just for Tuvalu but for British overseas territories and other countries throughout the Commonwealth.

Also at COP26, the UK launched the Clean Green initiative to help developing countries take advantage of green technology and grow their economies sustainably. That included a doubling of UK-aid-funded green investments to more than £3 billion over five years. It provides new guarantees to support clean infrastructure projects in the Commonwealth and throughout the developing world.

One of the obvious opportunities for renewable energy is in east Africa with solar. Let us face it: Africa has a lot more sun than we do in London. On my first visit to Kenya as trade envoy last year, I saw first hand the transformative impact that renewables can have in Africa. I toured east Africa's largest solar plant—Malindi—which was built by the British firm Globeleq using \$32 million of financing from CDC Group, now British International Investment. The plant's 157 solar panels began powering a clean energy transition earlier this year. That is a great example of where the UK-Kenya economic partnership is already delivering clean, green infrastructure on the ground in Kenya today and is the type of collaboration I would like to see replicated across the Commonwealth.

We have also seen deforestation throughout the Commonwealth; sadly, it is exacerbating climate change. As the chair of the sub-committee on the work of the Independent Commission for Aid Impact, I have recently held an inquiry on international climate finance and how UK aid is used for halting deforestation and preventing irreversible biodiversity loss. We had a recent oral evidence session with Lord Goldsmith as the Minister for the environment at the FCDO. I asked the Minister how the Government see the role of tackling deforestation and protecting biodiversity, specifically in relation to reducing poverty. I was pleased to hear the Minister say that the Government are now actively looking for nature-based solutions when planning Official Development Assistance-funded projects.

Tackling deforestation and planting trees is one of the areas where the Commonwealth is leading the world. The Queen's Commonwealth Canopy, launched at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2015, is an excellent example of how all Commonwealth countries are collaborating to make a difference to our planet. This is a flagship international conservation project and comprises millions of trees, from the Maldives to Malawi, from St Lucia to Singapore. It will eventually link Commonwealth nations across the globe, which demonstrates the power of the Commonwealth working together for the common good.

[*Theo Clarke*]

The project is also being replicated here in Great Britain. Earlier this month, I was delighted to plant my first tree for the platinum jubilee at Flash Ley Community Primary School in my Stafford constituency. Not only will that fruit tree teach local children about caring for the environment, but it also forms part of the Queen's Green Canopy, which aims to encourage every community throughout the United Kingdom to plant trees to mark Her Majesty's 70th year on the throne and expand the tree canopy in the Commonwealth. I encourage all my colleagues to do the same and especially the Minister, as my next-door neighbour in Staffordshire.

In conclusion, I applaud the efforts of all countries in the Commonwealth that are aiming to create a sustainable future that is more green. The Queen, as the Head of the Commonwealth, said it best in her recent Commonwealth statement. She said we must:

"endeavour to ensure the Commonwealth remains an influential force for good in our world for many generations to come."

I absolutely agree.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I call David Mundell—and not just because he is wearing a Commonwealth tie.

10.8 am

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to take part in this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (*Theo Clarke*) and for Bridgwater and West Somerset (*Mr Liddell-Grainger*) on sponsoring the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset in particular for the work that he does as chair of the UK branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and for the work that he is doing on the international front, stepping in, as is his wont, to challenging situations and carrying that work forward with his usual good humour and disposition.

Last week, I had the pleasure of taking part in a Commonwealth day celebration in another Parliament. I was on the steps of the Lesotho Parliament in Maseru with the Speaker of that Parliament and the President of the Senate, along with our excellent and newly established British high commissioner in Lesotho. It was heartening to see the value placed on the Commonwealth by the Members of that Parliament and the tributes made, as they have been this morning, to Her Majesty the Queen and her commitment to the Commonwealth.

As other Members have referenced, the Commonwealth ranges in scale from countries the size of India and the geographic size of Canada to the very small, landlocked Lesotho. People in Lesotho are clear that their country is as much in the heart of Her Majesty the Queen as any of the other members of the Commonwealth, and her 70 years of service were celebrated as much in Maseru as they are being celebrated here in London and in the rest of the UK.

That visit—I know you are familiar with Commonwealth Parliamentary Association work, Mr Davies—was part of a series of contacts that have taken place between the CPA UK and the Lesotho Parliament to enable parliamentarians here and the CPA UK to support the Lesotho Parliament to develop and improve processes, and to learn from each other. The Lesotho Parliament

is facing a situation that will be new to certainly all Conservative Members: there is a conflict within the ruling party and apparently a challenge to the Prime Minister, and there will potentially be a vote of confidence in Parliament. We were able to have a full discussion about how such matters are handled in our own parliamentary system.

I am being slightly flippant, but a serious discussion took place on how processes in that Parliament can evolve. The CPA UK has done a great deal of work that has fed into the National Reforms Authority, which has been established in Lesotho to try to take forward the omnibus Bill, which will reform that Parliament. That highlights the very important work that the CPA UK is doing not just in terms of what my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset does in this Parliament, but in working with other Parliaments—peer-to-peer working between Members of this Parliament and other Parliaments, and learning from each other. There are certainly things that we can learn from what is done in Lesotho and all the other members of the Commonwealth.

This is an appropriate time to pay tribute, as others have, to Jon Davies, the chief executive of the CPA UK, and his great team. We were accompanied on our visit to Lesotho and South Africa by Felicity Herrmann—she is responsible for many of the partnerships between this Parliament and other Parliaments—and others, such as Victoria Bower. They do an excellent job supporting members in their activities.

I led the delegation, and while we were there we met the Deputy Speaker of the South African Parliament. He made exactly the same points that my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset made about the status of the CPA. I want to reinforce to the Minister that that is a really important issue, particularly for African members of the Commonwealth, which feel that the CPA's charitable status demeans it in terms of the status that it should be afforded.

It was clear to me—I am sure the Minister and her colleagues are aware of this—that the position in South Africa vis-à-vis the UK is not exactly as we would want it to be. For example, the South African view of the Russian war with Ukraine is not the same as ours. It is very important that we have good working relations with South African politicians. South Africa is a hugely influential country, both in that part of the world and globally, and therefore we have to take it seriously when its Parliament says, "We don't like the way in which the CPA is constituted." I would be grateful if the Minister would take on board not only the point I am making, but the point made by my hon. Friend.

In his intervention, our hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (*Mr Mohindra*) referred to the Commonwealth as a family, while the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*) used this debate to raise his concern about faith issues. In my capacity as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on HIV and AIDS, I say to the Minister that we need to use the fact that we are in the Commonwealth family to put pressure on other members of the Commonwealth and raise the issue of HIV/AIDS and their response to it. Some 60% of people living with HIV live in Commonwealth countries, while one in four men in Caribbean countries where homosexuality is criminalised has HIV. There is a great deal to be done.

Thanks to the advances in medicine over the past 40 years, today there is no reason why anyone with HIV should live a shorter life than someone without it. Crucially, we have the tools to radically slow new infections through education and prevention measures. However, the ability to prevent the spread of HIV is seriously compromised by punitive laws, discriminatory and brutal policing, and denial of access to justice for people with and at risk of acquiring HIV, which is fuelling the epidemic.

The issue at the centre of international efforts to deal with this pandemic is a crisis of human rights law in many Commonwealth countries, not the lack of medicines. There is now overwhelming evidence of the link between the criminalisation of homosexuality and the rate of HIV infection. To end new diagnoses of HIV by 2030, which this Government are committed to doing, the punitive laws against LGBT+ communities in the Commonwealth must be reformed. We must not be afraid to raise this issue with Commonwealth family members—being a family is about being able to raise difficult and challenging issues.

As we have heard this morning, the Commonwealth is a really positive institution. Countries such as Rwanda and Mozambique have joined it. However, we must be clear with our friends and family members that we want to see them reform their own procedures and customs. On that basis, we can look forward to a very positive future for the Commonwealth. I certainly want to do my bit as part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in the UK. I encourage all my colleagues in this Parliament and the devolved Parliaments to take part—it is a really worthwhile opportunity.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Last but not least from the Back Benches, I call Maria Miller.

10.18 am

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Mr Davies. It is absolutely right that we should hold this debate, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), to mark Commonwealth day. Yesterday, in Westminster Abbey, we celebrated the rich diversity of the Commonwealth; today, we are hearing from right hon. and hon. Members from across the House about the important practical role that the Commonwealth plays. I declare a slight interest: I am a member of the CPA along with my hon. Friend, and a trustee of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) set out very clearly that one of the many values of the Commonwealth, and in particular the CPA, is in enabling Parliaments to talk to each other and work together to improve. I say “together” quite pointedly, because we have as much to learn as we have knowledge to impart, which is very important.

We live in an increasingly interconnected world. The situation in Ukraine shows that, as do the pandemic and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke) said, climate change. Whether it is equality, opportunity or religious freedom, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, so many issues

are interconnected, and organisations such as the Commonwealth, but particularly the Commonwealth, can play such a powerful role.

The Commonwealth continues to resonate because it reflects that interconnectivity between 54 equal sovereign nations around the world—54 nations that share values that are fundamental to our way of life. We are free, democratic societies that want to live in peace and to prosper, and we take action to support each other in achieving those aims. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford mentioned the Commonwealth games. Nothing embodies the Commonwealth more than athletes from across the Commonwealth coming together, as they will in Birmingham in July this year, to demonstrate the purposefulness behind the Commonwealth organisation.

Too often, when we speak about the Commonwealth, we talk about economic ties. They are important—the Commonwealth provides significant opportunities for global Britain to trade more freely, and the Government have been very successful in putting their words into action with the free trade agreements with Australia, New Zealand and Singapore and the ongoing negotiations with India, and by looking to boost ties with countries such as Canada. That is very real and important. However, for me, it is the democratic ties that are so important, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale said.

We have opportunities to work together to improve our democracies. It has never been more important in this world for us to strengthen democracies, and for this Parliament, as well as Parliaments throughout the United Kingdom and the world, to understand their role and their obligation to strengthen democratic ties and, fundamentally, to strengthen our democracies.

Within the Commonwealth, it is astonishing to see the very practical ways that countries can work together at parliamentary and, indeed, Government level. We have 11 member states that are committed—as, I am proud to say, our own Government are—to 12 years of education for women. We have an alliance of 34 Commonwealth nations that have joined together to look at ways to reduce plastics in our oceans. Those are practical ways in which Commonwealth countries can come together on policy issues that really matter to the future of our world.

Like other Members who have spoken, I want to pay particular tribute to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. When I joined Parliament, albeit it a number of years ago, I had not heard of the CPA, but over the ensuing decade and a half I have got to know it very well. I am deeply impressed by the way in which the CPA, not just here in Westminster but across the Commonwealth, is so dedicated to improving our democracy and the way democracies work, and to enabling us to learn from each other, as we are in this week's Westminster Seminar. I am privileged to be leading a session on Thursday on how we can be better scrutineers of Governments. Having been a Government Minister and the Chair of a Select Committee, I am looking forward not only to talking about my experiences, but to hearing from other Members about how they effect good scrutiny in their jurisdictions.

As well as the CPA, Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians has a crucial role in a world where still only one in every four parliamentarians elected is a woman. We have a long way to go. In our own Parliament,

[Mrs Maria Miller]

there are twice as many men elected to the House of Commons as women, so anybody who thinks we have got this right needs to read some of the evidence; we still have a long way to go ourselves. By working together, Commonwealth women parliamentarians can share experiences, perhaps hold each other to account, and scrutinise each other on how we are trying to increase women's parliamentary representation.

Across the Commonwealth, we are seeing significant action being taken. In the CWP Pacific region, women parliamentarians are using New Zealand as a crucial regional hub to increase women's representation, and are highlighting notable role models. The Canadian region is working with civil society on non-political training for potential women candidates at provincial and municipal levels to encourage more women to stand for Parliament. That is something that our Parliament should be seriously considering, as we still have a real shortfall in the number of women who want to stand for election.

Curiously, our own region is called the British Islands and Mediterranean region. Basically, that is the United Kingdom plus a number of other quite scattered jurisdictions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset set out. We are very focused on how we can use an important tool—gender-sensitive Parliament audits—to look at how good we are as a region at female representation. The research is clear that strong Parliaments are representative of their country's people and, of course, more than 50% of people in our country are female. We can use gender-sensitive Parliament audits to identify how we can improve the way we encourage women to stand for election and retain them as elected representatives.

The States Assembly of Jersey implemented such an audit in 2018, and the Scottish Parliament has announced its plan to carry one out this year. I am hoping that we can do likewise here in the UK. I pay tribute to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, which has looked at these issues in some detail. Indeed, four out of 13 Parliaments in our region have completed gender-sensitive Parliament audits.

I reiterate the comments made by my right hon. and hon. Friends about the status of the CPA. Its charitable status is becoming a real problem, and the Minister needs to take that on board. It is seen by many of our members as absolutely inappropriate. It does not sit well alongside the purpose of the organisation. The CPA needs to be recognised in the same way that so many other international organisations are recognised, and charitable status is not right. It would be such a shame, given the immense support that Ministers give to the CPA, if we could not resolve this rather administrative problem. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset, who is the chair of the CPA in the UK and, indeed, on a Commonwealth basis at the moment, for all the work he has done on that. A number of hon. and right hon. Members have paid tribute to the staff of the CPA, and I echo that.

In closing, I will make reference to a remark that Her Majesty made in her message on Commonwealth day. She said that Commonwealth countries should continue "to be a point of connection, cooperation and friendship."

Those words are absolutely right. For me, the Commonwealth is literally part of my family. Half of my family is Canadian. I am a proud mother of three Canadian children—joint citizens. It is those family ties, that connectivity, that binds us together—most importantly of all, under the leadership of Her Majesty.

10.29 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Davies. I too am grateful to the hon. Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) not only for bringing forward the debate, but also for speaking with such great authority and knowledge on the Commonwealth.

As we have heard, the Commonwealth brings together 54 countries and 2.4 billion people around the world. It is a network connecting many of the fastest-growing nations on Earth, with strong ties in language, culture, values and mutual appreciation. Of course there are also the famous Commonwealth games, which is one of the few opportunities for athletes in Scotland to represent Scotland under the Saltire; I am sure that the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) enjoys that just as much as I do.

The Commonwealth also has profound origins in colonialism and can be seen as a direct descendant of the British empire. Many critics of the Commonwealth have described it as an institute for Britain to forget about the British empire's genocides, exploitation, dominance and oppression of post-colonial countries.

Today, Commonwealth countries are still waiting for an official apology for atrocities committed by Britain during its colonial rule of those countries. For example, there was the massacre at Amritsar in northern India in 1919, when British troops fired on thousands of innocent and unarmed men, women and children during a peaceful protest. Over 100 years later, Britain has still refused to offer an official apology, having only acknowledged that the massacre took place. This Government should offer India and the people of Amritsar the closure they deserve by issuing a formal apology—something they have requested for years.

Numerous aspects of the Commonwealth demonstrate it is not the welcoming body that we all hoped and imagined it to be. For example, take the Windrush controversy of recent years. Hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of whom were part of the Windrush generation, were wrongly detained, deported and denied their legal rights. For years, Caribbean Heads of Government tried to discuss this issue with this Government, only to be rejected. It was only when coverage of these individuals' stories began to break in mainstream media that the same UK Government decided on a U-turn and abandoned their "hostile" immigration environment for the Windrush generation.

The UK has held the position of Commonwealth chair-in-office since 2018 and will continue to do so until June this year. To be honest, the UK Government have so far missed an opportunity to implement fundamental cultural change. In March 2020, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) addressed this issue and stated that the UK Government must do more, considering the two years we have lost due to the pandemic, and that time was of the essence to make a positive impact. Such an impact has not been made. The Government need to do

more to fully understand the Commonwealth and to ensure that its member states abide by the shared values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law that are enshrined in the Commonwealth's charter.

The Commonwealth has an unimpressive record of not being sufficiently vocal in enforcing these core values, a situation which has become more challenging as the organisation has grown in size. Some members ignore international pressure to promote democracy and human rights. Also, the Commonwealth family took no action in January 2021 when Uganda's President, Yoweri Museveni, clung to power after a deeply flawed election. Also, in 2013 President Mahinda Rajapaksa of Sri Lanka hosted a Commonwealth summit at a time when his Government stood accused of presiding over war crimes. In Nigeria, another Commonwealth member, there is a 10-year prison sentence for same-sex couples showing affection in public and a 14-year prison sentence for anybody having a gay marriage.

Also, the UK is withholding considerable aid funding from critical Commonwealth states, demonstrating that it is unconcerned about the Commonwealth. The UK Government have cut £4 billion from its foreign development budget for 2021-22 and according to Commonwealth Innovation Fund research the number of people living in extreme poverty in the Commonwealth will increase from 209 million in 2019 to 237 million by 2025.

Mrs Miller: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points about the Commonwealth, but will he not join me in paying tribute to the UK Government during their time as chair-in-office for supporting six Commonwealth countries to repeal and reform outdated legislation that discriminates against women, girls or LGBT communities? Is that not an opportunity that would not exist if the Commonwealth did not exist?

Steven Bonnar: I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. She is absolutely right, and wherever we can pursue openness, democracy, fairness and equality throughout the world, we should take the opportunity to do so. I just feel that we have missed an opportunity to do that while we have been chair-in-office. Nevertheless, I thank her for her intervention.

In 2019, the UK provided approximately £1.8 billion in bilateral aid to Commonwealth countries, accounting for over 18% of total bilateral ODA. In 2021, the then Secretary of State for International Trade, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—who now serves as Foreign Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities—signed off £183 million of cuts to education, gender and equality spending in the UK aid budget.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I think there is a slight misunderstanding here. The Commonwealth does not deal with aid budgets; it does not deal with anything to do with Government, but Governments are part of what we do.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned certain countries that we work with. He is quite right that there are issues in those countries, but I was in Abuja in Nigeria recently, and we talked about that as a family. They understood that there is a great deal of concern around the world, as does the President of Uganda, whom I met. He realises that there is an issue. His deputy now is Rebecca

Kadaga, who was formerly Speaker of the House out there, and she is pretty formidable. I say to the hon. Gentleman that he should please try not to confuse the two things. We do an enormous amount of work, but the air of publicity in certain countries goes against what we are trying to achieve.

Steven Bonnar: I take on board what the hon. Member is saying. I will take the opportunity to raise the injustices that we see across the world whenever I can, and if that includes Nigeria or any other Commonwealth country, I will continue to do so, but I thank him for his intervention.

The UK cannot claim to have a compassionate, co-operative and international outlook while simultaneously decreasing its contributions to lower-income countries, including those within the Commonwealth. We in the Scottish National party acknowledge that work needs to be done, and that only by understanding these little-said truths about the Commonwealth can we understand it in the present.

10.36 am

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Davies. I thank the hon. Members for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) and for Stafford (Theo Clarke) for co-sponsoring this debate and bringing it before this House. Many right hon. and hon. Members from across the Chamber have made significant contributions on topics including promoting democracy across our Commonwealth nations, promoting religious freedoms, economic prosperity, preventing the spread of HIV, and connectivity between Commonwealth countries.

Commonwealth Day is an opportunity for us to reflect on the enduring bonds we have with our Commonwealth siblings. Nothing more effectively reminds us that we are part of a global Commonwealth family than contact with our constituents. Our diversity is our strength, and I think we in Lewisham appreciate that more than most. I have Guyanese Indian and Jamaican descent, and I am British born and bred, so I am a child of the Commonwealth through and through. On my trips to both those countries, I have gained such an appreciation of the culture and traditions that have developed over centuries from people mixing together. In Guyana, I love the pepperpot and cook-up rice, just as in Jamaica I love the saltfish and ackee with green bananas. I have been to many Commonwealth countries so far in my life—The Gambia, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Mauritius and Malta—and hope to visit many more.

We cannot take our Commonwealth family ties for granted: the strong relationship we have with each other must be constantly nurtured. The institutions of the Commonwealth help us to do just that, and find new ways to partner and co-operate to solve our common challenges. Today, we look forward to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Rwanda this June. As we know, the timetable was delayed by the pandemic; the UK has now held the chair for four years, and I am sure the Minister will set out what the Government see as the achievements of our time as chair.

I also want to hear about the engagement that has been happening in preparation for June. One of the ways in which the Commonwealth brings people together

[Janet Daby]

is through sport, and we look forward to the 22nd Commonwealth games in Birmingham later this year, which will provide another welcome opportunity to renew and deepen our connections. I would like to take this opportunity to celebrate the achievements of Birmingham as it prepares to host the games.

The challenges we face are daunting, but we are stronger together than apart. Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine has far-reaching impacts. We must be clear that the Russian invasion is a violation of the Commonwealth values and principles set out repeatedly in declarations from Singapore, Goa, Harare and Coolum. Does the Government intend to facilitate any discussion among Commonwealth partners?

As Commonwealth members, we believe in the notions of peace and security, and the international rule of law. Both of those principles have been shattered by the Russian invasion. The Kenyan ambassador to the United Nations, Martin Kimani, said it best:

"We must complete our recovery from the embers of dead empires in a way that does not plunge us back into new forms of domination and oppression."

I could not agree more. Those words are another example of how we have so much to learn from the experiences and histories shared across our Commonwealth partners. I would like to again put on the record Labour's support for improvements to the curriculum so that a broader range of perspectives can be fully understood.

The Russian invasion will also have economic implications across the world, including for many Commonwealth countries. Labour urges the Government to publish assessments of the impact of the food and energy price rises on developing countries, particularly the least developed states. I urge the Government to restore funding to 0.7%, otherwise the humanitarian money that is rightly being devoted to Ukraine will come at the expense of others. That will often mean Commonwealth countries whose needs are also great.

Much of the UK's time as chair-in-office of the Commonwealth has been dominated by the covid-19 pandemic. I ask the Minister to give an update on the number of vaccinations delivered into arms as a result of UK donations. I also ask the Minister to say something about any progress that has been made on delivering those doses earlier and more predictably, because a dose that arrives just weeks before it goes out of date is not really a donation at all—it is closer to the dumping of medical waste. Quite frankly, that is an insult.

To recover from the pandemic, we need education systems to bounce back quickly and effectively. In many Commonwealth countries, as in the UK, schools were shut, in some cases for almost two years. That can have a massively greater impact on girls, particularly in parts of the Commonwealth affected by poverty. Children who are not in school are vulnerable to child labour and child marriage.

