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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 17 March 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electric Vehicles

1. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to encourage the use of electric vehicles. [906108]

11. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the (a) quantity and (b) reliability of public electric vehicle charging stations. [906119]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Government have committed £2.5 billion to vehicle grants and infrastructure to support the transition to electric vehicles.

Sarah Green: The British Vehicle Rental and Leasing Association, based in Amersham in my constituency, has pointed out that the cost of charging is still prohibitive for many companies. If a company with a fleet of vehicles wants to install charging points onsite, it probably also needs to install a substation, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of pounds, which is prohibitive. The BVRLA is therefore calling for a depot grant to help with those set-up costs. Will the Secretary of State consider introducing a depot grant to help companies with fleets to convert them to electric vehicles?

Grant Shapps: We are always looking at what more we can do. We put in £1.9 billion in the 2020 spending review, and we have enhanced that with an extra £620 million for the transition. I will always look at what else can be done. Electric vehicles—I can attest to this because I have driven one for several years—are dramatically cheaper than equivalent fuel vehicles, albeit that the infrastructure needs to be got right to make sure that they are chargeable.

Bill Esterson: The UK needs 480,000 EV charging points if we are to transition to electric vehicles. So far there are 28,000 publicly available charging points, and only 1,000 on-street charging points outside London. Last year, just 7,600 new charging points were installed. At this rate, we will have to wait until 2080 for everyone to be able to use an electric car. These figures are from the National Infrastructure Commission. How does the Secretary of State expect motorists to be able to play their part in the move to net zero if the Government are not delivering the charging infrastructure?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Gentleman presents a partial picture because he forgets that there are 300,000 chargers installed at people's homes, with Government support. In addition, the figures that he quoted are now out of date. There are 29,500 public installations, 4,500 of which are rapid chargers—a 37% increase in 2021 alone. We will be ready for everybody to go electric.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It has been more than two years since the Prime Minister promised 4,000 new zero-emission buses—representing only about a tenth of the English bus fleet—by the start of 2025. It took them a while, and it has been a year since the launch of the zero-emission bus regional areas scheme designed to deliver on that promise, but the Government said it would only deliver funding for up to 500 zero-emission buses in England. One year on, how many buses have been ordered through the standard ZEBRA process?

Grant Shapps: Seven hundred and five.

Gavin Newlands: I very much appreciate that answer, but it is completely different to the one I received to a parliamentary question on Monday, which was that the Government have ordered zero buses through the standard ZEBRA process since it launched but that they expect to do so later this year. I hope the Secretary of State might correct the record. The truth is that six months after the Prime Minister made his 4,000 bus pledge, the Scottish Government got on with delivering, with their SULEB—Scottish ultra-low emission bus—schemes delivering 272 buses, while just a fortnight ago Transport Minister Jenny Gilruth announced the first phase of the zero-emission bus challenge fund of £62 million for a further 276 buses. The nearly 550 buses delivered or ordered in Scotland are the equivalent of 5,500 in England. The UK Government are fiddling while the planet burns. When will the 4,000 buses be delivered?

Grant Shapps: As we said in our manifesto, we will deliver the 4,000 buses during this Parliament, and we are on track to do so. I have just given the hon. Gentleman the up-to-date information on the number already funded. The SNP spokesman makes a big fuss of this, but—I do not think he mentioned this—the Scottish Government missed their own legal emission targets under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. They were supposed to reduce the emissions but they missed the targets.

Transport Connectivity

2. **Virginia Crosbie** (Ynys Môn) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve transport connectivity within the UK. [906109]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): We are carefully considering the recommendations from Sir Peter Hendy's "Union Connectivity Review" and we will respond in due course.

Virginia Crosbie: I welcome Avanti West Coast's £170,000 investment and the creation of a dedicated driver depot in Holyhead, but direct rail services between London and Holyhead, the UK's second busiest ro-ro port and the main route connecting the UK and the EU, will reduce from nine per day prior to the pandemic to just two. What steps is the Minister taking to help providers return rail services across the UK to their pre-pandemic levels to support connectivity across the UK?

Robert Courts: I commend my hon. Friend on being a true champion for Ynys Môn. We continue to work closely with her and operators on the development of attractive timetables that are reliable, deliver excellent performance and are good value for money. Thanks to her campaign and that work, the two trains per day from London to Holyhead will increase to four in May, and we are looking to bring back more.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): There are conflicting views on East West Rail as a project to improve connectivity, but the one thing we all agree on in Bedford is that the delayed consultation response, the potential demolition of homes and concerns about the environment are taking a toll on residents. We need clarity, so will the Minister tell us whether the DfT is backtracking on the project? Will he instruct East West Rail to urgently publish its proposals?

Robert Courts: I will ask the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) to respond in detail to the concerns that the hon. Gentleman has raised as soon as possible.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on where we are with improving connectivity between the south coast and the M4? Is the study in his Department on track to report in September? Will it include an upgrade to the A350 as it rumbles through Westbury and Yarnbrook in my constituency? Can he give any commitment at all to a relief road that will, after so many years, bring some relief to my constituents in the town of Westbury?

Robert Courts: My right hon. Friend has raised the question of Westbury and the difficulties his constituents are facing. I have heard that very clearly, and I will ensure that he gets a detailed response from the roads Minister, Baroness Vere, on the progress.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Ministers will be aware that the Select Committee on Transport recently visited Leeds and Bradford as part of our inquiry into the integrated rail plan. Has the current Transport Secretary seen the former Transport Secretary Lord McLaughlin's comments that the Government's revised integrated rail plan goes against the best interests of people in the north of England? Is that why he has reduced Transport for the North's budget by 37%?

Robert Courts: The Secretary of State has met Lord McLaughlin recently, and he will no doubt have reiterated the point that I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman and everyone who asks about the integrated rail plan, which is that this is £96 billion of investment—the greatest from any Government in recent history.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): The Hendy review recommended the creation of a UK-wide strategic transport network. It also identified a gap in north Wales. However, when Transport for Wales bid for funds to develop the business case for investment to fill that gap, it was declined. Will the Minister meet me to discuss and perhaps reconsider that?

Robert Courts: We are committed to strengthening transport bonds throughout our Union. I note that the Welsh Government published a report recently saying that they did not support key improvements to the A55

in north Wales, nor the building of new roads, but I know that the roads Minister will be keen to meet my hon. Friend as soon as possible to discuss his individual concerns.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Connecting communities to the rest of the UK is crucial, but not at the expense of cutting off communities from their own locality. I urge the Minister to look again at plans in the High Speed Rail (Crewe - Manchester) Bill that will see the Metrolink from Piccadilly to Ashton-under-Lyne, which runs through my constituency, severed and mothballed during the construction phase, to be replaced by buses. It is unacceptable; can we look at that again?

Robert Courts: The Department is very keen to work with local communities to ensure that the plan works. I know that the HS2 Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) will be keen to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss precisely that issue.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Sometimes the Government get criticised over rail, but in my constituency, we have had electrification, more trains and more capacity going to Wellingborough, and we are now getting it going north to the great cities, and we have our station being redeveloped. It is in the middle of the country, and we have Station Island there. Is this an example of what the Government are going to do elsewhere?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. Under the previous Labour Government, 63 miles were electrified, whereas we, up to the end of the relative period, have electrified 1,221 miles.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Happy St Patrick's day to everyone, but especially the thriving Irish community in my Slough constituency. Industry data that I have seen shows that while passengers are battling to get on overcrowded trains, 21,000 fewer services are running today than there were pre-pandemic. With more people returning to rail, and to ensure that we do not have a car-led recovery, will the Minister now commit to restoring the services that have been cut? If not, why not?

Robert Courts: Following the Williams-Shapps review, we have announced the creation of Great British Railways, which will create a truly passenger-focused service for the UK. I have already mentioned the £96 billion that has gone into the integrated rail plan, as well as the restoring your railway programme. The Government are focusing on getting passengers on to rail wherever possible.

Bus Driver Shortages

3. **Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with (a) operator and (b) trade union representatives on bus driver shortages. [906110]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): My Department continues to work with trade representatives and operators to understand and mitigate the extent, impacts and reasons behind driver shortages.

Navendu Mishra: Happy St Patrick's Day, Mr Speaker. During the pandemic, bus drivers kept vital lifeline services going at huge risk to their health. Many now face reduced pay and conditions and disgraceful fire and rehire tactics employed by disreputable bosses, so they are understandably leaving the industry in droves. What steps are the Government taking to improve the pay and conditions of bus drivers, to encourage people to take up jobs in the sector, and to solve the current shortage?

Andrew Stephenson: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to bus drivers, who worked throughout the pandemic. The Government supported the work of local bus services with £1.7 billion of funding throughout the period. We do not intervene, however, on the levels of remuneration in private businesses, with the exception of setting rates for the national minimum wage and the national living wage.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister Sam Tarry.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Happy St Patrick's Day, Mr Speaker. During the height of the covid pandemic, bus drivers worked tirelessly, often at considerable risk to their health, to keep our vital services functioning by helping NHS staff and other essential workers reach their destination. This week, a Unite the union survey said that we now face bus driver shortages in 99% of garages, which clearly severely hampers services across the country. The same survey said that an average of 90% of respondents believe that the mass exodus is a direct result of low pay and poor working conditions. Those heroes of the transport industry clearly deserve something better, so is it not high time for operators to reward the efforts of our vital transport networks and the people who work on them, and give those bus drivers the pay rise and improvements in working conditions that they thoroughly deserve?

Andrew Stephenson: Similarly to several hon. Members, my grandfather was a bus driver so I always stand in solidarity with bus drivers across the country. The Government have supported buses with record amounts, not just with the money that we are putting in during the pandemic but with a doubling of bus funding compared with the previous spending review. We recently announced a further six months of the covid-19 support package for the buses and light rail sectors, worth a minimum of £150 million.

Rail Network: Accessibility

4. **Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve accessibility for disabled people using the rail network. [906111]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): We have extended the access for all programme until 2024 with almost £400 million to improve accessibility. The programme has already delivered lifts and other access improvements at more than 1,500 stations, with more to come in the next few years.

Mr Speaker: I hope that includes Chorley.

Afzal Khan: Disability access on the rail network is a major issue across the country. In my constituency, campaigners in Levenshulme have been calling for step-free access for years. We are making good progress, largely down to the determination of the community groups and local representatives who have brought the issue to the fore. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all stations have step-free access as standard, particularly Levenshulme, which is the busiest station with step-only access in Manchester outside the city centre?

Wendy Morton: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for raising your own station too. Levenshulme was nominated in the access for all main programme, but it was unsuccessful. The hon. Gentleman had a conversation with me about that. Let us be absolutely clear, however, that more than 75% of journeys are through step-free stations, compared with fewer than 50% in 2005. We are in the process of setting the funding envelopes for the next rail control period, which is 2024 to 2029. When further funding is available, any station without an accessible route into the station and to all platforms will be a potential candidate. It is an important topic. I recently visited Eridge station to see a project that had been completed there and as we know, it really makes a difference.

Mr Speaker: Including Chorley—excellent.

Transport for the North and Levelling Up

5. **Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of reductions in Transport for the North's budget on levelling up in the north of England. [906112]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Transport for the North's core funding for financial year 2022-23 totals £6.5 million, a rise of £500,000 on the previous year. This funding is in addition to the Government's historic £96 billion integrated rail plan.

Dame Diana Johnson: Shall we try again on this? On 18 November, the same day that Ministers ignored TfN's recommendations in the disappointing integrated rail plan, Whitehall also removed powers from TfN and levelled down its funding by 37%; the main devolved power Ministers have left with TfN is over making staff redundant. Does the Minister agree with the TfN chair, Lord Patrick McLoughlin, a former Secretary of State for Transport, in his letter of 3 March, in which he warned that funding cuts to TfN will mean "down-sizing of the organisation which in turn will result in redundancies"?

Andrew Stephenson: The right hon. Lady continues to focus on process while we continue to focus on delivery. It is not for the Government to comment on the business planning of a devolved transport body. TfN definitely has enough money to complete its statutory funding commitments, and it has far more money than any other sub-national transport body. On the staff affected by TfN's move to become the Northern Powerhouse Rail co-sponsor, the Department has commenced discussions on the TUPE process and as such I am unable to comment further at this time.

Bus Stop Safety

6. **Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to improve bus stop safety. [906113]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): Our national bus strategy has asked local transport authorities to consider the impact of roadside infrastructure on passenger safety and security.

Luke Pollard: After the tragedies in Plymouth, people, especially women and girls, must feel safe while waiting for a bus, so does the Minister agree that before Conservative-run Plymouth City Council cuts 211 bus shelters—a third of all Plymouth's bus shelters—it must stop and seriously consider the impact that will have on the safety of people waiting for a bus?

Trudy Harrison: We take safety, particularly of women and girls, very seriously and I realise the difficulties that have been faced in Plymouth. The hon. Gentleman will know that we recently commissioned our safety champions to work with stakeholders and they have now provided 13 recommendations which will specifically look at how we can protect women and girls on the transport network. I would welcome further consideration on the importance of bus shelters in use and also the illumination of those shelters as an important factor in protecting women and girls.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Bus safety is important, but so is train safety. Has the Department had any more thoughts about placing a simple sticker on the back of each train seat advertising the British Transport police text number so that passengers can summon help if required and also asking people to refrain from using bad language? I think the Minister will agree that this also fits nicely with the criteria for the Great British Railways headquarters competition in that Doncaster's champion MP not only did his apprenticeship on the railway but also helped to secure a more pleasant trip for all future rail passengers.

Trudy Harrison: I am most impressed by my hon. Friend's doughty campaigning in wanting to headquarter Great British Railways in Doncaster. Of course I agree that antisocial behaviour on public transport is a blight; however, I suspect that there might be unintended consequences from some on-train requests, such as encouraging more swearing and passenger confrontations, but I agree that we should look at doing more in this area and a solution using positive messaging to promote considerate behaviour could be an option.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister remember that two years ago a car ploughed into a bus stop in my Huddersfield constituency, killing a young girl and badly injuring two other people? That driver has never been found guilty of anything. He put forward a plea of automatism—that he was not actually in charge—and a clever lawyer got him off. What sort of justice is that?

Trudy Harrison: I am sorry to be reminded of that case. We are currently looking at how the justice system works for all drivers and I am happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with an update on that piece of work.

Train Service Frequency: Netherfield, Burton Joyce and Carlton

7. **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure that the frequency of train services in Netherfield, Burton Joyce and Carlton returns to pre-covid-19 outbreak levels. [906114]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): The pandemic is changing travel habits and we are starting to see some substantial changes in passenger demand for rail travel. As covid recedes, we must ensure that services are adjusted to meet changes in passenger demand. We are working with operators to consider what further changes might be possible at these stations.

Tom Randall: There is a widespread view in Gedling that rail services could be improved. For example, Carlton recently lost its direct service to Matlock and many trains pass through Burton Joyce without stopping. I continue to have discussions with East Midlands Railway about how it might reach the maximum amount of services in its agreement with the Department. I would welcome the opportunity to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how Gedling's stations might fulfil their potential.

Wendy Morton: I appreciate my hon. Friend raising the matter and can see what a hard-working campaigner he is for his constituents. I assure him that we are working with the operator to consider what further changes might be possible, subject to passenger demand and the cascading of trains into East Midlands Railway. I am happy to meet him to discuss this in more detail.

Rising Fuel Costs: Impact on Motorists

8. **Alex Davies-Jones** (Pontypridd) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to mitigate the impact of rising fuel costs on motorists. [906115]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I am working with my Cabinet colleagues to consider support for motorists during these challenging times.

Alex Davies-Jones: I place on record my celebrations for everybody celebrating St Patrick's day, and a happy Purim.

With fuel costs skyrocketing and the average family facing an annual increase of £386 in petrol costs, my constituents are being forced to choose between getting to work and heating their homes. Does the Secretary of State agree that now would be the worst possible time to introduce a tax hike of £255 on working people who are already seeing their pay swallowed up by the costs of simply living?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady asks specifically about the additional costs of motoring during these difficult times with what we have seen happen to the crude oil price. I gently remind her that she voted against a measure in the Budget to freeze fuel duty for a 12th consecutive year.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) for the 12-year freeze in fuel duty—that is extremely welcome—but given the increases in pump

prices and the costs for average constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, we need to do more at the forthcoming Budget. The Treasury is getting more revenue from VAT, so we need to find ways to reduce that duty burden so that people in my constituency can fill up and continue to go to work. Will the Secretary of State speak to the Chancellor about that?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the pressures that exist. As I mentioned, we froze fuel duty for the 12th consecutive year, which means that it costs about £15 less to fill up a family car than it would have done otherwise. He is right to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), who is perhaps the most expensive Member of this House, having cost the Treasury tens of billions of pounds over the years for this worthwhile saving.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Alan Davie, Ian Roberts, Geddes and Laird are the hauliers who keep the economy of Angus moving, and by the Road Haulage Association's estimate they are facing an 18% increase in operating costs purely on fuel. What discussions will the Secretary of State have with the Chancellor to get something sorted to keep our economy moving?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Member is right to point out the fantastic work done by haulage companies and all their workers. Over the next five years, the 2022-23 freeze will represent £8 billion off the fuel bill for motorists in this country, including the haulier sector, which I recently backed with 32 separate measures to ensure that it can continue to operate during what have been difficult times post covid.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): It is a very happy St Patrick's day in Ireland because fuel duty has been cut in the past week. I thank my right hon. Friend for what the Government have done on the fuel duty freeze, but the fact is that motorists are paying £1.60 or more for their petrol and diesel and we are heading for a de facto lockdown where parents cannot afford to take their kids to school and workers cannot afford to commute by car and have to stay at home. Will my right hon. Friend make appeals to the Treasury to cut fuel duty in the spending round next week?

Grant Shapps: I had not noticed that Parliament's most expensive MP was in his place in the Chamber. My right hon. Friend's work has been absolutely remarkable over the years: actually, after 12 years of the fuel freeze, the average family has saved something like £2,000 as a direct result of his excellent campaigning. I will of course have further conversations with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but it will be for him to decide on the next measures.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The price of diesel is now so high that a typical van driver will be paying £800 more than they were a year ago. Meanwhile, wholesale oil prices have fallen by 28% in just one week. Those are prices millions of working people and families simply cannot afford, so why is the Transport Secretary still defending the record profits of oil and gas giants as they swallow up the pay of hard-working British people? Why does he not insist that any fall in the price of oil is passed on to the price of petrol and diesel at the pump?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about ensuring that any fall is passed on quickly. For example, I notice that Brent crude is down to \$100 a barrel at the moment—it had been as high, I think, as \$130 a week or two ago—and I want to see that passed on. But I am very curious as to why, given her deep concern about the cost of diesel, she voted against our move to freeze petrol and diesel prices this year.

Louise Haigh: The Transport Secretary thinks he is on to a very clever point given that Labour votes against Tory Budgets, but I remind him that the last time the Tories tried to put up fuel duty, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), now the shadow Chancellor, forced a vote in Parliament to delay the increase. People need help in the here and now as they struggle to make decisions over which basic essentials to cut. This has to be a wake-up call for the Government. The crisis shows exactly why this country must never again be left dependent on the oil and gas of foreign despots.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) mentioned the statistic of 1,000 electric vehicle charging units outside London—a stat that the Transport Secretary did not correct—which reveals the gross inequity of access in this country to EV charging units. The National Infrastructure Commission was also damning in its appraisal that the Government have no plan to deliver infrastructure. When will he publish the strategy on EV infrastructure that the industry is calling for, to help turbocharge the transition to cleaner transport?

Grant Shapps: I have to say again that words are one thing—I understand the hon. Lady is doing her job—but action is another. When individuals vote against measures that will freeze fuel prices for British consumers and motorists, they can hardly then stand there and say, “Why aren't the Government doing something?” The Opposition could help: they could vote for it. On EV charging, I do not know where the stat of 1,000 chargers outside London comes from. It is completely untrue. There are nearly 30,000 chargers across the country, of which over 5,500 are rapid. According to the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, we now have the fastest chargers in the west. I hope the hon. Lady will welcome that.

Rail Industry: Competition

9. **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to encourage competition in the rail industry. [906116]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): As we create Great British Railways, we will work with the private sector to deliver for customers and taxpayers and restore competition through passenger services contracts as soon as possible.

Damian Collins: As international rail travel opens up post the covid pandemic, Eurostar still has an effective monopoly on services through Eurotunnel. What can the Government do to encourage other companies, in particular rail companies from Germany and Spain, that have expressed an interest in running alternative services through the tunnel?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I was fortunate enough recently to visit both Eurostar and Eurotunnel. What I can say is that the UK Government would support the growth of international rail services given the significant benefits they could provide for the UK. We stand ready to engage with partners to facilitate new routes where there is a commercial proposition to do so.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In York, it is about not just competition but collaboration. We have 100 rail companies leading in rail operations and in high-end rail engineering. We find that collaborative approach not only benefits the industry but takes the future of our railways forward. What is the Minister doing to invest in rail clusters, similar to the clusters in which her colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are investing in other areas of the economy?

Wendy Morton: What I can say to the hon. Lady is how important innovation is within the industry. With the new relationship between Great British Railways, the train operators and the innovators there are new opportunities to trial and roll out innovations more rapidly. Central to that will be the better management and exploitation of data, and GBR will be in an excellent place to do that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Transport Committee, Huw Merriman.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): We have gone from a situation where competition and franchising delivered £200 million in profits to the Treasury to the situation we have now, where the Government are funding rail to the tune of £15 billion. Some review of costs is of course inevitable. The Rail Minister spoke this week about workplace reform, so will she set out in more detail what those reforms will look like? Will the Government ultimately have the resolve to see this through?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those kind words. The Williams-Shapps plan for rail, which we published last year, set out the biggest change to the railway in three decades. We are committed to bringing forward that sector-wide reform. The country owes a great deal of gratitude to all railway workers for their vital work throughout the pandemic in keeping the UK moving, but it is important to recognise that the pandemic ushered in a financial crisis across the sector leading to interventions by Government to sustain the industry. Moving forward, the railway must be financially and operationally sustainable for the future so that it delivers the service that passengers want.

Levelling Up: Bus Services in Newcastle

10. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve the (a) quality and (b) affordability of bus services in Newcastle as part of the Government's levelling-up agenda. [906118]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Our levelling-up agenda includes investing £1.2 billion to deliver better and cheaper bus services across England, as set out in our bus strategy, which is part of more than £3 billion of new spending on buses.

Chi Onwurah: The levelling-up White Paper promises to bring local public transport connectivity closer to London standards by 2030—so not as good as London, just less worse and not for another eight years. Newcastle needs affordable and accessible bus services now, not the cuts we are seeing. Transport North East's bus service improvement plan sets out the improvements we need. Will the Minister fund it?

Andrew Stephenson: We hope to make more announcements on the latest round of funding very soon. Officials from the Department are working with representatives from the city regions, including Nexus and Transport North East, to establish options for integrated multimodal ticketing. We have of course already announced £5.7 billion for transport networks in the eight city regions, and the north-east, the North East Combined Authority and the North of Tyne Combined Authority will receive their share of the funding once appropriate governance is in place.

Airports National Policy Statement 2018 and Jet Zero Strategy

12. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): If he will review the airports national policy statement 2018 following the development of his Department's jet zero strategy. [906120]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): We will not review the airports national policy statement at this time, but will consider the case again once the jet zero strategy has been finalised and there is more certainty about the longer-term impact of covid on aviation.

David Simmonds: As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on airport communities, I know that many colleagues would like to know whether, in the light of the jet zero strategy, we now have the opportunity to spread the benefits of cleaner air travel to a larger selection of airports across the United Kingdom.

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend is quite right that the jet zero strategy provides the opportunity to spread cleaner, greener air travel across all parts of the UK. For example, the UK sustainable aviation fuel industry could create up to 11,000 green jobs while helping to level up with production facilities across the UK. We will be looking at regional aviation in our forthcoming aviation strategy.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I say in response to the Minister's response to the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) that the Secretary of State committed to review the airports national policy statement last July. It has to be done urgently. Since it was adopted four years ago, our net zero commitment has become law, we have adopted a carbon budget and we have held the chair of COP26. What we know about the jet zero strategy and the implications and difficulty of delivering sustainable aviation fuels means that the review must surely come sooner rather than later to incentivise change.

Robert Courts: The point that the hon. Member misses is that we have also had the jet zero consultation. A number of presentations have come in on that and we need to consider them carefully. There is a lot of interesting

work going on and we will respond on that in due course, which will give us the context to consider jet zero and the impact of covid. We will then look at the ANPS again.

Net Zero Strategy: Rail Electrification

13. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential role of rail electrification in the Government's net zero strategy. [906121]

17. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the (a) potential merits of and (b) UK capability for accelerating the decarbonisation of transport. [906130]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): Our transport decarbonisation plan sets out how we will decarbonise the transport sector by 2050. Electrification will play an important role in decarbonising all modes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), the Rail Minister, has already said, over 1,221 track miles of electrification have been delivered in Great Britain since 2010, compared with 63 in the 14 years of the previous Administration, and we continue to expand the electrified rail network. For example, the integrated rail plan announcement confirmed that we will complete the electrification of the midland main line and deliver full electrification and upgrade of the trans-Pennine main line.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank the Minister for her answer. We are in negotiations with Midlands Connect and her Department about upgrades and new investments on the Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton line, which is a very important line in the west midlands. Will she give me a commitment that she will look at that with a view to electrifying the Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton line as soon as possible?

Trudy Harrison: I can certainly give that commitment. I know that my hon. Friend has met with the Rail Minister and will do so again. As he knows, Midlands Connect is developing a business case for journey time improvements on the line connecting Shrewsbury, Wolverhampton and Birmingham. This will assess the enhancements required, the timescales for delivery and the costs and benefits of the scheme.

Chris Stephens: Given the huge impact increasing transport costs are having on the cost of basic foodstuffs and day-to-day living expenses, does the Minister accept the Road Haulage Association's estimate of an 18% increase in its members' running costs? Is that another cost that will fall disproportionately on the poor? What action is the Department taking to ensure the poor are not expected to pay the price for a Government looking to escape the net zero tariff?

Trudy Harrison: The decarbonisation of transport will bring benefits to our economy, our society and the environment. That is well and truly set out in our transport decarbonisation plan.