Analysis of the 2020 and 2021 aid budget cuts suggests that together they would result in 700,000 girls losing support from education programmes. The leaked equalities impact assessment last week showed a reduction of 75% for programmes to tackle violence against women and girls, and up to 80% for some sexual and reproductive health programmes. The focus of this year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Rwanda will be empowering young people through technology. There

are many strong UK companies and NGOs which could contribute expertise, so I hope that the Minister will say more about what the Government will be doing.

The benefits of an inclusive recovery from covid are huge. Girls and boys who can achieve their potential will build more secure societies and expand opportunities for trade and investment. Labour is watching closely to see how the Government live up to their promise to fully restore funding for women and girls, and I hope that the Minister will say more about that today.

Democracy and inclusive governance are core Commonwealth values. This year will see elections in many Commonwealth countries, including Malta, The Gambia, Papua New Guinea, Australia, Kenya, Lesotho, and Fiji. We look forward to being able to celebrate the outcomes of free, fair, and peaceful elections with all of those Commonwealth siblings in the months to come.

We must do everything we can to support those values through the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and Commonwealth Foundation, and through direct diplomacy by the Government. However, the funding for the Westminster Foundation for Democracy remains in doubt. The Government must continue to support its work.

The protection of human rights is another Commonwealth principle, and we must continue to raise issues affecting marginalised people across our sibling countries. As we know, the colonial legacy includes laws targeting LGBT+ people, and all those standing up against that legacy today must have our full support. Likewise, we must work together to end violence against religious and ethnic minorities, and ensure that journalists and political activists can operate freely in every Commonwealth country, including that of the incoming chair-in-office. I hope that the Government will set out their intentions to do that in their response.

Having saved the best until last, the Commonwealth must come together to tackle the climate emergency. There is surely an opportunity in Kigali to set the stage for COP27 in Egypt and to announce continued deepening of shared Commonwealth programming. What are the Government doing to engage with Commonwealth states in June on the acute needs that many have on climate financing and on adaptation, mitigation, and loss and damage funds?

The members of our Commonwealth family are bound together by so much: our histories, our common values, our endeavours and our shared challenges. The Commonwealth can be a deepening partnership of equals that helps our world to flourish all the more. Labour joins in the celebration of Commonwealth Day, and I with it, as the Commonwealth is special to me. We encourage the Government to set out the steps they will take to make the promise of the Commonwealth a reality.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): To respond to all those points, I call the Minister, Amanda Milling.

10.45 am

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): Thank you, Mr Davies. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, although I think I might struggle to answer every single point that has been raised in the debate. I have been furiously writing notes, and I will do what I can.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger) for securing the debate, which is timely and which gives us an opportunity to mark and to celebrate Commonwealth Day, and I commend him on his tireless work and support for the Commonwealth as chair of the CPA. We deeply appreciate the important work done by the CPA and its UK branch.

I welcome the commitment to the Commonwealth shown by Members across the Chamber, and I will do my best to deal with the points they have made, but I want to begin by mentioning one colleague who has been sorely missed during today's debate: our dear friend, Sir David Amess. Sir David was a passionate advocate for the Commonwealth, and he took part in last year's debate with his customary good humour, insight and conviction.

As Minister for Asia, I had the privilege of working with Sir David, and have travelled to a number of Commonwealth countries. Most recently, I visited Singapore, where I advanced our partnership to create a safer, more prosperous region. Each year, Commonwealth Day is an occasion on which to celebrate our connections and the diversity of our 54 nations. The Commonwealth makes up a third of the world's population, spanning every continent and ocean, and every stage of development. It is right that we use Commonwealth week to reflect on our shared values of freedom, peace and democracy as enshrined in the Commonwealth charter. That is a key theme that has come through all the contributions this morning, and the charter sets out the commitments of each member state to develop as a free and democratic society, and to promote peace and prosperity.

The value of those principles has been highlighted over the past few weeks, and they are completely at odds with Putin's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine. We will continue to work with our Commonwealth and international partners to ensure that there is strong political, humanitarian, defence and economic support for Ukraine.

This year, we celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen to mark her 70 years as monarch and 70 years as Head of the Commonwealth. Yesterday, the Prime Minister, Lord Ahmad, who is Minister for the Commonwealth, and members of the royal family were joined by Commonwealth representatives at Westminster Abbey for a service that paid tribute to Her Majesty for her tireless dedication to the Commonwealth. This summer, at the Commonwealth games in Birmingham, all 72 nations and territories of the Commonwealth will come together in the spirit of friendly competition. I am delighted that my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Theo Clarke), is in the Chamber today. The mountain biking event will be held in my constituency—I think the site is on the border of our constituencies, to be fair—and I am thrilled that we are hosting that event. I hope that Members will come to visit Cannock Chase, which is a beautiful part of the world.

In June, Commonwealth leaders will meet in Kigali for the first full in-person gathering of Heads of Government since the 2018 London meeting, but let us look at the past four years that we have been chair-in-office. We have worked hard to deliver the commitments made in London to build a fairer, more sustainable, more secure and more prosperous future for the 2.5 billion people of the Commonwealth. With our Commonwealth partners, we have built a fairer future. We have honoured

our pledge to support women's empowerment through trade. A number of Members raised the topic of women and girls. The SheTrades Commonwealth programme, which supports female entrepreneurs, has already helped generate sales of more than £32 million for women-owned businesses in Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and Bangladesh. We work with national human rights institutions across the Commonwealth to strengthen human rights, and we have ensured that more girls across the Commonwealth have access to education.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) mentioned LGBT rights. We have delivered programmes worth more than £11 million to support the promotion and protection of LGBT rights across the Commonwealth. We look forward to welcoming Commonwealth partners to the "Safe To Be Me" conference that we will host later this year.

With our Commonwealth partners, we have built a more sustainable future. The Government are committed to double our international climate finance to £11.6 billion by March 2026. Since 2018, we have co-founded the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, which has mobilised more than \$45 million to support climate-vulnerable Commonwealth countries. Colleagues raised the issue of climate. Through the Commonwealth marine economies programme, we have helped 17 small island developing states to build sustainable marine economies that are more resilient to climate change.

With our Commonwealth partners, we have built a more secure future. We work with all Commonwealth countries to strengthen their cyber-security. We continue to support the excellent work that the UK Commonwealth Parliamentary Association is doing in strengthening governance, parliamentary oversight and accountability across the Commonwealth. We welcome the work it is doing this year on climate change, women, online harms and modern slavery.

Finally, with our Commonwealth partners, we have been working for a more prosperous future. We have a network of Commonwealth trade envoys—it is good to see some here today—in countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana, Uganda and Rwanda. We have funded programmes to liberalise global trade. We have made rapid progress to secure trade agreements with 33 Commonwealth countries. We recently signed two historic trade deals, with Australia in December and New Zealand last month. This year we will launch a new developing countries trading scheme, which will help countries reduce poverty through trade.

Hon. Friends mentioned the legal status of the CPA. I know that Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, the Minister for the Commonwealth, wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset earlier this month, and I believe further conversations are ongoing with officials. We hope to find a legal route that will give the CPA the recognition it seeks. We have been proud to work with the CPA UK across a number of projects during our chair-in-office, which have sought to strengthen democracy, oversight and accountability throughout the Commonwealth, and we value that partnership. The CPA UK has put forward project proposals for the next financial year, and we are considering those as part of our business planning process.

I might have a couple of minutes to pick up on another couple of points.

Jim Shannon: I asked the Minister about the persecution of Christians and how they are focused on in the Commonwealth. I also asked about the Republic of Ireland. Will the Minister comment, if she is able to?

Amanda Milling: I was just coming to countries re-joining the Commonwealth. The UK is open to considering new applications for membership on their merits. The interest of potential new members is a sign of the Commonwealth's vitality. Decisions on membership are made by consensus of all member states. I believe that some of the countries mentioned earlier were members in the past. Whether they want to re-join is up to them, but as I say it is by consensus of member states.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a passionate champion of freedom of religion or belief, which is established in the Commonwealth charter. We would like Commonwealth leaders to recommit to promoting and protecting those freedoms at CHOGM. He will be aware that the Prime Minister appointed my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) as his special envoy, and will host an international summit in July. We continue to raise human rights with countries wherever concerns exist. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, my next-door neighbour, mentioned the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy. We hope that all 54 member states will have committed to participate by the time of CHOGM in June.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale mentioned HIV and AIDS. I know that he is a passionate champion of this issue. The UK's Global Fund and the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation are a really important way of supporting international progress on HIV and AIDS. There is strong engagement across Africa, including in many Commonwealth nations, as this issue is exceptionally important. We have a global AIDS strategy, which focuses on addressing those inequalities.

I think I have about one more minute before I must let my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset wind up. I am sorry that I have not been able to cover all the points made, but we have been able to get a snapshot of our co-operation with the Commonwealth and Commonwealth countries. Those partnerships and today's debate demonstrate how the Commonwealth brings great benefits to diverse communities across the globe. As we hand over the baton of chair-in-office to Rwanda in June, our commitment to the Commonwealth and the shared values of the Commonwealth charter will not dim. The pandemic, the growing impacts of climate change and the rise in

global prices make these testing times for all members of the Commonwealth, but as Her Majesty said in her Commonwealth Day message yesterday, we can

"draw strength and inspiration from what we share, as we work together towards a healthy, sustainable and prosperous future for all."

10.57 am

Mr Liddell-Grainger: I thank the Minister and all Members who have taken part in the debate. I am grateful for everybody's insight and to the Minister for being able to take on the points that have been raised. I know that the point about the CPA's status will be taken on board. The Commonwealth has achieved so many of the aims that it set out to. I did not mention this, but I am grateful for the funding that we get from the FCDO. I was not going to bring up our next funding bid, but I thank the Minister for doing so. I think she knows—certainly colleagues do—that every penny that we get from the FCDO is spent on programmes, and we do it well. The staff of the CPA UK is only 30. The staff of the CPA internationally is only 20. That a whole organisation can be run on such small numbers is phenomenal; they are a tremendous team.

We have praised Her Majesty for her incredible leadership over the last 70 years. That shows that one person can make a massive difference, and does so all the time. I say gently to the Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar), that any country can leave the Commonwealth. It is a club. People want to be part of the Commonwealth because it gives us a shared history, good or bad. It shows that by working together we can change things. It is not always easy; it can be difficult, and I take that on the chin, but our history is one of the things that binds us. Common adversity can bring commonality. That is what has bound us together. Dealing with colleagues from around the world—it is lovely to hear about people's heritages—shows that that is what makes this incredible organisation work so well. One can go anywhere in the world and meet people who say, "I've got a cousin"—or an aunt or whatever—"in the United Kingdom," and that is just wonderful.

We do this every year. We do it because it matters to an enormous organisation that has an enormous heart. We are a democratically led organisation, and we fight for people and democracy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Commonwealth Day.

Blackpool Airport and Levelling Up

11 am

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I will call Scott Benton to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Blackpool airport and the role of commercial passenger flights in levelling up.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The recent levelling-up White Paper rightly identified the areas that need to be addressed if we are to transform the UK and bring prosperity to left-behind regions. The UK Government have set themselves 12 national missions that they must achieve if this country is to level up. There are two areas, in particular, that I believe are pertinent to regional airports, including Blackpool, and I will demonstrate how they can play an important role in supporting the Government's broader aims.

The Government's first emphasis is on the restoration of pride of place. Regional airports are often important symbols of pride for local residents, offering a unique link to a town's history and representing modernity and wealth. For example, on the grounds that are now Blackpool airport, Squires Gate hosted the UK's first official aviation meeting in 1909, when 200,000 people gathered to watch Henri Farman set the first official British flight record of 47 miles. That would be the start of Blackpool's long and proud aviation history, with a fully fledged aerodrome opened in 1931, offering passenger flights to the Isle of Man.

During the second world war, RAF Squires Gate was established as a training wing for the No. 3 School of General Reconnaissance, and over 3,000 Wellington bombers were constructed next to the airport, with the factory buildings still in existence. This history is celebrated in Blackpool and continues today, with a Spitfire visitor centre, our brilliant annual air show, and the development of military aircraft at nearby BAE Systems in Walton. I know how important the airport is to my constituents and those of my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). In 2019, I started a petition urging the local council to restore commercial passenger flights, and I was delighted by the brilliant response it received, with over 8,000 local people signing it.

The second area I want to highlight in the case for levelling up is improving connectivity and infrastructure. The levelling-up White Paper makes clear the importance of connectivity and better transport links across the regions of the UK. Regional airports offer quick and easy connections, often at a fraction of the time and cost of rail travel.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising the important issue of Blackpool airport—a real jewel in the Fylde crown. Does he agree that one challenge the airport faces is very high fixed costs for air traffic control, fire brigades and security, which larger airports do not face? Does he also agree that the Government need to look again at repeating the airfield fund that a certain previous

aviation Minister launched on his last day in the job? That would match funding for investment in meeting these fixed costs.

Scott Benton: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his intervention. He has been a brilliant friend and advocate of Blackpool airport over many years, and during his work as aviation Minister. From speaking to him in the past, I know that a number of the things he was looking at while in post could support regional airports and help Blackpool to grow, benefiting the local economies of both our constituencies. I know he will be a brilliant advocate and supporter of this campaign going forward.

Regional airports offer quick and easy connections, often at a fraction of the time and cost of rail travel. They are also able to connect us to the furthest corners of our United Kingdom.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech, and it is music to my ears. As the Minister is aware, we have had a campaign in the far north of Scotland to do similar work for Wick airport. We have a destination—Aberdeen—which is great, and is a step in the right direction, but does the hon. Member agree that having a choice of destinations helps? In the case of Wick, we are seeking to get Edinburgh or Glasgow included as destinations.

Scott Benton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He makes a good point. He will know about the importance of public service obligations, especially in the regional context of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and the work we do in England to match the PSO offers in the devolved Administrations. He will no doubt be championing that for his own constituency.

The Union connectivity review emphasised the need for Government to support journeys too long to be reasonably taken by road or rail. That is especially significant in the case of the devolved Administrations and other parts of our United Kingdom, all of which would benefit hugely from greater links between them. More practically, regional airports offer economic opportunities, increased tourism, better business connections and more investment opportunities, and they provide the chance for unique service delivery, as my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys, alluded to with Blackpool airport.

Where does Blackpool airport fit in the levelling-up agenda, and what can the Government do to support it? As I mentioned, Blackpool airport has been in operation since the 1930s and operated commercial flights through the 20th century. However, the airport really took off—pardon the pun—in the early 2000s, with low-cost airlines such as Jet2 providing routes to international destinations, including Spain and Portugal, and smaller carriers, for example Citywing and Flybe, providing a strong regional network to destinations such as Belfast, Aberdeen and Southampton.

Unfortunately, following the financial crisis of 2007, passenger numbers began to fall and the operator of the airport, Balfour Beatty, ran into financial difficulty. Despite a number of routes still being well attended and the airport being used by over 200,000 passengers per year, in 2014 Balfour Beatty decided to put the airport

[*Scott Benton*]

up for sale. Sadly, a buyer could not be found and a subsidiary of Balfour Beatty purchased the airport and reduced operations, ultimately leading to the end of commercial passenger flights.

During this time, a decision was taken to demolish the former passenger terminal, despite protests from local residents. In 2017, Blackpool Council had to purchase the airport to save it from being permanently closed and demolished and to secure its long-term future as part of Blackpool Airport enterprise zone. That allowed for essential infrastructure to be maintained and investment plans to be explored.

Sadly, following my petition to ensure that commercial passenger flights were restored, the Labour council voted against the idea, citing the costs of bringing the airport up to scratch. While I appreciate the large capital cost of modernising the airport infrastructure, there have already been positive movements by the Government to support regional aviation, making investment more appealing. The cut to air passenger duty in last year's Budget has provided a brilliant opportunity for domestic flights from small airports such as Blackpool. The Government have effectively halved the amount of tax paid on domestic return journeys, allowing people to travel for less. That is much fairer than the previous system, which would charge those travelling domestically more than those flying internationally, despite travelling a much shorter distance and contributing less carbon to the environment. The cut could prove especially beneficial as more people choose staycations rather than holidays abroad following the pandemic.

In the case of Blackpool, our resort is already a great destination for tourists, and exciting future developments assisted by Government regeneration funding will mean that there will soon be even more attractions to offer to visitors. That point has been echoed by many of the tourism and leisure businesses in my constituency. For example, Amanda Thompson OBE, managing director of Blackpool Leisure Beach, has stated:

"Blackpool Airport was a wonderful asset for the town and direct flights to and from London and various European destinations show how important it is to have connectivity to the city and Europe. The resort needs to establish inbound tourism from Europe...as well as from...London—this is needed to encourage investment within the resort and the Airport can help to deliver this."

The Union connectivity review has provided great insight into how to use regional airports to achieve the Government's aim to improve transport connectivity and enhance quality of life and economic opportunity across the UK. The report made a number of suggestions that would greatly boost the case for restoring passenger flights to Blackpool airport and increasing the role of regional airports more broadly. Alongside the cut in APD for domestic flights, the report also recommended re-examining the role of public service obligation routes and the way in which they operate.

Currently, PSO routes are eligible for support only if they run to and from London and are exclusively operated by one airline. That has limited their use and has meant that such routes mostly exist outside of England, where devolved Administrations have stepped in. The report recommended liberalising the process to allow PSOs to operate between regions. It also recommended selecting a number of routes that would not have been previously

operated and removing APD on those altogether. That would not result in a loss of revenue for the Government as, without the reforms, those journeys would not previously have been made at all. If the reforms were to be adopted, they would offer a great opportunity for Blackpool to offer flights to the Isle of Man, Belfast and possibly even London or Glasgow. Blackpool's location makes it ideal to serve those routes. I hope the Government will seriously consider that recommendation and explore the policy further in the coming months.

These are positive steps and if properly pursued would allow Blackpool and other regional airports to play a vital part in UK connectivity and levelling up. However, the barrier to Blackpool and many other regional airports in taking advantage of such developments is the need for capital investment. Although the Treasury provides many funding pots, particularly for infrastructure projects, one area not currently covered by any schemes is regional airports. That makes it very difficult for airports such as Blackpool to get off the ground, with local government administrations often unable, or in Blackpool's case unwilling, to invest sufficient time and money in large projects.

A bespoke scheme to provide capital investment would be very welcome and would allow regional airports to modernise, invest in green technologies and take the pressure away from key hub airports. As there are only 26 regional airports, the fund could be relatively small and could deliver significant improvements quickly, certainly in the case of Blackpool.

I want to address the concerns regarding the environmental impact of flying, especially in the context of the Government's commitments at COP26. First, it is worth noting that domestic air travel makes up only 1.2% of total domestic transport emissions—a tiny fraction compared with cars, HGVs or trains. I am concerned that in reading reports like the Union connectivity review we are not looking to the future and considering upcoming technology. I was also concerned to see the media backlash following the cut to APD and the calls from newspapers such as *The Guardian* to ban domestic air travel altogether. Many environmental activists seem content to return to the stone age rather than innovating to maintain our wonderful way of life. For example, the Danish and Swedish Governments are both working with their aviation sectors to make domestic air travel fossil fuel-free by 2030. That is an ambitious target, but we must surely try to improve aviation rather than abandon it altogether.

I welcome the Department for Transport's jet zero strategy consultation and hope it will lead to constructive discussions with the aviation industry. We are now seeing the development of electric and hydrogen-powered aircraft both in the UK and around the world, and we have already seen low-carbon aircraft becoming more popular. For the technology to continue to develop and become widespread, it will have to be economically viable, and that will mean starting small. Domestic flights with their short airtime and lighter-weight aircraft would provide companies investing in low-carbon solutions with a perfect market for the technology to grow and mature.

I hope that the Government will look carefully at the role of regional airports—Blackpool in particular—in meeting their aims of levelling up, improving connectivity and moving towards net zero. It would be disappointing

if, when so many opportunities are being created for regional airports and domestic flying, Blackpool with its long history of aviation and its great location were unable to benefit, particularly from the cut to APD, which could be tremendous for Blackpool's tourism industry.

I also hope that the Government will look carefully at the reforms suggested in the Union connectivity report, especially the case for the expansion of PSO routes. Blackpool would be ideally suited for connecting to the Isle of Man and Belfast in particular.

Lastly, I hope that the Government will consider the creation of a bespoke funding pot or other targeted support to ensure that regional airports get the support they need to modernise, invest in those green technologies and take the pressure off our busy hub airports.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Mr Davies. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) for securing this critically important debate, touching as it does not just on Blackpool, which is of such huge significance to his constituents and to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), but to wider regional aviation. Many of the issues on which we have touched today apply to many Members throughout the United Kingdom. I know that the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), with his advocacy for Wick airport, will share in many of those points.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South is a hugely powerful advocate for this sector and for his area and I commend him for his energy, enthusiasm and vision for Blackpool airport and for the wider regional airport ecosystem. He has made a number of points to me throughout his time here, many of which the Government are considering. I hope to address some of those points during this debate.

I was particularly struck during my hon. Friend's speech by the history of Blackpool airport—everything from Henri Farman in 1909, with his record, through to Vickers Wellingtons during the war, and today's modern aircraft and aerospace technology at Warton nearby. I look forward to hearing more about that. We touched on it when we met recently and I look forward to seeing more when I visit this Friday. The importance of Blackpool airport to his area has been made vividly clear during this debate. The 8,000 signatures to his petition also show how important it is to his constituents.

I will touch on as many points as I can in the time that I have, particularly those relating to Blackpool and wider regional aviation. If we look at the issue as a whole, the UK is lucky to have one of the best-connected, best-value, safest, most innovative aircraft industries in the world—aircraft and aviation. It creates jobs, encourages the economy to grow, connects the United Kingdom and all of us with the wider world. It consolidates and grows our position as a dynamic trading nation.

Regional airports link us and serve our local communities, as we have heard vividly today. They support thousands of jobs in the regions and act as a gateway to international opportunities and economic growth. They foster, never let us forget, social and family ties and strengthen the bonds between us.

The figure that is perhaps most vivid is that before the pandemic, the aviation sector directly contributed at least £22 billion to the UK's GDP, supporting approximately half a million jobs. It is vital that, as we build out from the pandemic, the aviation sector is a key part of that. As far as this Government are concerned, it will be.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South rightly mentioned air passenger duty. That is part of our plans to boost regional connectivity and why, as he mentioned, the Treasury announced in the recent Budget a package of APD reforms to bolster air connectivity within the Union. That is a new reduced domestic band to support precisely the regional connectivity that he rightly pays tribute to, aligned with an ultra-long-haul additional band to ensure that our overall policy aligns with our environmental objectives. The reforms will take effect from 1 April 2023. That will be part of a package that aims to assist our domestic and international connectivity in the aviation world as we build out of the pandemic.

It is no exaggeration to say that levelling up is a key part of the Government's agenda and a key part of what aviation can enable. We must have our local communities and businesses connected not just with London but, as the hon. Gentleman quite rightly points out, with other parts of the UK, and level up the regions and build a truly global Britain. Our objective is to ensure that all nations and regions of the UK have the domestic and international air transport connections that they rely on, while ensuring that we meet our net-zero commitments. Maintaining the national network of aerodromes and airports is the foundation of the success of the wider UK aviation sector, be that general, business or commercial aviation.

We have touched upon Union connectivity. In November 2021, Sir Peter Hendy published his independent Union connectivity review. As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross has pointed out, I know the importance of Wick to him and to the wider UK; that has been emphasised during this debate. For Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and all parts of England, we will be looking to improve access to opportunities and everyday connections across the United Kingdom.

Jamie Stone: I am grateful for the Minister's kind comments. Does he agree that the operation of Wick airport is crucial to our endeavours, with Britain's first vertical space launch in Sutherland?

Robert Courts: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He draws attention to some of the future opportunities that regional aviation can sponsor. We have the space launch in his part of Scotland, with Wick enabling that, and a similar story in Newquay, at the other end of the United Kingdom. We see there vividly what regional aviation can bring to communities, wherever they happen to be. That is why the Government place so much importance on regional aviation. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point so clear.

The review shows the importance of airports and air connectivity, for all the reasons that we have touched upon. It also mentions the benefits of jobs, trade, investments and the strengthening of social ties. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South rightly draws attention to PSOs. We currently jointly fund those from Londonderry, Newquay and Dundee into London and that protects air connectivity from some of

[*Robert Courts*]

the more peripheral areas of our UK. As we consider our response to the Union connectivity review, we will explore what further opportunities there are to use PSO policy to support regional connectivity and the levelling-up agenda. We will continue to consider Sir Peter's recommendations and we look to respond later this year.

As part of the rebuilding out of covid, we are looking to produce a strategy on the future of aviation in the UK. That will explore the sector's return to growth. It will explore many of the issues that we have touched on in this debate and some that we have not had a chance to mention—not only the return to growth, but workforce and skills, aviation noise, innovation, regulation, consumer issues and, critically, regional connectivity, alongside climate change and decarbonisation and the critical role that aviation plays in retaining that global reach.

The hon. Member for Blackpool South is quite right. When we talk about decarbonisation, regional aviation will be a key testbed and he is right to draw attention to that. Indeed, on that, the consultation on jet zero—as we call it—was published in July 2021. While press headlines often tend to focus on transatlantic aviation, regional aviation is key to that as well. The consultation outlines our vision for the aviation sector and its decarbonisation. We are looking to publish that final strategy later this year.

One of our key proposals included a sustainable aviation fuels mandate consultation, which sets out our level of ambition for future uptake. We have published a summary of the responses that have come in already and we aim to confirm a mandate, targets, timescales and the design following a second consultation later this year.

The Government continue to support progress towards low and zero-emission aircraft technology, which includes some of the technology that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South has been referring to, through the Aerospace Technology Institute programme, providing £1.95 billion of funding towards aerospace research.

I will quote something that my hon. Friend said, because I wholeheartedly agree with it. He said that we should innovate to maintain our wonderful way of life. He is absolutely right and I am keen to emphasise that flying is not the problem; aviation emissions are the problem and it is those emissions that we have to tackle. We are tackling them, and by doing so we will create guilt-free flying.

On Blackpool airport and some of the work that has been going on with it, we published a general aviation road map in April 2021, which set out the Government's vision, strategic priorities and forward programme of work to support the general aviation sector. As part of that, the Government delivered the Airfield Development Advisory Fund to support local airfields and associated GA businesses to grow, thrive and upskill. I am delighted that Blackpool airport has made use of that consultancy service. The ADAF provided technical support on the potential relocation of the air traffic control C tower to a new location, as well as advising on the adoption of new air traffic control technology named virtual remote towers.

In addition, in October 2020 the Department provided funding to establish the Civil Aviation Authority's Airfield Advisory Team, to provide complementary support

and technical aviation advice to GA aerodromes on a range of matters. The AAT is an independent non-regulatory advisory team within the CAA, which also liaises with organisations to ensure that the economic, educational and community benefits of GA are understood, so that local planning authorities can make informed decisions. I encourage Blackpool airport to draw on that valuable service and support to help it advance its operations.

As I touched on at the start of my remarks, the UK has a world-leading, competitive commercial aviation sector, with airports and airlines operating and investing to attract passengers and respond to demand. Airports have a key role to play as part of that commercial sector; as I have said, they boost global connectivity and levelling up in the UK. Where opportunities for growth exist, it is key that local partners can come together with industry to develop the business case for new commercial flights.

I wholeheartedly commend and pay tribute to the energy and expertise of my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South on this issue. I can see how passionately he cares. He has a key role, which I can see he is doing already, in convening some of those local partners. He has mentioned his local authority and I encourage it to engage energetically with him to explore the options that may exist. He will also be able to bring together local enterprise partnerships, local businesses and other stakeholders to work together as a holistic whole, to establish the case for commercial flights and then to work with airline partners to create new connections for the communities. He mentioned the connections that existed in the past; hopefully, by bringing all those local partners together, he can build the case for those connections to exist again in the future.

We know that this process can work and I have given the example of Teesside International airport. This work happened there, with local authorities, the Mayor and local businesses coming together with airline partners to identify the need for new connections and then to develop the business case for them. Thanks to that effort, for the first time in over a decade Teesside International airport has direct flights to Heathrow. Also, just last month the combined authority and the local Mayor announced the creation of a new business park at the airport, which is expected to create up to 4,400 jobs when fully operational. That is an example of what can be done with leadership like that provided by my hon. Friend; we can look for such progress at Blackpool airport as well.

In the minute or so that I have left, I will say a little about diversification. I am conscious that Blackpool is already a highly diversified airport, which means that we have the option for highly skilled, dynamic and innovative businesses to grow and flourish—for manufacturing and the maintenance of aircraft; aviation services; and for research and innovation. That means that the wider economic benefits of airports and aerodromes can be fed through to the entire wider community, which of course increases the financial viability of those airports and aerodromes, and helps them thrive. Additional functions include pilot training. Also, as my hon. Friend said, there is the example of Newquay airport, which will also host a spaceport. That is a particular example of innovation, but there are other examples of such innovation.

Regional airports and regional connectivity are utterly critical to the UK's aviation sector because they unlock investment, jobs and trade across the country. I am in no doubt of the critical importance of airports such as Blackpool airport, which is why I look forward to visiting it on Friday and to hearing more from my hon. Friend and his campaign.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Private Rented Sector Housing

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered private rented sector housing.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Gary. I thank Members for attending this debate today and for what I know will be powerful contributions. I start by paying tribute to my constituents in Liverpool, West Derby, who are the innocent victims of this country's current housing system. I also want to thank ACORN, the Vauxhall law centre, Generation Rent, Shelter, the *Daily Mirror* and the many other organisations for their campaigns to get the changes we need.

For millions, the current system in the private rented sector is failing to provide homes that are safe, secure and affordable for everyone. Mindful of this House's sub judice rules, I am unable to go into the details of some of the appalling cases that my constituents have written to me about. However, issues raised with me by private renters include: constituents with health conditions such as asthma whose landlords have left them in damp properties with no gas supply in the middle of winter; constituents, including children, who have been hospitalised and suffered serious health impacts as the result of disrepair in their homes; and families living in fear of bailiffs, who were served a section 21 eviction notice by the landlord after complaining about terrible disrepair and conditions. My constituent told me:

"Section 21 takes the humanity out of the situation and that's precisely the problem. We are human and lives are being carelessly destroyed!"

Other constituents who have contacted me wanted the Government to take urgent action so that nobody in future has to go through the same horrific experiences. Nationally, the private rented sector includes some of the oldest stock in England; it remains the tenure with the lowest standards, based on the Government's decent homes standard. The latest English housing survey found that one in five homes in the private rented sector is classed as non-decent, and 12% have a category 1 hazard for which the most serious harm outcome is identified, for example, as death, permanent paralysis, permanent loss of consciousness, loss of a limb or serious fractures.

Does the Minister know how many serious injuries and deaths have resulted from making people live in such appalling accommodation? Shamefully, we have a system that means a private renter has more than a one in 10 chance of living in a home that could kill or seriously harm them or their children. Let that fact sink in—how can this be allowed to continue?

Private rented sector homes also have the worst energy standards on average. That means private renters will have to pay significantly more in heating bills because of poor insulation, inefficient heating systems or lack of double glazing. With the cost of living crisis starting to bite and energy prices set to soar, private renters really are in a precarious situation. Added to that, it seems that complaining puts them on a fast track to eviction. Research from Citizens Advice shows that those

[*Ian Byrne*]

complaining to their local authority about disrepair were 46% more likely to get a section 21 from the landlord. Section 21—the fast track to eviction—must be scrapped.

I recently spoke to Professor Ian Sinha, a consultant respiratory paediatrician at the fantastic Alder Hey Children's Hospital in my constituency, about the health impacts of poor housing conditions. Ian told me:

“The consequences of poor quality housing can be fatal for children: the National Child Mortality Database identified poor housing as one of the top risk factors associated with the inequalities that result in children's deaths....If babies and children breathe air rife with fungus, toxins, and dust, in overcrowded and cold homes, their lungs develop abnormally. Even though we focus on the shortterm effects, the problems they face in adulthood are even more stark—the poorest children are 5 times more likely to develop adult diseases like COPD, and chronic illnesses such as this lead to the poorest adults dying two decades earlier than the richest ones in Liverpool and many other cities...Poor housing can result in 20 years being taken away from your life...There is a window of opportunity for children to develop and grow—and the state of housing in which millions of children are forced to live is holding them back...That's why good housing for all should be the very essence of any levelling up agenda otherwise it's a vacuous nonsense.”

Professor Sinha continued:

“Parents are gaslighted at every opportunity—landlords deny pest problems—but mothers of premature babies tell us they know there are rats in the house because they see bite marks in their baby's oxygen tubing; mothers tell us that when they reach for the cereal there are rodent faeces in them; mothers tell us that their toddlers are afraid to go in rooms because they see mice looking at them through the gaps in the floorboards that still haven't been fixed. While parents are told that damp isn't an issue, they tell us their children are waking up coughing thick mucus every night in rooms riddled with mould, and they are bullied because their clothes smell of damp”.

After listening to that, we must remind ourselves that it is 2022, not 1822.

It is clear that the current legislation is failing, which is compounded by a decade of Government cuts to local authority budget cuts and the cutting of access to free legal support. Between 2009 and 2019, local authority budgets to ensure that private rental standards were kept up were slashed by 44%. Local authorities have lost almost half their capacity to enforce standards.

Selective licensing is a tool that local authorities can use to tackle poor property conditions and poor practice in the private rented sector. The landlord licensing scheme in Liverpool, which ran from 2015 to 2020, found that 65% of properties were not fully compliant on the first visit. Some 37,000 compliance actions were taken to improve conditions and 250 rogue landlords were prosecuted. I saw this first hand when I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), as his office manager, when we utilised the scheme to tackle rogue landlords. I hope the Minister can enlighten us further as to why landlord licensing is not operational across the whole country.

The regulatory framework for the private rented sector is fragmented, underfunded and, quite frankly, broken, and the White Paper and renters reform Bill must address these systemic issues. A renters reform Bill was promised by the Government in 2019. Where is it? Every single day that the Bill is delayed is a day millions spend in cold, insecure, unsafe and unaffordable homes.

During the height of the pandemic, renters were trapped in unsafe housing while the Prime Minister was apparently picking out new wallpaper. Now, many renters are fearful of section 21 evictions if they raise complaints, because they cannot afford to move house in the middle of this appalling cost of living crisis. The power imbalance means that the mental pressures facing renters are built into this broken system.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree with the points my hon. Friend is raising and I thank him for leading this debate. I am regularly contacted by constituents whose private landlords are refusing to fix issues. Like the examples raised by my hon. Friend, they are not small problems; ranging from black mould to rat infestations, these failings have a disastrous impact on my constituents' health and wellbeing.

As it stands, tenants who decide to withhold rent from landlords who fail to maintain their properties to standard will be in breach of contract and have next to no protections. Does my hon. Friend agree that increasing protections for tenants should form a fundamental part of our strategy to make the PRS safer and improve conditions overall?

Ian Byrne: My hon. Friend makes some fantastic points, and I fully agree. I thank her for all the work she does on this issue in her constituency.

The Government must present the White Paper as a matter of urgency, and new legislation must have real teeth and be enforceable. A renters reform Bill must abolish section 21 and end no-fault evictions, drive up standards through an updated and improved decent homes standard and create a national landlord register and licensing scheme to improve accountability and ensure that legal standards are met. It works—Liverpool has shown that. This is not more red tape, but an investment in the health and wellbeing of present and future generations. To reinforce this, have the Government undertaken a cost-benefit analysis of what it means for a child to grow up in a home that is a threat to their health and safety?

Let us put ourselves in the shoes of the people whose cases I have outlined. If an MP or a Minister were asked to live in a flat riddled with mould, in such a state of disrepair that it endangered the life of their family members and might lead to reduced life expectancies, we would rightly hear howls of rage reverberating from both sides of the Chamber. Let us take that fury and that righteous anger and, as legislators, represent with the same force the millions who are suffering that fate daily, forced into silence because of our unjust system. That would really be levelling up, and the Minister knows it—taking on the vested interests and doing something transformational, changing the life chances of millions for the better. Surely that is why we are all in this game.

This Bill must not tinker around the edges of a broken system, and it should not just move the goalposts. It must empower tenants and hardwire social justice into the system. From working with the Minister on numerous Bill Committees and Select Committees, I know he understands the need for change; but deeds will be the measure, not words.

2.41 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing this debate and on a very powerful speech, setting out the conditions as he sees them in his own constituency.

I have the largest private rented sector in Britain in my borough, including some of the most high-end private accommodation it is possible to find—the luxury penthouses, the oligarch properties—but also some of the worst conditions. I am going to make three points of slightly different lengths, but my first is to beware the tyranny of the average. I urge the Minister to reflect on that point, because we know that over the decades there has been a steady overall improvement in the condition of property, including in the private rented sector. However, beneath that, we have a huge and arguably growing problem that is concentrated in particular sectors.

That problem was very well set out in Julie Rugg's report three years or so ago, in which she looked at the sub-markets in the private rented sector. She rightly reflected on the fact that there are particular groups of people without power, including purchasing power—those who are dependent on housing benefit to rent their property—but also other kinds of power: those who do not have settled immigration status; those who have been homeless; the very young; the students; the old; and, in particular, those with disabilities. When the Minister responds and whenever we talk about this issue, it needs to be properly reflected that there is not a single sector, even allowing for geographical variations.

Secondly, I will touch briefly on the issue of enforcement. Although we will rightly hear from a number of colleagues, including the Front Benchers, about the need to move ahead with the overdue legislation to strengthen renters' rights, those rights will mean very little unless we are sure that we have enforcement capacity—two kinds of enforcement capacity, in particular.

The first is the enforcement carried out by local authorities, particularly through their environmental health departments. Although I do not have time to reflect on this at length, we know from the work of the National Residential Landlords Association, and my own series of freedom of information inquiries to local authorities over the course of the past 10 years, that most local authorities do not enforce, or do so informally. Some of that informal enforcement will be fine, but it is untrackable—it is not monitored.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is needed is a centralised national landlord register that ensures accountability, so that tenants know before moving in whether their landlords have been compliant, especially in relation to health and safety?

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Before the hon. Lady continues, it might be helpful to say that she is rushing, but she does not need to: every speaker can have six or seven minutes if they want, rather than four or five.

Ms Buck: I am grateful for that, Sir Gary; I am always anxious not to take too much time.

I certainly agree that one of the issues in the private rented sector is that we do not actually know where it is, other than when it comes to those claiming housing allowance in the private rented sector. There are landlords who are renting and we do not know who they are, so it is quite hard to enforce against them.

We have a patchwork of enforcement services. That requires resources from local authorities, which have been hammered over the past 10 years of funding cuts, and also political will. The situation needs a clear steer from the centre, together with good local knowledge—local authorities are in the best position to understand something about their own local markets. It also needs individual capacity for enforcement. We have just come from a statement on legal aid; one of the issues we should be very concerned about is the significant shrinking of the housing legal section's capacity in recent years, with fewer providers and less capacity for access to services that put individual tenants in a position to enforce their own rights.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point about people in the private rental sector not being able to enforce their rights, because of lack of legal aid. Does she agree with restoring legal advice in this area? That would help prevent problems from escalating in the first place.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the earlier one intervenes, the better, in all respects.

My third substantive point is the issue of temporary accommodation. This is property rented almost invariably from the private sector, often—although not always—managed by intermediary organisations such as housing associations and procured on behalf of local authorities. I raised a debate about this issue a little over a year ago, particularly looking at my own local circumstance, but the issue is wider than that. Human Rights Watch published a report a few weeks ago on the issue of temporary accommodation: a major human rights organisation felt it necessary to carry out an inquiry and report into the scandal of families and households in temporary accommodation and the conditions in which they are living. That report is utterly devastating. In the London Borough of Westminster, we have people living like this—I will quote from a couple of recent case studies:

"I've lived in this temporary accommodation Since June 2020 and have been under a lot of stress and strain due to my situation...I am infested with cockroaches and mice. As my son is a toddler, I always find him with the traps for...pests and putting them in his mouth. I fear for both his and my health. I have contacted my landlord, who are A2 Dominion"—

it should ashamed of itself—and

"Westminster Housing, and they keep sending pest control...They have sprayed the house but it only made matters worse. Cockroaches are everywhere! They're in my fridge, my bed, my sons cot, within the sofas, just EVERYWHERE! I also have damp in my kitchen wall where there is water between the walls where I have an electrical socket."

Another constituent wrote:

"I am currently in temporary accommodation and the council and housing providers which are A2 dominion"—

a bit of a theme will emerge with A2Dominion—

"are not listening to my concerns...The flat is infested with pharoah ants. They are all over the place. These ants carry bacteria which could harm my baby if they got to her. The ants have crawled on me. Today is the last straw when I saw them on

[*Ms Buck*]

my babies bottles. Pest control came out but never returned and there's more than before... the bedroom is...freezing.... I have to put the heating on all night and that still doesn't help so I've bought an electric heater that I have to put on through the whole night because of how cold the room is, and the electric heater takes so much electric that I can't be affording."

Another wrote:

"This house is riddled with black mould because of the continuous flooding. This has been going on since 2017. Each and every time I have made Westminster aware of the issues, I have been told that it is my fault because I don't keep the property ventilated...It's because I've been continuously flooded. I am forever cleaning black mould off the walls. My health has got worse. So much so, my current midwife is concerned for...my unborn child...I am continuously wheezing and have a dry cough...My eldest son has asthma and always complaining that his chest is hurting him."

Another wrote:

"I actually haven't had any hot water for at least 18 months and have to boil the kettle to have a bath. Why am I living like this in 2022???? Myself and my 18 month old sleep in the front room as the bedroom is too mouldy to sleep in. We have a hole in the ceiling and every time it rains, the water comes through."

The last one wrote:

"I live in a temporary accommodation provided by Westminster council. I reported a leakage and mould problem in February 2021 to the council. The timing...was...terrible because I was undergoing breast cancer treatment so it was necessary for me to be at peace in my home free from...dampness...The reply letter acknowledges that the TA suffers from...damage, mould and disrepairs and even apologises to me yet says I will only be updated once they have more information? I think this matter is...a severe health risk yet the council believes it is...fine to continue sleeping in a mould infested home and have water dripping from the ceiling while you sleep."

I could read 50 cases like that. The chief executive of A2Dominion earned a salary package of £276,000 in 2020, despite being in charge of a stream of those cases. But A2Dominion is not the only one.

It is my strong belief that, in addition to tackling the issues of enforcement and renters' rights, the Government need to take action on the issue of temporary accommodation. The people accommodated there are in accommodation procured by the state. The state should set a higher bar for services than for the remainder of the private rented sector; in fact, it sets a lower bar. I would very much like the Minister, a year since I last raised this, to tell me what the Government are going to do about it.

2.50 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Sir Gary. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing the debate and on his excellent introduction.

As I have said before, if the issues that we debate in this place were guided by the issues that constituents come to see us about, housing would be very near the top of the list and debated far more often than it is. Whether it is tenants facing eviction, or tenants coming back to see me in my constituency surgery for a fourth or fifth time because the damp still has not been fixed, it is clear that we do not have enough housing in the right place, of the right quality or of the right tenure. That is in part because the private rented sector has changed beyond all recognition in recent years and legislation

has not kept pace with those changes. The last piece of comprehensive legislation to affect the private rented sector was over 30 years ago, with the Housing Act 1988. Since then the sector has doubled in size, and that exceptional market growth, made possible by financial incentives for landlords, together with the lack of regulation, has been characterised by insecurity, poor conditions and sky-high prices.

The biggest irony, certainly in my constituency, is that many of these private sector properties were once in public ownership, before they were sold off at a discount rate, allowing many people to own their home for the first time, which is a good thing; but that generation has moved on. Those council houses were not replaced and the first proud home owners have often been usurped by private sector landlords. So we now have the ludicrous situation where in two properties, standing side by side, one tenant will have a much lower rent, much greater security and can usually be confident that any issues they have with the property will be dealt with by the regulated, accountable social landlord, but the other has none of those things. If anything demonstrates the short-term thinking that has guided housing policy for decades, that is it.