A14: Funding for Junction 10A

14. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If he will ensure that funding for junction 10A on the A14 at Kettering is incorporated into his Department's road investment strategy 3 from 2025. [906125]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The findings of the technical review for the A14 junction 10A have been completed by National Highways and form the high-level strategic outline business case for the scheme (SOBC). National Highways have confirmed they will be happy to share the technical review with my hon. Friend and meet him to discuss these in due course.

Mr Hollobone: Residents in Kettering, Barton Seagrave and Burton Latimer desperately need junction 10A to be included in road investment strategy 3 from 2025 because with 5,500 new homes being built on the Hanwood Park development to the east of Kettering, Kettering will grind to a halt if this junction is not put in place. Would my hon. Friend be kind enough to secure a meeting for me with the Roads Minister so that we can progress this scheme?

Andrew Stephenson: My hon. Friend continues to be the strongest possible champion for this scheme and for his constituents. I know he met the Roads Minister to discuss this recently, but I know my noble Friend the Baroness Vere will be more than happy to meet him again. Discussions about this scheme remain ongoing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): The road investment strategy will now have to take into account remedial work on smart motorways. Just last week it was revealed that for almost a week prior to a tragic collision on the M4, vehicle detection technology, there to protect stranded motorists, had been broken. What is more, overnight it has been reported that one in six stopped vehicle detection cameras on the M25 are currently out of action. These serious flaws in safety-critical technology on smart motorways are continuing to put lives at risk. I beg the Minister to urgently address these serious flaws and, in the meantime, to reinstate the hard shoulder before more lives are needlessly lost.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, with which I have a lot of sympathy. We are committed to making sure that smart motorways are among the safest roads in the country. We want drivers not just to be safe, but, crucially, to feel safe and confident when driving on those roads. That is why we have listened to concerns and are taking forward the Transport Committee's recommendations. We need to continue to work to ensure that smart motorways are as safe as possible for all road users.

Private Hire Drivers

15. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment his Department has made of the (a) adequacy of working conditions and (b) level of job security of private hire drivers. [906127]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Government support the proportionate regulation of the sector and will shortly be consulting on guidance to licensing authorities on how they might best achieve that, while maintaining high standards in safety, accessibility and workers' rights.

Daniel Zeichner: During the pandemic, the support available for taxi and private hire drivers around the country was patchy, and many experienced people have been lost to the sector. What assessment has been made of the situation and, in hindsight, what could have been done differently?

Robert Courts: I pay tribute to the sector for how it dealt with exceptionally challenging times during the pandemic; the hon. Gentleman is quite right to draw attention to that. These have been unparalleled and difficult times across the entirety of the economy. The key thing is that now we have one of the most open societies in the world because of the success of the vaccine roll-out. I am confident that the sector and the wider economy will bounce back.

Topical Questions

T1. [906133] **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I would like to update the House on the actions that we have taken to clamp down on Russian interests in the UK. As hon. Members have already seen, we have detained private jets that we believe are owned by, or connected to, Putin's cronies. I can now confirm that we are investigating a small number of yachts moored in this country, which we also suspect are linked to Russian oligarchs. I have taken steps to ensure that they are unable to depart, and investigations are ongoing. I can reveal that 10 Russian-linked ships have been turned away or redirected on their course, and eight ships or their companies have severed their Russian ties.

I also inform the House of conversations that I have been having with my opposite number, the Ukrainian Transport and Infrastructure Secretary, who has asked me to thank the whole House for the cross-party support that has been provided. He said that the UK's approach has been pioneering towards his country and that where the UK goes, others follow.

Mr Sharma: Let me declare my interest as a former employee of London Transport as a bus conductor and booking clerk. Transport for London has warned that it will be forced to cut one in five buses and 10% of tube services if it does not receive a long-term funding deal from the Government. It has been two years since the pandemic began and the Secretary of State has failed to come forward with this funding, despite offering 18 months of bail-outs to private rail companies. When will he finally stop playing political games with Londoners and provide TfL with a long-term funding agreement?

Grant Shapps: That would be £5 billion-worth of political games—because that is the amount that we have given to TfL to keep its services running. That has been an incredibly fair settlement. The hon. Gentleman talks about a longer-term settlement, but surely he would agree with us that we should see what is going to

happen with the pandemic; as it completes, we are able to talk about other things, including capital grants. However, I think £5 billion should be recognised by the hon. Gentleman.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): The A50-A500 corridor is absolutely critical to the economy of Staffordshire and improvements to those roads are vital for the levelling-up agenda in north Staffordshire. May I ask the Secretary of State to welcome the recent publication from Midlands Connect proposing a number of improvements on that route? Of specific interest to my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme are the plans and conversations he has had about improving junction 15 on the M6.

Grant Shapps: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he has been doing in that regard. We are very keen to ensure improvements and we will make sure that we continue to work with National Highways to try to provide those.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As you well know, Mr Speaker, I am a lifelong member of the Fianna Phadraig Irish pipe band in Wythenshawe; it is my great honour to stand at this Dispatch Box and wish one and all a very happy St Patrick's day. I am looking forward to getting home this afternoon and joining my comrades to entertain the masses of Manchester.

Worrying news has just broken that P&O Ferries has been called to port as DP World, its owner, seeks the long-term viability of the ferry company. Major disruption is expected. Can the Secretary of State update the House about any discussions that he has had with DP World or P&O Ferries about any potential redundancies, and the fact that we do not want any crews who are made redundant to be replaced by foreign cheap labour?

Grant Shapps: It was remiss of me not to acknowledge St Patrick's Day and Purim. Both are fun and enjoyable festivals, and I know that Members on both sides of the House and people throughout the country will be enjoying them.

On a much sadder note, I am concerned about the news that is breaking on P&O Ferries. I understand that it has temporarily paused its operations, which is causing disruption in the short straits between Calais and Dover, and at some other ports. I am working with the Kent resilience forum, and I have just instructed its members to become intricately involved, along with other partnerships. I will be taking further steps later today, which will include ensuring that my officials engage in urgent discussions with P&O about the situation, which is of particular concern to its workers.

Mr Speaker: If it is that serious and an emergency statement is required, the Chair will always be willing to listen.

T4. [906136] **Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said earlier, thousands of electric charging points are being installed across the country, including some in Basingstoke town centre, but what support is available to give people who do not have off-street parking access to charging points in residential areas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): I am pleased to hear about the good work that is being done by Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council. We want to spread that across the country. Since 2020 we have committed £2.5 billion to support the transition to zero emission vehicles, offsetting their higher up-front costs and accelerating the roll-out of transport infrastructure. I should be delighted to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss more ways in which we can support her council.

T6. [906138] **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): [R] For more than two months my constituency has been gridlocked while the Conservative-led council and Network Rail have been painting a bridge. Drivers are fuming, and firms have lost between 25% and 75% of their business. Ahead of the Commonwealth games and additional works in our towns, will the Minister agree to meet me to ensure that there is no repeat of this event?

Trudy Harrison: I will take the time to look into the matter further, and will endeavour to write to the hon. Member.

T5. [906137] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The Government's proposal to move the headquarters of the Great British Railways out of London is a great levelling-up proposal. Clearly the headquarters will have to be in the east midlands, which is the poorest region in the country, and I would guess that they will have to be in a town whose rail history goes back to 1850, whose railway has probably been newly electrified and which has a station island where there could be a development, and whose council has welcomed the proposal. May I save the Secretary of State a lot of time, worry and energy by suggesting that he should simply announce today that the headquarters will be in Wellingborough?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): My hon. Friend tempts me, but, as he will know, the competition closed yesterday. We have seen some fantastic bids from local authorities represented by Members on both sides of the House. There is real enthusiasm, and not just in my hon. Friend's constituency. The shortlist will be announced in due course.

T7. [906140] **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): The Secretary of State talked about electric buses earlier, but there is also the option of hydrogen. We have a groundbreaking hydrogen industry, while the Chinese have a real grip on electric bus technology. The West Midlands wants to buy hydrogen buses, and Northern Ireland wants to build them. The blockage seems to be the negative attitude of the officials in the Department. Can the Secretary of State sort that out, not only to help the environment in the west midlands but to give a much-needed boost to an emerging British industry?

Trudy Harrison: I am delighted to hear of the right hon. Member's enthusiasm for hydrogen, which I share. We are committed to rolling out a decarbonised transport economy, and I can assure him that there is equal enthusiasm in the Department. As for the scheme to which he refers, I will look into it, chivvy it on, and get back to him.

T8. [906141] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): When will the superb canopy restoration work be completed at Kettering railway station, and what other refurbishment and improvement works are planned for the station?

Wendy Morton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that question. I know he has been and continues to be a great campaigner for his constituency. I can assure him that the Kettering station canopy works are due to be completed in April and that a new national rail contract is being negotiated that will consider future investment plans.

Mr Speaker: I call Grahame Morris. Not here. I call Rob Butler.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Over the past few weeks, contractors for HS2 Ltd have brought yet more disruption and, frankly, despair to my constituents, especially in Stoke Mandeville and Wendover. They have misled property owners, they have gone back on reassurances and they have started work for which they have no permission, which has had to be halted. Will the Minister for HS2 please remind HS2 Ltd that its pledge to be a good neighbour is not just a slogan, and that it demands action?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): My hon. Friend continues to be a real champion for his constituency, as I saw at first hand when he took me on a tour of problem sites across Aylesbury. I note what he says and I will be more than happy to relay his message to HS2 Ltd. I also remind him and other colleagues across the House that, following my six-monthly progress report on HS2 yesterday, there will be a meeting at 2 pm today with the CEO of HS2 Ltd, Mark Thurston, and myself, which he will be welcome to attend.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): In the nearly five years I have been an MP, four cyclists have died on Oxfordshire's roads: Ling this month; Ellen last month; Samantha in 2020; and John in 2019. Speaking after Ling's death, her husband James said that one day he hoped to take his children to the roundabout where she died and to tell them:

"Look, no one else dies here because of Mummy."

The county council has rightly made cycle safety a top priority but it desperately needs Government help, particularly financially. Will the Minister consider meeting me to discuss how we can keep Oxfordshire cyclists safe and how we can avoid any more senseless deaths?

Trudy Harrison: I am terribly sorry to hear of the sad passing of the hon. Lady's constituents. We agree that infrastructure needs to be properly funded and of the highest quality. That is why the Government have promised an unprecedented £2 billion of investment in active travel over this Parliament. I would be very willing to meet her to talk about the work of Active Travel England and the ways in which our interim chief executive Chris Boardman is rolling out transport infrastructure.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Rising petrol costs are one of the many reasons that Andy Burnham's original GM clean air zone plan is unworkable and should be scrapped. What steps is my right hon. Friend

taking with colleagues from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ensure that Mr Burnham's desire to create the world's largest clean air charging zone does not place unsustainable financial burdens on Greater Manchester businesses and residents who are reliant on certain types of motor transport and particularly vulnerable to increased petrol prices?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the Mayor of Manchester, Andy Burnham, needs to go back to the drawing board on this.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister join me and my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) in congratulating the Unite workers on refusing to unload Russian oil at Stanlow in Cheshire? What further measures is the Secretary of State applying to sanction Russian oil and gas?

Grant Shapps: Yes, I do join the hon. Member in congratulating them. That came after I wrote to all the ports and asked them not to allow in Russian ships and Russian-connected ships. I should point out that this is the only country in the world to have a Russian-connected ban at our ports, and we look forward to other countries joining our lead, just as Minister Kubakov explained.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on refusing the Mayor of London's decision to remove the car park at Cockfosters station. Can it be a precedent, so that we can encourage motorists to park at stations and then use the London underground network to get into the centre of London? Will my right hon. Friend use that as a means to stop car parks being removed at termini throughout London?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend will have seen my action with regard to Cockfosters station. The plan would have removed all but 12 car parking spaces, and while I am keen to get people using active travel and all forms of travel, the idea that only 12 cars a day would turn up was ludicrous. It would just have meant other cars parking on the streets and inconveniencing residents. I encourage the Mayor of London to come forward with better plans than that.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The most recent NatCen baseline report on the Government's inclusive transport strategy shows we are still a long way from having a fully accessible and inclusive transport and active travel system. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress of his ITS commitments? In doing so, will he say why the deadline to report accessibility failures has been missed, why the consultation on bus stops has been paused and when the stakeholder group will next meet, as it has not met for over a year? Finally, how many staff are working full time on delivering these strategic commitments?

Grant Shapps: The hon. Lady asks a series of very good questions. We are working very hard on things like access for all on rail. She asks a number of bus-related questions, and we have put money into making sure that buses are more accessible through both signage and different types of communication facilities for people with disabilities. As she asks a series of questions, I will write to her with a detailed response to each of them. I hope she will find that useful.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): In answer to Question 3, I think the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), said he is meeting the trade union representatives of the bus driver industry. Can he confirm that he is meeting the trade union representatives regularly? Has his Department assessed the levels of bus driver pay and the impact of the same on recruitment and retention?

Andrew Stephenson: In answer to Question 3, I said that the roads Minister, Baroness Vere, is regularly meeting trade representatives, not trade union representatives. As the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (John Cryer) will know, the bus operators are predominantly private sector companies. It is not for the Government to dictate wages in the private sector, apart from setting the national minimum wage and the national living wage, which, I am proud to say, was introduced by this Government.

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): The French Government have recently decided that car adverts in France must now encourage consumers to use more environmentally friendly modes of transport such as walking, cycling, car pooling and public transport as alternatives to driving. Will the United Kingdom Government consider that one small step to decarbonise transport and encourage active travel and living?

Trudy Harrison: Our transport decarbonisation plan is world leading. The Prime Minister has said that we would like all short journeys in towns and cities to be walked or cycled by 2030. That is why we set up Active Travel England, led by Chris Boardman. I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to explain that in more detail.

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): The Scottish Government are investing 10% of their total transport capital budget in active travel options such as high-quality walking and accessible cycling infrastructure to support people to choose active and sustainable travel. Why has the UK Government's active travel budget failed to match those funding ambitions?

Trudy Harrison: We are investing £2 billion in "Gear Change" and our active travel priorities. The climate sees no boundaries, so it is important that we work together. I am in regular contact with the devolved Administrations, and I think we can all learn from each other.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Ministers will be well aware of today's announcement by P&O Ferries that there will be no sailings. I understand that 40% of its holdings are owned by a Russian company. This has left some of my constituents in Cairnryan unable to get home to Larne, and it has left people in Larne unable to get to Cairnryan. What can be done about this urgently? Will there be an opportunity to have a statement in the Chamber as soon as possible?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): This emerging story is clearly causing great concern. I will be in regular contact, and I will take any appropriate steps. Of course I will meet the hon. Gentleman.

DWP Estate: Office Closures

10.33 am

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on proposed office closures in the Department's estate.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I seek your guidance on whether it is orderly for an hon. Member who has taken very substantial donations from a trade union to ask an urgent question on a matter of direct interest to that trade union?

Mr Speaker: We need to be careful. Is the right hon. Gentleman sure that the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) took the donation, or was it an agreement with the constituency party? This is a very serious allegation. Is it a constituency party donation or was it donated directly to the hon. Gentleman?

Dr Murrison: It is in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Mr Speaker: That is not what I asked. We will leave it for now. We had better move on.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): At the Department for Work and Pensions, we constantly look at ways to improve our services. I wish to say up-front that we know it is important to communicate changes to all relevant stakeholders so that everyone understands our plans and why we are making changes.

This seems to be an unusual situation, Mr Speaker. It is very disappointing that the embargo agreed with the Public and Commercial Services Union does not seem to have been respected. Clearly, our staff should be the top priority at this time. I hope colleagues will understand that I am not able to go into all the detail this morning as we are briefing affected colleagues as we speak. In fact, the delivery of the first stage of the strategy is being announced to affected colleagues at 10.30 today—right now. The Minister for Employment will write to MPs with an affected site in their constituency after 1 pm today, and there will be a written statement to Parliament tomorrow morning. The letter to MPs will include notification of a virtual surgery that the Minister for Employment will hold on Wednesday 23 March.

The change is to back-of-house offices and will support the delivery of the Government priorities to get more people back into employment, to deliver long-term savings for the taxpayer and to meet Government commitments to modernise public services. The Department has developed a strategy that will, over the next 10 years, reshape and improve how, where and when it delivers services to claimants. The Department is transitioning to an estate that is smaller, greener and better. This will deliver substantial benefits by increasingly developing modern, secure, resilient, sustainable and automated systems to drive better experiences for our customers, colleagues and taxpayers.

The plans for the next three-year period affect the future delivery of back-of-house services—that is, services that are delivered remotely via telephone and online, without the need to see customers face to face. I assure the House that the plans do not affect Jobcentre Plus

and customer-facing roles. We have been engaging fully with PCS union representatives at the sites affected since January, and PCS union representatives will be present at sites for the announcements today, as the House would expect. Our focus today is, of course, on supporting staff through the changes.

Changes to DWP estates are not unusual. Like most public services, we are always looking to meet our customers' changing needs, reflecting developments in technology and the approaches of successive Governments. We value our staff and are working with them now to support those who will be affected by the changes as we seek to deliver the best possible services to our customers at all times.

Chris Stephens: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the PCS parliamentary group—which, of course, contains more than 100 Members of Parliament.

Will the Minister confirm that the announcement could mean that 3,000 jobs in the Department for Work and Pensions are at risk of redundancy? What measures will he take to ensure that that does not happen? Has there been an equality impact assessment of the proposals? I am thinking particularly about the impact on employees who have disabilities, for example, and may not be able to move to another location that may be miles away.

The Minister is aware that the proposals were first mooted six years ago and that the Department is looking to close offices in areas of high economic deprivation. That seems rather counterintuitive in the context of the so-called levelling-up agenda. Has an economic assessment been made of the closures and their impact on the local economies in the areas where it is proposed to close offices?

David Rutley: On our plans, we have, as I said, been working closely with colleagues and PCS over recent months. Around 12,000 colleagues will be moving from one site to another that is in close proximity—that will involve around 28 sites. Around 1,300 colleagues could be involved at sites where there is no other strategic site nearby. We are looking at what opportunities there are within the DWP and at what other opportunities there might be across other Government Departments. We have seen in other areas how this can work, and we are committed to doing that. Clearly, we will look at any other options that might work for those individuals.

Let me turn to the impact on the local economies. There are not normally too many people involved on each individual site, but, clearly, we have been working very hard to strengthen local economies, with the opening of a large number of new jobcentres. Again, I stress that this is about back-of-house roles. This will not impact on jobcentres and the customer-facing interactions within the constituencies.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I think that this would have been much better dealt with in a statement rather than requiring an urgent question. I understand that an office in a neighbouring constituency will be closing, so I urge my hon. Friend to make sure that we notify not just MPs in the constituency where the office is closing, but MPs in neighbouring constituencies, such as mine, where, for example, people will be travelling to work in those places and will be affected.

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. We will, of course, make sure that those communications are made. We will also make sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Mims Davies), has those conversations with MPs. If any MP needs to contact her, they should do so, and she will be willing to talk to them. She will also proactively get out to speak to colleagues. Please be sensitive to the fact that she is currently recovering from covid at home, so I am fulfilling her role today. If any colleagues wish to speak to me after this urgent question, I will gladly meet them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It looks as though the Department for Work and Pensions does not believe in levelling up, does not believe in its own rhetoric on jobs, and does not believe in keeping people in work. We hear that offices will be closed in Stoke, Southend, Peterborough, Chesterfield, Aberdeen, Kirkcaldy, Barrow, Bishop Auckland, Doncaster and Burnley, taking jobs out of these communities. Can the Minister answer these questions for the Members in Stoke, in Wellingborough and in Stockton whose communities and constituents will be concerned about the news today? We have heard that up to 12,000 jobs might be affected, but how many of the workers will be able to find new jobs locally within the Department? Can the Minister guarantee that there will no compulsory redundancies?

I appreciate that staff are being informed only this morning, but this is the correct forum for the Minister to answer these important questions. The PSC Union has said that its members are facing spiralling workloads. Is it not the case that the Department actually needs more staff, not fewer? If these closures are allowed to go ahead, we will face the absurd prospect of making staff redundant in one area, while recruiting new staff in another to do exactly the same job. That will be both costly and inefficient, so can the Minister confirm that that will not be allowed to happen?

If these closures go ahead, local communities will be faced with the loss of hundreds of good jobs potentially. Many of the closures are in areas of economic deprivation that can hardly afford to lose good-quality public sector jobs. Will there be a plan to help those communities attract well-paid jobs back to their local areas? This all comes at a time when families and working people are being hit hard by the cost of living crisis made by this Government. The price of petrol, food and energy is still soaring and people are worried about the future. Has there been any assessment of the impact that these job losses will have on the local economy? I think the Minister indicated in his previous answer that there had not been, but I would be grateful if he could confirm that. Has any consideration been given to the effect that this will have on the high streets of the affected towns? Will we see yet more boarded-up buildings? This is the opposite of levelling up; this is levelling down and it is closing down.

David Rutley: We are absolutely committed to bringing forward more jobs. Jobs are being filled and employment is at a record high. We have vacancies. It is important to highlight that the number of front-of-house roles that

we are fulfilling has increased significantly. We have taken forward a rapid estate expansion programme over the past two years. We have created 170 new Jobcentre Plus offices. Many colleagues across the House will be beneficiaries of that along with their constituents. By the end of March, that increase will be up to 194, so there will be 831 Jobcentre Plus offices, which is a huge, huge investment. There will also be an increase in work coaches, which will be a real benefit to our customers. As I have said, the roles that we are talking about are back of house. An equality impact assessment has been made—I do not think that I mentioned that earlier. On the impact on communities, on the whole, this will involve a relatively small number of colleagues in particular communities. We want to make sure that we support those people back into work. For the vast majority, there are jobs close by, and we will help them to transition into those areas. For those who do not have jobs close by, we will give them the support that they need.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) on this urgent question, though I feel this should perhaps have been offered as a statement. What I cannot quite understand is that the Minister is saying that no Jobcentre Plus offices are closing, but the shadow Minister says offices are closing. Which is correct, and does it affect anything in my area? This is all new to me.

David Rutley: To be clear, this relates to back-of-house offices that are often in our local communities. We are trying to update our estates, some of which are no longer fit for purpose, and to bring together colleagues with the right levels of experience to create clusters that will help the provision of back-of-house facilities and services. I want to be clear again—I am sorry if I was not clear earlier—that this does not affect front-of-house Jobcentre Plus. By the end of March we will have invested in an extra 194 of those facilities. We have increased the number of people who work in our Department and, as I said, we want to look after the people affected by these back-of-house changes. Hopefully that is clear to my hon. Friend.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): I, too, think it would have been better if the Government had offered this as a statement to the House. May I ask specifically about the Longbenton site in East Newcastle, which the Department shares with the Inland Revenue? What impact will today's statement have on employment at the site and the future location of the Department's employees on the site? It is a famous site, and they have been there since the 1950s. The Inland Revenue, which holds the lease, is giving it up and moving elsewhere. It is pretty logical that the Department will follow. Is it moving, and if so, where to? I make the obvious plea to the Minister that we want to keep the jobs in Newcastle upon Tyne.

David Rutley: I understand the question and the tone in which the right hon. Gentleman asks it; I know he has a lot of concern for his own constituency. We are briefing staff right now, so I am not in a position to give him the details now from the Dispatch Box, but I will gladly meet him directly afterwards to talk through his concerns and seek to reassure him. I think that is the most appropriate way of doing it, given where we are right now in the process.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): Can my hon. Friend outline to the House in a little more detail how these changes will lead to better working conditions for staff in the Department, what amounts of excess space the Department has and what opportunities there will be for people to relocate? I am thinking of those people elsewhere in County Durham perhaps having the opportunity to relocate to offices in my constituency.

David Rutley: DWP has too much estate. Recent calculations estimate there is capacity for 158,000 people, but the maximum headcount is forecast to be around 97,500 people. We need to ensure that we use that estate as effectively as possible, both for our colleagues and for the taxpayer. We want to refocus colleagues to work in clusters so that they can most effectively support customers and claimants, but at the same time help them to improve and develop their careers.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Many of the closures are in disadvantaged areas, including Liverpool, which cannot afford to lose good-quality public sector jobs. Can the Minister explain what he is doing to support those areas?

David Rutley: As I have said to other hon. Members, our top priority right now is working with the staff and supporting them through the changes. Most of the colleagues affected will be moving to other facilities that are really close by. In terms of the impact on the specific communities involved, typically the number of staff involved in a particular area is quite small. However, we will seek to see what we can do to improve. I do not have the details in front of me, but I am sure there will have been new, front-facing Jobcentre Plus offices put in place in Liverpool, because that is our commitment to help more people to get into work.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): In Harlow, the Department actually expanded the jobcentre, so it is now in two buildings, one in the Harvey Centre, which I visited recently and which is doing an enormous amount of work in getting Harlow people back to work. Will my hon. Friend or the Minister for employment come and visit the two jobcentres we now have in Harlow that are doing so much to help employment in our town?

David Rutley: As my right hon. Friend highlights, we are doing a huge amount of work to help claimants to find work and to help people to progress in work. I am delighted that he has those facilities in Harlow and I or the Minister for employment will gladly come and visit in the very near future.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Stephen Timms.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): This week's employment figures show that there are 580,000 fewer people in work now than there were before the pandemic. In particular, there seem to be several hundred thousand older workers now choosing not to work nor to claim benefit. We all want a full labour market recovery. Does the Minister recognise that this is going to require major Government investment rather than the disinvestment that I think he is announcing this morning?

David Rutley: I understand the point that the right hon. Gentleman makes, and he says it with authority as the Chair of the Select Committee, but I think he also understands that we are making a major investment in the front end—the customer-facing side—of our Department. As I said, over the past two years we have been increasing the number of jobcentres to 194. That will enable us to do exactly what he wants—to provide support for individuals across all ages through the plan for jobs.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was a bit concerned about the response that the Minister gave my right hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown) about the proposals for the site at Longbenton. We already know that the Inland Revenue is relocating from that site to central Newcastle upon Tyne, but what is proposed directly for the staff employed by the Department for Work and Pensions? This affects many MPs in the area who have hundreds of constituents employed at that very large site.