In a debate only last week, I described how reliance on the private sector had increased in my constituency due to the chronic lack of affordable and council housing, and how it was now rare to see properties offered at a rental value equivalent to the local housing allowance. A recent search of locally available properties revealed only two within the rental liability that would be covered by the LHA, with others ranging from £30 to over £200 above the required rate.

That is not a sustainable situation. People simply cannot afford to put a roof over their head in that situation, let alone pay for the increasing bills, energy, food and council tax that we hear so much about. But today's debate, as we know, focuses specifically on poor conditions in the private rented sector and rightly so, because private renters live in the poorest-quality homes in this country, with more than one in five properties in the private sector classed as non-decent. That may well be because, in part at least, it accounts for some of the oldest housing stock, with a third of all private rented sector properties built before 1919, so it is not a surprise, perhaps, that on average private rented sector properties have worse energy standards, meaning that the tenants have to pay significantly higher heating bills due to poor insulation, inefficient heating systems or a lack of double glazing. This is important because, as the cost of living crisis starts to bite and energy prices continue to go up, it is private renters, who are already paying higher housing costs, who will be worst affected. Of course, many private rents are higher than mortgage payments and certainly higher than social housing costs. How can we justify that situation?

As we have heard, many constituents have come to their Members of Parliament with issues with their properties. I will give one example: a property that was not watertight, so that the back door leaked every time it rained; pest control issues; electrical issues, with some of the plug sockets not fitted to the wall correctly; and issues with windows sealed shut and others that could not be closed or locked. I am sure we can all agree that that is just a snapshot of the conditions that people have to live with.

Too often, people are scared of raising concerns because of the risk of retaliation by the landlord. As we have heard, tenants who received a section 21 eviction notice were twice as likely to have complained directly to their landlord, five times more likely to have gone to their local authority and eight times more likely to have complained to a redress scheme, prior to receiving their eviction notice, resulting in a staggering 46% chance of their being served with a section 21 notice within six months of the complaint.

I met a couple this weekend who were in that position. They told me that they had been raising disrepair issues with their landlord for five years. When he finally acted, what did he do? He began work on repairs but decided to evict them at the same time. They are now living in temporary accommodation. No wonder people are reluctant to challenge landlords.

For too long, private rental properties have not had the priority they deserve from Government. A need for improvement of renters' position was acknowledged in 2019, and again in the Queen's Speech of 2021. Both committed to bringing forward reforms to drive improvements and standards in the private rented sector but, as we have heard, we are still waiting for those improvements. We were expecting a White Paper last autumn. In reply to my written question on the matter last month, the Minister said that would now be spring. We are now in spring, and I am hoping to hear from the Minister when we might see that White Paper and the Government finally taking the action that many Members want to see.

Housing is a basic human right. Decent and affordable housing has the power to improve people's lives fundamentally and the life chances of children in my constituency and throughout the country. Every day that the Government delay reform is another day that people are living in cold, unsafe, insecure and unaffordable homes. For millions of people, that is an unacceptable situation that has to change, because they deserve better.

2.56 pm

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for calling this important debate. The Minister may be aware that yesterday, at the Select Committee on Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, we heard powerful testimonies from two social housing tenants about similar issues in the private rented sector.

My constituency of Vauxhall, like that of my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), has one of the highest levels of private renters in the country. The average house price in Vauxhall is around £600,000, as of June 2021. Private renters also pay more than their fair share, often spending more than a quarter—in some cases, a third—of their income on rent.

For that cost, the very least my constituents deserve is to live in housing in good condition. That means that the properties they are renting should meet modern standards of insulation and energy efficiency. It means that structural defects should be fixed and not left to cause serious problems. It means that urgent repairs should be carried out rapidly, to a high standard. It means expecting the same standards and efficiency from a landlord that homeowners deserve and have in their own properties.

Too often we see private rented properties not living up to those standards. Instead, we see tenants living with health-damaging features, such as mould, for months if not years. We see requests to fix faults met with sticking-plaster solutions. Although many of us may associate disrepair and poor energy efficiency with our elderly housing stock, those renting new homes and flats are not immune to finding some of the issues that I have talked about. That was the case for my constituent, Louise. She moved into new student accommodation in Vauxhall, as her family home was overcrowded and she wanted space during her time at university. The student accommodation was in a new tower block and Louise moved in soon after it opened in September last year.

Unfortunately, where Louise should have expected a new quality build, she instead found something only half done, according to her description. She says her experience has included being stuck in lifts that did not work, with firefighters coming out to help her; hot water issues; dirty water coming from taps; and tailgaters coming into the building. She said that amenities such as the laundry room were not opened until October, despite her moving in in early September. In addition, the kitchen doors and curtains were all missing.

Louise is far from alone in that experience. It is worth remembering that this is student accommodation, where many are accessing the private rented sector for the first time, and so many are scared to speak up, but continue to live in those substandard conditions. We need to understand that lack of agency when we talk about standards enforcement and ensure that conditions across the board meet the standards that we all expect. First, where standards are in place, as hon. Members have said, local councils' ability to regulate them is drastically undermined by the cuts imposed by central Government. That makes proactive action hard and it means that tenants with so little experience of the private rental sector are unfortunately exploited by unscrupulous landlords. Providing fair funding to local authorities would allow the enforcement bodies to clean up the sector and ensure that those without a voice were not left at the mercy of disrepair.

Secondly, the insecurity at the heart of current private tenancy law goes hand-in-hand with the fears of raising issues with properties and demanding rights as a tenant. Next month, as the Minister knows, will be three years since the Government promised to end section 21 evictions, yet we are still to see that in the renters reform Bill. I hope the Minister will listen to our contributions this afternoon. I know he cares passionately about this area. I hope he will commit to bringing that vital piece of legislation forward as soon as possible to provide that reassurance and, most importantly, the protection that my constituents in Vauxhall deserve and renters up and down the country need.

3.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for setting the scene so very well. He does so with a knowledge and a determination for the change that each and every one of us wishes to see. I will give a Northern Ireland perspective, which the Minister is not responsible for, but will do so in order to back up the hon. Gentleman and the other speakers. It is always a pleasure to speak after the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi).

[*Jim Shannon*]

She and I usually spar in this Chamber. Either she is first and I am second, or vice versa. Today the hon. Lady takes prominence, as she always does.

These are incredibly poignant issues. There are just not enough houses to meet the need in Northern Ireland, and that has meant that people pay high rents for properties that are not fit for purpose, let alone worth the money. In my office there are three massive and critical issues—benefits, housing and planning matters. Every day in my office features housing issues.

Two years ago, the rent for a standard three-bed house in Newtownards, the major town in my constituency, would cost approximately £450—for a nice house in a nice area. Two years on, that same house will now cost at least £750. I was in shock just the other week when a lady came into the office. She is divorced from her husband—separation happens—has three children and was paying £850 for a house. The gas boiler was broken and she could not set the timer. She is in private accommodation because that is all that was available. She had to press the boost button each hour to make it work, in a house in wintertime with three children. The difficulty for her was that she could never get a house with the Housing Executive, which is the equivalent to council housing over here on the mainland, because she and her partner work and they have an income and good health, so there is no way in the world that they will ever qualify for the points to get them a Housing Executive house. It would be the same here.

That is a real problem. They are stuck in a rental house, they cannot get out of that rental house and there is no other accommodation, rental or private rental where they can go, so they find themselves in a very difficult position. My constituent had divorced her husband. Separation happens; not every marriage succeeds and hers unfortunately did not. They did not have enough credit to buy a house, for which a mortgage would have cost her less. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned mortgages and if someone were able to get a mortgage for a house, they might be able to pay less and have something to look towards. Unlike in the constituency of the hon. Member for Vauxhall, the average price of a house in my constituency is £250,000.

My constituent asked if we would contact her landlord to get the heating on in the morning so that her children were not shivering while getting dressed. That is the reality of housing in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland today; every Member has said it, and every other Member who will speak will confirm it. The simple solution on paper for her was to move, and yet she could not find anything large enough or in her price range. She therefore had no option other than to pay the top price for that low-quality housing—I know that this is replicated in too many other constituencies.

The Northern Ireland Assembly report for the Private Tenancies Bill states that

“the private rented sector continues to play a critical role in meeting housing need in NI”.

The latest available data, which is from 2016—hardly up to date—indicates that the private rental sector has taken over from the social housing sector as the second-largest housing tenure. Approximately 17.4% of occupied

dwelling are in the private rental sector, in comparison to the Executive—known as council housing here—which makes up 15.6% of occupied dwellings.

According to the Department for Communities, nearly half of those in the private rental sector are in receipt of some element of housing support. We say this every day in debates, but it does not lessen the issue: the price of energy is going through the roof. Renting is one cost, but then there is gas, electric or oil—whatever it may be. Housing benefit becomes a critical factor for many tenants in my constituency who are in the low-wage bracket and find those costs difficult to deal with. It is either through universal credit or housing benefit that they get help. In 2019-20, some £270 million was paid into the private rental sector, either in housing benefit or through the housing-costs element of universal credit. That tells us a wee bit about the magnitude of the issue we have before us.

The current fitness standard for all housing tenures in Northern Ireland, including private rental sector properties, has been in place since 1992. It is not the Minister's fault, but it is totally unsatisfactory to have a standard set some 30 years ago. The housing fitness standard has been described as a physical standard, but it is arguably very outdated and does not sufficiently address issues such as thermal comfort, energy efficiency or home safety—three critical factors. As people have referred to, there are houses overrun with ants, spiders and insects, so we do need to raise the bar, and raise it soon.

Too many families are living in substandard housing. There is too little legislative weight on landlords to do what they should morally be doing. As we have families faced with high fuel prices, they can little afford to carry out the work that landlords should be carrying out for them. It has occurred to me that we must make it a priority in this House to work on this issue, which is tantamount to the abuse of the vulnerable—those who feel trapped by poverty and circumstance, and by a lack of legal support and redress. I hope that the legal statement that was made today can help; I think the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) referred to that. We hope that the legal changes that have been talked about today may help get legal redress.

I know that the Northern Ireland Assembly are seeking to address this issue back home; we in this House must also ensure that obligations on landlords are a UK-wide standard. The Minister works hard at his job and I respect him, but I will ask him to take the UK-wide approach on board when considering the matter further. People in every corner of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland deserve that protection, regardless of their postcode. The hon. Member for Vauxhall said it was about helping people; I totally agree with that. Our job is to make sure that people's lives can get better. We need to do that.

3.8 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this incredibly important debate. Decent housing should be a basic right for all. The private rental sector has grown significantly over the last decade, but the Government have been incredibly slow in protecting the rights of renters.

The English Housing Survey estimated that 21% of private rental sector homes did not meet the decent homes standard, and 13% of privately rented homes have a serious health hazard. The impact of that on my constituents is huge. Last year I was contacted by a constituent who raised concerns about her privately rented property. Cigarette smoke from other tenants in the block would fill her entire flat, and her five-month-old baby developed a cough that doctors said was directly due to the smoke. Despite raising that with her landlords, and giving them the opportunity to fix the situation, it was not resolved and she was instead asked to tell her neighbours to stop smoking. Eventually she was placed on the housing register, but her private landlord wanted to charge her huge fees just to move out. Minimum standards were clearly not kept up, but with no clear regulation of the private rented sector, the landlords have the power to dictate these fees to the tenant, even when the property is unsuitable for habitation. My constituent also tells me that she was left without hot water for her and her baby for 11 days, without getting any response from her landlords. She has decided to move out of London, her home city, in the hope of finding better, more affordable accommodation.

The Government's inaction on section 21 no-fault evictions is also having a profound effect on my constituents. Despite the Government announcing in 2019 that they would abolish the measure, they are yet to do so. One of my constituents, who is unable to work due to a number of complex health issues, was served with a section 21 notice completely out of the blue, giving her one month to find a property for her and her children. She was told that she would struggle to get social housing and would have to move far away from her local support structures. She wrote to me stating that the whole experience had pushed her to the verge of suicide. I know it is difficult to hear, but policy decisions have a very real effect on the hardest hit. The Government should immediately abolish section 21 and give people security of tenure.

Another constituent who escaped domestic abuse was also served a section 21 notice from her private rented accommodation. She then found herself in appalling conditions. The temporary housing was covered in mould and damp, and there was an infestation of slugs. Instead of having this addressed, she was advised just to find another property. She and her children are now trapped in squalor, and have few or no options. This is a vulnerable family who, if not supported into decent housing, could find themselves back in the path of their abuser. Sadly, her case is not unique.

While the private rented sector is an important part of the housing mix, there has been a lack of urgency from the Government to take action on keeping the sector up to standard, and on giving renters rights. In the absence of such action, I want to mention some of the work that has been done in my constituency. While almost every council has a landlord forum, very few have formalised ways of communicating with private renters. Lewisham Council and others are trying to change this at local level. Lewisham is working with Generation Rent to research how private renters want to be engaged with, and as part of that, Generation Rent has launched a survey and planned focus groups with private renters in the borough. The aim is to provide a link between renters and councils; help the local authority become better informed about the issues

that private renters face and what it can do to support them; and help renters to become more knowledgeable about the council services available to them.

Local authorities cannot fix the system alone. We need a commitment and the energy to drive this forward at national level, yet to date the Government have failed to give councils the powers to deliver landlord licensing, to deliver their planned White Paper on rental reform, and to update the decent homes standard. Sadly, this just reflects the Government's record of kicking renters' rights into the long grass. Every day that the Government delay reform is a day many people spend in cold, dilapidated, hazardous and unaffordable homes. My constituents and many others across the country cannot wait any longer. Rental reform has to be done now, and done right.

I hope that today the Government are listening to all these stories from up and down the country of what people are facing in the private rented sector, and that they will outline when the millions of renters living in terrible conditions will finally be treated fairly.

3.13 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Streeter. I congratulate my good and hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing this important debate. It speaks volumes that, apart from the Minister—to whom I mean no disrespect—and his Parliamentary Private Secretary, no Government Members are present for this debate. They really should be. I do not know if it is an indication that there are no problems in the private rented sector in the constituencies of Government MPs, but this is a really important issue for me and for many Opposition Members.

I know from personal experience that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby, is a long-term advocate of improving housing quality and conditions. Even before he was elected to this House, he very kindly hosted members of my team from Easington, who visited Liverpool in 2018 to discuss and see for themselves how that city's very successful selective private sector rented scheme was improving the community's quality of life. I am grateful for that, because we learned from that scheme.

I will use the little time I have to highlight the issues that affect my constituency in east Durham. I am pleased to note that after many delays and much procrastination by the Government, permission was finally given to Durham County Council to implement a scheme based on the very successful Liverpool model. That scheme will come into effect on 1 April this year. That selective licensing scheme is not a solution, but it is an important tool in the toolbox. I thank Councillor Kevin Shaw, who my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby met during that visit. He is the erstwhile holder of the housing portfolio at Durham County Council, and has always been a champion of driving up standards, tackling homelessness, and the effective regulation of absentee landlords.

This is not an abstract argument. I hope the Minister will take up some of the invitations that have been extended to him, in order to see the impact that absentee landlords have on former mining communities such as Easington Colliery, Horden and Blackhall. That impact

[Grahame Morris]

is really quite sinful, and clearly exposes the Government's myth of levelling up. People living in those private rented properties, which in many cases are former colliery houses, think that term is some kind of joke. Far from levelling up, many people are struggling just to keep up.

When preparing for this debate, I was reflecting on the fact that I served for a number of years on Easington District Council, a local authority that had housing responsibilities. The vision of my predecessors was "farewell to squalor"—an end to squalid housing conditions—and that gave birth to the new town of Peterlee. The idea was that we would never again suffer the appalling conditions that so many families in my constituency were subjected to before the development of that new town.

From the Government's statements and Ministers' responses to debates, it seems as though they measure success on housing policy by new building starts. However, there are multiple facets to, and crises in, the UK housing sector, from a lack of affordable housing stock in overheated economies, such as in parts of London and the south-east, to problems associated with derelict and void properties in the northern regions, in areas such as mine, which are falling into decline and damaging local communities. A number of Members have made positive suggestions; I do not want to elaborate on those, but I hope the Minister will respond to the suggestion about section 21 no-fault evictions, the suggestion from my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) about addressing the issue of poor energy efficiency, and all the other suggestions made. When he responds to my remarks, I would like him to concentrate on the availability of a selective licensing scheme for the private sector.

When these problems were arising, I pointed them out to the Housing Minister. I was just checking how many Housing Ministers there have been since I was first elected in 2010; I think the current Secretary of State for Transport was the Housing Minister then, and there have been 11 or 12 since. Perhaps part of the problem is getting a grip on the portfolio and understanding the depth of the problem. As soon as we feel that we are making some progress with a Minister, they are shuffled, and we have to start all over again. I am not making excuses for the Minister, and I am sure he will respond in his own way.

Seven years ago, I warned the then Housing Minister, the right hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), that the bedroom tax was undermining the viability of social housing in many of my communities, and I pointed out the problems arising in the former mining community of Horden, where Accent Housing, a housing association, withdrew an investment plan after local housing market failure and a collapse in demand, partially because of the bedroom tax undermined demand for certain types of properties in the area. I said that I understood that Accent Housing

"is currently seeking permission from the Homes and Communities Agency to dispose of its properties on the private market, which means that it will put...up...for auction"—[*Official Report*, 11 February 2015; Vol. 592, c. 266WH.]

the whole of its housing stock, amounting to several hundred houses. That meant ownership was fragmented among many private landlords, who bought small parcels

of stock. Instead of dealing with a stock of 500, 600 or 700 houses, we had dozens and dozens of private owners buying three or four properties. I warned then that the consequence would be an influx of absentee private landlords. They are not bad people; I am not suggesting that they are evil. Some have good intentions. They buy these properties, often at auction without even seeing them, to put that investment in their pension portfolio, but the effect has been bad for residents, tenants and the wider community.

I want action from the Government. I fear that their policies have laid the foundations for many of the problems with poor condition of housing stock. There has been decline of local housing demand, increases in the number of derelict and void properties, and a decline in the local quality of life. I have no doubt that the rise in crime and antisocial behaviour has been exacerbated by Government policies, and by the reduction we had in the number of police. I know we are all desperately trying to reverse that, but much of the damage has been done, and it will take a huge commitment and a great deal of time and effort to recover from this position.

Horden is not alone. Many areas, particularly former industrial areas—perhaps including the Minister's constituency—have been blighted by problems and the short-sighted nature of managed decline. My constituency needs significant funding for housing redevelopment and regeneration, so will the Minister stop holding competitions to identify the areas of greatest need? He should take responsibility for the devastation that has been inflicted on communities such as mine, where people have served the nation, including by mining the coal that powered the engines of industry that made Britain great, and they deserve recognition.

In conclusion, I ask the Minister not to join his long list of predecessors in batting aside the criticism. I want him to work with the Labour party Front Benchers, and to visit my community. I want us to work together to create a funding and investment package that will improve my area and others. I want an investment package that will really deliver on the levelling-up promise. We want an end to meaningless rhetoric.

3.23 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne), who campaigns tirelessly to try to find ways in which we can lift people out of poverty. They suffer, through no fault of their own, because the system is rigged against them. I especially pay tribute to his work fighting for a legal right to food, so that no families or children go hungry in the fifth richest economy on the planet.

We had a fantastic debate on supported housing recently in the Chamber. A number of my colleagues spoke and exposed the racket in the housing sector. I hope in my brief comments to suggest a few ways in which the Government could begin to put things into reverse.

The private rented sector is booming in this country—and in Liverpool; it accounts for 32% of all housing stock across the city, and in at least one third of council wards, the proportion is approaching 50%. Liverpool, Walton, which I represent, is ranked as the most deprived constituency in the whole of England. My office is

overwhelmed by constituents coming to me and my staff for help because the places where they live are blighted by damp, mould, cold, or vermin.

Kim Leadbeater (Batley and Spen) (Lab): I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate due to other commitments. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just those in private rented accommodation who find themselves trapped in totally unacceptable conditions—many of which we have heard about today? People such as Janice Dawson and her husband, in my constituency, can be forced to live in damp and unhealthy leasehold properties because management companies fail for years to carry out essential repairs, despite repeated promises to do so.

Dan Carden: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right, and that problem is found not just in leaseholds, but in supported housing and housing association homes. In every sector that we look at, there is too little regulation and funding to put those issues right.

When my constituents come to me with those issues of damp, mould, cold and vermin, they are ignored by their unscrupulous landlords. The overstretched local authority, which is supposed to attempt to enforce the few housing standards that we have, is doing so with ever-dwindling resources because of more than a decade of austerity cuts. We should not underestimate the constant, crushing, dehumanising misery that squalid housing conditions cause people and families. The local authority has made tackling those problems a priority in recent years, especially in the private rented sector, but needs urgent support, which the Government have failed to deliver.

In 2015, Liverpool City Council introduced the UK's first city-wide landlord licensing scheme, which my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) saw in operation. Since its introduction, 70% of inspected properties have been found to be in breach of their licence conditions. Some 37,000 compliance actions were carried out, 2,500 legal and fixed penalty notices were issued, and almost 250 landlords were prosecuted. In practical terms, that meant improving the lives of tenants, making electrics safe, installing fire doors, eradicating damp and preventing illegal evictions. In other words, the scheme worked.

What did the Government do when Liverpool City Council applied for a new licensing scheme in 2019? It rejected the application—a huge blow for residents. Only after numerous resubmissions have we found out that the scheme can be reintroduced in April. However, this time, it will apply to only 80% of the city's wards, because of a diktat from Whitehall. That will undermine the city council's ability to enforce standards across the region, and tenants will suffer as a result.

In the light of a near 65% cut in Government funding to Liverpool's core budget since 2010, Ministers must look at how they can do more to support local authorities that want to ensure that residents have security, dignity and comfort in their home. The Government must rescind the damaging relaxation of permitted development rights and return those powers to local government, too. Ministers should turn their attention to what could be done to support the creation of flourishing communities

that support the health and wellbeing of their residents, not least by implementing comprehensive national housing standards.

In recent months and years, I have been working with the Town and Country Planning Association to seek to introduce a healthy homes Act, which would effectively outlaw the slums of the future. We need robust new measures to hold landlords and developers to account. A significant barrier to effective action is the radical imbalance in access to Government among interest groups. We cannot tackle the housing crisis without tackling the undue influence that property developers have over Government policy. A recent report by Transparency International UK found that although property tycoons have an open door into Whitehall, tenants are shut out. Given that private renters make up one in five of all households across Britain, their absence from policy making is conspicuous. It warps the process in favour of vested interests.

At a recent Public Accounts Committee hearing on the regulation of private renting, I made sure that ACORN, the community and tenants' union, was invited to give evidence. I wonder if the Minister has ever met with that union. The testimony provided to the Committee by ACORN'S representative was powerful and is too rarely heard. I urge the Minister to tell us what he plans to do to address that imbalance and ensure that tenants are given a seat at the table.

3.32 pm

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Gary. This has been, I think, an incredibly important debate about an issue that really does not get enough attention in this place but which is of huge and growing importance to many of our constituents, not least given the size of the private rented sector and its ongoing—and, indeed, accelerating—expansion.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) on securing the debate and on the way he opened it. As always, he spoke with great force and sincerity on behalf of his constituents, and brought alive the reality of the appalling conditions faced by far too many of those renting privately.

Following his impassioned remarks, we heard a series of incredibly powerful contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Westminster North (Ms Buck), for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi), for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), for Easington (Grahame Morris) and for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Their contributions were all directly informed by their respective constituency experiences and the obviously huge housing caseloads each of them deals with on a weekly basis.

It is not in dispute that some of the worst standards in housing are in the private rented sector. It goes without saying that that statement should not be taken to imply that every privately rented property is in bad condition, or that all private landlords fail their tenants. I also fully accept—no doubt it will be referenced in the remarks the Minister's officials have prepared for him—that, measured by either the decent homes standard or the housing health and safety rating system category 1 hazards, the absolute number and proportion of poor

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

quality private rented homes continues to fall, albeit steadily rather than drastically, as part of a half century if not longer of improvement in housing standards.

There is still clearly an acute problem for those private sector tenants who are the most vulnerable, have little or no purchasing power, are increasingly concentrated at the lower end of the private rental market and—as anecdotal evidence would suggest—are also increasingly concentrated geographically. However, we still need the Department to provide accurate data on precisely how private rented homes are distributed across the country.

As we have heard from all speakers today, for tenants forced to live in homes that do not meet the decent homes standard and that often have a category 1 hazard what should be a place of refuge and comfort is instead a source of daily anxiety and, in many cases, torment and misery. Whether they wake up every day to mould, vermin or dangerous hazards, today's debate has provided yet more evidence that substandard private rented housing takes a huge toll on the physical and mental health of those in it and prevents families and children—it is this I find the most saddening—from flourishing as they should be able to.

I know the Under-Secretary cares deeply about improving housing standards and life chances, but it should be a real source of shame to him and his colleagues that after 12 years of Conservative-led Government, one in five homes in the private rented sector still does not meet the decent homes standard and one in 10 has a category 1 hazard posing a risk of serious harm. The Minister and his colleagues should be agitating week in, week out for the changes necessary to bear down decisively on this problem, and for those changes to be enacted as a matter of urgency. What makes the situation all the more frustrating is that it is patently obvious what the required changes are and, indeed, there is broad consensus across the House on most of them.

I leave aside the more fundamental issue of a striking lack of decent, secure and genuinely affordable social homes to rent, which is in many ways at the heart of the problem, and will instead use the time left to explore in a little more detail the three most important areas where change in the private rented sector is required: standards, enforcement and rights. Each has already featured in the debate.

First, on standards, a technical but crucial issue is that the Government need to review and strengthen national standards for rented homes, and to do so at pace. The decent homes standard, which provides for general benchmarking, has not been updated since 2006. It is welcome that it is being reviewed, but the process needs to be expedited. Will the Minister tell us when the Government expect the decent homes standard review to complete? The HHSRS is also under review and we need the conclusions of that exercise to be published as soon as possible. Will the Minister give us an update on when he expects that review to complete?

My final point on standards is that, in the levelling-up White Paper, the Government committed to exploring “proposals for new minimum standards for rented homes”.

Obviously, we have no issue with that in principle, but will the Minister give us some sense of how such minimum standards would interact with the updated decent homes

standard and the HHSRS? The last thing we need is to make the current regime even more complex and challenging to administer.

Secondly, the Government must start taking enforcement more seriously. A number of contributors have talked about the importance of enforcement. The Minister could emerge from Marsham Street in a month's time with proposals for the most robust set of national standards possible, but it would count for little if those standards could not then be enforced in practice. As my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North mentioned, two changes need to be made if the Government are to facilitate the proper enforcement of standards across the country.

The first is to give local authorities the means to enforce standards properly themselves. At present, enforcement of standards across the country is incredibly patchy and tenants face a postcode lottery as a result. Those councils that could do more with the resources they have but are not need to be encouraged to do so, but the problem in large part is the product of central Government funding cuts over many years. Does the Minister accept as much? If so, what plans do the Government have to provide local authorities with the funding and support they need to enforce regulations, as well as enabling, rather than frustrating, those authorities that wish to adopt landlord licensing schemes?

The second change is to enable tenants themselves to enforce standards. I appreciate that the issue lies outside of the Minister's departmental responsibilities, but does he accept that unless legal aid is reintroduced for disrepair claims so that lower income tenants can seek to enforce existing standards—let alone future standards—progress on his objectives is likely to be held back?

Thirdly, the Government must act now to give renters more rights and better protection, so that they can seek redress for poor quality conditions and disrepair without fear of retribution. There is clear consensus across the House that we need to overhaul the outdated legislation that applies to the private rented sector. However, it is now three years since the Conservative Administration of the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) promised to abolish section 21 no-fault evictions. There has been a lot of talk about the White Paper today but, perhaps most disappointingly, we were promised a renter's reform Bill in the Queen's Speech last year yet as we approach the end of the Session, not only is there no sign of that Bill but we are now told to expect a White Paper in its place in the spring.

Of course, we need to ensure that any proposals for reform are considered and properly scrutinised, but tenants need protection now. They cannot afford to wait 12, 16, 18, 24 months or longer for the White Paper to be published and consulted on and for legislation to be brought forward. Given the implications for tenants suffering now, I would like to hear from the Minister why, having committed to a Bill in this Session, the Government have now determined that a White Paper will do instead.

To conclude, the House must act to improve conditions for the millions of private renters trapped in substandard housing, and must act quickly. Tenants living in squalid conditions cannot wait years while the Government slowly analyse yet more reviews and engage in more consultations and delay. We know what needs to happen; it is now a question of delivering it. I look forward to

hearing from the Minister that the Government are not only seized by the urgency of the problem but, as a result, will look again at how the changes that need to be made can be enacted quickly.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I remind the Minister to leave three minutes at least for Ian Byrne to wind up.

3.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. Given that I have a bit of a cold, it might be easier for me to conclude two or three minutes early, to give my voice a rest. I thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) for securing this debate on the quality of housing, which is an issue that affects us all. Although I appreciate that there has been no representation from the Government side, I like to reflect that that might be because my colleagues have faith in the Minister responsible and the forthcoming promise of legislation, but that will be for others to judge.

We have discussed standards in the private rented sector. I am delighted that the opportunity has arisen, because we have ambitious plans to create a vibrant private rented sector that is safe, healthy and fit for purpose. During the debate, we have heard a wealth of expertise and experience from across the House. Although I appreciate that we are on different sides of the House, I like to think we are on the same side of the argument. I share others' determination to address these problems.

I start by reiterating our commitment to drive up standards in the private rented sector. Good quality housing can help to improve a wide range of outcomes, including health, quality of life and educational attainment. Since 2004, landlords have had to ensure that their properties are free from the most serious category 1 hazards, those that pose an imminent risk to tenants' health. In 2016, we strengthened local authorities' enforcement powers to deal with hazardous properties by introducing financial penalties of up to £30,000, extending rent payment orders and introducing banning orders for the most serious and prolific offenders. Councils have been using those powers.

I fully appreciate that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), says that the Government are not spending enough, but I think the examples I give show that some councils are doing that. He described the provision as patchy, which is unfortunate and certainly something the Government would like to address, but there are definitely examples of good practice.

Enforcement action by Burnley Borough Council over the past two years, for example, has netted fines and costs of more than £85,000. This year, Bristol City Council banned a landlord for letting or managing properties for five years after it found he was running a seriously unsafe house, with 18 tenants, including six children. At the height of the pandemic in 2020, when people were spending so much more time in their homes, we increased safety further by requiring landlords to ensure that electrics in properties were safe. Local councils have also been using powers we gave them to do that. Fenland District Council has fined four landlords £25,000 for dangerous electrics. We are amending regulations to make it mandatory for both social and private landlords

to instal a carbon monoxide alarm in any room used as living accommodation where a fixed combustion appliance of any fuel type is used.

There has been a marked improvement in standards in the private rented sector. The proportion of homes in the sector with category 1 hazards has halved since 2010. However, as the shadow Minister pointed out, 12% of homes in the sector still contain serious hazards. It is not good enough, so I need to talk about what we will do.

The levelling-up White Paper outlined a set of ambitious missions to level up the country and support our communities. On housing quality, the Government set our ambition to half the number of non-decent rented homes by 2030, with the biggest improvements in the lowest-performing areas. We have committed to consult on introducing a legally binding decent home standards in the private rented sector. We are working with a range of experts to review the housing, health and safety rating system risk assessment tool, which forms part of the decent home standards. That will make it more efficient and effective for local authorities to use and more accessible for tenants and landlords.

We are exploring a register of private rented properties so that local councils can identify where to target their enforcement and leave the good landlords alone. We are also committed to requiring all private landlords to belong to a redress scheme to drive up standards further and ensure all tenants have a right to redress. As have been said, we will abolish no-fault evictions, which will mean tenants who complain about poor standards are protected from revenge evictions. We will publish our landmark White Paper later this spring, which I understand technically starts on 20 March, so I hope very soon.

Let me turn to the issues that Members have raised. I appreciate it is slightly outside the course of the debate, but the social rented sector was mentioned by a few Members. We had the social housing White Paper, the charter for social housing residents. The regulator for social housing and the housing ombudsman have not needed to wait for us to introduce legislation to become more muscular in their interactions with the problems they face. The housing ombudsman has seriously increased its number of staff, as has the housing regulator. As we prepare for legislation, I am in constant contact with them both to ensure that they will have the powers that they need, but they already have the staff they need to carry out that level of enforcement.

A number of people mentioned the problems with mould in the socially rented sector, which was deplorable. Following the report published by the housing ombudsman, we do not have the presumption that it is the tenant's fault—a lifestyle choice on their part—that causes damp, so we are already seeing steps in the right direction in advance of any legislation.

On the items listed by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I share the frustration with section 21. Clearly, that will be fundamental in the White Paper. It seems deplorable that people could be concerned about reporting dangerous items in their property to their landlord with that fear hanging over them. We have consulted widely. I share the concerns of others and that will be fundamental to our reforms.

Jim Shannon: The shadow Minister clearly said that there are landlords who are doing the job right, but there are those who do not. Is it the Minister's intention to bring those people up to the standard of those who

[*Jim Shannon*]

do it right? Owning rented accommodation is not a cash cow; it is more than that. There is an obligation to look after their tenant. Will the standard be those good owners of rental accommodation?

Eddie Hughes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It was raised by another Member with regard to the balance of power between tenants and landlords. For too long, the power has rested more fundamentally with landlords and we need to redress that balance to bring the standards of the worst up to the standards of the good, and we need to accept that that might mean that some landlords will exit the sector. If they have been providing a particularly poor service and poor quality accommodation, the sector will be better for their absence from it. That is why we are consulting on a decent homes standard for the PRS. Unfortunately, I am not able to say when that work will be concluded, other than in due course, but we are working closely with stakeholders to make sure that the review gives us an appropriate basis for legislation in the future.

I completely accept that there have been problems previously with the selective licensing across Liverpool. My understanding of the situation is that there were some statutory problems with the application. I appreciate that it might have been an administrative-type problem, but at least we are there now. I am an enthusiastic consultee with regard to the idea of a landlords' register, because it would be incredibly helpful for all councils to know where their private rented landlords are, and it would help them focus whatever resources they have more specifically.

Grahame Morris: This is not a one-way Streeter—sorry, street even for the tenants. There are certain advantages for landlords of such a scheme being adopted, which I understand will happen in County Durham in two weeks' time, based on the excellent scheme that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) was promoting.

Eddie Hughes: It is great to hear about good work that is going on across the country, and I fully accept that we can learn from the work that other areas are doing.

I quickly want to cover a few more points. The hon. Member for Vauxhall (Florence Eshalomi) mentioned Louise's case. I would be grateful if she would write to me, so I can pick up that case, because we need to be concerned about standards in all forms of accommodation, and student accommodation is one of them. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised working with devolved assemblies. One of the things I have been working on is the new homes ombudsman, who will ensure the new properties we build are of an appropriate quality. We have been working very closely with the devolved Assemblies on that issue, and we will continue to do so in other areas.

I am grateful for the invitation from the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) to visit. I hope there is no reshuffle before I get the opportunity to get out and about more, to say the least. With regard to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), when we are talking about insecurity and poor quality

housing, I hope that work to abolish section 21 will address both those points because tenants will have more security and more leverage to complain about the standards of accommodation they are being provided with.

Matthew Pennycook: The one question I would like the Minister to answer before he wraps up is why the Government have decided to replace a commitment to a renters reform Bill in this Session with a White Paper. Can he guarantee that we will get that comprehensive renters reform Bill in this Parliament?

Eddie Hughes: It would be fair to say that I will do everything I can. I feel personally invested in ensuring that happens. On the delay, I am not sure this is the legitimate answer the Government expect me to give, but we have been through two years of covid, and I have seen—we are seeing it now with the situation in Ukraine—that a number of staff have to pivot to the most pressing item that the Government are dealing with. We have a finite number of staff, and clearly covid has caused incredible challenges for the Government. I personally feel that they have responded well, but I understand the frustration. I conclude by saying that the debate has been incredibly useful for me—

Ms Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Eddie Hughes: I do not have time to give way; I need to give the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby time to wrap up. I remain open and will continue the conversation with hon. Members should they wish to take that opportunity.

3.54 pm

Ian Byrne: It is clear from the contributions to the debate that the message is loud and clear: for so many, the system is unfair and unjust, and it leaves so many tenants living in fear, squalor and genuine worry about what the future holds for them and their families. We should think of this statistic when we leave this place today and we should think of it every day: poor housing can knock 20 years off somebody's life. That is something that we should never forget. It is what should drive all of us in this Parliament.

I welcome the passionate contributions today from my fellow Members—the debate has been excellent—and from the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I also welcome the Minister's commitment. I know that he genuinely wants to drive social justice through the Bill that we are talking about. I welcome his commitment on abolishing section 21 and his acknowledgement that current landlord licensing is patchy. We will see what is in the White Paper when it eventually comes. I look forward to working with the Minister in driving that. I hope that he redresses the situation and that we get a landlord licence scheme rolled out nationally, because licensing works and would make such a difference.

I thank everybody very much for taking the time to participate today. I really hope that the Minister does remember the 20-year fact, because deeds are far more important than words.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered poor quality conditions and disrepair in private rented sector housing.

BBC Accountability and Transparency

3.57 pm

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Gregory Campbell will move the motion and then the Minister will respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate, as is the convention for 30-minute debates, so the Minister will have the final word.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered BBC accountability and transparency to Government and licence fee payers.

The BBC traditionally was a world-leading news and current affairs broadcaster—paid for, of course, by the licence fee. When I have raised issues such as the one that I will raise today, the Government have said that it is for the BBC to deal with how it allocates and spends our licence fee moneys. I understand and accept that. The problem is that when I and others raise very important issues such as the lack of transparency and the lack of accountability and I and others go to places such as our regional BBC, we do not get answers. Then we come to BBC London and we do not get answers. Then we go to the National Audit Office and we do not get answers. Then we go to Ofcom and we do not get answers. The buck has to stop somewhere, and eventually the buck stops with the Government, Parliament and all of us who, on the public's behalf, have to try to hold the BBC to account.

A few years ago, as the Minister and others will remember, we had the term “on-screen talent”, which sometimes is a misnomer. There was an issue about the on-screen talent having huge salaries about which no one knew anything. I and others campaigned long and hard to get those salaries brought into the public domain. We all remember programmes in which publicly paid broadcasters were asking us as MPs how we allocated our overheads and how we spent our salaries, how we divvied up our salaries. On rare occasions, Ministers would say, “Just hang on a minute, Mr Dimbleby. How do you spend your money, given that you get it from the licence fee?” Unfortunately, very few people did that, although some of us did. The BBC is very good at asking questions, but it is not very good at answering them. That eventually worked its way through and the BBC now has a banding process whereby it announces the salaries of on-screen talent in certain bands, which is some progress but not sufficient.

Then, on the topic of accountability, we moved on to the issue of outside interests. That resulted in the BBC putting an external events register on their website 18 months ago. I quote:

“As announced in October 2020, the BBC will publish a quarterly summary of the paid-for external events undertaken by on-air staff in journalism and senior leaders, in order to promote the highest standards of impartiality.”

That sounds very good.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on having secured this debate. He has mentioned two issues in relation to wages and others, but he also referred to impartiality. Does my hon. Friend agree that people are now aware that the political agenda of the BBC is premium, and while we have heard about the revamp of attitude, we have seen little fruit?

The BBC's coverage of the Democratic Unionist party—my party and that of my hon. Friend—before the election has been pointed and, indeed, pointedly detrimental. Does he agree that this is an indication that the culture in the BBC remains the same—biased, bitter carping by too many producers?

Mr Campbell: Indeed. On many occasions, a stark contrast can be seen between the interruptions, constant bickering and trying to misinterpret what is being said by certain of us, and the kid gloves used with others.

For that external events register, the BBC initially put out two columns: if a presenter was undertaking external tasks, they were either paid under £5,000 or over £5,000. That is not really much of a guide, because we do not know whether that person got £25 for speaking at an event or £4,995. The BBC then relented under some pressure, and there are now four categories: under £1,000, between £1,000 and £5,000, between £5,000 and £10,000, and over £10,000. That is an improvement, but unfortunately the BBC has to be dragged into making these simple changes, almost like bringing it from the latter part of the previous century into the 21st century. A simpler approach would be for the BBC to say at the end of the year how much every presenter who undertakes external appointments earned in total—did they earn £565, £10,400, or much more? That would be a much simpler approach, because there are hundreds of these references in the BBC's register.

I will now move to an issue that is even more significant than external events: the commissioning of programmes for the BBC. In Northern Ireland and across the UK, we have a flourishing independent media sector. It is right and proper that we help to promote the people—young people in particular, but others as well—who establish small independent companies and want to get products from those companies on to either commercial radio and television, or BBC radio and television, because that is where the next generation of media producers, backroom people and camera people will all eventually come from. However, that small independent sector comes up against a huge brick wall, because in some regions of the BBC, there are BBC personnel who have “independent” companies of their own. They apply for commissioning contracts and, remarkably, are very successful in getting them.

That is very good if there is a level playing field—if independents can apply for those contracts, and people who work for the BBC can also apply for them. The problem is that the level playing field does not remain level. There are a small number of BBC personnel who have their own companies and, when they get contracts and a programme emerges on the BBC, can then use their own programme to advertise their privately commissioned programme that is on that evening. We have all repeatedly heard things like, “You may want to tune in at 10.35 tonight, when there is a programme on”, and then the next day when the BBC presenter is on, someone gets in touch and says, “I really enjoyed your television programme last night.” Yes, a programme paid for by us, the licence fee payers, and advertised freely on the BBC to the disadvantage of independent media companies that merely want to operate on a level playing field.

The issue has not been resolved. After holding numerous meetings with the BBC, the NAO and Ofcom, I was told that an additional safeguard would be brought in

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

to protect and safeguard against any abuse of the system. That happened three years ago, in 2019. If there was a commissioning process that was open to all and sundry to apply for, and an internal BBC person with their own company applied for it and was successful in getting through the various stages, there would be a further stage of approval before the awarding of the contract and that person received the commission.

That further stage is an internal stage. The regional head of the BBC looks at the application—from a person that he or she knows, because that person is in his or her employ, and has received numerous commissions in the past. They have to rubber-stamp the application.

We are led to believe that that is a further safeguard. I do not think so. It is not independent; it is not transparent; and it certainly does not stand up to scrutiny. It has been in place for three years. Obviously, we have had the pandemic for two of those years, so we are unaware of the success or otherwise of that safeguard. I have watched closely and have seen the same small number of internal BBC employees receive a similar number of successful contracts since the safeguard was in place, so the BBC needs to answer the questions.

I hope the Minister can raise these important matters with the BBC. As we all know, there is an ongoing issue. The Secretary of State has made it clear that the BBC will have questions to answer and that, as we go into the future, there is a severe question mark over the licence fee—we understand that—but people are angry and annoyed that they pay for a service that they either do not receive, do not want or cannot opt out of. If they watch or listen to any live BBC broadcast, they are automatically liable to pay the BBC licence fee.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is giving a brilliant speech. I agree wholeheartedly with his points on accountability and transparency. He is alluding to the issue of value for money from the BBC. Many of my constituents have long felt that the BBC does not offer value for money. In a deprived constituency such as mine, they question the licence fee and whether they should pay what is essentially a regressive tax. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Mr Campbell: I do indeed. There is a rising tide of resentment, particularly when the public see matters on the BBC that seem to be quite partisan, whether locally, nationally or internationally. We can look back through the pandemic; we can look at the middle east; we can look at a whole series of incidents.

I remember the infamous time with the BBC's North American correspondent when President Trump was first elected. At the very first press conference in the White House, the incoming President, for all his faults, said to the North American correspondent, "Who are you with?" He said, "The BBC," and the President said, "Another winner." That North American correspondent never forgot that put-down. Every time I saw him on at the White House, there would be a disparaging reference to the Trump Administration. Unsurprisingly, I have seen very little by way of disparaging references to the current incumbent of the White House—comparatively few, if any. I agree with the comments of the hon. Member

for Blackpool South (Scott Benton). The tension and annoyance of the general public rises when they see events and incidents like that on the BBC.