David Rutley: As I indicated to the right hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East (Mr Brown), I will gladly meet both him and the hon. Gentleman after this to discuss those concerns further. The Minister for employment will actively engage with affected colleagues, and we are engaging with the staff as we speak.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this urgent question. Ebury House in my constituency has been earmarked for closure. Will the Minister agree to meet me urgently to discuss what impact this will have on staff, and can he provide a cast-iron guarantee to this House and to my constituents that the services they receive will not be impacted?

David Rutley: This will not impact on services because the services we are talking about are primarily telephony and digital. Clearly, our primary concern now is to see what we can do to support people who might be impacted by the changing terms for staff. I will of course meet the hon. Gentleman after this, or during the course of today, to discuss his concerns more fully.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On two occasions now, the Minister has referred to the equalities impact assessment, saying that this amounts to relatively small numbers of people at each site who will be affected, but over the whole estate, “small” can add up to a lot of individuals. Given that these jobs are located disproportionately in more deprived communities, the loss of good-quality public sector jobs is a really important issue. What conversations are the Minister and his Department having now with those people who may be affected, and what efforts is he really putting in place to ensure that nobody loses their job and everybody is redeployed?

David Rutley: As I have said before, we are working with the vast majority of the individuals who can be relocated very close to their current facility. We will continue to work hard with others, too. This is our top priority. We value our colleagues, who have helped the Department through some incredibly challenging times over the past couple of years, and we want to support them through the period now. I highlight to a couple of

[David Rutley]

Members who have made this point that we continue to be committed to the Newcastle area, but I will meet those colleagues after this urgent question.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this urgent question, although I entirely agree that it would not have been necessary, had the Minister not tried to sneak the announcement out in a written statement on Friday after most of us had gone back to our constituencies. One of the premises earmarked for closure is Victoria Road in Kirkcaldy, which is not in my constituency, but employs a number of my constituents and provides support services for about 3,000 of my constituents in north-west Kirkcaldy. I echo the plea made earlier that the Minister should write to all Members of Parliament, because he probably does not know which constituencies have people who are affected by each of those closures. In that letter, will he explicitly set out why they should believe the assurances being given that this office closure programme will have no impact on public service, when similar promises given about HMRC's office closure programme turned out to be utterly worthless?

David Rutley: Those MPs who have affected sites in their constituencies will be written to by 1 pm today, so further details will be available. If other colleagues may be affected tangentially, we will make an extra effort to contact them as well.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am not sure that is good enough, if the Minister does not mind me saying so. I think all Members of Parliament should be written to, clearly explaining what the Government are doing and what the implications are for our constituencies. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) read out the list of areas affected. He mentioned Doncaster, so can the Minister please tell me what that means for my constituency of Hull North and the city of Hull?

David Rutley: Right now, we are speaking to the colleagues affected. We have engaged PCS every step of the way to ensure we are following the right process so far as colleagues go. The engagement with parliamentary colleagues will take place as planned at 1 pm today, when letters will be made available. If the right hon. Member has further concerns, I will make sure that the Minister for employment contacts her after this urgent question.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): This issue speaks to the treatment of DWP staff, with morale in DWP offices across the country already at rock bottom, not least due to DWP management's response to covid among staff. That has been an ongoing issue, but the Renfrew Jobcentre Plus office effectively closed after staff had to walk out after management refused to act after eight out of 18 staff tested positive for covid. In the end, 16 out of 18 staff tested positive. Can the Minister tell me what covid safeguarding, if any, is in place at DWP offices across the country,

whether earmarked for closure or otherwise? Do they all follow the relevant local public health advice and regulations?

David Rutley: The Department has been following all the guidance that it needed to, and if there are concerns about that, I will gladly follow up with the hon. Member outside the Chamber.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify something? My understanding is that the Government are proposing a full site consolidation involving moving staff from Seaham Lighthouse View in my constituency to Wear View House in Sunderland. The impact of these closures in areas of economic deprivation, such as east Durham, will be huge, and we can ill afford to lose good-quality public sector jobs. My question to the Minister is: how will closing a DWP office in my constituency that employs 390 people help Easington to level up, when the Government are moving employment to the larger cities?

David Rutley: We had a full debate in Westminster Hall yesterday that the hon. Member was successful in securing, and we discussed this in more detail. What we can do to support his area is not just around the changes we are proposing today, but is much broader. There is a big broad economic agenda to improve the north-east, which his constituency will benefit from, too.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) for securing this urgent question. He is open and transparent about his strong trade union membership, unlike some Members of the House, who spend their weekends partying with Russian lords and are not open about that.

The Minister talked about the process of digitisation. Estonia is one of the great digital states of Europe and, as it admitted, the big failure of its transition to digital statehood was not recognising the profound impact on the most vulnerable, not only in the delivery of public service at the front end but in the back office. Can he assure the House that there will be no detriment to public service at the front end, given that he is removing the back office?

David Rutley: We are not removing the back office; we are modernising it. Of course we want to ensure that we deliver, at the front end, for people in the channels that need it. It is interesting and important that many people who have disabilities or health conditions and who are staff members can now be empowered to do their work, because they do not have to travel because of digital capabilities. There are some exciting possibilities there, notwithstanding the fact that, on the frontline, we need to ensure that we are providing support for all customers in the way they need it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the impact of job losses, the Minister has clearly said that, in his opinion, there will be no impact on the offices and the delivery of the service, but I suggest that there is always an impact when jobs are lost. People who live in rural constituencies who have to travel by bus or do not have a car can be sanctioned if they do not attend their

appointments. Can he assure the House that the benefit entitlements of constituents of MPs present, and not present, will not be affected by the changes in the offices?

David Rutley: I assure the House that this does not have an impact on the front end—on the activities that we do to support our claimants and our customers. It is also important to reconfirm that we are not reducing staff numbers; the focus is on retaining as many people as possible. We have great staff and we want to retain them. In many cases, people will relocate to another site in close proximity.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At last week's business questions, the Leader of the House announced that there would be a debate this afternoon on protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond. Unfortunately, it seems to have dropped off the Order Paper and no one understands why. I am sure that Government business has changed, but through your offices, may I encourage the Leader of the House and the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee to allow time for that debate, plenty of time before COP15 happens?

Mr Speaker: I do not know whether the Leader of the House wishes to give an answer to that. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that we can get you an answer but I do not have one to hand. I am sure that, as we go to business questions, the Leader of the House may want to point it out.

Speaker's Statement

11.2 am

Mr Speaker: Yesterday, I joined fellow G7 Speakers on a call with the chairman of the Ukraine Parliament to discuss supporting parliamentary democracy and peace in Ukraine. The Ukraine Parliament has met at least twice during the war—a testament to the commitment of its Speaker and MPs to keep their country running and democracy alive in Ukraine. I will continue to have meetings.

Business of the House

11.3 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): It would be a pleasure. The business for the week commencing 21 March will include:

MONDAY 21 MARCH—Opposition day (17th allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

TUESDAY 22 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Nationality and Borders Bill.

WEDNESDAY 23 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his spring statement, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Commercial Rent (Coronavirus) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Boiler Upgrade Scheme (England And Wales) Regulations 2022.

THURSDAY 24 MARCH—Debate on a motion on war pensions and armed forces compensation scheme payments, followed by a general debate on the impact of long covid on the UK workforce. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 25 MARCH—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 March will include:

MONDAY 28 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

Thangam Debbonaire: Well, there are lots of questions there. I start by thanking the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business and wishing everybody—all colleagues and beyond—a happy St Patrick's Day.

I want to pick up comments from colleagues at Transport questions—in topical, I think—about P&O and what looks like a real situation. I note, Mr Speaker, that you said that there might be a statement. Does the Leader of the House have any update for us on when there might be such a statement? I also echo the point the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) raised in his point of order: where has the COP15 debate gone? I note that the Leader of the House said he would mention it in his response.

It is a happy day in part at least because this morning Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori have come home. They have been reunited with their families after years of unjustified detention in Iran—it is a long time since I have felt able to smile at the Dispatch Box. In particular, I pay to tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) for fighting for their constituents.

However, we continue to see the devastating consequences of Putin's illegal attack on Ukraine, with war crimes committed daily. The Labour party stands with our allies, including NATO and others. We must strengthen our unity and resolve. We stand in complete solidarity with the Ukrainian people, but there are also implications for our own national security, so can the Leader of the

House confirm that the Government will not go ahead with the integrated review recommendation to cut 10,000 troops?

The hardest possible sanctions must of course be taken against all those linked to Putin. They must not live a Mayfair lifestyle in Moscow while committing atrocities in Ukraine. The sanctions package so far announced contains good measures, including the most recent on luxury items—pushed, I may say, by the Labour party—but questions remain about enforcement. The body responsible for dealing with this has issued just six fines in six years. I have already asked this but we have not had an answer, so could the Leader of the House again ask the Chancellor, who will be here next week, to tell us what he is doing to ensure sufficient resources are in place so that sanctions on dirty Russian money are properly enforced?

We on this side on the House are not ignoring the worsening cost of living crisis hitting working people up and down this country. We are on their side, but, unfortunately, it seems that the Government are not. Labour market figures published earlier this week revealed the true scale of the crisis engulfing working people: rocketing bills, stagnating wages and a buy now, pay later sort of loan scheme from the Conservative party, which is choosing to increase national insurance at the worst possible time, hitting 27 million workers. As I said, we are on the side of working people, but the Government are not. Instead, the Prime Minister is busy rowing back on his promise to ban second jobs for MPs—something we voted for. Will the Leader of the House confirm that at the spring statement the Chancellor will be scrapping his disastrous Tory national insurance rise?

The Online Safety Bill will, I hope, finally be published today—it may even have been while I have been standing here—although there was no mention of the Second Reading in the business statement. So that is another “Where is it?” question. Last year, the Prime Minister said that it would have completed all stages by last Christmas. With Russian misinformation on social media at an all-time high, threatening democracy, can the Leader of the House finally confirm when the Second Reading of the Online Safety Bill will be?

In a sign of our country's vulnerability and energy insecurity, the Prime Minister went to Saudi Arabia to seek an increase in oil production, despite the appalling human rights record of that regime. Going cap in hand from dictator to dictator is not a long-term energy plan, so can the Leader of the House confirm when the Government's energy security statement will be brought forward? As part of that plan, the Government should and could look again at Labour's proposal for a one-off windfall tax on oil and gas producers. That would cut household energy bills by up to £600, helping those who need it most. Why are this Government forcing working people up and down the country, including the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, to pay the price for over a decade of mistakes made in Downing Street? I look forward to hearing his response and hope to hear more from the Chancellor on this next week.

Mark Spencer: There are a lot of topics to get through—the hon. Lady's enthusiasm is spilling over this week—so let us make a start. P&O obviously is a developing situation. Mr Speaker, you indicated that you might take a statement later and I am sure that the Department

for Transport would want to keep the House updated. I have not had any confirmation that there will be a statement later, but I know the Department will be looking at this closely and I am sure it will keep colleagues informed as the situation develops.

The hon. Lady moved on to the great news about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and the whole House will want to celebrate her safe return to the United Kingdom. She named a number of colleagues on her side. The right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) raised the matter at business questions on a number of occasions and also needs some recognition. I hope that the hon. Lady would also recognise the contribution of the Foreign Office and a number of Foreign Secretaries who worked very hard to try to expedite the process and get Nazanin home, which they have been successful in doing.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady again for her support and that of the whole House on our response to Putin's invasion of Ukraine. We continue to see the most appalling atrocities committed in Ukraine by the desperate regime in Russia. I have to say that these people will be held to account for the crimes that they are committing. This week we saw the bombing of a theatre with more than 1,200 people in it. One cannot even begin to imagine the carnage that such weapons cause. That is why we are right to continue with our sanctions regime. We have now sanctioned more than 1,000 people on the list and we are taking robust action against these individuals. We should be enormously proud of putting those measures in place. Alongside that, we have the largest humanitarian support package that there is and military support, with weapons for Ukrainians to defend themselves. The UK's response has been exemplary. The Prime Minister has shown extreme leadership on the matter and continues to do so.

The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the fact that that conflict is causing huge ripples around the world in terms of energy prices and the impact on the food market. The Government are very much aware of that. That is why we have put in huge packages of support. As she said, the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be at the Dispatch Box next Wednesday for his spring statement. I am sure that he will update the House on progress in that direction.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Prime Minister's trip to Saudi Arabia. Surely she recognises that the way to influence our world leaders is to engage with them: to go and sit with them, challenge them face to face and encourage them in a direction of improving human rights. We can do that only by having those face-to-face meetings and being a critical friend of those regimes. That is the right way to conduct world business.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Goring gap question—the subject of early-day motion 1082, which I raised at Prime Minister's questions yesterday—requires consideration by the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the whole of Government because it runs roughshod over all the planning responsibilities of district councils.

[That this House calls for revocation of the conclusion of the planning inspector in the appeal relating to land north west of Goring Station, Goring-by-Sea, Worthing, the Goring Gap, separating Worthing from Ferring in

Arun; notes the letter of the hon. Member for Worthing West to the Prime Minister in October 2019 asking that any inspector nominated to hear an appeal against refusal of a planning proposal should be limited to gross obvious major misjudgment; rejects building over substantial parts of the valued strategic gap between Goring-by-Sea and the village of Ferring; notes the inspector recognised the first two main issues were whether the appeal site offers an acceptable location for development and the effect of the proposed development on the landscape, including in the setting of the adjacent South Downs National Park; recognises that if the inspector's reasoning were allowed to stand, it wrecks the responsibilities of housing authorities and county councils and attacks declared ministerial policy to maintain strategic separation between towns and villages; notes that every green field and open space between the Downs and the sea is threatened by development; and asks the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to meet potentially affected hon. Members and local authority leaders without delay.]

In a letter to the Prime Minister in October 2019, I said that an inspector should be instructed to overturn a proper decision by a local council only if there has been gross misjudgment by the council.

The issue is that Persimmon is greedily trying to fill in the strategic green gap between Goring and Ferring, in contradiction of the Worthing local plan.

The interim letter from the other planning inspector was clearly going to accept what Worthing was doing. It is wrong for one inspector perversely to grant an application when another is considering the local plan.

Can I meet the Prime Minister, and will the Government make a statement on restoring proper planning powers and revoke this inspector's decision?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As he indicated, he raised the matter at Prime Minister's questions yesterday. Independent planning inspectors take into account all relevant matters and decide each case on its own merits. However, the planning permission has been issued, so it is final, unless successfully challenged in the courts. As a challenge may be made, it would not be appropriate for Ministers to discuss the specifics of the case at the Dispatch Box, but the Government remain committed to taking forward planning reforms. As the "Levelling Up" White Paper set out:

"Ensuring natural beauty is accessible to all will be central to our planning system."

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I wish all our Celtic cousins a very happy St Patrick's day and welcome Nazanin home to her family. The Leader of the House is absolutely right to pay tribute to the shadow Leader of the House's predecessor. As you know, Mr Speaker, no session of business questions was complete without the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) raising the case of Nazanin. I also want to thank the Leader of the House for continuing to ensure we have ample opportunity to debate and consider the ongoing situation in Ukraine. That is what our constituents expect from us and we will continue to be as flexible as possible as we go forward.

Yesterday, we learned from the Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) that the Prime Minister is a "very social" person.

[Pete Wishart]

I have say that that came as a complete and utter surprise and shock to me. Blow me down with a feather, Mr Speaker! Who would have thought? Apparently, that accounts for his penchant for hanging around with Russian billionaires and oligarchs. Perhaps that description also helps us to understand a little bit more about the sheer number of rule-breaking parties and the heroic hedonism demonstrated by his No. 10 operation. Can we have a debate about prime ministerial sociability, and perhaps an update on the Sue Gray report and the conclusion of the Metropolitan police inquiry so that they can be considered properly by this House? Democracy requires that normal politics and scrutiny continue in this House.

One can only feel sorry for the Scottish Conservatives. Their leader, the hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross), dismissed by the Leader of the House's predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), as a political lightweight, has now had to endure the indignity of withdrawing his letter of no confidence in the Prime Minister. Instead, the red carpet will be rolled out at the Scottish Conservative conference to the man that every elected MSP wanted gone only a few weeks ago. So may we have an urgent debate on abject humiliation? [Laughter.]

Lastly, the Dnipro Kids issue remains unresolved this morning. My understanding is that everything is in place at the Ukrainian end and a plane is available to take off on Friday morning. There are places waiting for them in Scotland, with the care and support they need. Can we please get them over here and brought to safety in Scotland?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He started by emphasising the united approach of the House on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We should not dismiss that. We should recognise that all political parties are right to condemn the actions of Putin. Having a united House of Commons sends a very strong message and I am grateful for his support.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Scottish Conservative conference, which will be taking place this weekend. There are huge numbers attending that conference, but I am sure there will be a space for him should he wish to cross the Floor of the House. I can arrange for a membership form to be headed his way. He could then pledge allegiance to the Prime Minister, attend the conference and demonstrate his support.

The hon. Gentleman finished on an important matter—his leader raised it at Prime Minister's questions—of supporting children and getting them out of Ukraine and into a safer place. The Secretary of State for Education has made arrangements for more than 100,000 children to be supported in the UK through UK schools. We are absolutely committed to that. Our response—not only supporting people who are being evacuated out of Ukraine but providing humanitarian and military support—is an example to the rest of the world.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): Somerset County Council is about to spend £8 million on a computer system that will ultimately cost about £20 million. IT projects in this country have a pretty shabby history. The problem we have is that

there will be unitary elections in May, with the four district councils still there, but the system will be neither one thing nor the other. With counties and districts buying expensive systems that inevitably tend not to work, may we have a debate in this House on IT projects?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a tenacious campaigner on local government reform and this is not the first time he has mentioned Somerset councils in the Chamber. I know he will continue with enthusiasm to hold them to account and ensure they deliver for his constituents.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I wish my constituents in Gateshead, who will be celebrating as I speak, a very happy Purim and a very happy St Patrick's day.

The debate on protecting and restoring nature at COP15 and beyond was withdrawn at the request of the answering Department. The debate's main sponsor, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), acceded to the request, and we have promised her that we will reschedule the debate immediately after the Easter recess as long as we get the time from the Government.

I am glad that the Leader of the House announced the Backbench Business for 24 March on war pensions and armed forces compensation and on the impact of long covid on the workforce, but I am a little surprised that he has not also announced any time to debate the Chancellor's spring statement. Possibly there will be nothing of any importance within it, I do not know.

The Backbench Business Committee can gladly report that we now have reinforcements. Two new members, the hon. Members for Bolton West (Chris Green) and for Broadland (Jerome Mayhew), were appointed a couple of days ago, so it will be easier for us to get a quorum for our meetings in the coming weeks.

Lastly, I cannot help but note that we go into the summer recess on 21 July, but as yet we are not coming back. Will the Leader of the House let us know some time soon the date for our return after the summer recess?

Mark Spencer: It is a pleasure to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place. He was missed last week.

I am grateful for the update on the COP debate, which of course the Backbench Business Committee called for. I hope that he will recognise that so far I have delivered quite well for him on every request he has made. I think we are performing reasonably well on giving him what he asks for. As he identified, the spring statement will be next Wednesday and I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, will be very generous in allowing colleagues plenty of time to ask questions of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I think that those were all the questions that the hon. Gentleman had.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): The people of Leyland—especially in Moss Side—have contacted me because they are concerned about street crime and antisocial behaviour, which has been an ongoing problem. The local police respond, but they are coming in from Chorley and Preston—[HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"]—which is too far away when your bike is being stolen by

somebody with a knife, and gives plenty of time for people to scarper. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is past time to reverse the Labour police and crime commissioner's cut to the Leyland response team and to get Leyland police station's response teams open so that the community can feel safe on their streets?

Mark Spencer: I can understand why people would want to leave Chorley! [*Laughter.*]

I completely agree with my hon. Friend that everyone should have the security and confidence that comes with having a safe street and a safe home. That is why we are putting 20,000 more police officers on the streets. I know that the new Conservative police and crime commissioner, Andrew Snowdon, is already making a difference to community policing across Lancashire. I am confident that the Conservative team, under my hon. Friend's leadership, will deliver for the people of Leyland.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): At the end of February, the Prime Minister announced an immediate full asset freeze for VTB bank. The next day, the Chancellor countermanded that and gave it till the end of March to wind down its transactions. It turns out that an individual who is the head of global markets fixed-income trading at VTB bank has donated £44,000 to the Tory party in the last three years. That indicates a close association between the Tory party and people at VTB bank. He also donated £3,000 to the local Greenwich Tories at the end of December. We are now fighting local elections. Should we be fighting local elections that are funded by Russian money?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the sanctions regime we have introduced and our ability to sanction those individuals associated with the Putin regime, but we should not confuse Russian people or people of Russian descent living in the United Kingdom with those who are supportive of the Putin regime. It is quite important to draw that distinction. He is able to raise that question in the House today because when anybody makes a donation it is logged and registered, and it is transparent for the electorate to view. That is a healthy place to be in a modern democracy.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): The shadow Leader of the House raised the important issue of energy resilience and security. On that theme, we need to look at water resilience and security. The east and south-east of England is running out of water, which is a serious and urgent issue that needs to be addressed. We need to build more reservoirs and build our resilience. Can we have an urgent debate in this place to talk about getting more water into the east and south-east?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a long-standing campaigner on these issues and I know he will continue to hold the Government to account about them. He is right to draw attention to the fact that resilience within our infrastructure and utilities is vital to our future. For a long time, we have taken our access to good, clean water for granted, but that happens only with investment in our infrastructure. He is right to continue to draw attention to that.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The Prime Minister was in Saudi Arabia this week, days after 81 people were executed by the same regime that has been waging the devastating attacks on Yemen since 2015. The long-established community in Liverpool, Riverside has called on the UK Government to halt arms sales to the Saudis in order to end the humanitarian crisis. Can the Leader of the House make some time for a debate on that humanitarian crisis?

Mark Spencer: I know the hon. Lady took the opportunity to engage in the urgent question earlier in the week. I emphasise again that the way to influence regimes around the world is to go and engage with them, to sit opposite them, to hold them to account and to challenge them face to face. The purpose of the Prime Minister's visit was to engage with our colleagues around the world, to try to influence them and to lead them in a direction that is better for human rights.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I was horrified to read some extremely unwelcome news reports this week that the commitment made by the Government in their manifesto and in the Queen's Speech to ban trophy hunting imports may be scrapped. Every day that we delay, more magnificent and endangered animals—lions, elephants, rhinos and even pangolins, to name just a few—are killed for sport and their corpses brought back into this country. Will the Leader of the House confirm when the animals abroad Bill will be brought forward and reaffirm the Government's commitment to ending trophy hunting imports?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend has a long-standing record of campaigning on this topic. We have committed to a ban on importing hunting trophies from nearly 7,000 species. That is one of the toughest bans in the world and will go well beyond our manifesto commitments. She will understand that parliamentary time is finite and there has been huge pressure on it, not least because of emergency legislation brought forward in response to covid and to Ukraine, but we will bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows and business will be announced in the usual way.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I ask for a debate on those who are not pulling their weight in delivering sanctions on Russia over Ukraine? Lots of shops in the UK have now withdrawn products from their shelves, but anyone who wants to buy a £150 bottle of Beluga vodka can go to Selfridges, where it is on the shelves, or Harrods, where they have to ask for it and it is literally underneath the counter. There are also British companies that are still doing business in Russia, like Subway, Pirelli and Baker Tilly, who provide advice on how to hide money. Is it not time that everybody pulled their weight, because that is the only way we can make Putin fail?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw the House's attention to these matters. In asking his question, he has delivered some of the publicity that is required. The only way to send the strongest message to that regime in Russia is to stick together and to hold firm. He is right to ask for that debate and I am sure there will be methods, either through an Adjournment

[Mark Spencer]

debate or Backbench Business debate, for the House to continue to draw attention to those who are not condemning or issuing those sanctions as they should be.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Some of my constituents live in houses in multiple occupation. By their very nature, those are large houses that can come with council tax bills in bands E to H. Some of those constituents are on low incomes but are not benefiting from the discount for bands A to D—they are being charged the same tax as householders who may be able to afford the bills. May we have a statement on what the Government might do to assist my constituents who find themselves in such a situation?

Mark Spencer: The Government have announced a package of support worth £9.1 billion for 2022-23 to help households with rising energy bills. Council tax bands provide a targeted means of delivering support quickly to those most in need. The Government recognise that other households that do not automatically qualify for the rebate may require support. That is why every council has been provided with a share of the £144 million fund to provide discretionary support targeted to any household in financial need—including, if they choose, those in higher council tax bands.

I hope that my hon. Friend was able to raise the issue at Treasury questions this week; if not, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be delivering his spring statement next Wednesday, and my hon. Friend will have the opportunity to raise it then.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Some Members have come in rather late and should not really want to catch my eye; I am sure that you will not embarrass me or yourselves.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am glad it wasn't me you were referring to, Mr Speaker—I am sure I was here.

On Wednesday at 5 pm, Thames Water began releasing sewage into Colwell brook at Witney, and that release is still ongoing. At 9.15 pm yesterday, Thames Water began releasing sewage into the Thames at Oxford. The Oxfordshire community says that enough is enough, which is why I and local campaigners have been fighting tirelessly to secure bathing water status for the Thames on Port Meadow. We are delighted to hear that a decision is expected in April. However, Surfers Against Sewage are calling on the Government to designate 200 official river bathing waters by 2030. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on how the Government can support communities to apply for bathing water status?

Mark Spencer: I know that the hon. Lady has secured debates on this issue in the past and that she is passionate about it. She is absolutely right to draw the House's attention to it. There were strong measures in the Environment Bill to clamp down on the illegal release of sewage into our water courses. There are exemptions for water companies to make releases in extreme weather, but I think some of them, frankly, are abusing some of

those loopholes. The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to that. That is why the Government are introducing stronger measures in the Environment Bill and will continue to hold water companies to account.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Being asked by a smart Stroud child constituent what MPs do all day, what I am doing to protect owls and orangutangs, and how we can help Ukrainian children is far worse than being grilled on the tellybox.

I give credit to the Parliament team who gave virtual tours of the House during the pandemic and brought me in to speak to local schools such as St Joseph's, Rodborough, Upton St Leonards and Cashes Green. Given that restrictions have now been lifted here, will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging more Stroud schools and others around the country to engage with the Parliament education teams and come to visit us here in Westminster?