I ask the Minister to raise these matters with the BBC, because we are talking about public money. There is a system in place that some of us have tried to work within. We know that the BBC is accountable for that money. We have tried regionally; we have tried nationally; we have gone to Ofcom; we have gone to the NAO—but the rationale is slow and intractable, and the BBC is slow to get to the point it should have come to automatically. It should not have had to be dragged to this point—it should have embraced it—but there is a reluctance at the heart of those in the BBC to adopt these structures.

I ask the Minister to enter into his response to the debate with an open mind and an open heart and to endeavour to take these matters up when there are discussions with the BBC, in order that the public, and all of us who occasionally or frequently watch the BBC, can rest more assured that the BBC is accountable to us who pay their very wages.

4.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nigel Huddleston): It is an honour, again, to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) for securing the debate and for the many important points he, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Scott Benton) have raised. I know all three are frequent commentators on BBC performance, and I know that the hon. Member for East Londonderry has had conversations with my colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I will make sure they are aware of the issues he has raised today. My colleagues and I regularly meet the BBC and will be happy to raise the hon. Gentleman's points.

He is absolutely right; this debate, and the success he has had on the points he has raised, show that the BBC is accountable, as he said so clearly and eloquently, to Parliament, and to the public and the licence fee payers. That is really important and the hon. Gentleman made the point clearly.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister continue to raise the issue of the complaints mechanism process with the BBC? In the last year for which figures are available, 2020-21, there were almost half a million audience complaints to the BBC about content. Eighteen resulted in a partially upheld or an upheld complaint. That is a woefully inadequate complaints process, when it results in such a low number of upheld complaints.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I know that he raised that issue with my colleagues at DCMS, including the Secretary of State. He raises important points. Addressing complaints is an important part of the responsiveness that the BBC can show, and the respect it can show to the public, as well as to Parliament. I will make sure that his point is reiterated—I know he has raised it before.

As the Secretary of State has said, the BBC is a global British brand. The Government want the BBC to continue to thrive in the decades to come, and to be a beacon for news and the arts around the world.

There are many things the Government support about the BBC. At this time, I want to draw particular attention to the work the BBC has been doing in relation to the conflict in Ukraine. The value of the BBC to people across the globe can be seen in the brave and admirable work of many BBC journalists who are risking their lives to bring us unbiased and accurate news from a live war zone in Ukraine.

However, the Government have also been clear that there are areas where we want to see the BBC do better. That includes the BBC's approach to openness and transparency, which is the matter for discussion today. The BBC's royal charter, underpinned by a more detailed framework agreement, guarantees the BBC's current model, as an independent, publicly owned, public service broadcaster.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South raised the issue of value for money. On 17 January, the Secretary of State announced in Parliament that the licence fee would be frozen for the next two years and would rise in line with inflation for the following four years. This settlement aims to support households at a time when they need that support the most and sends an important message about keeping costs down and giving the BBC what it needs to deliver to fulfill its remit. The BBC will continue to receive around £3.7 billion in annual public funding, allowing it to deliver its mission and public purposes and to continue doing what it does best. We recognise the important point about money that the hon. Gentleman raised.

The charter also requires the BBC to act in the public interest; to observe high standards of openness; and to seek to maximise transparency and accountability. The public has a right to expect the BBC, as a public service broadcaster, to be open and transparent. The Government believe that this focus on transparency and accountability is a key obligation for the BBC and essential to maintaining public trust. That is why, for example, the Government now require the BBC to publish salary details of all BBC staff paid over £150,000, which was done for the first time in the BBC's annual report back in 2016-17. The public deserve to know how their licence fee is being spent.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry mentioned the issue of the external events register. In 2020, the BBC announced it would publish a quarterly summary of the paid-for external events undertaken by on-air staff in journalism and by senior leaders in order to promote the high standards of impartiality. The first quarter to be published covered January to March 2020-21. The Government welcome the publication of this information and it is an important example of how the BBC can increase its openness and transparency.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that perhaps he can chalk this up as a success. It looks as if the BBC has already moved to be even more open in the characterisation. I hope that is a step in the right direction and shows that the BBC is listening and has heard the points raised by him and others and will take action. I understand his frustration at having to labour those points, but I think this shows that movement in the right direction can be made.

As we know, unfortunately, the BBC has fallen short in the past in a number of ways. Lord Dyson's report last year into the "Panorama" interview with Princess Diana shed light on the serious consequences incurred

when the BBC does not meet the high standards of integrity and transparency which we expect from a public service broadcaster. Lord Dyson found that the BBC's broadcast coverage was not open in regard to what the BBC knew about its own activities or transparent enough in response to questions from the press.

The BBC has clearly made progress since the 1990s, when the interview took place. The subsequent review by Sir Nicholas Serota into the BBC's editorial process, governance and culture found that the BBC was much more open and accountable than it was 25 years ago, but that more could still be done. The Serota review also uncovered a persisting culture of defensiveness at the BBC, especially around admitting mistakes. The review also noted that, as a publicly-funded organisation in a society that is increasingly open, the BBC must further identify opportunities to enhance transparency.

This view is also held by Ofcom, the independent regulator of the BBC. Ofcom has consistently called for the BBC to be more transparent in how it explains its decisions to the public, engages with industry on proposed changes to its services, and in its reporting. Ofcom's most recent annual report on the BBC's performance noted that it has seen some improvements in recent years, but more needs to be done. We support Ofcom's view that it is critical that the BBC holds itself accountable by clearly setting out how it will implement its strategies, measure their success and report on their effectiveness.

The Government have therefore welcomed the BBC's acceptance of the Serota review's findings and recommendations in full and the BBC's publication of its 10-point impartiality and editorial standards action plan. We see this as an essential step in driving culture change at the BBC.

We also welcome recent announcements that the BBC will be carrying out the first of its thematic editorial reviews under the plan of its coverage of taxation and UK public spending. This will be chaired by Sir Andrew Dilnot and Michael Blastland, and the Government look forward to publication of the review this summer.

Mr Campbell: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive nature of his response. In the concluding part of his response, will he detail the issue that I raised towards the end of my speech in relation to the commissioning of programmes, which is an important part of the debate?

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reiterating that point. I will come to it in a moment.

Looking further ahead, the Government will shortly begin the mid-term review of the BBC charter, which will consider the overall governance and regulation of the BBC. A key part of that review will be whether the BBC plans for reform have materially contributed to improving the organisation's internal governance.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the point about commissioning, and in that context he highlighted the incredibly successful Northern Ireland independent production sector, and the overall film and TV production sector in Northern Ireland, which I know; I have managed to visit it a couple of times. It is absolutely incredible—world class—both in front of and behind the camera, which is why so many productions are based there. It is a really important sector, and commissioning and the commissioning process is vital.

[Nigel Huddleston]

According to Ofcom's annual report on the BBC for 2020-21, published in November last year, the BBC has confirmed it is on track to meet the charter requirements on commissioning—64% of television, 53% of radio and 59% of online opportunities were open to competition. Ofcom notes that progress towards the targets this year has not been as significant as in other years, and in the case of online the percentage of content that is contested decreased. For TV and radio programming, Ofcom understands that the smaller increase is due to the BBC putting some of its plans for competitive tendering on hold due to the impact of covid-19. I will ensure that my colleagues in the BBC hear the other comments that the hon. Gentleman raised earlier. I am sure that they will keep a close eye on the record in *Hansard*.

Richard Sharp, the chairman of the BBC, has said:

“Trust is the foundation of the BBC's relationship with audiences and it is more important now than ever.”

I agree. It is for this reason that it is more necessary than ever to rebuild and maintain trust in the BBC among those who have lost it. The BBC has made promising steps towards greater transparency and accountability, but there is more to be done. The Government will continue to work closely with the BBC to ensure that it remains trusted and valued by audiences in the UK and across the world for many years to come.

Question put and agreed to.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

Welsh Local Authorities

4.27 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role of Welsh local authorities in delivering public services and economic development.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Sir Gary, and to be able to speak about the record of Welsh local government in delivering public services and economic development. It is a particular honour to do so after two hard years of the covid-19 pandemic, in which local government teams across Wales, not least in my own two local authorities of Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan, have played a critical role in supporting their local communities and in adapting on the hoof to maintain services during some of the most testing times that we have seen for decades.

We have also seen the very best of partnership and co-operative working—I am proud to say that as a Labour and Co-operative MP, and I spoke about the issue in this place not so long ago—with central Government and a range of other bodies, from our local health boards to our schools, care services, police and other rescue services. I can say, hand on heart, that I was deeply moved at a number of points during the pandemic to see councillors, officers and staff at every level working 24/7 to ensure that no one, from our children to the most vulnerable, was left behind. When we look back on this period, I have no doubt that many will conclude that it was their finest hour.

Let me point above all to one key principle: that of co-constructing services in partnership with the Welsh Government and other key stakeholders. That was best exemplified by the success of the test, trace, protect system in Wales. Compared with the complex, expensive and, I am sorry to say, failing system that we saw at times on the England-Wales border, the TTP system was more efficient and effective and, crucially, substantially cheaper. Independent analysis carried out last year by Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre showed that the cost of personal protective equipment and test and trace in England was almost twice as expensive as that of their equivalents in Wales. The report estimated that the cost of PPE and the devolved elements of the test and trace system in Wales was £533 million. The Wales Governance Centre's analysis showed how that was approximately half the amount of consequential costs stemming from English spending on test and trace and PPE, which stood at over £1 billion. Those costs were £158 lower per person in Wales than they were in England.

We all know that buried on page 199 of the recent annual report of the UK Government's Department of Health and Social Care was the disclosure that it had incurred £8.7 billion of losses on the £12.1 billion spent on PPE in 2021. That is a truly shocking waste of taxpayers' money. I urge the Government genuinely to reflect on how that money could have been used more productively and effectively had the collaborative approach taken in Wales been used across England. When we look at the financial headlines, we also see success when it comes to local government in Wales. Instead of hollowing out and decimating local government, we have seen a revaluing of the crucial services, expertise and local knowledge that local government delivers.

The Welsh Government have provided a 9.4% uplift in funding overall, which in difficult fiscal times is a testament to the value placed on local government in Wales and, crucially, its hard-working staff. Next year, local authorities in Wales will receive £5.1 billion from the Welsh Government in core revenue funding and non-domestic rates to spend on delivering key services. That means supporting our councils with an additional £750 million to provide the critical services that Wales relies on, such as schools, social care, recycling and so on. That equates to an increase of 9.4% across Wales, or £437 million on a like-for-like basis compared with the current year, and no local authority in Wales will receive less than an 8.4% increase, which I am sure Members will agree is substantial given the overall fiscal constraints. That shows what I believe are Welsh Labour values in action, providing support to critical public services and workers who have helped us every day throughout the pandemic.

Among other things, local government will be able to maintain the Welsh Government's council tax reduction scheme, with the Welsh Government providing £244 million in support to the most vulnerable people in Wales. It will support the major programme for government commitments, including the pledge to introduce free school meals for all primary school pupils in Wales. Social care staff will receive the real living wage in Wales—currently £9.90 an hour—from April 2022. That will apply to registered workers in care homes and domiciliary care, in both adult and children's services. It will also apply to personal assistants who provide care and support that is funded through a direct payment—a real testament, I am sure, to the work of those staff through the pandemic period.

The Welsh Government are keen that we nurture that collaboration, drawing on that relationship to look to the future. I am thinking about the different models proposed for housing, and the need to think creatively about the future of social care, to be bold in the exploration of new, innovative models of transport and to think innovatively about the urgent need to decarbonise our economy and our communities. I declare an interest as someone who started his career as a play worker and a council official in the Vale of Glamorgan Council, at one point dressing up as Gully in Gully's Gang, trying to support young children in our communities. I am sure that there are pictures somewhere. I have had direct experience of working in local government in a number of roles in south Wales.

I pay tribute again to every local government staff member across Cardiff, the Vale and the whole of Wales, from teachers to refuse collectors, care workers and highway staff, who all went beyond the call of duty, often taking on new roles and complex, challenging tasks. Particularly in the early stage of the pandemic, before we had access to the life-changing vaccines, they did so knowing the risks that they could be exposed to, even when the best precautions were in place, in order to ensure that a vulnerable elderly person did not go without support, that a child did not go without a meal or learning, and that no crucial piece of local infrastructure fell into disrepair.

I will come on to some of the successes in local government across Wales. I will focus on my own two local authorities and then take a quick canter through the others, but I could not do justice to all the authorities

in Wales in this speech. I hope that other Members will intervene and make their own speeches, in which they can go into more detail. I am hugely proud of the work of Cardiff Council, under our leader Councillor Huw Thomas and his team. It has been a record of innovation, commitment and ambition over recent years. The list of successes is huge, but in addition to their remarkable work supporting people throughout the pandemic and their day-to-day delivery of services, I will highlight some other key successes.

A remarkable scheme of council house building and bearing down on homelessness under the leadership of Councillor Lynda Thorne has been truly transformative, with much more to come. I can see those new council properties being built in my own community and in deprived communities that need them. On campaigning and delivering on the real living wage, 40% of real living wage accredited employers in Wales are now located in Cardiff. That means that 8,000 people have had a pay rise thanks to pressure and campaigning from our council. There have been huge and continued redevelopments, from the city centre to the bay in my constituency, including the Central Square area, now home to the new BBC headquarters. UK Government buildings have chosen to locate there, as well as the Cardiff School of Journalism and our new, and promised, bus station and transport hub.

I have seen new leisure facilities in my constituency, including the new Star Centre and pool in Splott, and remarkable new education facilities, including Eastern High in my constituency turning around educational performance and aspirations. There are new green transport links, plans for the metro, and, hopefully, a new Cardiff Parkway station, a public-private partnership in the east of the city. We are attracting and developing new high-value sectors, including film and TV production and high-tech and other future-proof industries, in our cities, and building the skills chain to support them.

I am of course proud to have a constituency that includes not just one but two local authorities, one of which is the Labour-led Vale of Glamorgan. I pay tribute to the leadership of Councillor Neil Moore and the deputy leader, Councillor Lis Burnett, who is one of Penarth's councillors, for their work throughout the pandemic, and that of their whole cabinet and team. Again, I could praise much of their day-to-day work, but recent highlights include saving the Penarth pier pavilion after a difficult period and bringing it back into vibrant and sustainable public use, and pioneering the Big Fresh Catering Company, a local authority trading company based on co-operative principles in our schools, which has turned a £350,000 deficit into a £500,000 surplus in one year, with that money being reinvested in schools.

We see huge investment at the Penarth Learning Community that turns around prospects for learners on a combined school site. St Cyres School is a part of that and recently celebrated being one of the first schools to be designated a school of sanctuary for its work in supporting those fleeing conflict and persecution abroad. The new food pod scheme, designed to support local communities that faced major challenges during the pandemic and to tackle food waste, is part of the council's clean slate neighbourhood programme, a two-year scheme to make a key area of Penarth cleaner, greener, healthier and better connected. We are investing in our

[Stephen Doughty]

green and seaside spaces, from Cosmeston to the famous Barry Island, making the Vale a destination for all to visit and enjoy and generate local employment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) could not be here this afternoon—my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) is here—but she wanted me to highlight the work of the Labour-led Newport Council, led by Councillor Jane Mudd. Newport distributed 9,000 laptops and devices to learners during the pandemic, administering £55 million of Welsh Government funding to support businesses. Newport has world-beating recycling rates and exciting plans for economic development and regeneration in Newport city centre. Newport and my own city of Cardiff are leading the way with support for unaccompanied, sanctuary seeking children.

Neath Port Talbot dealt with a series of emergency and crisis situations, including severe flooding in Skewen, a gas explosion in Seven Sisters, and landslips. It is also investing in significant regeneration projects in Neath town centre, Harbourside in Port Talbot, and the Plaza cinema in Swansea, which I am sure we will hear about given the colleagues I can see here. New technology is being pioneered through the Homes as Power Stations approach and through Passivhaus, which creates buildings that use less energy. There is work to tackle homelessness, as we have seen in Cardiff, by developing the former Bryn House community education centre in Uplands.

Bridgend has made a record investment in 21st-century schools, renewed sea defences, and cultural regeneration, including at the Maesteg town hall. In Rhondda Cynon Taf, which I am sure we will hear about, there is free wi-fi in all town centres and investment in town centre regeneration, and a huge amount of work is being done, including by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), to tackle flood risk and the impact of the terrible floods of a few years ago. Like Cardiff, RCT is delivering a real living wage to council contractors, as well as directly employed staff.

Torfaen is pioneering new and exciting support programmes for dads and is piloting new forms of democracy with advance voting in elections. In Flintshire in north Wales, a £15 million redevelopment of a new care home is being undertaken, with state-of-the-art accommodation to support people. Caerphilly has received awards for its free school meal delivery for families. The approach to free school meals and feeding our children was in stark contrast to the regrettable situation in England, which had to be put under pressure by Marcus Rashford and others. Also, it set up Caerphilly Cares, a signposting and support service for local people.

I could not possibly mention every local authority and location, because I would be here for hours. However, I have given Members some highlights of the really exciting, positive and impactful changes that local government has made both in providing services and in driving economic development in Wales. It is a record of success, impact and ambition under a Welsh Labour Government who value our local services, and Welsh Labour-led councils that deliver every day.

Although I have highlighted the substantial political differences that Labour authorities make, I must thank again all council staff and workers across Wales, no

matter the political make-up of their authority, for the services they provide day in, day out, particularly during the pandemic. I should also highlight the role that all councils have played in offering help to the people of Ukraine and in offering to rehouse people fleeing Afghanistan and elsewhere, and also their response to cleaning up after the huge local storms and the damage caused in recent weeks.

I want to end by paying tribute to Councillor Andrew Morgan, leader of the Welsh Local Government Association, and his deputy, Councillor Rob Stewart, for the work, leadership and constructive partnership that they and all of their council leader colleagues provided throughout the pandemic and which continues today. In concluding, I hope that the Minister will recognise and welcome the leadership shown in Wales, and pledge to learn from and partner with, and not circumvent, our local authorities in Wales, which are doing so much good.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): There are five Members who wish to speak in half an hour, so you will have about six minutes each.

4.40 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. It is also delightful to be in this debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I congratulate him on securing it.

Across Wales, our local authorities are showing ambition in their commitments to economic development and the provision of public services. My own local council in Swansea is no exception. One of the biggest projects planned in the city is the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, which has been talked about since well before I took my place in this place. After the original proposal was rejected in 2018, the new Blue Eden project was announced last year.

The new project will not only make Wales a world leader in renewable energy innovation, but bring hundreds of jobs to part of a city that has suffered for far too long as the industries for which it was once the heartland have been relocated. Although the Blue Eden project does not rely on any public funding, local government will have a key role to play in helping to develop and deliver the project. It will also be looking to the Welsh and UK Governments for support in doing that.

That project is about global innovation and will put our little corner of south Wales on the map, but today I want to share information on some of the economic investments that my local authority has committed to public services. They are progressive and ambitious commitments, showing the council's determination to improve the lives of people in communities across Swansea.

My local authority has invested a record £179 million in our schools and education services; committed £5 million to upgrade all children's play areas across the city, and scrapped fees for local sports clubs to use public parks and pitches; invested £144 million to deliver better care services for vulnerable adults and children; committed £50,000 to provide new life-saving equipment in every community in the city; expanded apprenticeship opportunities and is providing grants of up to £10,000 to support local businesses; invested £4 million to support homeless people, including through the "always a bed"

pledge, meaning that nobody needs to be homeless in Swansea; and is providing free bus travel for everyone across the city on selected dates throughout the year.

Those are bold decisions, made in difficult times, but they are the right decisions, putting the interests of people from across the city front and centre and supporting communities by continuing to build a better Swansea. With the bold and innovative leadership of Swansea City Council's leader, Rob Stewart, it will hopefully have an opportunity to continue to lead on those bold and ambitious plans.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): As someone who had his honeymoon in Swansea—it was a long time ago—I welcome the hon. Lady's speech.

4.44 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this excellent debate. I had the privilege of being a council leader in the past; I know what a difference it can make. In fact, I was responsible for a 26 km electronic tram system in south London.

The council leader in Swansea, Rob Stewart, has great ambitions for a Swansea metro. However, we need the money to do that. I should again make the case to the Minister that Wales deserves its fair share of HS2 money, in accordance with that received by Scotland. That would give us an extra £4.6 billion to invest in our electrified systems. There are only 22 miles of electric rail across all of Wales, despite thousands of miles of it in England.

We have great ambitions there, but we also have great ambitions elsewhere. We have already heard that Swansea does a great job in its core service provision—in education, social services, housing and local transport—but also in terms of culture. The Minister joined me in Swansea West at the brand new arena that seats 3,500 people; Mark Drakeford, our First Minister, was there as well. That will be a great magnet for new investment and a great boost to people who live in Swansea. We have heard about the Blue Eden version of the Swansea lagoon. I knew about the lagoon prior to my election in 2010 when I was working at the Environment Agency Wales; at last, despite the blockages from the UK Government in providing the money, Blue Eden, its new rendition, is moving forward without Government support.

At a time when energy prices are rising, climate change is accelerating and we can see what is happening in Ukraine in terms of the need for energy security, it is imperative that we redouble our efforts to invest in clean, green alternatives, as opposed to fracking. In Swansea 62% of people are recycling, compared with 30% in north London, which is also building a new incinerator. I am very proud that my colleague the Minister for Climate Change in the Senedd, Julie James, has announced a moratorium on new incineration in Wales. That is something that England should take forward.

We saw the great work that local authorities did during the pandemic—in Swansea, Cardiff and throughout Wales—by looking after people in great need and providing food for people who were isolated, as well as by providing business support. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned the waste of money in England; strangely, we got the Barnett consequential of

that, so we had more money to give to our local businesses. Local businesses therefore got much more support in Wales than they did in England, because we used local authorities and health authorities rather than mates in the private sector. For Ukraine, Swansea is a city of sanctuary. We are a nation of sanctuary in Wales, and we look forward to having the resources and the opportunity to open our hearts and homes to the people of Ukraine.

We need our fair share of money. I have mentioned the transport money, but in addition to that we have had a freeze over the last 10 years of austerity. Had the income of the Welsh Government grown in accordance with the economy, we would have had £2 billion to £3 billion more. We are set to lose something like £1 billion in EU funding. The Minister may talk about a mix of cash flow and the amount allocated per year, but the reality is that we are not seeing the money that we saw before. We look forward to getting the shared prosperity fund at the level that was promised. We welcomed levelling up, but it is small beer compared with the huge numbers that we are talking about. We want a fairer future. I am pleased that the £10 minimum living wage, which has been enabled in Swansea, will help a fair deal at a time when benefits are going up by only 3.2% when inflation is set to be 8% by next April.