Mark Spencer: I, too, have been grilled quite recently—by year 6 at Blidworth Oaks Primary School in my constituency. It is absolutely vital that we encourage children to engage in our democratic process and understand how politics works. The parliamentary support mechanisms that engage with schoolchildren are fantastic. I encourage colleagues up and down the country to engage with their primary schools and ask students to come and learn more about Parliament and how it operates.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Many on both sides of the House have in the past asked for a debate or statement on the terrible situation in Nigeria, which has now just about met the United Nations criteria for genocide. Most of the attacks—not all—are against the Christian community, on a widespread scale. I have asked Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Ministers questions about this in the past, but the answers have been a bit less than satisfactory. The last time, the relevant Minister said that some of the attacks might be connected to religious bigotry—the FCDO had clearly been sweating blood on that analysis. May we have a statement or a debate?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw the House's attention to the situation in Nigeria. I know that many Members on both sides of the House are concerned about religious persecution, and call it out on a regular basis. I think that it is worthy of debate, and that such a debate would be popular in the House. The hon. Gentleman will have another opportunity to ask about the issue during Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 26 April, but I think that applying for a debate in the meantime is the right thing to do.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I thank you for what you said earlier, Sir, about talking to the Ukrainian Speaker, and for all the efforts you have made to allow the House to engage with the terrible crisis in Europe. I also thank the Leader of the House for what he has done to provide statements to the House. I think there have also been at least three debates on Ukraine in the Chamber and Westminster Hall this week.

May I make a suggestion for next week's business and for that of future weeks? I suggest that there should be a statement on Ukraine each week after business questions to update the House. Members would know about the statement, and could make the time to come to it. Will the Leader of the House consider that?

Mark Spencer: As my hon. Friend has said, both you, Mr Speaker, and the Government have provided many opportunities for colleagues to ask about what is happening in Ukraine, and for the House to debate the subject. I see no reason why that should not continue. Indeed, we could probably do better than a regular statement on Thursdays, and update the House on a regular basis when the situation changes.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Let me begin by wishing everyone in my constituency a happy St Patrick's day.

I know from my experience that this House does not promote equality. In fact, I would say that it is actually exclusionary. The Leader of the House has been helpful and open to discussion, but given that we are currently moving from crisis to crisis, can we, as a matter of urgency, introduce measures enabling all Members to vote and represent their constituents?

Mark Spencer: May I say what a pleasure it is to see the hon. Lady back in her place? I know that Members on both sides of the House will also be pleased to see her here. I, and others, understand the challenges that she is fighting and overcoming, and I pay tribute to her efforts. She will be aware that the Procedure Committee is about to report on ways in which we can assist Members through proxy voting, or other methods of enabling them to engage in the democratic process. I await the publication of the Committee's report, but in the meantime my door is open to her, and I suggest that the second we receive the report, she and I meet to work out a plan for how we can help her to continue to exercise her democratic rights.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): My constituents have been disgusted to find out about the treatment of child Q by the police, but they are also desperately concerned about the fact that this is not an isolated incident. In Brent North we saw the vile treatment of the dead bodies of two black sisters, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman, by the very police officers who were supposed to be safeguarding the crime scene, and I am currently dealing with two other disturbing cases of police racism on behalf of my constituents.

Colleagues on both sides of the House are also desperately concerned about this issue. I am second to none in my admiration for the thousands of police officers who keep us safe on our streets, but something must be done about racism in the Metropolitan police, and I ask the Leader of the House for an urgent debate on the issue in Government time.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will understand that I do not want to comment on the individual case that he raised at the beginning of his question. I would say, in general terms, that the use of strip-search powers is an operational matter for the police, but we are clear about the fact that those powers should be used in accordance with the law, and with full regard for the dignity of the individual concerned.

I do not think that anyone could be other than concerned about the matter that the hon. Gentleman has raised. It should be fully investigated. There are clearly some challenges within the Met police force, of which both the Mayor of London and the Government are aware, and they need to be addressed. The hon. Gentleman was right to draw this matter to the attention of the House; it is worthy of further debate, and the situation does need significant improvement.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Can I ask my right hon. Friend what business he has in mind to help the House ensure that the process of the restoration and renewal of Parliament is undertaken for the benefit not just of Members of Parliament but of the thousands of staff and visitors who are here every day?

Mark Spencer: This is a very important issue. I do not know whether my hon. Friend is aware, but the Commissions of both Houses will be meeting this afternoon to discuss progress and to update this House later on any changes to the regime. The current plan that the House voted on certainly seems to have migrated in terms of its length and its cost, which has raised some concern within the Commission. I can assure my hon. Friend that this House will be kept up to speed with any changes, and will have the opportunity to vote on any changes that are brought forward.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, I hope that you and the Leader of the House will join me in the great celebration of Nazanin. Who would have thought, when a group of us took bouquets of flowers to the Iranian embassy for Nazanin on Valentine's day, that we would get this result? So, well done everyone; it is brilliant that she is out. I am going to have a little party next week to celebrate, and you are both invited.

In my constituency, I have a man called Richard Dass. When the war broke out in Ukraine he jumped into his camper van, filled it up with stuff and drove out there. He is still there helping people. He has the languages and the contacts, so he knows what the local hospitals want and what supplies are needed, but I am having great difficulty in sourcing those supplies for him. Could the Leader of the House use his influence with Ministers to get me the relevant information for Richard Dass? He is a brave young man doing a great job.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments about Nazanin, and I join him in celebrating her safe return. I also join him in congratulating and paying tribute to his constituent who is assisting with the humanitarian support in Ukraine. I will pass on those comments to the Foreign Office and see if we can assist him in getting the information he requires.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The freezes on fuel duty by Conservative Governments since 2010 have been the right thing to do and have saved motorists and businesses thousands of pounds. However, the cost of petrol and diesel remains disproportionately high compared with other countries because of fuel duty. The Government cannot buck the market, given global events effecting the price, but they can change the level of taxation. Will my right hon. Friend allow for an urgent debate ahead

[Greg Smith]

of the spring statement so that Members on both sides of the House can highlight how the high cost of petrol and diesel is affecting motorists and businesses?

Mark Spencer: We recognise that the global price of crude oil has been increasing in the past year, leading to a rise in petrol prices around the world. That is why we are supporting people by freezing fuel duty for the 12th year in a row. This is the longest sustained freeze in British history, saving drivers money every time they fill up their tank compared with pre-2010 prices. The 2022-23 fuel duty freeze will save consumers almost £8 billion over the next five years. However, the overall impact of energy price spikes on the public finances needs to be considered in the round, and the Office for Budget Responsibility will be setting out the overall fiscal position next week, when the Chancellor will be giving his spring statement.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I have a constituent who had to flee an abusive relationship. That was clearly traumatic enough, but she has now discovered that her ex-partner took out an advance universal credit payment, or loan, of nearly £1,000, which went directly into his bank account. The Department for Work and Pensions is saying she is jointly liable for this money, which she did not see a penny of, and it wants her to pay it back. We know that coercive and financial control can be a problem in domestic abuse, so will the Leader of the House please ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to intervene and show compassion for my constituent?

Mark Spencer: I am very sorry to hear about the situation in which the hon. Gentleman's constituent finds herself. People in coercive and controlling relationships should reach out for support to try to escape that situation. I will make sure that the Department for Work and Pensions is aware of his question to see whether anyone can assist his constituent.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Not only is today St Patrick's day and Purim, but tonight is the start of the Hindu festival of Holi. There are two versions of why Holi exists. The first is that Holika, the evil witch, took the king's son Prahlad into a burning fire, but she was consumed by fire and he was delivered unharmed. The other is about Lord Krishna, whose face turns blue after being poisoned, and therefore he throws colours around to encourage people not to see that he is blue. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Hindus across the world "Holi hai!"?

Mark Spencer: I would like to join my hon. Friend in wishing the Hindu community across the UK a happy Holi, including those in his constituency. It is a joyful occasion. I have not participated in it myself, but splashing colours around looks like great fun, if nothing else. I think it is something I would quite enjoy.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Residents of Lantern Court and Compass Point in my constituency are stuck in limbo with unaffordable insurance premiums and eye-watering repair bills while they are unable to sell their apartments. Can the Leader of the House confirm when the Building Safety Bill will come before us?

Mark Spencer: Business will be announced in the usual way, and the Government are very keen to get on with the Building Safety Bill. I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that the Bill will help to support his constituents. It is heading our way very soon, but he will have to be patient and wait for business to be announced in the usual way from the Dispatch Box.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): On 28 July 2021, every Labour councillor in Bury voted to destroy large areas of green belt in my constituency. By supporting Andy Burnham's "Places for Everyone" plan, local Labour politicians ignored the views of thousands of my constituents who wish to preserve areas of countryside at Walshaw, Tottington and Elton reservoir. Will my right hon. Friend make time for a debate on Places for Everyone and the devastating impact it will have on green-belt land in my area?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is a tenacious campaigner on behalf of his constituents. This is not the first time he has drawn attention to the shortcomings of Mayor Burnham, and I know he will continue to do so by campaigning tirelessly for his constituents. He demonstrates once again today what a great representative he is for his constituents.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I am sure the Leader of the House will be tempted to consider an electric tractor or a hydrogen combine harvester, if he has not done so already. Consumers across the UK have been switching to electric vehicles. Impressively, plug-ins were 26% of the February car market, and that proportion is growing. However, the charging infrastructure sector and the automotive manufacturers are frustrated by the lack of an integrated strategy. Can we have a debate in Government time on how the Government will ensure these two industries do not stall?

Mark Spencer: I have been lucky enough to buy an electric car, which has been a revelation. It is a very good product. The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that not only cars will have to migrate to a new fuel source in the long term. The good news is that in his part of the world, which is the heart of the car industry, great companies such as JCB are doing a lot of research into hydrogen fuel cells and gigafactories, into which the Government are pouring huge amounts of investment to make sure the United Kingdom is at the heart of the new revolution in energy supply. That is the right thing to do, and the Government are very committed to doing it.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Can we have both an urgent statement and a debate on the draft terms of reference for the covid inquiry? Astonishingly, although there is a small sentence on school restrictions, they do not mention children or the impact on children's mental health, lost educational attainment and life chances. Children must not be forgotten in this inquiry.

Mark Spencer: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. Obviously, that inquiry is about to get started and it will be wide-ranging, and to restrict it to any particular area would be a mistake. He is right to draw attention to the impact that the pandemic had on children, and I am sure that the inquiry will go into all areas of covid and be a wide-ranging inquiry that we will respond to in due course.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): This week has been an important one for those infected in and affected by the contaminated blood scandal. Sir Robert Francis has given his review of compensation frameworks to the Cabinet Office, ahead of what we hope will be the conclusion of the infected blood public inquiry later this year, so that the Government are ready to respond to whatever recommendations Sir Brian Langstaff makes. I know that the Paymaster General has already indicated that he will publish Sir Robert's review, alongside the Government's response. When that happens, will the Leader of the House ensure that a statement is made to the House, as Members of Parliament have not had an opportunity to question the Government over the past few years about this issue, with the inquiry ongoing, and it would be a really opportune moment for us to be able to ask questions about the Government's plans?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady, because I know she has campaigned on this issue for a very long time. I also pay tribute to Sir Robert Francis QC, who has conducted the inquiry—an enormous amount of work has gone into it. As she said, the Paymaster General said from the Dispatch Box that he would publish that inquiry. I hear her plea for a statement at that time, and I will pass it on to the Department of Health and Social Care, which I am sure will look upon it favourably.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): In 1222—I know the Leader of the House was not there at the time, but his predecessor might have been—our late King Alexander II designated the already ancient Dumbarton a royal burgh. It is actually first mentioned by Ptolemy, on his great historic map of the then Roman empire, where it was known as Alauna, before becoming Alcluith, which even the Speaker of the other place has taken as our designation. Does the Leader of the House agree that it is now time to debate in this House the value and worth of our ancient and historic places, and the wonderful opportunities they speak to in terms of our heritage and history and the communities who have made them their home for centuries?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is a true champion for Dumbarton, and I enjoyed his history lesson. It is a demonstration that lots of places up and down our great British Isles are worthy of visiting and have a great tourism industry. We should celebrate that in this House and continue to draw attention to it, and he has contributed in that way this morning.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): There are massive concerns across South Reddish at the proposal to merge GP services in South Reddish with the surgery in Heaton Norris, closing the site at South Reddish in the process. That will massively reduce accessibility. I am opposed to the changes, and a survey conducted by local campaigner Holly McCormack showed massive public opposition too. May we have a debate on GP service cuts and accessibility to GP services, so that these issues can be properly addressed on the Floor of the House?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the fact that accessing GP services is a very important challenge that faces many of our constituents. He will be aware that lots of those policies in that part

of the world are under the control of the Mayor of Manchester, who has some responsibility, too. The issue is worthy of debate and it would give the Government an opportunity to celebrate their record and acknowledge the investment that we are putting into the NHS.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The stories we are currently hearing of security being hired to remove P&O crew from vessels is deeply concerning. As I understand it, all P&O sailing staff are to be made redundant with immediate effect and to be replaced with agency staff—but it is okay, apparently, because those staff will be able to apply to the agency for employment. All sides have had an issue with the Government's inaction on fire and rehire, but today's events go further still. I heard what the Leader of the House said earlier in response to the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), but will he make recommendations to the Secretary of State for Transport such that he comes back to the House today to make an urgent statement?

Mark Spencer: I will make sure that the Department for Transport is aware of the hon. Gentleman's comments. He will understand that the DFT is currently working feverishly behind the scenes to try to assist with the situation. I am sure that, in due course, the DFT will update the House on the progress made, but at the moment we need to leave it to get on with its job in trying to assist those who are in a challenging situation.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): After eight years as leader of Hounslow Council, Councillor Steve Curran recently announced that he was standing down as a councillor to focus on his health and medical treatment. Steve and I occasionally disagree on things, but on the big things we do not. Under his leadership, Hounslow has achieved more than 2,000 social rents and council homes and London's best roads and fewest potholes; it is on track to deliver on net zero; and it was named the 2021 *Local Government Chronicle* council of the year, particularly—although not exclusively—for its work supporting businesses and vulnerable residents during the covid crisis. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending our best wishes to Councillor Curran? Will he find time for a debate in Government time on the important work of local councils such as Hounslow?

Mark Spencer: I suspect that Councillor Curran and I would probably disagree politically on a few issues, but I am sure that in his eight years as leader of Hounslow Council he has worked tirelessly on behalf of the hon. Lady's constituents and many others. She is right to draw attention to the fact that councillors and council leaders of all political persuasions up and down the country put in an enormous amount of effort to try to improve people's lives. That is worthy of debate and I encourage the hon. Lady to talk to the Backbench Business Committee or apply for an Adjournment debate.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have a statement on covid? In York, the case rate is now 625 cases per 100,000 and shooting up. In York Hospital, the bed occupancy rate for patients with covid is now greater than it has been at any previous point in the pandemic, including during the spike because of the delta variant. We were promised guidance on care home visits and for care home staff and NHS staff, but it has

[*Rachael Maskell*]

not been brought forward. We urgently need to know how the Government are to manage the rise in the number of covid cases, so may we have a statement?

Mark Spencer: There will be an opportunity for the hon. Lady to question the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care directly at Health questions on 19 April. A debate on covid is worthy of an application and she could apply to the Backbench Business Committee or for an Adjournment debate. That would provide an opportunity for the Government to set out our fantastic record on covid—how we were the first to deploy the vaccines and the first to get out there with a booster programme, and how we offered tremendous support for those who found themselves laid off.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out his support for my Bill on paid bereavement leave for all, which will have its Second Reading tomorrow and has support throughout the House?

Will the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, join me in urging Members from all parties to observe a minute's silence at midday on 23 March, to commemorate the lives lost during the pandemic and show our support for all those who have been bereaved, as part of a day of national reflection?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to that minute's silence; it is important that we reflect upon the lives of those who have not been as fortunate as we have been to make it through the covid pandemic.

I wish the hon. Lady well with her private Member's Bill tomorrow. I am sure she will convince the House to support it. The democratic process will take place and I wish her well in it.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): May I also say happy Holi, happy Purim, and happy St Patrick's Day?

On Wednesday, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 15 March the International Day to Combat Islamophobia. I hope the Leader of the House will join me in commending the international community for taking important steps to promote a culture of tolerance based on respect for human rights and for freedom of religion or belief. Given the rampant Islamophobia in the UK, which has devastating consequences on our British Muslim community, will the Leader of the House consider a Backbench Business debate in Government time on Islamophobia?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question and for his good wishes. He is right, again, to draw attention to the fact that all forms of racism, which are often overlooked, should be called out. We have a responsibility as Members of Parliament and also as members of society to call out any form of racism, and 15 March gives us the opportunity to remind people once again that racism is unacceptable in all forms and should be called out by anybody who sees it.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Rutherglen Bankhead Tenants and Residents

Association on its 30th anniversary this month, making it one of the longest standing associations in south Lanarkshire? Will he schedule a debate in Government time on the contributions of tenants and residents associations across the UK?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to draw attention to the thousands of tenants and residents associations up and down the country. There are many very active groups in my own constituency that contribute a great deal not only to the place in which they live, but to the community with which they engage. I join her in congratulating her constituents on their 30th anniversary, and I wish them all the best for the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I wish you, Mr Speaker, and everyone in the House—right hon. and hon. Members—a very happy St Patrick's Day? It is said that if, on St Patrick's Day, St Patrick turns the stone over, it means that the sun will shine for 30 days. I am sure that we are all looking forward to 30 days of good weather—certainly, that is my hope.

Just this morning, ISIS-DRC claimed the killing of more than 50 Christians in a raid on villages in Ituri province, in the north-east of Democratic Republic of Congo. This is just the latest in an increase in attacks by ISIS affiliates on religious minorities. The Leader of the House is always very responsive, so will he ensure that there is a statement from the relevant Minister of Her Majesty's Government on the re-emergence of ISIS and the potential threat to religious minority communities in DRC?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He always brings a little sunshine into this Chamber whenever he contributes. That is why Mr Speaker saves him up to the end to bring that enthusiasm. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there is a Westminster Hall debate this afternoon on some of these challenges, which he has called. I am sure that he will be there to lead it. He is right to draw attention to this matter. He is a tenacious campaigner on religious rights around the world, and I pay tribute to him for the work that he is doing in highlighting this terrible crime.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Points of order should come after statements. Is it about this?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is about previous business, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is definitely previous business, is it? I have already been hoodwinked once today. I do not want it to happen twice.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: It is regarding the urgent question this morning.

Mr Speaker: That was earlier. Your point of order can come after this statement.

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Secretary of State for Justice to make a statement, let me say that I understand that the content of it has been extensively trailed this morning, including through tweets from the Secretary of State's Department and from the right hon. Member himself. I have made it clear previously that important policy announcements need to be made first to this Chamber, not to the media. I repeat that again today. It is a discourtesy to the House and to the Members, and I expect Ministers to make sure that this does not happen again.

12.3 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Dominic Raab): Mr Speaker, forgive the exuberance in communicating at least the trail of this statement. Of course, you are absolutely right, and I will make sure that it does not happen again.

Today, I am setting out the proposals to tackle strategic lawsuits against public participation—the so-called SLAPPs—to end the abuse in UK courts, and of UK laws, by corrupt oligarchs and Putin allies to protect democratic debate and to uphold our fundamental liberties of free speech and a free press.

Let me offer the House a recent illustration of the problem we seek to tackle. Earlier this month, the British journalist Tom Burgis was sued for libel in the High Court by the oligarch-owned mining company ENRC. His book “Kleptopia: How Dirty Money Is Conquering the World” seeks to chart how dirty money is being used around the world, highlighting instances of money laundering, corruption and other wrongdoing.

ENRC did not just bring its claim against Mr Burgis's publisher, but made multiple claims against him personally, as the author of articles, tweets and podcasts about his book. The High Court dismissed ENRC's claim at a preliminary stage, on the grounds that the statements it had complained of were not defamatory, and awarded costs to Mr Burgis. It should be said that ENRC has also been under criminal investigation by the Serious Fraud Office, and during that period, ENRC has also brought two separate High Court civil claims against the SFO itself, in 2019 and in 2021.

That is not a one-off case, however, and such cases often do not end well. Certainly, they do not always end in the way the libel suit I mentioned did. I give it as an illustration, but that one-off case is part of a worrying and growing pattern of conduct that we are starting to see, whereby those accused of wrongdoing try to use their deep pockets and the UK courts to financially bully their critics into submission.

I will try to give the House a sense of the scale of the problem. Provisional figures from the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe, CASE, estimates that there were 14 such cases in the UK last year. It is worth pausing to reflect that that is a significant increase from just two in 2020 and one in 2018. This is a relatively recent, but burgeoning, phenomenon. Across Europe, CASE has identified 538 SLAPP cases over the past decade, 26 of them brought in this country, so this is not just a UK problem.

As a matter of plain principle, it is wrong that unscrupulous individuals and corporations are able to exploit our laws and our courts in this jurisdiction with

claims designed to muzzle respected journalists, academics and campaigners, explicitly to stop them from shining a light on corruption and links to organised crime. If we think about it for a moment, this is a modern-day struggle between David and Goliath. We have individual journalists, authors and academics on the one hand, pitted against billionaire oligarchs, some of whom bankroll the Kremlin, on the other. We in this House cannot, and will not, allow our courts and our justice system to be used by those kleptocrats to intimidate and harass those who lift the lid on their murky dealings and wrongdoing.

The stark reality of the problem runs far deeper than the relatively small number of cases that will ever reach court. It is fair to say that the high-profile cases that we know about are likely to represent just the tip of the iceberg. This is probably the most important point for the House today: SLAPPs have their most pernicious impact through the pre-action letters and legal pressure applied well before court proceedings are initiated. Understandably, if a researcher or campaigner of relatively modest means finds themselves on the receiving end of such bullying tactics, the risk is that they will back down before a formal case is begun, for fear of the sky-high costs and damages that most working people in this country could not possibly afford to bear.

That is the harm we must guard against—publishers and authors forced to hesitate before publishing properly grounded stories, and legitimate, well-researched investigative reporting reined in, or perhaps not begun in the first place, for fear of the crushing legal costs. The most serious and surreptitious danger in all this is that SLAPPs then have a chilling effect on the transparency that is essential to a healthy democracy.

Of course, the war in Ukraine has highlighted the urgency of tackling what is a recent but none the less growing problem. The same kleptocrats availing themselves of SLAPPs are often found bankrolling President Putin's war machine. As the Kremlin silences Russia's independent press and jails critics of its illegal war, in this House and in this country we will stand up for those shining a light on corruption and cronyism.

So today I have set out proposals to reform our libel laws and launched a call for evidence, a copy of which is available in the House, that asks for views on how to make these reforms as targeted and effective as possible. Let me briefly summarise the measures we are taking. First, we will consider whether it is necessary to establish a legal definition in order to create a higher threshold for SLAPP-type cases, and look at whether we need to introduce stronger powers to enable our courts to strike them out earlier as an abuse of process to deal with the risk, the threats and the bullying that these cases involve. Secondly, we will set out for consideration options to strengthen the public interest defence. Thirdly, we will consider limiting legal costs in SLAPP cases, perhaps capping the costs that claimants can receive, to address the issue of the glaring inequality of arms between the parties in these kinds of cases. Fourthly, our proposals allow courts to put restraint orders on repeat litigants and consider the case for a specific requirement for SLAPP claimants to prove malice in libel cases. Fifthly, we will review the wider existing defences in our libel laws to assess whether and how they could and should be reformed to counter the growing threat from SLAPPs. Sixthly, we will look at the regulatory regime. In fairness, I should point out that the Solicitors Regulation Authority

[Dominic Raab]

recently issued new guidance reminding solicitors of their duty to report misconduct, identifying SLAPPs as an example of litigation for improper purposes. We will assess how that regulation is working and whether it is adequate in the light of the evidence that we have.

This call for evidence is necessary to provide us with the most robust basis on which then to move swiftly to introduce the targeted reforms to deal with the problem at hand. These reforms sit alongside our proposals for a Bill of Rights that will reinforce freedom of speech and freedom of expression. This is a good example of why that Bill of Rights is necessary.

Today in this House we have an opportunity—I hope that hon. Members on both sides will embrace it—to put President Putin and his cronies on notice. We will not allow our courts to be abused to censor those brave enough to call out corruption. We will protect our free press, which is there precisely to hold the powerful to account. We will defend freedom of speech—the liberty that guards all our other freedoms in this country. Our reforms will further strengthen free speech so that those with blood on their hands and those with dirty money in their bank accounts are no longer free to hide in the shadows. I commend this statement to the House.

12.12 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement—and so does everyone on Twitter. It certainly marks a major and welcome shift in Conservative party policy. When the Prime Minister was Mayor of London, he actively encouraged oligarchs to pursue vexatious libel claims through the British courts, and it is good to see some belated recognition today of just how wrong that was.

We are used to double standards from this Government when it comes to Russian dirty money. Senior Ministers, including the Prime Minister himself, parted with Kremlin-linked oligarchs even as their plundered wealth flooded into London. They buried the Intelligence and Security Committee's Russia report instead of acting on the threats it exposed to our politics and to our democracy. The reason there has been an increase in this kind of lawsuit—what the Secretary of State called a “glaring inequality of arms”—in this country is that the Conservative party got itself hooked on the Kremlin's dirty money. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) has worked bravely to expose the Conservatives' increasing dependency on Kremlin-linked oligarchs. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us how many Conservative party donors have used a SLAPP to silence free speech?

These measures, welcome though they are, are too little, too late. Labour called on the Government to fix this problem way back in January. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) demanded clearer guidance for judges, tougher regulation of law firms, and legislation to control costs so astronomical that no one can afford to stand up to Putin's bullying billionaires. My right hon. and learned Friend the Leader of the Opposition demanded legislation two years ago.