In Swansea and across Wales, Welsh Labour is striving to achieve and deliver a stronger, fairer and greener future. I welcome what it is doing, and I am privileged to congratulate the local governments across Wales and in particular in Swansea.

4.48 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this important debate.

It is important that we shout loudly and proudly about the work that our local councils do across Wales. I am obviously going to speak about Newport City Council. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) is unable to be here, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth has alluded to. However, she is very keen that we put Newport City Council, its leader Jane Mudd and all her cabinet colleagues on the map. I was not going to speak today—I was just going to intervene—but when I was reminded that Newport became a city 20 years ago this month, I thought it was important that I speak about that.

Throughout the pandemic, our local government have stepped up to the plate and shown how important their work is—certainly in Newport. They kept the children of key workers in school to enable them to go out to do vital work in retail, in track and trace, and in hospital settings. The local council, by providing those key services, put in place infrastructure to enable other people to get on with vital work.

Further services included homing the homeless during the pandemic. Newport City Council has a designated caseworker who works with those who are more difficult to reach and maybe not so willing to engage with local services. That person is doing a brilliant job of bringing people in and getting appropriate services to vulnerable people who might need additional care. That is a really good service provided in Newport.

[*Ruth Jones*]

Recycling has already been mentioned. In Wales, we are proud to be the second best recyclers in the world—we are happy to give England some lessons on how that should be done. We have integrated recycling that goes across local authorities, allowing each local citizen to play their part by putting out the right recycling.

In Newport we are also very conscious of air pollution. Our local council leader, Jane Mudd, has been very bold and we now have a fleet of electric buses, which are all part of our integrated public transport. As my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) said, we have free travel for all in March. That is brilliant—people can get the bus for free.

Newport City Council undertook a “Stand with Ukraine” rally on Sunday, where I was privileged to stand with Jane Mudd, our leader, to say that Newport is a city of sanctuary, alongside the whole of Wales. We are looking forward to working with the local council, the Welsh Government and non-governmental organisations, including St Woolos cathedral and the Very Reverend Ian Black, who will be opening their doors to refugees when they arrive.

I nearly forgot to mention that Jane Mudd has been instrumental, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East, in work on the western gateway, developing links across Wales and further afield—as far as Swindon and Reading—to make sure that we have the business infrastructure in place. That will be really important.

Newport City Council does a brilliant job. It works with local people, local organisations, other councils and, of course, the Welsh Government. After all, great partnerships produce great results.

4.52 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): As ever, it is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Gary. Like my colleagues, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing this important and timely debate.

Local authorities play an incredibly important role in delivering public services, and this afternoon we have heard about the incredible work of local authorities across Wales. The debate has been quite Swansea-heavy, but let me say that I am proud that my local authority of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council has been leading the way on the long-term recovery from the devastating impact of coronavirus and the unprecedented flooding that devastated my community back in 2020.

However, even with the support of local authorities, we cannot and should not pretend that the last few years have been anything other than challenging for communities across Wales and the UK more widely. As the cost of living continues to rise sharply, it is clear that we cannot rely on the UK Government’s half-baked levelling-up agenda to address the ever-widening funding gaps. That is why I feel incredibly fortunate that the Labour-led RCT Council, led by Councillor Andrew Morgan and the deputy leader, Councillor Maureen Webber, has been bold and ambitious in supporting my local community as we transition towards a recovery period.

I feel a particular closeness to my local authority because, like many of my colleagues, it is where my political career began. I first stood to represent my local community of Tonyrefail West in 2012, and I have remained a very proud local councillor ever since. Before anyone seeks to point the finger, I would like to place on record that that position has been unremunerated since my election in 2019.

Despite that, my eyes have always been open to the real impact that effective local authority councils and town and community councils can have on their area. In recent years I have had the real privilege of playing my part in a number of local projects, including seeing a new play area built in Edmondstown, a new school development in Tonyrefail and an all-important speed reduction scheme on Barn Hill. The importance of our local authorities in delivering those everyday services, which residents across Wales truly rely on, is clear for all to see.

In my area, RCT Council has been central to an ambitious regeneration project that will be transformational for our local high streets, which, as I am sure we can all agree, have been particularly hard hit over the past few years. Even with the best efforts of our Welsh Labour Government, it has been an especially difficult time as independent shops that may previously have been completely reliant on footfall and in-person transactions have been forced to modernise rapidly and move their operations online. That is why I am particularly grateful that RCT Council has consistently prioritised supporting businesses big and small through its business advice and guidance hub.

Let me reassure colleagues that the support for local economic development in our area does not stop there, thanks to our council. I am delighted to report that RCT is currently backing a number of ongoing important regeneration projects within Ponty town centre, which will bring jobs to the area as well as strengthen the local economy. The regeneration framework, aptly named Pivotal Pontypridd, began in 2017 when the council first identified Pontypridd as one of its five strategic opportunity areas. While it will come as no surprise that I, as the Member for Pontypridd, welcome this news with open arms, I will do my best, out of respect for other Members, not to gloat too much, though it is very tempting.

This fantastic regeneration project aims to build on the investment that RCT Council has secured and made available for a number of crucial projects in recent years, including the £12 million Pontypridd town centre regeneration programme, and the £14 million project that saw Pontypridd railway station get a much-needed upgrade. Over the past four years, RCT Council has committed to many more projects, which amount to an incredible £115 million investment for our town centre. Those include funding the brilliant Llys Cadwyn, which was completed in 2020 and sits proudly in the centre of our town. That mixed-use development is now home to important businesses, such as Transport for Wales HQ, Bradleys Coffee, the excellent Gatto Lounge, which I recommend for a cocktail or two, and a new library, fitness centre and customer contact point for council services.

In a world where we are used to seeing decision makers at the top of Government change with little warning—perhaps the less said about reshuffles the

better—it is clear that our local authorities are playing an increasingly important role in ensuring that local projects such as these receive the consistency and dedication that they truly deserve.

To conclude, that is why it is so important that we shout proudly about the work going on in Wales, thanks to our fantastic local authorities. They play a crucial role and must not be impacted by funding cuts from central Government, not now or in future. After all, it is our councillors across the nation who are often at the heart of fixing everyday issues, which may never reach the inboxes of a Member of Parliament. They deserve our unwavering support at every level.

4.56 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this timely and important debate. I am proud to work, alongside my Welsh Labour colleagues, my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), with the local Labour council in Swansea. As has been mentioned in today's Swansea-heavy debate, it was the first Welsh council to adopt a minimum staff wage of £10 an hour. By doing that, Swansea Council shows how much it values its staff, who are the ones who have kept our vital services running, especially throughout the pandemic.

I pay tribute to the hard work and dedication of the Swansea Council leader, Rob Stewart, and his cabinet members. It is amazing to see many projects come to fruition, such as the new Swansea arena, which I know the Minister visited. I am looking forward to going there in May to see "The Good, The Bad and The Rugby—Live". Although the Minister knows the frustration of the people of Swansea over the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, he will agree with me that the new Blue Eden project is the innovative and economy-boosting project that Swansea, and indeed Wales, needs.

Last month, Swansea Council announced a record-breaking budget for services that affect my constituents every day. An extra £35 million of funding will go towards record levels of spending in schools and social care, with support concentrated on community-based services, such as litter picking, street cleaning and road improvements. Those are all issues that I am sure many of us hear about from our constituents every day. It is great news that the Labour Government have protected the budget of Swansea Council, allowing it to invest more in the priorities of the people of Swansea and Gower.

The pandemic showed us the huge benefits of spending time outdoors. I am pleased that Swansea Council has introduced schemes to reflect that, with free bus travel over the school holidays, allowing families to make the most of the fantastic outdoor spaces available, whether that is our world-famous beaches on the Gower peninsula or our green spaces, such as Penllergare valley woods. I am pleased about the investment that is going into playground spaces, which my colleagues spoke about. A lot of that is seen in my constituency, such as Gowerton park, Parc Melin Mynach, Bracelet Bay, Pennard park and Coed Bach park, to name a few that are currently undergoing transformation.

One thing that has not been spoken about today is that in 2015 Swansea became the first council in Wales to introduce the local area co-ordination network. Our local area co-ordinators—or LACs as we call them—were invaluable during the pandemic. In the first five months, they responded to over 20,000 inquiries, from picking up food and medication to dropping pets at vets, and anything in between. These local authority co-ordinators who work in my constituency and across Swansea are dedicated to their communities. My thanks go out to them on behalf of all my constituents who they have worked so hard to support. One of the good things about the scheme is that we are showing the rest of Wales and beyond what good practice this is. To see that good practice roll out in other authorities is what it is all about, because it benefits everybody.

I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to those cabinet members from Gower who will not be standing again in the local elections, who have been very patient, collaborative and kind to me since I was elected in 2017: Councillor Mark Thomas from Penclawdd, who has been environment enhancement and infrastructure manager—highways, to a lot of us—and Councillor Mark Child from West Cross. We will also be saying a sad goodbye to Christine Richards, our councillor for Loughor and the former deputy leader of Swansea Council.

We know how important our local councils are to us all. Our working relationship with them and with the Welsh Government is key. I am proud to work alongside Swansea Council and look forward to continuing this work post-election with new faces and old friends.

5.1 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary, and to respond to the debate on behalf of the Opposition. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) on securing the debate and setting out so passionately the excellent examples of local authorities delivering for local residents.

My hon. Friend rightly talked about the level of support and commitment from officers and members right across local government in Wales during the pandemic. He also spoke about the support from the Welsh Labour Government through the plans for free school meals, social care, workers receiving a real living wage, and the significant investment in local government services. He highlighted the good work in Cardiff Council and the Vale of Glamorgan Council with a stellar list of achievements across the two authorities in regeneration, transport, dealing with food poverty and many other issues.

Local government has always played a huge role in delivering frontline services. I know that only too well from my 20 years as a county councillor before being elected to Parliament. However, it is fair to say that the role of councillors and councils, as we have heard a number of times today, has never been under as much pressure as the last two years. By and large, all 22 local authorities across Wales, for members, officers and frontline staff, have really stepped up to the plate and continued to deliver excellent public services for their communities.

[Gerald Jones]

Many of today's speeches have highlighted the flavour of the work done by our local authorities. My hon. friends the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) talked about the good work of Swansea Council, with the new Blue Eden project, which sounds very exciting and will create hundreds of jobs. They also talked about the significant investment in education and schools, the 62% recycling rate and transport improvements. Swansea was the first council to offer the minimum staff wage of £10 an hour.

I was particularly interested to hear about the work on green spaces and sports pitches with the abolition of pitch fees, which is something that the opposition group on Merthyr Tydfil Council, led by Councillor Darren Roberts, have pledged to do if they win the election on 5 May.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) about the achievements in Newport City Council: the multi-agency social work hub; the safeguarding; the western gateway, looking out across the region; and the significant work on tackling recycling.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) talked about the work of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, leading the way after covid, storms and flooding affected many communities across her constituency and the surrounding area. That comes from being bold and ambitious. She also mentioned looking at significant improvements in play areas and schools—services that we all know people rely on every day and appreciate very much, as they do town centre regeneration as well.

I know from part of my constituency in the Caerphilly County Borough that the council there has been at the forefront of supporting families during the pandemic, recently delivering its one millionth free school meal, supported by Welsh Labour Government funding and delivered with a real sense of commitment—not, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) told the Welsh Labour conference on Saturday, after

“a last-minute U-turn after a really good kicking from a Premier League striker”,

which was the case in England.

In Torfaen, Welsh Labour councillors are among the local residents who make up the volunteers who ensure that households across Torfaen have access to regular food. 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. 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. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and I had the pleasure of visiting Flintshire last week.

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. In Neath Port Talbot, the council has given advice, information and financial support to more than 2,000 businesses, along with administering £47 million in covid payments to businesses.

I think it is fair to say that local authorities are often the strategic partners in projects to support economic development. They are the catalyst and brokers that often bring together a range of partners and stakeholders that deliver holistic projects for our communities. Since devolution, our local authorities have been at the forefront of delivering regeneration projects across Wales—we have heard about many of them today—all done in partnership with the Welsh Government and other strategic partners. That strategic partnership must be safeguarded as the Government here in Westminster move forward with their levelling-up agenda. Wales cannot afford to lose the high level of partnership working and trust that has been built up over 20 years. That is why it is important that the Welsh Government are at the table for discussions and decisions around levelling-up projects going forward.

The excellent record of partnership working in Wales can be further illustrated by the fact that, throughout the pandemic, the leader of the Welsh Local Government Association sat around the table with the Welsh Government to ensure that the response to the pandemic was co-ordinated between the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities. I pay particular tribute to Councillor Andrew Morgan, who facilitated that role. In addition, the Welsh Government Minister Julie James MS met council leaders on a weekly basis, co-ordinating the response to an ever-changing and fast-moving pandemic. That example of partnership working extended, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, through the Test, Trace, Protect scheme that rolled out across Wales as a partnership between Welsh health boards and Welsh local authorities, which know their communities best and delivered a scheme at a fraction of the cost in England—and more efficiently, if I may say so.

In conclusion, we know that the Welsh Government have protected the budgets of Welsh local government in recognition of the frontline services they have provided. Today we have heard just some examples of Welsh Labour councils delivering for their communities in the most difficult of times. I and all others offer our best wishes to them on 5 May and hope that we see the return of many more Labour councillors and councils to work with our Welsh Labour Government to continue to deliver public services for the people of Wales.

5.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (David T. C. Davies): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and all other hon. Members in this debate because I find myself in the strange position of actually agreeing with much of what I have heard today, including much of what the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) just said—until the slightly political points at the end.

Let me begin by making a serious point. The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth paid tribute to those council workers across Wales who worked 24 hours a day during the covid pandemic and, of course, during

the floods that immediately preceded the first lockdown. I am sure all of us went out and saw what these amazing people were doing. I visited people who, as the hon. Member said, had worked literally 24-hour days filling sandbags for people during the floods and had come off other jobs to do that. We know about the unsung heroes, such as the road gritters and many others, who are out there and who will work for 24 hours when the chips are down and when we need it. I absolutely want to associate myself with all his comments about the wonderful people who work for our local authorities across Wales. We are indeed lucky to have people of that calibre working for us, and we should never take their services for granted. We thank them all.

Hon. Members may be surprised by this as well, but I pay tribute to all local councillors in Wales—not just the Labour ones, of course, but including them—who it has been my pleasure to work with in this role. One or two things that I wanted to say have been mentioned; as the hon. Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) said, what a fantastic arena Swansea Arena is—something that Swansea Council brought forward.

When I met Rob Stewart last week, he made it clear that the project was not just about him; there was a whole team behind him. But what a fantastic team it was. As I am sure hon. Members will agree, the moment someone walks in there, they see what an absolutely amazing building it is—it bowls them over. It will be a huge asset for Swansea and the whole of Wales, and I am pleased to have worked with those who played a part in bringing it about, and I congratulate Swansea Council.

I had better not say too much about the tidal lagoon project. We know that there were issues with the previous one. I believe that Rob Stewart is a very capable person. I do not want to say too much in the run-up to an election or my words will probably appear on his leaflets, but he is somebody to be taken seriously. These matters are not for me, but I am sure that anything he puts forward will be taken in that light.

Given that all of us agree that by and large we have very hardworking councillors, there has to be a question as to whether the Welsh Government might want to devolve further powers to local authorities over the coming years, particularly as the Corporate Joint Committees become legal entities and as the growth deal regions take on all sorts of extra responsibilities. All of us realise that centralising control is not a good thing, whether it is in Cardiff or Westminster, and feel that some of the services offered by local authorities might improve even further if local authorities were given even more responsibilities.

It is correct that local government in Wales and across the UK has been at the forefront of responding to the pandemic, leading from the front and co-ordinating the fight against the virus. We want to harness that leadership in our drive for economic recovery, improving local services and focusing economic growth on the industries of tomorrow. That is why it has been a privilege for me to be part of the growth deal projects, and see how local authorities of all sorts of different political dimensions and viewpoints are coming together to bring forward programmes and projects that can benefit the whole of Wales.

One hon. Member mentioned the extra money going into local authorities—I think it was the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi). I obviously welcome that, but, dare I say it, that was made possible only because of funding to Wales through the Welsh block grant of £18.4 billion a year on average over the next three years. It is one of the best ever funding settlements for the Welsh Government—in fact, the best ever. For our part, the UK Government recognise the value of local authorities in leading communities. We know and trust them to make the decisions that are best for their local areas, and we look forward to seeing local authorities put back in the driving seat over programmes, such as the levelling-up fund and the shared prosperity fund, about which details will be coming out shortly.

As I mentioned, we are working with local authorities and other partners in the four Welsh regions to deliver long-term investment through the city and growth deals. We are working with local areas on bespoke investments, and I remain hopeful of a positive announcement on freeports very soon. As hon. Members will know, £790 million is going into the four Welsh city and growth deals; of course, a lot of money is coming from the Welsh Government as well. We have enjoyed working with the Welsh Government and local authorities to kick-start economic growth.

We are seeing the deals produce results. As I think the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth mentioned, just two weeks ago, Cardiff Capital Region announced the purchase of Aberthaw Power Station, with a hugely exciting plan to turn the site into a centre for green energy. I had a very good discussion with Kellie Beirne about that just before the announcement was made. I look forward to seeing hundreds—perhaps thousands—of jobs being created in the industries of tomorrow as a result.

I have mentioned the fantastic Swansea Arena already. In north Wales, I look forward to visiting Bangor University later in the spring to look at the digital signalling processing centre, into which we have invested £3 million in groundbreaking technology to help secure and develop further investment in the regional digital economy. We are seeing the fruits of the growth deals coming to light, from improving tourism facilities at the world heritage site in the Dee Valley to building a new transport interchange at Porth in the Rhondda.

I believe the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) mentioned levelling-up deals. I think I am right in saying that there were three successful bids to the fund in the area, and I signed them off myself. I was surprised at criticism from elsewhere that there had been pork-barrel politics, because one of the only local authorities that did not get any of the levelling-up fund was my own in Monmouthshire—if there had been any pork-barrel politics going on, I had not been very clever at getting anything out of the barrel myself. Of course, in reality, local authorities put forward the projects, which were assessed by independent officials. I was pleased to sign them off and I hope I might get an invitation to come and see them when they are developed.

This is real devolution: empowering local places and making sure that devolution goes beyond Cardiff Bay. As a Government, we look forward to working closely with local authorities across Wales. I have mentioned some. We have not mentioned some of the Plaid Cymru local authorities. I would be pleased to meet many of those leaders to discuss growth deals with them, as well as the independents in mid Wales.

[David T. C. Davies]

In Monmouthshire, I must mention my excellent council leader, Councillor Richard John, who has done such a superb job of leading Monmouthshire over the last two years. I could cite many achievements—I am sure that Labour councils could learn many things from how things are done in Monmouthshire, such as the superfast infrastructure. Monmouthshire is the only local authority in Wales to run a post office. Despite the fact that the funding formula seems to disbenefit rural areas, Monmouthshire has managed to keep its council tax rises down to manageable levels. That is not to underestimate the achievements of other local authorities across Wales.

Geraint Davies: On the point of levelling up and pork-barrel politics, will the Minister try to clarify the criteria for levelling-up grants? In the past, obviously, the EU funding was needs-based and focused on lifting productivity in areas of deprivation. We would all welcome more clarity so that there cannot be any accusations that money is just being given out for political reasons.

David T. C. Davies: I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman on that matter. The allocation was very much needs-based. The officials involved were completely independent and assessed bids against a series of criteria.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister for the tone in which he is responding to the debate. I wonder whether he could go back to his colleagues at the Treasury and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on an issue I have raised a number of times in the past: funding for dealing with fire and building safety issues in Wales.

When it comes to the funding given through big announcements at Westminster, it has been really difficult to get clarity about what is passed on to Wales. Councillor Lynda Thorne from Cardiff Council spoke with me the other day. We are trying to support residents, but without clarity on the money coming through from the UK Government, it is difficult to respond systematically. Can the Minister raise that with his colleagues again?

David T. C. Davies: I think that is a perfectly reasonable request. It is very obvious that some things are devolved and some things are not. When they are devolved, when the UK Government make an announcement it is only going to apply to England, and roughly 5% will come to Wales. But there are some quite unusual, niche issues on which even Ministers and MPs might not be absolutely certain. If that is one of them, I will be happy to come back to the hon. Gentleman and give a full response.

Before drawing this debate to a close, I want to mention Newport City Council. Newport is my home town, and I congratulate all the councillors there—particularly those who were involved 20 years ago when Newport became a city. At that time, it was a Labour council, but my late father was one of the councillors then, and it was something he felt very passionately about. I am sure all of us who have a connection to Newport are pleased that it got exactly what it deserved.

I thank hon. Members for this afternoon's debate. I have sought to answer as many points as possible in the time given, and I am sure answers to the ones I was not able to address will be forthcoming shortly. I will say three things in conclusion: first, the UK Government see Welsh local authorities as the leaders of their areas, best placed to take decisions on public services and investment to drive growth and jobs. I have had the pleasure of meeting, eating with and working with leaders from all the major political parties except the Liberal Democrats—that is because there are no Liberal Democrat leaders in Wales. It has been a pleasure and a joy to do so, and I have found that they all want to put their constituents first, rather than party politics.

Secondly, the UK Government believe in devolution, but that devolution reaches beyond Cardiff Bay. Apparently the Welsh Government think the same way, so we are looking forward to more powers being devolved to local authorities over the coming years. Thirdly and finally, these are clearly very turbulent times, and it is more important than ever that we remain focused on the long game, with Welsh local authorities working with Welsh businesses and civic society to deliver a prosperous, levelled-up Wales. Wales needs its two Governments working hand in glove, and it is time for the Welsh Government to work with us, not oppose for the sake of it. The Secretary of State for Wales and I would really like a warm, constructive relationship with the Welsh Government, co-operating and collaborating in order to secure the future prosperity of Wales. Thank you very much; diolch yn fawr.

5.21 pm

Stephen Doughty: It has been a fantastic debate, with some great contributions from colleagues. It is a shame that we did not have some colleagues from other parts of Wales present, but we did try to get in points relating to a number of the other local authorities, including in north Wales and elsewhere. It is important to recognise their contribution, and that of their staff and councillors.

Suffice it to say that during the pandemic we have seen the best of our local authorities in Wales, but not only that: going forward, our local authorities are setting out a hugely ambitious and optimistic agenda. They are innovating, particularly in relation to the greening of our towns and cities and our economy going forward, and the new industries and technologies that will be the bedrock of the future Welsh economy and the future of jobs and opportunities for our young people. Thank you again for chairing the debate, Sir Gary, and thank you to all colleagues and the Minister for participating today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role of Welsh local authorities in delivering public services and economic development.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 15 March 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Framework

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): On 20 May 2021, the Government announced the appointment of Sir Robert Francis QC to carry out a study to look at options for a framework for compensation for people infected and affected by infected blood, and it was agreed that the study would report back to the Government before the independent Infected Blood Inquiry reports.

I am pleased to confirm that Sir Robert delivered his report to me on 14 March. Sir Robert completed the comprehensive and detailed study in a timely fashion, and I would like to thank Sir Robert and his team for the careful and sensitive way they have worked. I would also like to thank all those who contributed to the study, sharing their experiences and views with Sir Robert. I know this must have been very difficult for many. I am grateful for their valuable contributions.

I will now carefully consider Sir Robert's findings and recommendations. It is my intention to publish the study and the Government response, in time for the inquiry and its core participants to consider them before Sir Robert gives evidence to the inquiry. I will write in due course to Sir Brian Langstaff, the chair of the inquiry, about our plans for responding and publication.

[HCWS681]

TREASURY

Independent Panel on Ring-fencing and Proprietary Trading: Final Report

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Today I have laid before Parliament the final report on behalf of the Independent Panel on Ringfencing and Proprietary Trading. In 2020, the Treasury appointed an independent panel¹—first to review the operation of the legislation related to ring-fencing; and secondly to review banks' proprietary trading activities, following a statutory report from the Prudential Regulation Authority published in September 2020². Given the inherent links between the structure of the banking sector and proprietary trading activities, the Treasury appointed a single panel to conduct both reviews.

The ring-fencing regime was introduced in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, following recommendations from the Independent Commission on Banking in 2011, to strengthen the resilience of the UK banking sector. The regime, which came into force in January 2019, separates core retail banking services from investment banking activities, with the aim of protecting depositors from riskier activity conducted outside of the ringfence or in the wider financial system.

Following Brexit, the Government have the opportunity to develop an approach to financial regulation that better suits our markets, while maintaining high standards, fostering competition, and boosting international competitiveness.

The Treasury welcomes the panel's comprehensive set of recommendations. The Treasury will establish a taskforce with the Bank of England with immediate effect to assess the panel's recommendations and options for taking them forward and will publish a Government response later this year.

This report is published at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-panel-on-ring-fencing-and-proprietary-trading-final-report> and copies are available in the Vote Office.

¹ Terms of reference for the Panel's appointment:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/members-of-the-ring-fencing-and-proprietary-trading-independent-review-panel-announced-and-terms-of-reference-for-the-review-published/independent-reviews-of-ring-fencing-and-proprietary-trading-terms-of-reference>

² <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/prudential-regulation/publication/2020/proprietary-trading-review>

[HCWS683]

DEFENCE

Visits Abroad: Correction

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): Today I have made an online correction to parliamentary question 119455 answered on 10 February 2022.

Due to an administrative error incorrect data was reported in relation to my visit to the US in July 2021.

The total cost to the public purse of my overseas accommodation, meals, visas and other expenses excluding travel between 11 and 23 July 2021 was £6,687.68 and not as previously reported £1,766.68. This has now been corrected.

[HCWS685]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

National Lottery Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Chris Philp): The Gambling Commission has today announced the outcome of its competition to run the 4th National Lottery licence, covering the 10-year period from 2024 to 2034. In accordance with relevant legislation, this decision has been made by the Gambling Commission's Board. DCMS and Ministers have not been involved in the decision-making process.

Today's announcement marks an important moment in the history of the National Lottery, which has raised over £45 billion for good causes across the United Kingdom since its launch in 1994. The National Lottery has made over 660,000 individual grants to communities and to the arts, heritage and sports sectors. In recent years this included over £1.2 billion to support the UK's Covid response and recovery.

The 4th National Lottery licence competition was launched by the Gambling Commission in August 2020. Following extensive market engagement, the Commission received four final applications to operate the licence—the highest number since the first licence was awarded in 1994. Following a thorough evaluation process, the Commission has chosen Allwyn Entertainment Ltd. as the preferred applicant to operate the licence and Camelot UK Lotteries Ltd. as the reserve applicant. Pending a legal standstill period, which will last for at least 10 days, Allwyn Entertainment Ltd. will be confirmed as the incoming licensee and will, following the signing of an enabling agreement, work with the Commission to ensure a smooth transition from the 3rd to the 4th licence, which will operate from 1 February 2024. The details of the Commission's announcement can be found at: <https://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk>.

The award of the 4th National Lottery licence is made under provisions in the National Lottery etc. Act 1993. That legislation sets out the roles and responsibilities of the Government and the Gambling Commission and gives the Commission the power to award the licence to run the National Lottery. It also enshrines the principles underpinning the UK's National Lottery: that it be run with due propriety, that the interests of all players be protected and that, within these parameters, returns to good causes are maximised. These principles are at the heart of the 4th licence, which will see operator profits more closely aligned with good causes than under the 3rd licence, while also continuing to hold the operator to account for protecting players and maintaining the highest standards of propriety.

This award does not change the principles governing the distribution of funding to good causes across the UK, which is the responsibility of 12 public bodies acting as National Lottery Distributors, as set out in legislation.

[HCWS679]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Changes in Immigration Rules

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Kevin Foster): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary (Priti Patel) is today laying before the House a statement of changes in immigration rules.

The main changes are as follows:

We have made changes to the immigration rules which will implement the plan for growth measures, including the launch of the new Global Business Mobility route, High Potential Individual (HPI) route and Scale-up route.

The sponsored Global Business Mobility route will simplify the UK immigration offer for business by bringing together, reforming and expanding various business mobility routes. It will provide routes for the following:

- Senior executives and specialists undertaking temporary assignments at a UK branch or subsidiary of the business they work for—replacing the intra-company transfer route;
- Graduate trainees undertaking a placement in the UK as part of a structured training programme—replacing the intra-company graduate trainee route;

- Teams of workers sent to establish a new branch or subsidiary of an overseas business—replacing the sole representative provisions in the representative of an overseas businesses route;

- Service suppliers undertaking work covered by one of the UK's commitments on trade in services—replacing the service supplier provisions in the temporary work international agreement route; and

- A brand-new provision for secondments to UK businesses in connection with high value contracts for goods or investment.

The Global Business Mobility route represents a world-leading offer for businesses. For the first time, teams of workers will be able to undertake assignments connected to a business's expansion to the UK, thereby facilitating inward investment, while the new provision for secondments is a world-first in enabling collaboration between UK and international businesses. These new and reformed routes will make mobility across the UK border as frictionless as possible, while at the same time ensuring international trade serves the interests of British workers and our economy.

Delivering on the Government's commitment to build back better, we are launching two new immigration routes, the Scale-up and High Potential Individual routes. These routes will provide UK businesses access to a more flexible pool of highly skilled workers.

The Scale-up route recognises the benefits these high-growth businesses offer to the UK and the need to ensure they are fully supported in maintaining this growth at a key time.

Unlike other sponsored routes, the Scale-up route will only require individuals to be sponsored for the initial six months on the route. This will therefore enable UK businesses to compete for the internationally sought after, highly skilled workers they need to take these important high-growth businesses from strength to strength.

To ensure the Scale-up route is an attractive offer for this much sought-after cohort, it will allow for extensions of stay and settlement. To qualify, individuals must demonstrate, through a minimum level of PAYE earnings, they are employed in graduate level occupations.

The new High Potential Individual route will make it as simple as possible for internationally mobile individuals who demonstrate high potential to come to the UK. It will be open to those graduating from top global non-UK universities, who hold a recently awarded degree, equivalent to a UK Bachelor's or postgraduate degree. It will enable those who have already demonstrated their potential through academic achievement to come to the UK without a prior job offer. This will be a highly selective route with graduates of a limited number of universities eligible. The Home Office will update the list of eligible universities annually. Those granted will be given a two-year work visa—three-year for those with a PhD—and will be permitted to move into other long-term employment routes, subject to meeting the eligibility requirements. This route will support UK employers by enhancing the pool of the highly talented individuals available to UK businesses, by complementing the existing graduate route which allows a period of post-study work for international students graduating from UK universities.

To ensure the Global Talent visa continues to allow those at the very top of their professions a smooth application process, in consultation with our Global Talent endorsing bodies, we have further expanded the

list of prestigious prizes which allow applicants to qualify without needing to apply for a separate endorsement decision.

We are also introducing a reformed route for settlement family life. This route applies to partners and parents who must complete a 10-year qualifying period in the UK before qualifying for settlement. People who have a 10-year qualifying period for settlement as a partner or parent begin to qualify for settlement in July 2022—the 10-year route started in July 2012 when Appendix FM was introduced—and the changes ensure they benefit from simplified rules.

We are also introducing a reformed private life route. This route introduces a number of changes for children and young people, including bringing the concession on early settlement, introduced on 20 October 2021, into the rules. It means children and young adults who have spent half their life in the UK can be granted settlement after a five-year qualifying period, rather than 10 years. This allows for a child who was born in the UK and who spent their first seven years here to qualify for immediate settlement. The reformed private life route also clarifies that where an adult has permission on this route, their children born in the UK during the parent's time on the route can qualify for permission as the parent's dependants. These rules allow for increased flexibility for applicants to count time on other routes to settlement towards their qualifying period, meaning when a person's circumstances change their qualifying period for settlement does not have to start again. The changes also ensure an applicant with a criminal conviction resulting in a sentence of 12 months or more cannot qualify for settlement, and they make clear, where a person has breached other suitability rules but nevertheless been granted permission to stay in the UK, they must complete a 10-year qualifying period, and at least five years showing compliance since the breach, before they can qualify for settlement.

The changes to the private life route also aim to ensure applicants on the private life route benefit from simplified rules.

Changes are also being made in respect of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), which enables EEA and Swiss citizens resident in the UK by the end of the transition period, and their family members and the family members of certain British citizens returning with them from the EEA or Switzerland, to obtain the UK immigration status they need to continue living in the UK. Some changes are also being made in respect of the EUSS family permit, which enables relevant family members to travel to the UK.

In particular, these changes reflect the concession arrangements in place outside the rules for an EUSS family permit to be issued in place of an EEA family permit in certain circumstances. These arrangements reflect the closure of the EEA family permit route after 30 June 2021 and enable those covered by them to apply to the EUSS following their arrival in the UK.

The changes also enable a dual British and EEA citizen who exercised free movement rights in the UK before acquiring British citizenship and who has retained their EEA nationality of origin—known as a “Lounes” dual national, in line with EU case law—to sponsor relevant family members under the EUSS and the EUSS family permit in some additional circumstances. These

are where the dual national acquired British citizenship without having met free movement requirements to have held comprehensive sickness insurance in the UK as a student or self-sufficient person.

There are also changes on validity of applications and about variation of applications.

Finally, the seasonal worker route is being expanded to include roles in ornamental horticulture, to support our distinguished flower growers in the UK. A new minimum hourly pay requirement has been added to the route to require that all workers will be paid at least £10.10 per hour. This will be equal to the minimum hourly rate that those applying on the skilled worker route are required to meet to discourage poor conditions often seen in the sector.

[HCWS680]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Trade Update

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): On 14 March 2022, the Government announced that they will take action to deny Russia's entitlement to Most Favoured Nation tariff access to our economy for hundreds of imports, adding a 35-percentage-point tariff increase on £900 million-worth of imported goods from Russia and Belarus, including vodka and antiques—tariffs increasing from 0% to 35%. This is a balanced starting point with room to go further in due course. The UK will also ban exports of luxury goods to Russia in lockstep with our G7 allies. The export ban will affect goods such as luxury vehicles, high-end fashion and works of art.

We want to maximise the harm to the Putin war machine, while minimising the impact on UK businesses, as G7 leaders unite to unleash a fresh wave of economic sanctions on Moscow. In particular, the ban will make sure oligarchs and other members of the elite, who have grown rich under President Putin's reign and support his illegal invasion, are deprived of access to luxury goods and assets.

Denying Russia access to Most Favoured Nation treatment and applying additional tariffs will restrict Russian imports to the UK. We will target imports from Belarus with the same measures, in line with the evolving sanctions position, and to prevent circumvention of Russian-origin goods. The UK Government reaffirms our commitment to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), working closely with others in taking action to ensure those who do not respect the rules-based international order cannot benefit from it.

These new measures will further tighten the growing economic pressure on Russia and ensure the UK is in line with sanctions imposed by our allies.

Secondary legislation to implement this decision will be laid before Parliament under the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 as soon as possible.

[HCWS677]

UK Export Finance Update

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan): The Government are appalled by the unprovoked, barbaric and brutal invasion of Ukraine

and will continue to stand strong in supporting Ukraine through both significant economic and humanitarian assistance.

Due to the effects of the Russian aggression, I was advised by UK Export Finance's (UKEF) Accounting Officer that in his view, the risks involved in the provision of UKEF support in Ukraine no longer met UKEF's normal underwriting criteria. However, the Government have concluded it is in the national interest for UKEF support to remain available to facilitate the continuation of UK exports to Ukraine. I have, therefore, instructed UKEF to remain open for cover in Ukraine within an overall market appetite of £3.5 billion and to make appropriate arrangements accordingly.

I have also instructed UKEF to cease cover for Russia and Belarus and, as a result, UKEF support for exports to, and investments in, these countries has now been withdrawn.

[HCWS678]

JUSTICE

Criminal Legal Aid Proposals

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): The pandemic has been exceptionally challenging for our justice system. We owe our whole legal profession—solicitors, barristers, chartered institute executives, and judiciary and court staff—a debt of gratitude for keeping the wheels of justice turning over the last two years.

Thanks to their immense efforts, we are making progress in tackling the court backlog, and getting back to a more normal way of working—in the interests of victims, witnesses and the wider public.

As Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, I am committed to making sure our world-class justice system is put on a stable footing for the future, for the benefit of victims, defendants and the whole of society, which is why I am today announcing the launch of the Government's response to the Criminal Legal Aid Independent Review (CLAIR) and the means test review consultation for both criminal and civil legal aid.

I would like to thank Sir Christopher Bellamy for his thorough, invaluable report—along with his panel of experts, and everyone who contributed their views as well as all of those who contributed to the means test review.

These two consultations address the recommendations made by Sir Christopher Bellamy and his advisory panel and the review of the legal aid means test launched in 2019. The Government's response to CLAIR reflects the whole system approach taken in that review.

My proposals include an uplift of almost all criminal legal aid fees for criminal defence practitioners by 15% as soon as possible. This would inject an additional £115 million p.a. at steady state. A further £20 million p.a. is being held for other proposals including:

- a reformed litigators graduated fee scheme which pays solicitors in the Crown court,
- investment in work in the youth court, and
- grants for training contracts and for solicitor advocates to gain rights of audience in the Crown court to support the sustainability and development of solicitors' practice.

These proposals bring the total investment to £135 million p.a. at steady state, in line with Sir Christopher's recommendations.

With the Government's additional funding to support court recovery, this will take taxpayer funding of criminal legal aid to £1.2 billion p.a., the highest level in a decade.

And, in the short term, our proposed cash injection will give a 15% boost to fees for police station work, magistrates court work, the work of advocates in the Crown court, most of the work of litigators in the Crown court, solicitors in very high cost cases, and some smaller schemes.

CLAIR made a number of recommendations non-fee recommendations about the future of criminal legal aid, and in line with these we are also making proposals including:

- to reform fee schemes, so they reflect the way our legal professions work including increased work outside of trials and new practice like pre-recorded evidence;
- to explore new ways of delivering remote legal advice in police stations;
- to work with the professions and regulators on how, together, we can promote greater diversity across the system—opening up a career in law to anyone with the talent to succeed, regardless of their background;
- to establish an advisory board bring together information and real experience from the front line to inform Ministers' decision making on legal aid policy;
- to remove barriers to the work of members of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives who do not enter the profession through traditional routes; and,
- to support training contracts for criminal solicitors and grants for solicitors to train to represent clients in the Crown courts and above as solicitor advocates.

Investment and reform will make the fee structures better reflect work done and will improve the efficiency of the criminal legal aid system by incentivising early engagement and resolution where appropriate.

They will reinforce a more sustainable market, with publicly funded criminal defence practice seen as a viable, long-term, career choice, attracting the brightest and best from all backgrounds—a pipeline for the judges of tomorrow.

The proposals will put criminal legal aid on a sustainable and stable footing for many years to come—underpinning an effective and robust justice system that will benefit victims of crime, and everyone in our society who relies on it.

On the means test review, I am proposing a wide suite of changes to ensure continued access to justice. These include:

- increasing income and capital thresholds for legal aid eligibility, meaning that 3.5 million more people will be eligible for criminal legal aid in the magistrates' court and 2 million more people will be eligible for civil legal aid;
- removing the upper income threshold for legal aid at the Crown court, meaning that all Crown court defendants will be eligible for legal aid;
- excluding assets from the means test where they are the subject matter of the case, making it easier for domestic abuse victims to access legal aid;
- removing the means test for three areas of civil legal aid: civil representation for under-18s, civil representation for parents or those with parental responsibility facing the withdrawal or withholding of life-sustaining treatment from their child, and legal help for inquests involving a potential breach of rights under the ECHR (within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998) or where there is likely to be a significant wider public interest in the individual being represented at the inquest.

These measures aim to improve the operation of the whole criminal defence market and the justice system. They are designed to make the criminal justice system more efficient—particularly around new technology—and to make the criminal defence market more sustainable. The consultations will run for 12 weeks, after which the Government will consider responses in detail and formulate our response.

[HCWS684]

Outdoor Weddings and Civil Partnerships

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove): On 20 December 2021, the Government launched a public consultation on outdoor weddings and civil partnerships. The consultation sought views on the Government's proposals to continue to permit outdoor civil marriages and civil partnerships on approved premises, and to permit outdoor religious marriages in the grounds of places of worship. I am writing to inform Members of the publication of the consultation response on outdoor weddings and civil partnerships and laying of the resulting statutory instrument (SI). The consultation sought views on the Government's proposals to continue to permit outdoor civil marriages and civil partnerships on approved premises, and to permit outdoor religious marriages in the grounds of places of worship.

Since 1 July 2021, couples have been able to have their civil marriage and civil partnership proceedings in the open air, in the grounds of buildings such as stately homes and hotels which are approved or become approved for these civil ceremonies. Previously, these proceedings could only take place indoors or otherwise within permanently immovable structures. These outdoor ceremonies were made possible because the Government laid a temporary SI putting in place these flexibilities, in order to give couples more choice and flexibility in the setting, and to support the wedding and civil partnership sector. However, that SI has effect only until the end of 5 April 2022. The Government are now laying this further SI so that these outdoor civil marriage and civil partnership proceedings can continue indefinitely, thus continuing to offer increased choice and flexibility.

The Government also proposed to extend the policy of permitting outdoor ceremonies to religious marriages in the grounds of places of worship using a separate legislative reform order. This would provide similar choice and flexibility to couples seeking religious weddings and to the religious bodies that solemnise them. The proposals would enable couples to have a greater choice in relation to the location of their ceremonies, and for approved premises and religious bodies to have more flexibility in the locations for ceremonies, should they choose to offer it. No religious group would be obliged to provide outdoor ceremonies, and existing protections to safeguard religious freedoms would remain in place.

The Government have carefully considered all the responses to the consultation. Respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of continuing the provision of outdoor civil marriages and civil partnerships: therefore, the Government are now laying this SI so that these proceedings can continue beyond 5 April 2022 indefinitely.

Respondents were also in favour of the proposal to extend the provision of outdoor ceremonies to religious marriages, on a permissive basis. The Government will therefore take these proposals forward via a separate legislative reform order to be brought before Parliament in due course, as this will require a change to primary legislation to implement.

This reform for continued outdoor ceremonies will act as a stepping stone towards later and more comprehensive and durable reform following the Law Commission's recommendations, should the Government decide to undertake such reform. The full consultation report, including detailed analysis of responses to individual questions and a list of respondents, is available at: <https://consult.justice.gov.uk/digital-communications/outdoor-marriages-civil-partnerships/>.

The SI has been laid in Parliament today, to come into effect on 6 April therefore ensuring the smooth continued provision of outdoor marriages and civil partnerships beyond the expiry of the previous SI. A copy of the consultation response will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS682]

Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 15 March 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme

The following is an extract from the statement on the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme on 14 March 2022.

Michael Gove: The scheme will be open to all Ukrainian nationals and residents, and they will be able to live and work in the United Kingdom for up to three years.

[Official Report, 14 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 619.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations:

An error has been identified in my statement.

The correct information should have been:

Michael Gove: The scheme will be open to **all Ukrainian nationals resident in Ukraine prior to 1 January 2022**, and they will be able to live and work in the United Kingdom for up to three years.

DEFENCE

National Shipbuilding Strategy

The following is an extract from the statement on the National Shipbuilding Strategy on 10 March 2022.

Jeremy Quin: Today, I am delighted to announce that we are going one step further by publishing our refreshed national shipbuilding strategy. Drawing on the multi-talented skills of the Government, industry and academia, and backed up by more than £5 billion of Government investment over the next three years, the plan creates the framework for our future UK maritime success.

[Official Report, 10 March 2022, Vol. 710, c. 505.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Defence Procurement, the hon. Member for Horsham (Jeremy Quin):

An error has been identified in my statement.

The correct information should have been:

Jeremy Quin: Today, I am delighted to announce that we are going one step further by publishing our refreshed national shipbuilding strategy. Drawing on the multi-talented skills of the Government, industry and academia, and backed up by more than **£4 billion** of Government investment over the next three years, the plan creates the framework for our future UK maritime success.

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