The Conservatives' track record is frankly problematic. They ignored the Leveson inquiry when it called for low-cost litigation for claimants and defendants in media

cases. Instead, they sided with Putin's oligarchs against British journalists and campaigners until it was far too late. The Secretary of State says that he wants to end abuses in UK courts by Putin's cronies, but he is proposing a consultation that does not finish until 19 May. Has he made an estimate of how much these oligarchs will continue to abuse the current skewed system until then, as they attempt to hide their collaboration with the Kremlin? Let us be clear: their money funds Putin's wars of aggression in Chechnya, Georgia, the Crimea, and now the rest of Ukraine. The Government must act much faster if they want to cripple Putin's war machine and stop it slaughtering the children of Ukraine.

The Secretary of State mentions the Solicitors Regulation Authority, but what penalties will be imposed on firms acting in these cases? What is the SRA doing to check that solicitors are doing proper due diligence on oligarch clients and the source of their wealth before helping themselves to a share of it? What action is he taking to stop law firms helping the Russian state to make money that helps to fund Putin's war machine? Putting Putin “on notice” is not enough—the Government must end this corruption now.

Dominic Raab: It is a bit surprising, on an issue of such seriousness, that the hon. Gentleman resorted to making the usual partisan political points. Frankly, I think the House can rise above his partisan approach.

The hon. Gentleman says that this is too little, too late. In fact, in January, when he says Labour called for this, Justice Ministers had already made it clear that we were actively working on proposals. Indeed, I made that clear in the House in February. He referred back to 2018, or a couple of years ago. We had one case in 2018. As I said, this is now a burgeoning problem. Frankly, an element of “Captain Hindsight” seems to have crept along the shadow Front Bench.

In relation to the broader points that the hon. Gentleman makes about oligarchs, I set out in the House yesterday the scale and the level of sanctions that we have imposed—indeed, with cross-party support. We have led the way internationally.

The hon. Gentleman did not really make any substantive points about the consultation. [*Interruption.*] He did not really, actually—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) is chuntering from a sedentary position. He did not really ask me anything—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Lady should not be chuntering from a sedentary position. She is a very senior Member of the House and she should know better.

Dominic Raab: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I look forward to the hon. Gentleman taking some time to look over the proposals in a slightly more sober way. I hope that, on reflection, he will agree to that, given that some Labour Members, particularly the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), as well as my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), have shown that this can be done in a cross-party way.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I unreservedly welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's statement. This has been a seriously cross-party issue.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has taken a terrific part in it, and the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and many others have engaged in it, because it is so important: we are talking about a fundamental defence of free speech. This is going to be difficult but it is also going to be urgent. The one point on which I agree with the Opposition spokesman is that dealing with this will be urgent, because it is not just about oligarchs. We have already debated in this Chamber cases like that of Mohamed Amersi—a disgraceful case brought against a former Member of this House. The timetable is important. I unreservedly welcome to this, but will my right hon. Friend give the House some indication of when he expects legislation to come out of the call for evidence he has announced?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend. He is absolutely right to pay tribute to the cross-party nature of this, notwithstanding the statement by the Opposition spokesman. That is very important, and he has helped to lead it, as is often the case. He asked about the timetable. As he will see, these are substantive proposals—not a Green Paper but a set of proposals. It is important, with regard to libel, which is there to defend the reputation of decent, upstanding people, that we get this right. It is about testing the evidence so that when we go to legislation, we get this right. After the consultation, I will look for the earliest opportunity and the earliest legislative vehicle. It may end up being a third Session Bill, but he has my reassurance that we are already looking at the appropriate legislative vehicle. It depends how much of this we do in primary legislation. I suspect most of it will require primary legislation.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I welcome it, and the sentiments behind the proposed changes. For too long, Russian oligarchs have used their ill-gotten wealth to threaten and silence those who would rightfully seek to expose them. We know that the UK is awash with dirty money, whether it is the London laundromat, golden visa schemes or utilising UK law firms to silence journalists and intimidate activists who rightfully call out their unethical behaviour. Vladimir Ashurkov, a Russian political activist who was an executive director of Alexei Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation, said that SLAPP lawsuits were

“acts of hybrid warfare which are used to weaken the UK's democracy, judicial system and fundamental freedoms”.

Given that we know that Kremlin-linked oligarchs use SLAPP lawsuits to silence criticism and to attempt to control the public narrative, what steps is the UK taking to ensure that we cannot be manipulated to silence free speech, while protecting journalists and political activists? What steps are the Secretary of State and the UK Government taking to name and shame such companies and will specific secondary legislation be proposed to strengthen existing defamation and libel laws?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her thoughtful and cogent statement, intervention and set of questions. I point out to her that we are dealing with the tier 1 visa, and the sanctions regime, both in the number of people and entities, plus the scope—I think it is now at \$45 billion—demonstrates what we are doing on that front. The substantive proposals are all set out in the

call for evidence, which is available in the House. She will find all the answers. I think it will be a combination of things. There are regulatory matters through the SRA regime that we want to look at, particularly around the ethics for solicitors, where there will be elements of perhaps secondary legislation. When we are dealing with libel law and the Defamation Act 2013, it will require changes to primary legislation, but I do not want to pre-empt the outcome of the call for evidence.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify what has been a stunningly quick recent phenomenon, bearing in mind the exponential increase in cases in the past year alone. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for discussing this matter with me when I was in office. We could see this trajectory rising at an alarming rate. The Secretary of State is absolutely right now in his consultation to build on the work we did in the Defamation Act 2013, where we raised thresholds to bring libel cases, and strengthening the public interest defence is absolutely the right way to go. Will he undertake to look not only at this phenomenon, but other areas where we see individuals or groups bringing cases purely on the basis that they wish to get disclosure or information from Government that is designed to make some sort of political or power point, as opposed to wanting the merits of the case dealt with by a court?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to all the work that my right hon. and learned Friend did in his tenure as Justice Secretary. He and I have looked at various things in this House together over many years, and the one thing we have always agreed on is the primacy of free speech. It is not entirely unqualified—libel laws are there for a reason—but he is absolutely right that the quintessential British liberty that guards all the others is freedom of speech and expression. However troubling it may be for politicians to have the journalistic scrutiny, rigour and all that, we understand in our hearts that it is critical to a healthy, vigorous democratic society, and I will certainly look at any other examples that he may wish to raise where we see this kind of legalised bullying through the courts and our jurisdiction.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): This is all really good stuff, and I am delighted that we are moving in the right direction. I always want the Justice Secretary to go faster; he can be very slow in delivering what he knows I want him to deliver. The real trouble we have had in this country is that the people of Britain have never known the truth about Russian money, because journalists, broadcasters, sometimes politicians and Governments have been too frightened to go to court because they know that the pockets on the other side are so deep, and they are terrified they will lose their home or their business, or the Government will lose millions of pounds on behalf of the British taxpayer. Can I ask him about the seizure of goods? We will need to seize assets. Take Chelsea football club—we will not be able to sell it on until we have seized it. Will we not need legislation for that, as well, and will he ensure that there is a proper tender for the sale of that, so that it does not go to somebody who is equally dodgy?

Dominic Raab: Forgive me if I do not get drawn into Chelsea football club, which is outside the scope of what we are discussing in this statement. I pay tribute to

[Dominic Raab]

the hon. Gentleman. Since doing BackBench Business debates on Magnitsky in 2012, he and I have always, whatever else we may differ on, made common cause on the need for robust sanctions. He has been one of the leading lights in relation to SLAPPs, and I will certainly look carefully at the important specific points he has made.

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am very impressed by the Deputy Prime Minister's action, and I thank him. It is a great shame that over recent years, we have allowed a corrupting cottage industry of legalised intimidation and legalised gangsterism to be offered by unscrupulous law firms in this country to some of the most wretched and unscrupulous people on earth. I hope that the senior partners in firms such as Carter-Ruck, CMS, Mishcon and Harbottle & Lewis will consider whether they feel that they have played an entirely negative role in enabling Kremlin neo-fascism. My brief question is that I was bringing forward a private Member's Bill on this issue so that the tools of abuse—data protection, privacy and libel laws—can be wrapped up in a series of amendments. Should I continue to try to bring forward that private Member's Bill in the hope that I can help write some clauses that would be of value in an upcoming Bill, or should I offer that in evidence to the consultation process? I am keen for the Bill to be strong, just and transparent.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend should do both. I thank him for his campaigning tenacity on all this. As ever, he is very forensic, as well as tenacious. I make one point. He makes a perfectly reasonable point about legal ethics—as I mentioned, we will look at the SRA regime, which is important—but I want to avoid this being an anti-lawyer push, because the vast majority of legal practitioners are as aghast as us at the abuses we see. Let us have a targeted approach, because we are more likely to be effective at dealing with the real problem that he has been so tenacious and eloquent in highlighting.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I have a daughter who works for a London law firm. I join my colleagues on all sides in saying that speed is of the essence. The fact of the matter is that some of the luxury yachts have already left, and we do not want that to happen in this case. When I was an undergraduate at the London School of Economics, I remember Professor Michael Oakeshott saying that the courts of England, like the Ritz Hotel, are open to everyone. That is the case, so I welcome the measures today. I want them to be speedy, and I want everything we do to make clear where our support is in terms of this terrible invasion of Ukraine.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his long-standing interest in this area and the very constructive points he has made. We need to act swiftly, and I said that in my statement. We also need to recognise that we are constantly balancing the right of honourable people to protect their reputation—libel law has a role to play in this country—with not allowing libel law to be hijacked by those with deep pockets to muzzle the very transparency that we want in this country. That is a balance, and we need to be careful to get that balance right. We also

remain a global country with a global outlook, and we want investment into this country. That is crucial and is part of our USP. What we do not want is dirty money or the money of those with blood on their hands. We will move swiftly, but the most important thing is that we do not do this in a knee-jerk way, because when this House does things in a knee-jerk way, we get it wrong and we repent at leisure. Let us move swiftly, but firmly. That is why the call for evidence is about how we shape these reforms, not whether we do them.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to set out the harm, intimidation and cost bullying that comes even before there is live litigation, as that happens in many libel matters generally. I also welcome him guarding against being anti-lawyer, particularly as he is doing so much work in other areas to undo the historical attacks on lawyers in this country. Thinking about the indispensable free press in this country, it is difficult for us in the UK to comprehend how narrow and limited is the information that Russian people, for example, receive, let alone what they understand can be trusted and impartial. Will he clarify what the Government are doing more widely to promote press freedom?

Dominic Raab: As ever, my hon. Friend absolutely nails the point. These reforms are targeted at a specific problem, which is recent and burgeoning, and we do not want to conflate that because it might hit other areas and do ancillary or incidental harm and because that is a displacement of our effort and our energies.

My hon. Friend asked more generally about what we are doing around the world. When I was Foreign Secretary, we ramped up the Media Freedom Coalition, which, in my time, we chaired with the Canadians. I am not sure whether it is them or us who currently hold the chairmanship—I think it is the Canadians. We expanded that coalition. The idea was to help with the legislation that countries have to protect free speech and to ensure that, when journalists come under attack, they get legal support. We raised quite a lot of money and we keep working on it. I know that the current Foreign Secretary is enthusiastic and energetic about it.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Justice Secretary's statement. He has well specified the problem and the need for urgency, so I urge maximum speed, although he is right to be cautious about getting the legislation right. There should be a presumption that the public interest test is right. That test is not synonymous with the British state; I hope he would agree with that. Nor is it necessarily, in this complicated world, synonymous only with the UK national interest. Will he ensure that the test takes the widest possible view about what is good for this complicated world, because that matters against the oligarchs?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and makes one of the most important points. If he looks at the call for evidence and the menu of options that we set out, we look at the threshold for bringing SLAPPs and whether there ought to be a new right of public participation. We look at the various defences in defamation law to see whether they are sufficient to deal with this problem. That includes the public defence and the serious harm test of a defamatory statement. We are trying to look at it from every angle. I should add for

completeness that we will look at whether we are getting the right balance in terms of being an attractive destination for litigants to want to solve disputes, which is a great USP for the country, and whether we have allowed and given succour to libel tourism in this particularly pernicious area. We will look at all those things and I look forward to his further thoughts in those areas.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I, too, warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. As he said, however, SLAPPs are an international phenomenon that are used across Europe to stifle investigative journalism. Most notorious, perhaps, are the 47 lawsuits that were being brought against Daphne Caruana Galizia at the time of her murder in Malta in 2017. Does he therefore agree that protecting freedom of the press properly will require international action? Can he say what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other jurisdictions to bring about co-ordinated action?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I mentioned the European figures; it is clearly a much broader phenomenon. One of the things that we have looked at is the threshold. To give an illustration of a jurisdiction that we have looked at, in the United States, there needs to be malice, I think, for most libel cases. Under the US constitution, there are a whole series of judicially enforceable rights that are probably stronger than in this country under the European convention on human rights or otherwise in relation to free speech. We will look carefully at the bespoke libel laws that we have and we are mindful of the lessons that we can learn from other jurisdictions.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the statement and especially the Justice Secretary's words about it being the tip of the iceberg. I was caught up in the issue when Navalny released his list and I named Abramovich in this House as someone who we needed to look at sanctioning. I then tried to do a follow-up story with a newspaper but, lo and behold, the lawyers got involved and the newspaper never printed it. I wonder how many such stories that shed sunlight on our democracy have been stifled.

The Justice Secretary will know, however, that it is not just oligarchs who do that. For example, Sienna Miller said that she had to stop her case against the News Corp newspapers in December because she could not afford to continue to take the case to court. Will the legislation cover not just the oligarchs who desperately need looking at but anyone who seeks to use the law to silence the truth?

Dominic Raab: Yes. Whatever other differences we have had over the years, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady's campaigning tenacity on the issue. I think she is right. Of course, although we have oligarchs and Ukraine in mind, it would need to be something that applied across the board.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): As a former journalist, I believe strongly and passionately in freedom of the press. We see all too vividly at the moment how important that is with the incredibly brave journalism coming out of Ukraine, yet that freedom has been increasingly threatened in recent years, so I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Will he reassure journalists and the wider public that he will take whatever steps are necessary to uphold freedom of the press and freedom of speech more widely?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and I remember him as a television news presenter, so he has first-hand experience of the issue. He is right that we need to deal with the problem. More broadly, we have seen all sorts of incursions on free speech over recent years. There has been, I think, some collective denial about this. That is partly because, in some areas, if it is an issue that we feel torn about, perhaps people turn a blind eye. We need to redevelop the culture—frankly, the attitude—that we listen and perhaps embrace views that we do not always find comfortable. Freedom of speech is the liberty that guards all the others. That is why, on top of these reforms, our Bill of Rights reforms, which will strengthen and reinforce freedom of speech, are so necessary and timely.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I welcome the statement. As ever on these occasions, the devil will be in the detail, but I share hon. Members' concern for urgency in disabling the enablers of the oligarchs. It is a war of attrition, but it is not just against journalists; it is also against Government agencies such as the Serious Fraud Office, which ENRC took to court in a SLAPP litigation, as well as an individual who formerly worked for the Serious Fraud Office. When the Justice Secretary is considering the legislation, will he consider creating a protection for such agencies from that sort of litigation, perhaps through a complaints system for anyone who wants to take up an issue with an agency such as the Serious Fraud Office, rather than them going through really expensive litigation that wears down the resources of those agencies to do the job for which we set them up?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman makes some valid points. Yes, we will look across the board at the defendants in these SLAPP cases. We in this House, because of the privilege that Parliament affords, have the opportunity and the responsibility to ensure that, come what may, those abuses are not swept under the carpet and that the issues that need to be aired, whether through authors, academics or journalists, are not muzzled.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. I was lucky enough to meet Tom Burgis recently, who, alongside other journalists such as Oliver Bullough and others, does an incredible job of highlighting the dirty money, corruption and general economic crime. The other cohort that does that most effectively, and has been involved in every case that I have been involved in in those circumstances, is whistleblowers. Will he, with his Home Office colleagues, seek to put protections and compensation for whistleblowers into a future economic crime Bill? Those people are critical in identifying this stuff and bringing those guilty of it to justice.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend makes good points both on SLAPPs and more widely on whistleblowers. I will make sure we have that angle in mind and speak to our Home Office colleagues on the legislation it is looking at.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I join others in thanking the Secretary of State for his clear commitment to protect our legal rights across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; it is good to hear positive stories coming out of this place. I have long expressed concern that those with

[Jim Shannon]

money are able to tie legal knots around those with limited funds. Does he believe these proposals go far enough to protect freedom of speech and ensure money does not equate to legal victory?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman has been a staunch supporter of our liberties in this House and in the United Kingdom. I hope when he looks at the series of options—there are over 30 pages—he will see that we have covered all the bases, whether it is the threshold for SLAPPs to bring libel claims, the cost protections, or the ability to strike out or have a permission stage to deal at an earlier stage with abusive claims. If we have not, precisely because this is a call for evidence, we will need to look at other areas as well.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): It is abhorrent that corrupt elites have sought to suppress legal criticism in this country. Will my right hon. Friend join me in saying this type of litigation has no place in our society? Could he go further and highlight what other steps the Government are taking to crack down on these dodgy elites exploiting our country?

Dominic Raab: As my hon. Friend will know, we are sanctioning over 100 individuals and entities—I think the sum involved is \$45 billion—and the economic crime Bill has come in. I regard the issue we are dealing with today as a forensic target issue. We will move swiftly—I have heard hon. Members call for that—but it is right that we move on a firm basis, identify and target the problem itself, and that the pendulum does not swing too far the other way. I am confident that we can get the balance right, but we need to test the evidence for the reforms I have put forward and then proceed as swiftly as possible to legislate.

Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities

12.42 pm

The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on our work to tackle ethnic disparities and to build a fairer, more inclusive Britain for all.

In April last year, I came before this House following publication of the report by the independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, chaired by Dr Tony Sewell. I return to the House today to announce publication of our response to that report and to outline our new “Inclusive Britain” action plan.

The Sewell commission was established by the Prime Minister in response to the protests we saw throughout the summer of 2020. It was tasked with carrying out a deeper examination of why disparities exist and considering how we can reduce them. The commission published its findings on 31 March 2021, making 24 recommendations in all, focused on health, education, crime and policing, and employment. The result was a groundbreaking report that set out a new, positive agenda for change. It provided an important contribution to both the national conversation about race and the Government’s efforts to level up and unite the whole country. I would like to take this opportunity to again thank the commissioners for their tireless efforts and the invaluable contribution they have made to helping us better understand this complex and multifaceted policy area.

The Government fully endorse the findings of the Sewell commission and our action plan is based largely on its recommendations. Its report conclusively showed something which I, and indeed hon Members on all sides of this House, know to be true: disparities do persist in the UK and racism and discrimination continue to shape people’s experiences. But it also showed that most of these racial disparities are not driven by individual acts of prejudice committed by people behaving, either consciously or subconsciously, in a racist way. What the report’s analysis shows is that, for the most part, negative disparities arise for reasons not associated with personal prejudice. That is why so many disparities stubbornly persist even in this progressive age when there has never been such an acute awareness of racism and so much action and policy against it. All of this underscores the importance of moving beyond gestures and soundbites, to look in depth at the evidence and to challenge many of the deeply held assumptions about race and ethnicity that exist within our society.

The response we have published today, entitled “Inclusive Britain”, presents a clear strategy to tackle entrenched disparities, promote unity and build a more meritocratic, cohesive society—a society in which everyone, irrespective of their ethnicity or cultural background, can go as far in life as their ambition will take them. The response sets out over 70 actions to level up the country and to close the yawning gaps between different groups in education, employment, health and criminal justice. In many of these areas, we have gone much further than the commission envisaged to ensure that our action plan is as ambitious as it possibly can be.

The UK is a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, multicultural success story and we believe that many of our greatest strengths derive from the diversity of our population.

One only has to look at our brilliant NHS—one of the largest and most diverse employers in Europe—to see the benefits of being an open, tolerant and welcoming country. However, it would be naïve to say that tolerance and inclusion are the universal experiences of everyone who lives here, so our action plan seeks to right these wrongs with three clear aims: building a stronger sense of trust and fairness in our institutions and confidence in British meritocracy; promoting equality of opportunity, encouraging aspiration and empowering individuals; and encouraging and instilling a sense of belonging to a multi-ethnic UK that celebrates its differences while embracing the values that unite us all.

One of the most basic, but also one of the best, ways to build trust is to ensure that every individual in our society knows that they will be treated fairly and will not be discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity. So we will continue to work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to challenge race discrimination through investigations and supporting individual cases. We will hold social media giants to account for the vile and racist abuse that is allowed to propagate on their platforms. Our groundbreaking Online Safety Bill will force those companies to comply with a tough new regulatory regime, and if they fail to take action then the Bill will allow us to issue hefty fines of up to £18 million. These fines could be even heavier for the big operators failing to take down racist posts and racist accounts. We will also tackle unfair pay through new guidance to employers on how to assess and address their ethnicity pay gaps.

To improve the way in which stop-and-search powers are used by the police we will strengthen scrutiny arrangements so that local communities are able to hold their police forces more effectively to account. We will strive towards the goal of ensuring that police officers and members of the judiciary better reflect the people and communities they serve.

To tackle persistent ethnic disparities in health outcomes, our new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities will even the playing field in access to good-quality care, with measures to be set out in a White Paper this spring. We will place particular emphasis on maternal health disparities, including identifying and driving change through our new maternity disparities taskforce. We will also tackle misleading information that can undermine trust in our public services and the institutions delivering them. This work includes encouraging more responsible and accurate reporting on race issues in the media.

The second strand in our action plan is to promote equality of opportunity, encourage aspiration and foster personal agency. Over the last decade we have made great strides in widening opportunity and giving more people from all backgrounds the chance to fulfil their true potential, but there is still more to do and we are fully committed to removing the barriers that are holding people back.

That starts from birth. We know that a strong start in life, and a stable family support system, can make all the difference. That is why we will invest £200 million in expanding the supporting families programme and £300 million in transforming start for life services and creating a network of family hubs so that children can grow up in a loving, stable and nurturing environment that fosters creativity and learning. This funding also means that families in desperate circumstances will

receive the dedicated support they need to turn their lives around, find well-paid jobs and ensure that they and their loved ones can live happy and healthy lives. Indeed, we have asked the Children's Commissioner to ensure that such services put the needs of children at the heart of everything they do. We also want to see more ethnic minority children adopted by loving parents who can give them everything they need in life to grow and flourish.

Members across this House know that access to high-quality education from an early age will set a child up for success later in life. While some ethnic minority children outperform their white British peers, that is not the case for every ethnic group, so we will look to level up pupil attainment by understanding what works best to drive up standards and bridge the attainment gaps for good.

We are providing the biggest uplift to school funding in a decade—£14 billion over three years—and supporting children to catch up on what they missed during the pandemic, and we will drive up the quality of education outside mainstream schools. Our forthcoming schools White Paper will focus on improving literacy and numeracy standards for the most disadvantaged pupils. We will also continue to invest in what works for pupils, improve access to apprenticeships and demand better transparency from our higher education providers so that all prospective students know there is a wealth of options open to them.

While promoting and celebrating diversity is hugely important, it is ultimately meaningless if people do not feel a sense of belonging or inclusion. That is why the third strand of our action plan is to instil a sense of belonging in those who feel that they are treated differently, left out or left behind because of their colour, class or creed. No child should grow up feeling alienated from the society in which they live. They should know that this country is proud to call them citizens of our United Kingdom and that that applies to every individual who chooses this country as their home irrespective of whether they were born here. To foster that sense of belonging from an early age, we will work with a panel of experts, historians and school leaders to develop a model history curriculum to help pupils understand the intertwined nature of British and global history and their own place within it.

When those children grow up and enter the workplace, we want to ensure that they do not experience some of the biases and unfairness that they do today. To that end, we are appointing a new “inclusion at work” panel to help employers drive fairness across their organisations. The panel will develop a wide range of new and effective resources that employers can use so that they move beyond unverified, low-quality training materials and create a more meritocratic place to work. That is complemented by a new “inclusion confident” scheme to provide employers with the tools to overcome barriers to in-work progression and improve retention of their ethnic minority staff. Finally, in the fields of science, innovation and medicine, we will ensure that new technology, including cutting-edge medical equipment and artificial intelligence, is harnessed for good and not inadvertently biased against ethnic minorities.

It was right that we took the time to consider carefully the commission's findings. The breadth and scale of our action plan shows that we have put to good use the time

[Kemi Badenoch]

since the report was published, but we have not stood by and waited to publish our response before taking action. We began to implement the commission's recommendations even before the report was published, including moving the Social Mobility Commission into the Cabinet Office. We have also published new guidance on how to write about ethnicity while moving away from use of the term "BAME", and our recent levelling-up White Paper draws on the commission's findings.

So much work has been done, and I am grateful to all those who have helped us get here. I thank officials for their support in the race disparity unit—Summer Nisar in particular. I also thank Bryony Bonner in my private office and the special adviser Daniel El-Gamry, as well as Munira Mirza, formerly of No. 10.

"Inclusive Britain" sets out a clear and comprehensive action plan to tackle ethnic disparities, level up communities and build a stronger, fairer and more united country. I will return to the House in 12 months' time to report on the progress we have made in delivering those actions.

12.52 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. I will be honest with the House: I was beginning to think that today's statement would never come. The "Inclusive Britain" strategy is woefully late. The Sewell report was published a whole year ago and the Conservatives have been in government for more than a decade. We all know that significant race and ethnic disparities exist in Britain today—indeed, even the flawed Sewell report acknowledges that life chances and outcomes for black and ethnic minority people vary hugely—so why has it taken the Conservatives 12 years to decide to do anything about it?

Most frustratingly, the strategy unquestioningly accepts the Sewell report's controversial premise that there is no such thing as structural racism in our society. When the report was published last year, it was met with outrage for its failure to acknowledge that structural racism exists and, despite the spin on today's announcement, the Government continue with the same flawed analysis; one that Baroness Lawrence rightly stated is

"giving racists the green light."

If both the Sewell report and the strategy fail to identify the root causes of racial and ethnic disparities, how can either possibly hope to tackle them? That is why the strategy was always going to be hopelessly ineffective and short-sighted, and that is why it will fail to deliver for black, Asian and minority ethnic communities.

Let us briefly reflect on what that means. The strategy fails to deliver for black, Asian and minority ethnic NHS workers—frontline workers who faced a disproportionate risk to their health throughout the deadly covid-19 pandemic. It fails to deliver for black children living in Britain, more than half of whom are growing up in poverty. It also fails to deliver for Child Q, a 15-year-old black girl from Hackney who faced the most appalling treatment at the hands of the police, with racism very likely to have been an influencing factor. When the Government publish a flawed report and then churn out an inadequate strategy a whole year later, those are the very people they are failing.

When we look at the strategy line by line, sadly, matters go only from bad to worse. The strategy suggests that we can tackle race and ethnic disparities by just levelling up, but levelling up is a slogan still searching for a meaning. It is the empty soundbite for a Minister struggling to answer the question. It is not the solution to entrenched racial disparities. Where the strategy does put forward proposals, they are either too weak or too slow. For example, it fails completely to implement mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting despite repeated calls from the CBI, the TUC and the Labour party to do just that. Does the Minister think that such measures are not urgently needed? It is absurd that her strategy places so much emphasis on early years support when the Government systematically decimated Sure Start, stripping away a lifeline for children and families. The strategy will not paper over the long-term harm that did.

Where the Conservatives dither, the Labour party acts decisively. The Labour Government in Wales have already introduced a bold race equality action plan to create a truly anti-racist Wales. The Leader of the Opposition commissioned Baroness Lawrence to produce a report addressing the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minority communities, with clear recommendations for the Government. The next Labour Government will introduce a landmark race equality Act to tackle racial inequality at its source.

The Conservative Government have had 12 years to act. Instead, they have failed to deliver and failed to acknowledge the genuine reasons for racial and ethnic disparities in Britain today. This country deserves so much better.

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. I have a lot of time for her personally, but the fact is that Labour Members cannot bring themselves to acknowledge that this is an ambitious strategy. It would not have mattered what we brought to the House today; they would have criticised it.

The report is not late: we started implementing actions immediately after the commission's findings came out. Labour Members know that. They know that the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities is set up and running, and they know about the work that we have been doing on maternal disparities. They even know about the changes we made in ethnicity reporting and guidance, because her predecessor wrote to me about that. We have started implementing many actions and are presenting how they weave into so many other strategies across Government, such as levelling up, the health inequalities strategy and the schools White Paper. We will not wait for the last thing to be ready so that we can put it into a nice package for the Labour party to criticise.

It is laughable to say that Labour is decisive in this area. It had the internal Forde inquiry into racism in its own party in 2019, and, three years later, it still has not reported. It is joke that Labour Members are telling us we are late when we have started implementing the actions.

I turn to the hon. Lady's specific comments on the report. It is not true that the commission's report denied the existence of structural racism.

Taiwo Owatemi: It did.

Kemi Badenoch: If it did, the hon. Lady would have been able to stand at the Dispatch Box and read out that section. In fact, the commission said that it did not find institutional racism in the areas that it examined.

A rhetorical trick is happening around this question. There is a difference between racism and institutional racism, which has a specific definition as defined by Macpherson. The commission said that there is racism and that it does persist. It has made recommendations on actions to tackle that in its report, and we have taken them up. It is quite wrong to conflate the two. We see crime in our country every day, yet we do not say that this is an institutionally criminal country. We look in the same way at accusations of racism, and it is important to distinguish where there is a pervasive institutional failing across the board that is unable to provide services to people of colour. So I am afraid I reject the misrepresentation Labour Members make about the commission. I also remind them about the personal targeted attacks and harassment the commissioners suffered because of that misrepresentation—a group of commissioners who were all, bar one, ethnic minorities. I am very committed to ensuring that ethnic minorities in public life get a fair say and have their voice. What is wrong is when people with different opinions are attacked and told they are not allowed to think in a certain way because there are rules about what black people or Asian people are allowed to say. We reject that.

The hon. Lady raised the case of Child Q, and I am very happy to speak about that. It is an appalling incident. I am glad to see that the Met has apologised and that the Independent Office for Police Conduct is looking at it. We have systems in place to ensure that when things go wrong we can right them. What we cannot do is stop any bad thing happening to anyone in the country at any time. That is a threshold that is impossible to meet. What we do know is that everybody is rightly appalled and outraged by what happened to Child Q. That is an example of a country that cares about ethnic minorities and about children in the system. We will continue to do everything we can to support them.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests relating to higher education. In accepting my congratulations on her robust counter to the small minds who have criticised the Sewell report—small minds that cannot tell the difference between disadvantage, disparity and discrimination—will the Minister ensure that every Government Department effects what she has said today and what the report proposes? Education is at particular risk, from Brighton and Hove Council's destructive and pernicious racial training for primary school teachers, which still has not been dealt with despite a cursory inspection from the Department for Education, to Nottingham University—my old university, by the way—which, appallingly, withdrew Tony Sewell's honorary degree, while giving them to Chinese holocaust deniers. Will she issue guidance to each Government Department to stop the nonsense about critical race theory and white privilege?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend is right to make the point about distinctions in language. Discrimination, disparity and disadvantage all mean different things. They can correlate and they can be related. Now that we have an action plan and something

written, I can assure him that we will be propagating it across Government and not just across but beyond Whitehall.

My right hon. Friend is right to raise the case of Brighton and Hove. In fact, I read in a paper today about a black mother who complained that the anti-discrimination training is actually discriminatory. He is right to raise the case of Tony Sewell, who, unbelievably, had an honorary degree withdrawn because he did not believe that this is a racist country. That is an example of the sort of silencing of ethnic minorities that we are seeing across the board. It is terrible, and I have to say I was disappointed to see the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) congratulate Nottingham University on cancel culture. She will find that those sorts of actions prevent ethnic minorities from participating in public life.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advanced sight of her statement. Only by acknowledging and understanding institutional inequalities will we be able to effectively tackle them in all aspects of life. That is certainly true in the world of work, where BAME people were already in a precarious position in the labour market before the pandemic, and is linked to the disproportionate economic impact on those groups of the cost of living crisis.

I have two quick questions. The TUC recently warned that insecure work is tightening the grip of structural racism in the labour market, with BAME workers overrepresented on zero-hour contracts. Will the Minister urge the Government to introduce the long-awaited employment Bill to tackle zero-hour contracts?

Unlike with gender pay gaps, there is currently no legal requirement for UK businesses to disclose their ethnicity pay data. Will the UK Government follow the recent recommendations of the Women and Equalities Committee and introduce mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting by April 2023, including urging employers to publish a supporting action plan?

Kemi Badenoch: We have made an action on ethnicity pay gap reporting in the report, and we will be issuing guidance to help businesses and organisations to deliver it. What we are not going to do is mandate ethnicity pay gap reporting. It is very different from gender pay gap reporting, which is binary—male and female. Men and women are represented equally across the country. Ethnicity pay gap reporting covers multiple categories that are not necessarily applicable in each area, so mandating it in a particular way could actually end up distorting and skewing the figures. What we are going to do is support organisations that want to understand what is going on in their businesses and help to progress pay and opportunity for ethnic minorities.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the report because it will ensure that everyone, from whatever background, can climb the important ladder of opportunity. The vice-chancellor of Nottingham University should hang his head in shame for the way Tony Sewell has been treated. I genuinely find it incomprehensible that such a thing could happen, with an honorary degree being withdrawn.

My hon. Friend will know that the Education Committee produced a report into our biggest ethnic group, disadvantaged white working-class children, who underperform at every

[Robert Halfon]

stage of the education system compared with almost every other ethnic group. They are at the bottom except for Gypsy/Roma children in terms of going on to higher education. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the report also looks at our Select Committee's recommendations and makes sure that white working-class people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disadvantaged no longer?

Kemi Badenoch: My right hon. Friend is right. I have seen his Select Committee's report, and those are things we will be working on. He is right to point out the disadvantage that children from white working-class communities face. The commission found that the issues that affect black Caribbean, black African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian children when it comes to deprivation and disadvantage also affect white working-class communities, which is why we know that race cannot be the factor that explains many of those disparities. What I can tell him is that the solutions we have put in place will be solutions for all children. That is one of the principles we have for this report: we are not segregating or targeting specific solutions for specific communities; we are going to be looking after everybody.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that recommendation 4 of the report is that the Government wish to:

“Bridge divides and create partnerships between the police and communities”.

Will the Minister explain how she thinks strip-searching black schoolgirls helps to bridge the divide between the police and communities? Is she aware that this is not an isolated incident? The Metropolitan police's own figures show that in 2020-21, 25 young people under 18 were strip-searched. Most were black or from other ethnic minorities: 60% were black and the rest were some kind of minority ethnic. Only two of the 25 children who were strip-searched were white.

Is the Minister aware of how degrading this strip-search was? It was not just that this schoolgirl was stripped naked. They made her part the cheeks of her bottom and cough. She was on her period. I could give more detail, but I do not want to distress people in this House. It was utterly degrading. She is still traumatised. I must stress that they found no drugs and she has never been accused of taking drugs. How can the Minister sit there and tell this House that that had nothing to do with that young girl's race, and that the figures I quoted are not striking? Will she assure this House and the wider community that the Government will take notice of whatever comes out of the report into that case, and make sure that the Metropolitan police and schoolteachers will not collude in the mistreatment of young schoolgirls again?

Kemi Badenoch: The right hon. Lady is very, very correct to raise the issue of strip-searching. The Home Secretary, I believe, wrote to her shadow and said that the incident is deeply concerning. Strip-searching is one of the most intrusive powers available to the police, because it allows officers to go well beyond a person's outer clothing. There are safeguards and codes of practice that must be followed when the power is used, so what has gone wrong in this specific instance? That is being investigated. I do not have the full details and I am not

able to provide those sorts of answers until an inquiry is finished. What I can tell her is that those figures are startling. No one has said that racism does not exist. No one has said that there are no problems in the system, but what we do ask is that we investigate every single incident and that where we see a trend, we try to understand what is going on. The action plan provides even more things we can do to support communities to hold the local police to account.

The other thing that we stress is that when these things happen we must not forget that every day the police save the lives of young people across the country. They save the lives of young black children, brown children and Asian children—children from all communities. When incidents such as this happen, we must not look at them as representative of every single thing that the police do, even though we will do all that we can to tackle them and reduce the number of times they occur.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Aylesbury is a diverse community and it is all the better for it. Does my hon. Friend agree that today the Government have ushered in a new way to think about race and, more importantly, a new way to act about race, shifting from ideology to evidence and from destructive discourse to constructive action? In other words, will she reassure us all that today marks a new approach that will genuinely improve people's lives whatever their race or religion?

Kemi Badenoch: I am very happy to reassure my hon. Friend. This is a new way of thinking about things. We are not looking at issues in isolation. We had many suggestions from people across the country about what we should do. The Government have listened. We do not agree with all the suggestions, but we think that to have a genuinely ambitious and transformative strategy on race we need to ensure that we look at the evidence. We do not accept the premise that all disparities are due to discrimination, so that is one principle that actions must have. We also want to make sure that we do not damage institutions even when we find problems, because the institutions themselves will be part of the solution. Finally, as I said in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), we also want to make sure that we target solutions across the board and do not segregate communities. We were sent many actions that did not meet those three tests, which we believe will help to frame the way that we look at race in this country and improve it for a generation.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab): Unfortunately, I find what the Minister has said to be smoke and mirrors. We started with a report that began on the premise that there is no evidence of institutional racism when those who contributed to the report and those who it is meant to support have widely rejected that idea as completely false. Why would the Minister not take the question back to the drawing board? What on earth is moral history meant to be when people have called for the teaching of black history? How can the Government claim that there is no evidence of institutional racism given the case of Child Q and everything we have heard about police institutions, educational institutions and health institutions? Claiming that those institutions do not fail people will not help us to start from a place where we can fix things. Does the Minister understand why black, Asian and ethnic minority people across the country will not be encouraged by what she has said

today? It simply looks like more smoke and mirrors, more warm words and nothing that will solve the racism we face daily.

Kemi Badenoch: I completely disagree with the hon. Lady. In fact, I know that black, Asian and other ethnic minority communities across the country will be very pleased with the plan because I have gone out and spoken to them. I repeat what I said to the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi), who spoke from the Labour Front Bench: I know that there is nothing that we could say from the Conservative Benches that would please Labour Members, because they believe that they own this topic. They are not in government; we are. The fact is that we have been carrying out actions over the past 12 years. We even had one of the shadow Front Benchers, the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), carry out a review.

We have taken actions on those reviews, yet even after we carry out those actions Labour Members stand up and deny that anything is happening. The truth is that they are not interested in an action plan. They want a debate about institutional racism. I will not spend time as a Government Minister having an academic argument and debating semantics and language. We will deliver the actions in this plan, and I am very proud to be the Minister responsible.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for setting out the Government's comprehensive plan to tackle negative disparities wherever they exist, and especially on the model history curriculum, which will be very important. I am proud of our heritage. Of course there is good and bad, but we are proud of where we come from and what way we are going. Will she confirm that this Government remain fully committed to a fairer Britain for all and to taking necessary actions for everyone who is left behind by society, regardless of gender, age, sexuality or ethnic background? We are all one country and one great nation.

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, and my hon. Friend will find that that is what the model history curriculum will deliver.

I forgot to mention to the hon. Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy) when she talked about black history that black is a category that cuts across so many significant ethnic groups that there is no way that one history module could go into any depth. We need a model history curriculum that explains the story of Britain and all our places within it. We cannot have segregated history curriculums for people of different skin colour. I am completely against that and I do not support it.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): All of us want to tackle racism in all its forms in this country. One thing that ethnic minorities felt let down by at the height of the covid pandemic was what was seen by many as the Government's disregard for the disproportionate impact that covid had on many ethnic communities. Will the Minister assure us that the action plan will address that issue and that it will be included in the covid inquiry?

Kemi Badenoch: I am really surprised that the hon. Lady would say that. We did an 18-month piece of work on covid disparities and covid's disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, and I came to this House multiple

times and gave updates and reports, so it is not true to say that the Government did not take that seriously. I am very confident that the findings will be part of the covid inquiry; they were even among the evidence that the commission used, which we built on when we were writing the action plan. If she wants to write to me, I am sure that we can get a report to her to show her its findings.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) stated that the report of the independent commission was received with outrage because it failed to find structural racism. Surely we want Government strategy to be based on evidence, not ideology. Does my hon. Friend agree that a narrative that all minority discrimination is caused by majority discrimination or privilege is by definition divisive, diverts attention away from the real causes of discrimination as found by the independent commission and is incompatible with the goal of a sense of belonging?

Kemi Badenoch: I completely agree with that. We cannot have young ethnic minority children growing up being told that everyone in that society is against them. It means that they give up, lose aspiration and decide not to take up opportunities that they should, because the rhetoric is so demoralising.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): A year ago, when the independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published its report, within hours it was unravelling and it has been discredited. The strategy published today states that the Race Disparity Unit will begin consulting on the types of data it will collate with a view to reducing the levels of evidence and data that it will collate. Everybody across the House knows how important data and evidence are, so can the Minister say why the RDU is consulting on that? When will the consultation begin, and will it be a public consultation? Why on earth would it seek to reduce the level of race and ethnicity data right now?

Kemi Badenoch: I am not quite sure why the hon. Lady thinks that we are trying to reduce the amount of race and ethnicity data. We are improving and increasing the amount of data. Perhaps she could write and explain a little further; I am not sure that she has quite got what the RDU will be doing. More broadly, she mentioned that the report began to unravel, but I remember seeing invitations to events at which she was supposed to be participating and was planning to criticise the report—well before it was published and anything had been seen. She and I know that what she said is not quite what happened.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I know that my hon. Friend is 100% committed to implementing the commission's recommendations. Does she agree with me that it is our Conservative belief that background should not determine destiny and promoting fairness is the key to truly delivering real social mobility? As we level up in places such as Darlington, can she comment on how "Inclusive Britain" is key to our ambitious levelling-up plans?

Kemi Badenoch: Yes, that is absolutely right. When constructing the actions in the report, our three pillars were building trust and fairness—fairness was right at the heart—creating agency and opportunity, and inclusion.

[*Kemi Badenoch*]

Those actions will benefit everyone across the country, including people in Darlington. We are focusing more on inclusion than on diversity, because we believe that inclusion brings in more factors, such as socioeconomic factors, that tend to be forgotten. Given everything that my hon. Friend has said in the House about Darlington, I think he will find his constituents welcome that approach.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Soon after the pandemic began, the Prime Minister said:

“people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here should have support of one kind or another”.

The no recourse to public funds condition meant that many got no support at all. The Select Committee on Work and Pensions has heard harrowing testimony of the hardship that resulted. Will the action plan that the Minister has announced review no recourse to public funds, which has driven ethnic disparity?

Kemi Badenoch: No, the action plan will not be looking at that. No recourse to public funds was outside the terms of reference for the commission, and the action plan is very much based within those terms of reference.

I challenge what the right hon. Gentleman says about no recourse to public funds, because it is important that we do not conflate migration and ethnicity. No recourse to public funds was based on nationality, and during the pandemic I distinctly remember, even in the Treasury, that we took many policy decisions to overcome any barriers that people might have had. I cannot speak specifically about what the Work and Pensions Committee has looked at, but I am sure officials from that Department will take those points away. If more can be done within that policy, I am sure that we will look at that, but that would fall outside my terms of reference for the Equality Hub.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): The highly discredited Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities report stated that Britain “no longer” had a system that was “deliberately rigged” against black people, but as the first black MP for Liverpool, I would beg to differ. I have little faith that the “Inclusive Britain” report with its 70 practical actions will change how police powers work. The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill will give more power to the police to stop and search, and it will not stop them from strip-searching young girls. Can the Minister explain in detail how local scrutiny will prevent that from happening?

Kemi Badenoch: I will continue to rebut the assertion that the report is widely discredited; it was discredited only in certain quarters, in the same way that our environmental policy will never meet the test for the likes of Insulate Britain and Extinction Rebellion. The fact is that we are doing something that will be great for the vast majority of people in this country. The report will change the way we look at race in this country. We are in government and we are taking these ambitions forward.

On her question on local scrutiny, the commission looked at the way that policing was taking place in communities. It accepted that there was a “lack of trust”—a trust deficit; I think the hon. Lady would

agree with that. The commission put forward a recommendation that we will be trialling and piloting. I cannot give specific details of how that will happen, because I am not a Home Office Minister, and the actions of the police are independent and we cannot get involved in their operational decisions. If the hon. Lady has suggestions on how that can be improved or tackled, I am very willing to hear them.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am disappointed that there is not a Home Office Minister on the Treasury Bench. The Select Committee on Home Affairs report, “The Macpherson Report: twenty-one years on”, was published last summer and we have been waiting for a substantive reply to our recommendations ever since; the Government said that they wanted to deal with their response to the commission. Now that the Minister has made this statement, can she confirm that the Government will respond to our call, first for urgent action on racial disparities in law enforcement? She referred to stop and search, but it is not enough to do something just about scrutiny, as she announced in her statement. Secondly, will the Government tackle the worrying decline in confidence in the police among some ethnic minority communities? Thirdly, will they deal with the need for anti-racism training in the police, especially in the light of the horrific case of child Q, where race played a part in her treatment?

Kemi Badenoch: The right hon. Lady is right that there are actions on stop and search in criminal justice, but we are doing many different things, including improving skills training for police officers. She will find that the actions in the report will address the issues she raises. I have already made comments on the case of Child Q, which I will not repeat. I am sure Home Office Ministers will be able to respond to the questions she has specifically for them.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): In the light of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, I put on record my dismay and sorrow that Child Q experienced being stripped of her clothes and searched at her school by police officers. I thank the Minister for mentioning Child Q, but is she aware that she was on her menstrual cycle, which made the experience even more undignified? This morning I was shocked to hear that she was taken out of an exam by teachers and, following her ordeal, it was considered appropriate by all professionals concerned for her to return to her exam, with no consideration for her emotional wellbeing. That is one of the cruellest and most despicable things I have ever heard.

Teachers and officers failed to keep this child safe and, speaking as a former child protection social worker, I think that they have acted in the most abusive manner. They are not fit to work with children and they bring shame on their profession. This child now suffers from self-harm and is having therapy. I have fond memories of my secondary school and my teachers, but her bitter memories will remain with her for life. Will the Minister fully investigate what role the colour of Child Q’s skin played in how degradingly she was treated?

Kemi Badenoch: We are all appalled at the details that we are hearing about Child Q. As I said before, I cannot comment until a full inquiry has come out, but it is important to understand what led to the failures. They

are very significant failures, if what we are hearing and all the details that are coming out are true. We have systems in place to look again, learn lessons and make sure that they are not repeated. I am sure that everyone in Government will be seeing what we can do to ensure that happens.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I have listened with great interest right from the start of the statement and to all of the questions, and two things strike me. Racism is totally abhorrent and I can completely understand why Members, especially Opposition Members, are absolutely fuming that it is not completely exterminated from our society, but I say as a scientist that we have to fix that problem via evidence and ensure that we are helping the people whom we seek to help. Does my hon. Friend accept that the evidence in the report and delivering on it is the most important thing to stamp out the evil of racism in this society?

Kemi Badenoch: I can assure my hon. Friend that that is the case. The evidence and looking underneath it at the details of what is happening is important; otherwise, how can we tell when looking at something negative that has happened to someone from an ethnic minority whether that is racism or not? In many cases, when the commission examined a case where racial discrimination was given as a reason, it found that that did not explain the disparity. One example is the difference between black African and black Caribbean students when it came to exclusion. There is a statistic that black children are more likely to be excluded from school than white children, but looking at the data, black African children, who are far more in number than black Caribbean children, are far less likely to be excluded than white children, even within the same communities, compared to black Caribbean children. They have the same skin colour. Racism does not explain that disparity. That is an example of why people need to look at the evidence and not immediately jump to a discrimination conclusion.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I am astonished that the Minister does not think that there is evidence of racial disparity in this country. She made the point that a strong early start makes all the difference. When the Government smashed up Sure Start, that made a demonstrable difference to black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, and, yes, to the deprived white communities in Britain. She is talking about putting £500 million back. Can she go back to the Treasury and say that that is totally inadequate if we are going to make a real difference? Can she go and tell the Treasury that if we want to make a difference, real money can do that?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Gentleman is putting words into my mouth that I did not say and that the commission did not say. I have already disputed that. It is not true to say that we have not found any evidence for racism or racial disparity in this country; that is not the case.

Regarding the hon. Gentleman's comment about Sure Start, I remind him that when we came into government in 2010, the country's finances were in a dire state. His party ran down the finances of this country, and we have spent the past 10 years fixing them, which is why we are able to put more money back in the system. He is citing one particular statistic on funding. He does not,

for example, mention the £14 billion increase, which is unheard of and, frankly, unprecedented in this country. We are doing what works, not just complaining because we do not want to see Conservatives do well. We are going to do well for this country, and I am very proud of what this action plan puts forward.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I want to take the Minister back to her statement, where she outlined that one of the most basic but also best ways to build trust is to ensure that every individual in our society knows that they will be treated fairly and not be discriminated against on the basis of their ethnicity.

I hope that the Minister will recognise that a number of black and minority ethnic children do not feel that that is the case. They do not feel that that is the case when they continue to be stopped and searched; when they hear the story of what happened to Child Q; or when they watch their community centres being raided. The Minister has mentioned that she has been out speaking to communities. I invite her to Lambeth to speak to a group of young people from my constituency, so that they can share with her their experiences of what they face day in, day out.

I commend the police in Lambeth, who are doing great work with those communities, but the fact is that there is still mistrust. The Minister outlined that the powers for scrutiny of the police will not come into effect until summer 2023 and that police training in de-escalation and conflict will not happen until autumn 2024. Please Minister, why cannot those be brought forward?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right that we are concerned about the trust deficit and people feeling that they do not belong or are not included in this country. We have listened, and we believe that this is what is going to work.

I understand very much the story the hon. Lady is telling me about people believing that, because they are being stopped and searched and being raided—she points to the case of Child Q—they do not feel trust in the system. What we need to show is that when these actions happen, they are done fairly and that when they are not done fairly, they are investigated. A country that did not care about racism would not be tackling these issues at all; we would not be looking at them. What we want those communities to see is that we do care. That does not mean that those things will never, ever happen, but that when they do happen the process is fair.

I am very happy to come and explain the policy to the young people in Lambeth; as the hon. Lady knows, I used to live in Brixton, near her, so I know the community very well. I am very happy to take up any opportunity I have, as a black woman in the Government, to explain to people all we are doing and how that is going to work for them.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am really astonished that there is so little reference to policing in the Minister's statement today. It was the actions of police in the US that sparked the protests here and led to the commissioning of the Sewell report. Trust and confidence in policing are absolutely fundamental to communities feeling safe and secure, and that is foundational for addressing disadvantage and racial disparity in every other area of life. Yet my constituents

[Helen Hayes]

see racism and racial disparity in the actions of police, whether in the use of stop and search, deaths in custody or—this week—in the grotesque case of Child Q, which is all the more appalling because it is not the only example.

What action is the Minister taking in the action plan to address the transformation in the culture of our policing, which is so desperately needed to address racial disparity?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady said that the report was set up because of what happened in the US; I really have to stress to the House that we are not the United States and we cannot assume that the problems there are exactly the same as the ones here. That is why the commission investigated what was happening in the United Kingdom and made recommendations based on what is happening in the United Kingdom. It is really important that we understand the difference; in so many things that I see and read, people are conflating what is happening in other countries with what is happening here. Our police are not routinely armed, which makes a huge difference when it comes to our statistics. I have seen four statistics on deaths in custody that are based on US stats. There is a lot in the report that will help improve policing, but it is based on evidence from this country, not just on what is happening on social media and Twitter.

The fact is that the mothers of children who die as a result of knife and gun crime do not dislike stop and search. They want to see more of it—they want communities to be policed properly. That is what we are going to be doing. If the hon. Lady looks at the worst statistic in the report—that black children are 24 times more likely to die of a homicide than white children; this is not race crime—she will find that we need stop and search in communities, to help stop those types of crime.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The Sewell report states that when we include more minority ethnic history in our curriculum, children from those backgrounds identify themselves as part of British history. I have been proud to work with footballer Troy Deeney, who the Minister will know is the driving force behind taking the knee in the premier league, on his new campaign, #HistoryUntold, which would mandate—not model—a history curriculum that reflects our society. In Wales, the Lib Dem Education Minister in the last Government did that. We are asking for this to be the case in England. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Education? Would she like to back Troy's campaign today?

Kemi Badenoch: I do not know the details of Troy's campaign but I can say that the model history curriculum has been drawn up in conjunction with the Department for Education. We think it is the right way to teach history in a super-diverse country such as ours. That is why we are moving beyond the very broad categories such as BAME. We have a very complex society and a model history curriculum will allow us to tailor history depending on the school and community, and ensure that people feel included in the history of the United Kingdom.

Points of Order

1.35 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Earlier this morning, a Minister was asked to come to the House to answer an urgent question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) about the consolidation and closure of Department for Work and Pensions offices.

I stood to ask the Minister a question because we had seen a published list of closures and consolidations. Nowhere on that list was West Dunbartonshire mentioned. I was thankful for that because such office closures would be a dreadful imposition on my community and those who work for the Department in my constituency. Nevertheless, a publication has now come out via *The Mirror*, which highlights Glasgow, Radnor House, Clydebank. With all due respect to the Minister and the Department for Work and Pensions, Clydebank has never been, is not, and will never be—with all due respect to that great city—part of Glasgow.

I want the Minister to come here and tell me why the Department has failed to inform me, as a Member whose constituency this is impacting. Why have I not received an email that we were all told we would receive at 1 o'clock? May I have clarity from you, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how I go about that? Alternatively, will the Minister come and give an explanation?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. As he will know, it is incumbent on Members, including Ministers, to correct the record if they provide incorrect information to the House. It is also important that, if Ministers are informing Members and others about events in constituencies, they inform everybody who is relevant. I am confident that the hon. Gentleman's point will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench, who will feed back what he has said. If a correction is required, or further information should be sent to the hon. Gentleman, I am confident that that will be forthcoming.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Members representing port constituencies, not least in northern England, will be shocked at the news being reported about DP World, which owns P&O Ferries, suspending services this morning, sacking 800 P&O workers immediately by pre-recorded video message, and replacing them with agency staff.

I understand from the RMT union that those agency staff, mainly from overseas, are in buses on the quayside, while members of a security firm, hired by DP World and wearing balaclavas, are taking British crew off these ships. This is shameful and goes against all norms of fair and reasonable behaviour. It is clear that foreign ratings will be employed on terms less favourable than those applying to current UK seafarers. This is about a race to the bottom on terms and conditions, reminiscent of the worst Thatcherite policies.

Of course, the UK seafarers being removed from those ships battled through the pandemic to keep P&O afloat, and the company received taxpayers' support. This action will also have a major economic impact on places such as the Humber. Further to the comments of

Mr Speaker in Transport questions earlier, will you, Madam Deputy Speaker, please indicate whether the Secretary of State for Transport, who at this very moment is tweeting his concern about what is going on with P&O, will come to the House this afternoon to make an emergency statement about the actions of P&O?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order, and I completely understand the deep concern that she has expressed. We have had an indication that there will be a statement at 5 pm on this extremely important issue because the Secretary of State wishes to inform the House about the latest position, and I am sure she will be here then. I hope that that is helpful.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you have had any notice from the Department for Education—and, if you have not, what Members could do about it—regarding a statement on the treatment of Tony Sewell. He was commissioned by the Government to produce a report, which he dutifully did, only to be—I put it in these terms without exaggeration—persecuted by his old university, Nottingham. As several Members have said today, it is vital for the Government to make their position clear on behaviour of that kind on the part of a public body such as the University of Nottingham.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order, but we have just heard a statement on this issue, and I rather believe that he raised some of these matters then. However, I am sure that the Ministers on the Treasury Bench have heard his comments, and if there are further statements forthcoming—although, as I have said, we have just heard a statement on this issue—I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman, who is a long-standing Member of the House, knows that there are various ways in which he can raise issues should he wish to do so. If he does not have that information to hand, the Table Office will no doubt be pleased to advise him on the different points that can be made.

Education Catch-Up Programme

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Robert Halfon will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of his statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement, and call Robert Halfon to respond to them in turn. May I emphasise, as I did last week, that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not to the relevant Minister? Interventions should be questions, and should be brief; they should not be long statements. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

I call the Chair of the Education Committee, Robert Halfon.

1.42 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank you and the Backbench Business Committee for giving me a chance to make a statement on the Committee's new report, entitled "Is the Catch-up Programme fit for purpose?" I also thank the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). It seems a bit like groundhog day, because we have spent the last few weeks debating this subject, and we did so in the Committee just last Tuesday. I want to give a special mention to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson), who is an incredibly hard-working member of the Committee, and to thank her for being here today.

Let me begin by paying tribute to all the teachers and support staff, not just in my constituency but around the country, who have done everything possible to keep children learning, and to the children and young people themselves, who have had to deal with extremely difficult circumstances. I only wish that the chair of the covid inquiry had not forgotten to mention the word "children" in the draft terms of reference; I hope that that will change.

To date, the Government have spent almost £5 billion on the catch-up programme, which I warmly welcome, but, as our report points out, more targeted efforts are needed to help our children to recover from the pandemic. The impacts of school closures were devastating for most of them. Many now face an epidemic of educational inequality, a widening attainment gap, worsening mental health, an increase in their safeguarding risks, and an adverse effect on their lifetime chances. One study found that children locked down at home spent an average of two and a half hours each day doing school work, but one fifth of pupils did no learning at home, or less than one hour each day.

Our report sets out four key findings. First, it notes that disadvantaged pupils have been the worst hit. The Education Policy Institute told us that disadvantaged pupils could be

"five, six, seven—in the worst case scenarios—eight months behind" their most affluent peers. There are regional inequalities too. By the second half of the autumn term in 2020, the average learning loss in maths for primary schools was 5.3 months in Yorkshire and the Humber, compared with just 0.5 months in the south-west.

[Robert Halfon]

By March 2021, the national tutoring programme, the Department's flagship programme, had reached 100% of its target in the south-west, but just 58% in the north-east, 59% in the north-west, and 60% in my region of the east. These regional disparities should not be occurring.

Secondly, rates of persistent absence remain high, but without up-to-date data from the Department we do not know how many "ghost children" continue to experience severe levels of absence. In December, the Department announced that rates of persistent absence had risen to 16.3% in secondary schools in the autumn of 2020. That equates to almost 502,000 of the 3 million secondary-age pupils. I strongly support the work of the Children's Commissioner in this regard. Her new report suggests that 124,000 children were severely absent last year. However, we do not yet have the Department's official absence figures even for the summer term of 2021. Without that data, we risk creating an Oliver Twist generation of children, lost to the system forever.

Thirdly, Randstad and the national tutoring programme are not delivering for the most disadvantaged pupils. Our inquiry found that the NTP had reached just 15% of its overall target. Some headteachers described the "bureaucratic nightmare" of navigating Randstad's tuition hub, and said that there was a "lack of communication" with schools about the programme. Concerningly, Randstad has also reportedly removed the requirement to reach 65% of children eligible for the pupil premium from its tutoring contracts with providers.

On Friday, the Secretary of State announced that the Department had agreed to publish mid-term data on the performance of the NTP, and that the £65 million originally allocated to the tutor and academic mentor NTP pillars would now go directly to the school-led tutoring arm. We strongly support that move, which we called for in our recommendations. I believe that all the money should have gone to schools, because they would have known how best to spend it, and could have been judged on the outcome.

Figures published by Randstad, mentioned by the Department, suggest that more than 1 million young people have now started tutoring courses, but there are questions to be asked about those figures. For instance, 311,000 of these new starts were made in the previous academic year, when the previous contractor, EEF, was leading the roll-out of the NTP. In total, only 720,000 new starts have been made this academic year, according to the statistics. Moreover, Randstad has revealed that about one in six pupils are enrolled on multiple courses, and are therefore double-counted. Of course I am pleased that more young people are accessing the help and support that they need to catch up on their lost learning, but much greater effort is required to target that support at those who need it the most. The Government must ensure that Randstad shapes up. They have made some changes, but if things do not improve dramatically they must cancel the Randstad contract.

Finally, the Department needs to do more to support young people's mental health. Our Committee heard that the number of children referred for mental health support in 2020 represented an increase of nearly 60% in comparison with 2018. The impact of social media was especially concerning. Research shows that, just last

year, 16.7% of 11 to 16-year-olds using social media agreed that it had had a negative impact on their wellbeing. One in three girls said that they were unhappy with their personal appearance by the age of 14, and 78% of Barnardo's practitioners reported that children aged 11 to 15 had accessed unsuitable or harmful content through social media. These are worrying trends. Our report asks an important question: how can we ensure that the catch-up programme delivers for the most disadvantaged?

First, we need more reliable and up-to-date data to establish the full effect of the pandemic on children and young people. This data must include regional breakdowns, and must pay due regard to disadvantage and special educational needs. Greater statistical transparency is also needed on the performance of Randstad and the NTP.

Secondly, we need to end the spaghetti junction, as we call it, of catch-up funding. It is a fragmented catch-up programme with complex and bureaucratic funding applications that schools have to navigate. Teachers know their pupils best, and our report recommends that the funding schemes are simplified and merged into one pot for schools to access and spend where the recovery need is greatest. Any future initiative should direct funding to schools using existing mechanisms for disadvantage, such as pupil premium eligibility. Then, schools should be held accountable for how they spend the funds on improvements for the children.

Thirdly, the Department should launch a pilot scheme in the country's most disadvantaged areas to explore the benefits that a longer school day—in terms of extracurricular activity such as sport, music and drama—could bring to pupils' educational attainment and mental health recovery. The Minister will know that there is a wealth of statistics to show that such extra activities improve both the mental health of children and their educational attainment. This is topical, given that we have heard mention of the online harms Bill. The Government should introduce a social media levy on the profits of social media companies. That could be distributed to schools to support better online harm and mental health resilience training. For example, from a 2% levy, the Government could raise £100 million, which could be spent on resilience for children. It would certainly concentrate the minds of the social media companies.

Finally, the Department for Education should take really urgent steps to address the issue of persistent and severe absence by working with schools and local authorities proactively and appointing attendance practitioners to work with parents, local authorities and schools to return these children safely and quickly into school. There are 13,000 children missing in year 11, a crucial exam year. The most disadvantaged schools have the equivalent of a whole classroom missing. Dramatic action must be taken by the Department to get these so-called ghost children back into school and learning again.

Education catch-up must be for the long term. If the Department is to make the case to the Treasury that the programme is making a difference and if it is to get more funding for the future, it has to prove that the programme is providing value for money for the taxpayer with the existing funds and also, most importantly, that the catch-up programme is really working for the most disadvantaged pupils. Education should be the cornerstone

for levelling up, and every avenue should be taken to extend the ladder of opportunity to every child. Charles Dickens wrote of

“so many things forgotten, and so many more which might have been repaired”.

If we are to ensure the catch-up is fit for purpose and to the benefit of every child, we must act to fix it now.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for his statement. We have often worked on issues in our constituencies that share similarities. I agree with him about the spaghetti junction of the funding. How does he think we can support the Government in unravelling this spaghetti junction and recognising, as he said, that schools are the only people to be able to lead this recovery, with the proper governance structures? Can we do more to help?

Robert Halfon: I was pleased to visit the hon. Lady's constituency when I was the Skills Minister and to go to her wonderful FE college. As I said earlier, and as we say in our report, the Government say that they believe in school autonomy, so why not ensure that the funds go direct to the schools so that they can spend them on the catch-up programme as they see fit? The Government need to look at long-term reform of the pupil premium to ensure that it reflects the long-term disadvantaged, but why not give it to the schools and then look at the metrics to see how the children are improving in terms of the catch-up? When they need to intervene and offer support, they can do so. At the moment, there are different funding streams and it is incredibly difficult and bureaucratic for the schools to deal with these funds. It just makes life complicated. As we know, the Randstad part of these strands is not working properly, despite significant amounts of taxpayers' money being put into it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): It is a real privilege to serve under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) on the Education Committee. As we know, Kevan Collins recommended £15 billion to meet the needs of catch-up, and the £5 billion that is available falls far short of that. The fact is that the national tutoring programme is failing to meet pupils' needs at the moment. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the contract needs to be terminated as soon as possible?

Robert Halfon: I am very close to saying yes, the contract should be terminated. We have said that Randstad should perhaps be given one last chance. The Government made some changes last Friday, but if they announced today that they were terminating the contract with Randstad, I would certainly not be upset. I suspect that most teachers and support staff would not be upset either. I have always worked for more funding for schools, and I absolutely get that there is a debate about more money, but my point is that, if the Department goes for more money when the £5 billion it has already been given is not working properly, not giving kids what they need and not giving the taxpayer value for money, how can the Department go to the Treasury and say that actually it should be £10 billion or £15 billion if the existing money is not being used to get it right?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister, Matt Western.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Chair and the Select Committee for putting together this report. This is clearly not my specialist subject, as the right hon. Gentleman knows from last week, but it is clearly not Randstad's either. The entire programme is, as the tutoring providers have said, shambolic and at risk of catastrophic failure. Having sat on Select Committees, I appreciate how words are carefully chosen and I see that the report states on page 30:

“It is not clear that the National Tutoring Programme will deliver for the pupils that need it most.”

Sometimes words get argued over. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could elaborate on that. As I understand it, the requirement that 65% of places should be allocated to children on the pupil premium was dropped. Could he explain a bit more on that?

Robert Halfon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. On the first point, it is not just our report saying this; the Department for Education itself said in its December report that there were significant problems with the catch-up programme. It is quoted in the report. He may have been reading the direct quote from the Department. I forget whether that was the exact quote, but there was one from the Department itself saying that there were significant problems with the catch-up. I beg his pardon, but what was his second point?

Matt Western: I asked about the 65% threshold.

Robert Halfon: I have been worried about this, and I have raised it with the Minister on the Floor of the House and in the Select Committee. The Minister has said that that target remains, although there is some flexibility in terms of some of the tutoring groups. I am absolutely clear that the catch-up programme should reach the most disadvantaged. My worry is that it is not, and we will continue to press the Government and make sure that it does.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Select Committee Chair for his statement and for answering the questions put to him.

BILL PRESENTED

ONLINE SAFETY BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Nadine Dorries, supported by the Prime Minister, Secretary Dominic Raab, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Priti Patel, Secretary Sajid Javid, Chris Philp, Julia Lopez and Mr Damian Hinds presented a Bill to make provision for and in connection with the regulation by OFCOM of certain internet services; for and in connection with communications offences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 285).

Ordered, That the Explanatory Notes relating to the Bill be printed (Bill 285—EN).

Backbench Business

Irish Diaspora in Britain

1.58 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Irish diaspora in Britain.

Lá fhéile Pádraig sona daoibh, a Leas-Chean Comhairle. Happy St Patrick's day to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone. That is the hard bit of my speech done. It is worth recording that, while there are around 600,000 people who declare themselves to be Irish living in Great Britain, the true figure, if we look at those who are first and second generation, is probably something like 10% of the population of this country—some 6 million people. There should be 60-plus MPs here today on that basis. Alas, there are not. In fact, there are proportionally more Britons living in Ireland than there are Irish living in Britain, which is an interesting statistic. I say that because we have a very complicated relationship between our two islands, and a complicated history that has been interwoven over not just a few hundred years but thousands of years, from St Patrick travelling one way and St Columba travelling another way.

Those of us who have some claim to an Irish background are very proud of that background. I grew up in the very Irish city of Manchester, and in an Irish part of that city, listening to Radio Eireann at breakfast every morning. It is instructive that I knew as much about the tallyman's projections for an Irish election, and that I knew, long before it had been declared, that the last seat in Donegal would go Fianna Fáil, as it virtually always did. Even better, I knew at least the advertised prescription for worming cows.

I never used that piece of information but, nevertheless, it has held me in good stead.

Manchester was a very Irish city, and the Irish were everywhere. One of the players who died in the Munich air crash, Billy Whelan, was Irish, and one of the heroes was Northern Ireland's goalkeeper Harry Gregg, who dragged people—Bobby Charlton among them—from the ruins of the plane, for which he became a legend. He was a legend on the football field, too, because a few months previously he had helped Northern Ireland to defeat England. Northern Ireland went on to play in the 1958 World Cup.

When Manchester United won the European cup in 1968, slightly after Celtic—that team was partly Irish, too—four of its players, Shay Brennan, Tony Dunne, the very Scottish but very Irish Pat Crerand and, of course, the great George Best claimed Irish origins. The Irish in Manchester could not be ignored.

The image of the Irish in those days was of builders and nurses, which was true to a degree. My good friend John Kennedy, who is known to many hon. Members, came from County Mayo with nothing in his pocket and built a business that has allowed him, as an older man, to be a philanthropist. My equally good friend Rita Maher—God rest her soul—probably nursed more people back to life, and towards the end of their life, than I had mugs of tea in her kitchen.

They are the archetypal working-class Irish, but it would be a mistake to see the Irish as just that, even though there are 200,000 Irish people working in our

NHS—the Irish are much more than that. Robert Boyle, the father of modern chemistry, was Irish-born but lived long parts of his life in England. Britain's greatest general and the victor at Waterloo, the Duke of Wellington, was Dublin-born. The Brontë sisters are famed Yorkshire women writers, but their father was from Northern Ireland. Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw had Irish backgrounds and contributed to British society. I am proud to say that Denis Healey and Jim Callaghan were both of Irish origins. More recently, Danny Boyle, Caroline Aherne and Professor Teresa Lambe, one of the co-creators of the AstraZeneca vaccine, are all from Irish backgrounds.

The contribution is much wider than the image of builders and nurses. "McAlpine's Fusiliers" declares:

"As down the glen came McAlpine's men
With their shovels slung behind them".

Nevertheless, we have doctors, lawyers, accountants and academics, everything the Irish contribute to this country. It is great to be able to record that.

These two islands have a complicated history that has caused problems. Although there is no doubt that the north of Ireland suffered most during the troubles, no part of these two islands did not suffer—my own city was bombed by the IRA in the late 1990s. The Good Friday agreement was a triumph not just for Bertie Aherne and Tony Blair, although their perseverance was instrumental in making it work, but for the many others who brought it into being. It was so important because it was not just about peace or even reconciliation; it was about a very different way of living together. It was about mutual respect between the people of these two islands, which is worth recording because the Good Friday agreement has taken a knock in recent years.

This is not the right time to rerun the Brexit debate, but Brexit has confounded and confused the relationship between these two countries. It has had an impact on the Irish living in Britain. We have to get back to getting it right. We owe it not simply to the Irish in Britain or to Britons in Ireland; we owe it to all our people to get it right once again. That is the big prize we have to pursue because, in the end, mutual respect is what we should be about.

Brian Dalton of Irish in Britain, who is alas stricken with covid—good luck to you, Brian—would say that the challenges facing the Irish in Britain are, of course, about making sure we live well together, but we face some challenges in common, such as dementia in an ageing Irish population and heart conditions in an Irish population whose diet in their youth probably was not always good. We face these things together.

It is about recognising Irish heritage and what it means in modern society, but there is something more important. The 6 million people of Irish origins are the template for this mongrel nation of ours. I say that with pride, because we are a mongrel nation brought together from many different strands. It is the template for how we treat and respect each other. If we can use the Irish in Britain as the template for how we respect heritage and how we respect each other, we will achieve something important for modern Britain and for the relationship between our two islands.

I am proud to be part of the hand-me-down Irish diaspora, and I am proud that colleagues are here to speak on this tremendously important issue. I am proud

because the Irish in Britain represent the best of modern Britain, as do all those who weave the tapestry of what we are as a nation.

May the blessings of St Patrick be with us all this day, and may the blessings of St Patrick—I say this wearing a shamrock and a Ukraine badge on my lapel—be with the people of Ukraine, too. The peace we want between these two islands is the peace we want around the world.

2.6 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my near constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd). I agree with every word he said.

To be bluntly honest, when I thought about what I wanted to say in this debate I was thinking about my dad and my memories of him. When we talk about the Irish diaspora in Britain, we do not see ourselves as different. The Irish diaspora is part of our everyday life. An estimated 6 million people in the UK have an Irish grandparent, which means people will probably have some form of relationship with somebody with an Irish grandparent—they will see them in the shops or at their place of work. We see the Irish diaspora, Irish history and Irish culture every single day.

I could not be prouder of coming from an Irish Catholic background. On my dad's side, I have two Irish grandparents, Frank and Molly, who came to this country in the 1920s. My dad and his sisters would tell me stories of their early experiences in Lockwood when they first came to live in Huddersfield as native Gaelic speakers. They vividly remembered the abuse, the insults and how they were treated. My dad always told me the story of how his mum once had a bucket of water poured over her head from a house window while she walked down the street. Those early pioneers, certainly in my family, had to go through terribly difficult times, and I am very proud of everything they achieved. The fact that they took the step to come over here to find a job or to make a better life means that I am stood here, and my cousins are all over the country doing whatever they are doing in their lives. I am pleased to say they are all positive, lovely people, and their Irish heritage touches every person they meet, which is a wonderful thing.

On my mum's side, my great-grandfather John was born in Athlone in Westmeath. He came over here, to Bradford, in the 1870s, so this migration is not just from the '20s to the '50s; it goes back over many years. He married a Yorkshire lady. Again, without those roots and without people being brave enough to come over here to a place and a country they did not know, without friends, in many circumstances, many of us would not be able to have the lives we have today. When I look at the contribution of the Irish diaspora in Britain, I think it is everything; there are no negatives and there is nothing else to say. Every part of our life as a nation has a little bit of Irish heritage and history within it, because we are all part of a wider story.

Sometimes the best way to elicit and highlight a point in this place is not by going on Google to find out facts, but by speaking from personal experience about the things that people have been through and how they shape the country that we are and the one we want to be. In my youth, I always used to hear stories in my

family about Gerald Paddy Slavin—I am looking at the hon. Member for Rochdale, as he may not know this—who came over to Huddersfield, to Longwood, in the 1930s. He is my great uncle—the brother of my grandma—and was born in Aghnacloy. He came across, got a job, worked hard, got married and looked after his family. He served on HMS Nelson during the second world war as a gunner. He was a true hero and a man who served the nations of Great Britain and Ireland in every possible way.

When he was in the Army, he decided, or it may have been decided for him, that boxing was the thing for him, so a man who had worked in the mills of Huddersfield and brought up a family—a respectable man—in 1948 fought in Belfast for the heavyweight title of Ireland. He became the heavyweight champion of Ireland, and went on to fight Don Cockell, Brian London and various other people. Within my family and my personal experience of people who have come over to this country and been part of a wider story, here was not only a heavyweight champion, a man who fought the great boxers of the era, but a man who was a respectable, kind, caring father—a good man. Those qualities sum up my experience of the Irish diaspora in Britain. The Irish community where I grew up in Huddersfield, who were a central part of that town's identity, could tell endless stories about what things were like in Huddersfield and I am sure that there are similarities with what was happening in Manchester.

I could not be more proud of the contribution made by Irish people, over many hundreds of years and continuing to this day. I am lucky enough to have that heritage, and these opportunities, from my relatives who came over from Westmeath in the 1870s. To my grandad Frank, the idea that he would have a Conservative MP as his grandson would be mind-blowing. When they are all looking down, I hope that when they see me, my cousins and all the rest of the family—this applies to everyone, all over the country, who is lucky enough to have Irish heritage—they will say that there was a complicated history, which we could talk about forever, and there were challenges and some awful times, but the sacrifices they made created opportunities for us, which we are enjoying today. I will be forever grateful.

2.13 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): Like all Members, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this debate, which is possibly the first Backbench Business debate in this Chamber to focus specifically on the Irish in Britain. I have known him for more than 25 years and am acutely aware of his political skills, but to secure this debate on St Patrick's Day, in the middle of the Cheltenham festival, which is promising another greenwash of wins for Irish trainers, and following the biggest Irish victory in Twickenham history says something about his tacit political skills of timing; it is an extraordinary gift and we appreciate it today, with this debate. On acknowledgments, I should also stress the role of my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), whom I know will be immensely proud to be replying for our party this afternoon. He performs incalculable work on behalf of the Irish in Britain today and wider UK-Irish relations. He does a great job, and long may it continue.

[Jon Cruddas]

This is undoubtedly an important debate, allowing us to demonstrate our support for the Irish in Britain, and how the Irish are recognised and valued as a core part of British society, fundamental to its economic and cultural life. As has been said, that cannot be expressed simply in a numbers game of Irish nationals in the UK, given the countless millions of second and third-generation Irish who have shaped the character of this country, informed by their family identity, culture and heritage. Yet the importance of this debate goes beyond general statements of support, partly because it is more personal for those children of Irish immigrants, brought up within Irish families in this country, who have become Members of this Parliament. Let me give full disclosure: my family come from Donegal. My wife sits in the other place, and her family come from Mayo and Galway. They all came over in the 1950s, for reasons of work. Many of us also represent communities with very strong Irish traditions and cultures.

Much debate of this debate might well focus in on the needs of the Irish community in this country. Undoubtedly that is correct, given that, as my hon. Friend has mentioned, an estimated 10,000 Irish in England may be suffering from dementia and that death by suicide is disproportionately high in this community, as are some of the effects of cancer-related diseases. Those are all vital issues, but today is also an opportunity to highlight not just the community's needs, but the fundamental contribution of the Irish in creating and shaping Britain's economy and society over many decades. That extends throughout Britain and throughout this city—it is not confined to Brent, Camden and Islington. Dagenham, 13 miles from our debate, is a good example of that. For it is impossible to understand Dagenham without an intimate appreciation of patterns of Irish migration in the creation of community, which is a story played out over many decades and one that is still strong today.

I am fortunate to be writing a history of my community, and 7 November 2021 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of modern Dagenham. Exactly 100 years earlier, the first house was completed on the Becontree estate; 27,000 new homes, containing over 100,000 residents and spread over 4 square miles of marshland, would follow by 1935; this was the largest council estate in the world. In 1931, the Ford Motor Company relocated from Manchester's Trafford Park to Dagenham. The site offered deep-water port access, allowing for bulk coal and steel shipments on a much larger scale than the Manchester Ship Canal did. The 475 acre riverside site became Europe's largest car plant, with 4 million square feet of floor space. By 1953, it employed 40,000 direct workers, and 11 million vehicles and over 40 million engines have rolled off the line.

I raise that because when the plant first opened in 1931 so many men from Leaside in Cork got work there that some oral histories suggest that the county accent predominated on the factory floor. Later in the '30s, when tractor manufacturing in Cork was terminated and transferred to Dagenham, thousands more followed. When these Cork migrants returned for a holiday, with their trendy clothes and money, they were affectionately known as "Dagenham Yanks". It was the beginning of a link between the two places that remains as strong today—it is an industrial link that uprooted Irish villages and planted them into what was then Europe's largest

factory and on to its largest estate. That pattern of migration continued throughout the whole of the last century; estimates suggest that well over 10,000 Irish migrants have worked for Ford in Dagenham over the years, laying down strong local roots and family connections.

One of the few private estates in Dagenham, the Rylands estate, just opposite the factory gates, was literally built to house thousands of Cork Ford workers. In the 1940s and 1950s, thousands more Dagenham Yanks were attracted to the expanding assembly plants. When the engine plant that Ford retained with Dunlop in Cork closed in 1983, many thousands more came across the water throughout the '80s. The social impact of this migration has been immense not least in the promotion of Irish culture and heritage. In the local pubs and drinking clubs, such as O'Gradys, the Casa and, right outside the plant gates, the Mill House Social Club, Dagenham was known as Little Cork, a place of tripe and drisheen, spiced beef, Beamish and Murphy's. The term "Murfia" was coined to describe the Corkonian-controlled network of work and political connections, patterns of family and kinship, and extensive cultural, sporting and faith-based communities.

Local Gaelic Athletic Association clubs flourished, and there was a deep-rooted connection between the Ford paint shop and Tomas McCurtain's GAA club. This was partly the product of an Offaly man named Bill Flanagan, who supervised paint contractors and was always eager to hire good hurlers and footballers for McCurtain's. Many of them originated from Dromina in County Cork, through the influence of the legendary Timmy O'Sullivan, a main contractor who relocated half the village. Sadly, he died in 2014, but he is still a legendary figure. He even convinced the Cork hurling team, including Christy Ring, to travel over to play McCurtain's in the '60s, and Bertie Ahern regularly came down to present jerseys.

The wider character of Dagenham was informed by the GAA, the pipe bands, the Irish language classes, the music and the dancing, and they have remained enduring features of the Dagenham culture for decades. I make these points not out of some sense of romantic nostalgia but to acknowledge the extraordinary economic, social and cultural contribution of the Irish community in Dagenham and its wider role in powering manufacturing across this city and the manufacturing economy of the country over many decades. The Irish were indispensable in the creation of our community in Dagenham, which has helped to define the industrial history of this country and this city.

Locally, things have changed—car assembly finished in the early 2000s—but this debate speaks to what is being made in Dagenham today, with new industries emerging that promise once again to strengthen the economic links between the two countries. For instance, Hackman Capital Partners—the owner of what will be the largest film and TV studio in London when it opens in Dagenham in a few years—has just acquired two Irish film studios, in Wicklow and Limerick.

In recent years, Irish migration has slowed, yet the community retains a strong Irish identity, with extraordinary numbers of second and third-generation Irish alongside a healthy number of older Irish residents, who are well represented in the churches, the union branches and groups such as the Irish Pensioners Forum of East London, a social and cultural group for older Irish people partly funded by the Emigrant Support Programme,

which does some fantastic work for communities up and down this country. Such networks of support, advice and kinship—in the local clubs, societies and groups—have been critical in the response to covid. The sense of fraternity that is the hallmark of the Irish in Dagenham has really been a blessing for us.

Today's debate gives me the opportunity to acknowledge, in Dagenham's 100th year, the role of the Irish in the creation and sustaining of Dagenham. They remain a cornerstone of the local community. I have told just one story to illustrate the indispensable quality of the Irish community in this country, which we can honour and treasure today.

2.22 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful to be called, Leas-Cheann Comhairle—Madam Deputy Speaker—and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for not only securing the debate but stealing my thunder: his Gaelic pronunciation is a wee bit better than mine. As a vice-chair of the all-party group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain, I am delighted to be here. I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are also a member of the group and that you work with its chair, the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn).

As someone with probably one of the longest Irish names in history—Máirtín Seán O'Dochartaigh-Aodha—it would have been remiss of me not to have participated in this debate. I am a grandchild of Irish immigrants on my father's side and have Irish great-grandparents on my mother's side. Sarah Timlin—a very uncommon name in Mayo, if not in the whole of Ireland—was from Ballingen in County Mayo, and John Doherty was from Stralongford, which is literally a big long road between Letterkenny and Convoy in County Donegal. A strange and complex family, just like the story of our heritage across these islands. Sarah and John met in Scotland and married back in County Mayo. Further back, Sarah's big brother fell on the western front the week before the armistice was signed.

John's family from Donegal—well, that is a completely different matter altogether. Let me say something about the complexity of John's life when he came to Scotland. He was brought up by a single parent. His mother Ellen had 15 children and was designated in the 1901 census as illiterate—a stigma—because she only ever spoke Irish. Although she may have been illiterate in English, which she never spoke, she was able to bring up 15 children singlehandedly on a farm in the middle of Donegal in the early 1900s. Most of her children survived birth—unlike a lot of children at the time—and many went to the United States. I now have a lot of family around Philadelphia and in New York. Luckily for me, my relatives made their life in Clydebank.

I wish to say a few words about the heritage and sporting activity of the Irish diaspora not only in my community but across these islands, and specifically in Scotland. This year, the Gaelic Athletic Association celebrates 125 years of existence in Scotland. It is now based in the Clydebank community sports hub in Whitecrook, which has a rather large Irish diaspora. I was delighted that Minister Seán Fleming TD from the Dáil Eireann came from the Oireachtas yesterday to visit the GAA in Scotland, although I was sadly not able to attend myself.

I am grateful that on St Patrick's day back in 2016 the House highlighted and supported my recognition of St Patrick as a guy fae West Dunbartonshire. At least as far back as the 13th century, Jocelyn of Furness wrote in his stories of the Celtic saints about Patrick being born in what we now know was a Roman fort in the village of Old Kilpatrick, where the well was reopened in the 1930s. Sadly, it is not like Knock these days—there are not thousands of folk coming for a shrine—but Members are more than welcome to come to Old Kilpatrick and taste the waters.

In modern times, there is Irish heritage through the industrial revolution not only in Dumbarton but throughout the shipbuilding in Clydebank. The Twitter feed of West Dunbartonshire Arts and Heritage reminded me today that the ships the Carrowdore, the Clarecastle and the Clareisland were all built in Scots shipyards in the village of Bowling by the Guinness family, for one reason: to ship Guinness fae Dublin straight to the heart of Glasgow and across the whole of Scotland.

Only last week, we commemorated the 81st anniversary of the worst aerial bombardment in the history of these islands: the Clydebank blitz of March 1941. The Irish diaspora were very much part of the rebuilding of Clydebank and the fight against national socialism, which crossed all communities, even in the difficulties of the 1940s. It was a very proud moment.

I am mindful that in the past five years the West Dunbartonshire Council administration took the unusual but welcome step to recognise the connections between West Dunbartonshire and Letterkenny, with the signing of the first ever friendship agreement between a Scottish local authority and an Irish local authority. I was delighted to be there to welcome the then mayor of Letterkenny—who was related, which was great.

It is not always a great story. As the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, I have to be mindful of the fact that for an Irish Traveller, St Patrick's day is tinged with sadness, and of the challenges that the Irish Traveller community face across these islands in terms of their ethnicity and lived experience. I hope the Minister will take cognisance of that.

In summing up, let me perhaps ask a question of the Minister. It is appropriate that we mention today the complexity and history of these islands, which is an opportunity to build on the strength of diversity and for Governments across these islands to work together, as was noted in the St Andrew's agreement. When the Minister sums up, will she give the House an idea of progress on an Irish language Act in the context of the new deal, and of opportunities to support and promote the Irish language in Northern Ireland?

Perhaps there is something to learn from Scotland, where the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act was introduced in 2005 by the then Labour Administration in Holyrood and unanimously supported. My own Government in Holyrood are now bringing forward a Scots language plan to develop a guid Scots leid. There is also an opportunity when it comes to Ulster Scots. The diversity of language is a great opportunity for the whole island of Ireland and, of course, the whole of these islands, to recognise the strength of diversity in language and culture.

I again thank the hon. Member for Rochdale for securing this debate.

2.29 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I rise proudly to speak as the vice-chair of both the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly and the all-party group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this debate.

In 2018, I spoke in one of the Brexit debates on the eve of St Patrick's Day. I said then that, although we did not know where St Patrick was from, we knew that he was probably not Irish, but he did wander and roam across much of these islands. I also talked then about the Bristol merchants who, under Henry II, went to Dublin in 1171 to defend Dublin castle and were rewarded with the establishment of trading posts between Bristol and Dublin. The point is that the movement of people, trading to deliver economic prosperity, is what has fashioned our political relationships across these islands for centuries, and today is no different. In so many other respects, though, today is so very different and thank goodness for that.

My own parents were part of the post-war '50s exodus of young people from rural Ireland to London. Their older siblings had to come, but my parents came for the craic, because, frankly, it was a lot more fun here than it was in rural Mayo or Cavan. We all know that they faced some challenges, but what fantastic opportunities England gave to them and has given to us, no more so than, in one generation, my being elected here as an English MP, of which the entire family is enormously proud.

Here in Britain, that post-war community established support networks. Since the 1970s, as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale, the work of Irish in Britain, as an umbrella organisation, has supported individuals and groups throughout the country. Colleagues can check on its website, but, on average, there are at least 1,000 Irish people in each of our constituencies. The charity supports culture, heritage and health. I and the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is in her place, proudly supported the Green Hearts campaign a couple of years ago.

The post-war exodus was facilitated by the common travel area—loosely defined, securing centuries-old exports of Ireland's youth to the powering of Britain's economy between the then separated countries in 1922. Covid has highlighted for most of us many, many difficulties, but, for me, effectively losing the common travel area was particularly difficult. Trying to visit my older family members, some in care homes, across the border in Cavan and in Northern Ireland with different rules, added needless bureaucracy, cost and stress to thousands of families. We were an afterthought for the Government in Dublin, and it took them a long time to listen to the pressure from us here and through the embassy here in London as they tried to balance their responsibilities to their greatest and oldest neighbour with their responsibilities within the European Union. This will continue to be difficult—we understand that. As we heard last week, Ministers mistakenly suggested that Ireland and the common travel area is an unchecked backdoor to Britain; it is not. None the less, we say to both Governments that, as the diaspora, we will continue to roam freely across these islands, and both Governments need to learn from our experience the social, political and economic benefits of the CTA.

Ireland has changed beyond recognition with membership of the European Union. I want to highlight briefly one area of particular importance that is joyful for me, which is women's rights. Women were at the heart of Irish politics and culture throughout the battles for home rule and independence, but the consolidation of the Irish state, with the dominance of the Church, meant that very quickly women were relegated to the private sphere. Indeed, although much divides Unionists and nationalists, as the dust started to settle, there was one thing on which they could all agree and that was keeping women in the home. That is where I learned my formative politics: watching and listening to Irish women; learning that what was said in public was not the same as what was said in private.

My nan, sat by her peat fire in Mayo—I can still smell it—and the women would call round. She sat there talking. My Mum carried on this tradition in London, with women coming round for a chat. After a long night of talk on every conceivable subject, my mum passed on to me what she had heard at home, saying, "up the chimney with that now". Up the chimneys and around the tables of thousands of Irish homes, women talked differently than they did in the public sphere from which they were effectively barred. It ill behoves any politician who does not know what goes up the chimney.

Once in the EU, Ireland, like the UK, had to accept the social change along with economic support: equal pay, maternity rights, non-discrimination on marital status, and finally those votes on divorce and abortion. What I learned from the private conversations around the chimney I also learned from women here in the British Labour party: individuals in private do not change the world. Women have to occupy the public space. Women have to have political power to secure our rights to equality with men and to change the laws that dictate the private sphere, and all legislators across these islands have a long way to go. It has been a privilege to be part of the solidarity among the women of these islands—north, south, east and west—and we still have much work to do.

Today, I have my slightly wilting shamrock and my British-Irish parliamentary brooch. As a child, I was sent to school with the shamrock, but I did not often wear it on St Patrick's Day through the '80s. That was due in part to my moving away from my childhood, seeking an identity of my own, and in part due to the fact that being Irish here in the late '70s and '80 was hard. We were expected to have a view and to take a side in the constant struggles, but we did not often have a side. I knew that there were many sides, and I knew that I had a stake in them all. The 1980s changed the narrative of having sides. That decade allowed us to have many sides, and we all wanted the same thing: to live in peace and prosperity.

The 1998 Good Friday agreement was not just about Northern Ireland, Ireland, or a border; it was about the freedom of movement of people across these islands, about our deep roots, about mutual interest and respect, and about shared security and prosperity. Our duty now is to build upon it in full.

Finally, one of my predecessors as a Bristol MP is Edmund Burke. I think he was Bristol's last Irish MP, whose statue still stands proudly in the centre of our city—a city he apparently visited only twice. He lasted six years, which is a milestone that I have only recently

passed. During that time, he had a somewhat acrimonious time with the Bristol Merchant Venturers whose patronage was needed in those days in order to be able to hold office. Burke, as is befitting the father of modern conservatism, recognised that restrictions on people—as with the anti-Catholic legislation at the time—and restrictions on trade from Ireland meant an ever-impooverished Ireland, and that, he felt, was economically unwise for England. His riposte to the anti-Irish protectionism of the Bristol merchants should be heeded by us all today:

“England and Ireland may flourish together. The world is large enough for us both. Let it be our care not to make ourselves too little for it.”

2.36 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I am very grateful for this opportunity to take part in a debate to celebrate the contribution of the Irish in Britain and the very deep bonds of friendship and neighbourliness between our two islands. The other quote I remember from Edmund Burke was when he said that, for most English people, their ambition about Ireland was to hear no more about it, but I thank all the Members participating today for having a much wider ambition.

It is a pleasure to follow Members from across the House who have done so much to honour and deepen the contribution of the Irish to the fabric of Britain. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this debate and the others who have spoken. I also thank the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) who played such a key role in events yesterday and who has exemplified and represented the Irish in Britain for many years with inclusivity, practicality, confidence, wit—lots of wit—and stories, and we are very proud of him for it.

It was not always an easy landing for Irish people in Britain. We know that many faced discrimination and isolation, but Britain, and England in particular, provided refuge, acceptance and opportunities for people who, in many cases, had been rejected by Ireland. Perhaps that was because they were pregnant, because they were gay, because they were different in some way or because there was no work for them. Ireland, to our great shame now, pushed out many unwanted people to England, who then found acceptance, solace and opportunity here, and for that we are very, very thankful.

Irish people and their descendants have not only found a good home in Britain; they have helped to make it a good home for other people. The work of Irish people across all classes of work, skills, vocations, talents, enterprise, creativity and service is rightly a source of pride—from roads and buildings in decades past to those at the very top of industry and the creative sectors today, and throughout many decades and very much during covid's curtailments, within the National Health Service. It was lovely to see that represented and celebrated in the parade at the weekend.

As a result of that contribution and mutual support, I have no doubt that the Irish centres and networks in Britain will be stepping forward to offer support, service and space to Ukrainian refugees in their time of need. While the common travel area privileges the Irish in Britain and the British in Ireland, as befits our close neighbourly relationship, the Irish stand in solidarity with others across the world who have had to leave their

homes because their home was not safe or because they could not make a life there. We know how it feels to be cast at times as a suspect community, and to be at the bottom of the pile. That experience is reflected in the internationalism of the Irish community and the support that they offer to migrants and minorities from elsewhere.

The deep integration of Irish people on this island has not come at the expense of pursuing distinctive Irish sports, traditions and arts, which, as others have mentioned are flourishing. Indeed, in many parts, British TV presenters and journalists frequently claim some of Irish people as their own. The only surprise is that our current Home Secretary has not spotted British citizenship being conferred on people and come down on it like a house of bricks.

Fosta, Seo Seachtáin na Gaeilge, coicís go deimhin, agus tá imeachtaí ar fud an tír, agus ar fud an domhain a thugann failli dúinn cultúr, teanga agus oidhreacht na hÉireann a cheiliúradh. Indeed, what better opportunity than this to celebrate Seachtáin na Gaeilge, Irish Language Week, which is taking place now and is an opportunity to celebrate Irish language and culture across the island and across the world.

Irish people in Britain are a strong thread in British-Irish relations and a critical part of the ethos and architecture of the Good Friday agreement. John Hume always saw, and the Social Democratic and Labour party to this day have always seen, those three strands of the agreement as interdependent, indivisible and mutually reinforcing. Cherishing and nurturing the strand 3 relationship is core to the role of SDLP MPs taking up our mandated place in this House. That is something we take very seriously.

As others have said, the conflict playing out in Ukraine reinforces the need to protect what has been the most successful peace and reconciliation project in generations. It is a fact that the violence and at times the depravity of the troubles—all of it, and all that went before it—drove a wedge between people that has been difficult to bridge, but it is precisely because of those painful aspects of our history that we must continue to work to deepen and maintain friendship, co-operation and reconciliation, to put that cycle of mistrust in the past and to realise the reciprocal benefits of cultural, personal and trade ties. It is a statement of fact that a strong, pluralist Britain is in Ireland's interests and vice versa. Nothing will change that.

Thanks to the Good Friday agreement, Irish people here have been able to step forward even more. We encourage them to keep doing that and not to be afraid to lead in British-Irish relationships at the many cultural, social, business and sectoral levels where they provide a natural nexus.

We live in the shadow and the shelter of each other, as President Michael D. Higgins acknowledged during his historic state visit and address here in 2014. Confident in our relationship as equals and with mutual interest, we can

“embrace the best versions of each other”.

The Irish in Britain are doing so every day; many are moving on from the traditional binaries of the past and embracing the “or both” part of the Good Friday agreement, not feeling that they have to decide between being British and Irish if they do not wish to do so. The tensions of the past five years, as the hon. Member for

[*Claire Hanna*]

Rochdale said, are probably a topic for another day—indeed, we probably do talk about them every other day of the year, so I am happy to park them for today.

Though our relationship has been turbulent in the longer past and in the recent past, it can and should be mutually beneficial, warm and reconciled. I say thank you to the Irish people in Britain and the British people in Britain and in Ireland who make that so and wish everyone a happy St Patrick's Day.

2.43 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Go raibh maith agat, Madam Deputy Speaker—thank you very much. I, too, wish all right hon. and hon. Members and also all my constituents across Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill a very happy St Patrick's day.

We all know that Ireland is Scotland's closest neighbour and relation, and our often shared heritage and our historical bond run as deep today as the Rivers Clyde and Liffey combined. We in Scotland value immensely the relationship between us and our Irish brothers and sisters, and our bond remains ever strong.

The histories of the peoples of Ireland and Scotland are closely intertwined, with our stories of migration taking many forms at different times over the centuries. Whether Scottish or Irish, chances are we are all immigrants. Place names and family names and our traditions across both our lands are an ever-present reminder of our interlocked Gaelic past and, more importantly, our shared futures together.

My own family surname comes from an Irish heritage, and my roots can be traced back to County Donegal, itself an Irish county with its own unique story, being geographically in the north of Ireland but part of the 26 counties that make up the rest of the island. Today, my ties to Ireland allow me to visit frequently; just last week I was fortunate enough to be in the town of Drogheda, County Louth. The reason for that trip was to partake in one of those old Scottish and Irish traditions we share, wetting the baby's head, as we welcomed Finn Martin Murphy into this world—born of a Scottish mother and an Irish father, so it is safe to say the connections between our families and countries are safe for at least another generation.

While there, I took the opportunity to visit the site of the Battle of the Boyne in Drogheda—a truly historic place that can be appreciated regardless of faith, creed or political persuasion. The profound consequences of the battle reverberate to this day in the to-ing and fro-ing over the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol, but it is always worth remembering there is far more that unites us than separates us. I was also able to indulge in Ireland's greatest export, Guinness. I extend my gratitude to those kind persons of the St Laurence's Club at McHugh's for their warm hospitality. As they say in Ireland, the craic was 90.

Both Scotland and Ireland are nations who have stood strong through both glory and tragedy, from the creation of Saint Columba's monastery on the Isle of Iona—the Irish saint also lends his name to my local parish in my constituency—to the tragedies of the Scottish highland clearances and an Gorta Mór, the great famine in Ireland, which saw so many perish and

thousands of Scots and Irish move between these lands. Millions of people worldwide today can trace their descendants back to these tough, resilient Irish and Scottish survivors.

The 2011 Scottish census revealed that almost 11,000 Irish citizens were living in Scotland, and Coatbridge in my constituency is long renowned in both Scotland and Ireland for its Irish diaspora. By the same token, many of my countrypeople live across the Irish sea—15,000 in the north of Ireland alone, based on the same 2011 census. A further 57,600 people were recorded as speaking an Gaeilge, so it is no surprise that our relationship across the sea remains vibrant and is vital to Scots and Irish alike.

With the current census in Scotland ongoing, and the ramifications of Brexit never far from the minds of the Scots or the Irish, I am entirely confident that the number of Irish passport holders in Scotland will have increased sharply over the past couple of years. Such drastic impacts on our identities and outlooks as Brexit will have a profound effect on the eventual make-up of these shared islands. Despite our no longer sharing membership of the European Union, the strong and enduring foundation of the common travel area and the structures created by the Good Friday agreement provide a stable foundation for the continued development of good relations between our peoples.

Ireland has a long tradition of diaspora engagement around the world, which was reinforced by the Department of Foreign Affairs appointing its first Minister for diaspora affairs in 2014. Scotland engages her global diaspora through GlobalScot, a worldwide network of almost 800 entrepreneurial and inspirational business leaders and experts. The Scottish Government will continue that good work with Irish colleagues on common issues and shared goals, particularly on diaspora affairs, to assess where lessons can be drawn from Ireland's experience.

There is also scope for increased exchange and partnerships between different diaspora organisations. That is something I am eager to encourage, in the hope that it will allow us to provide greater support to Irish community organisations across Scotland—a community that, it cannot go unsaid, has not always been fully accepted into Scots society by all.

However, today is about celebration—the celebration of the feast of St Patrick—and we are all a wee bit Irish today, are we not? Together across this House we celebrate our shared heritage, our music, our traditions and our culture.

2.48 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) said, we are all a bit Irish today. It gives me a great deal of pleasure to speak in this debate because this is a subject that is important to me for many reasons. I would like to acknowledge all the Members here today who were either born in Ireland or are of Irish extraction, whatever party they represent. Of course, I salute all my constituents, everyone in this country and everyone around the world who is celebrating St Patrick's day today.

I would like to pay a special tribute to our former Labour colleague and Member of this House, Jack Dromey, who sadly died earlier this year. I knew Jack long before he was an MP—in fact, when he was a

firebrand trade unionist energetically involved in the Grunwick dispute. That dispute engaged Jack because it was about mainly Asian women striking against their extreme exploitation, low wages and terrible conditions in their factory, which led to them being sacked when they tried to form a union. As a proud Irishman, Jack was vehemently opposed to any idea that these women could not be unionised, and he was determined to fight for those mainly migrant workers.

That brings me to my first substantial point, which is why we, as immigrants or the children of immigrants, came to be here in the first place—because of course we are, all of us, descendants of the children of empire. It is a great credit to the people of Ireland that they have the honour of having set in motion the end of colonialism and the end of empire. I know that is a controversial view in some parts of this House, but my starting point is the position of a colonised people. My concern is not for the nostalgia and relics of the past, but the truth is that the people of India are only now recovering their former wealth and place in the world after the raj, and the people of China are recovering from having been effectively carved up by foreign powers. The people of Ireland now have a greater per capita GDP than this country. Yet before independence all these countries lived in abject poverty. I say that not to disparage anyone, but it confirms my view that no people can prosper while they are not free. In the approximately 100 years of British rule in India, the population fell substantially. We know that the Irish fared even worse. So all around the world there is a special place of pride reserved for the Irish, who began the end of empire, and there is a certain pride and a certain outlook that is conferred on many Irish people and people of Irish descent as a result.

I would like to convey my own personal experience of growing up in a part of west London not too far from where Jack Dromey did—Kilburn, which had, when I was a child, a very large Irish community. Others who migrated to this country came from the east and settled in the east end of London, but Irish—and, to a great degree, the West Indians—came to west London. The infamous sign, “No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish”, came from that time and place. I grew up in that part of London when it was famous for its so-called race riots, but they were not race riots at all; they were rampages by white racist gangs and fascists. One even called itself the White Defence League, showing that it was continuing to play the same old tired songs.

My mother never tired of telling me about a time when one of those white fascist gangs came rampaging down our street knocking on doors to find out if black people owned the houses. Although our house, which was in Paddington, was a three-storey house, we only lived in one room—the rest of the house was occupied by tenants. That is how my parents could afford to pay the mortgage. In the basement was an Irish family headed by my Uncle Jimmy. The white racists were going up the street knocking on doors. Uncle Jimmy thought the absolute world of me; he adored me. I was a little baby. My mother used to give me breakfast and then she would take me down to Uncle Jimmy’s, and he would give me another breakfast. When he heard the white racists rampaging up the street, he said to my mother, “They’re not going to get our Diane”. He went up the stairs and opened the front door, and when the

racists saw a white man there, they assumed he owned the house and went away. I suppose the pride and self-confidence that comes from slaying colonialism works its way down to the individual level, so even those rampaging white racists and white supremacists cannot frighten you. I will of course always be grateful to my Uncle Jimmy.

For 20 years before 1998, as some Members have mentioned, there were what were known as the troubles. To some of us observing at the time, it felt like low-level warfare, and I think the participants on all sides regarded it the same way. One of the features of war in general is that there is hardly ever a participant who looks back on it fondly. There is nearly always regret and sorrow, and I think that regret is true for the vast majority of the combatants in the troubles on every side, whether they were loyalists, republicans or part of the forces of the state. One of the reasons it took so long to get to the Good Friday agreement in 1998 was how the conflict was portrayed, including Britain’s own role in it. Many argue that there was a refusal to understand the Unionist population and their feelings, a denial of Britain’s role and a determination to demonise rather than understand Irish republicanism.

Well, we have come a long way. Irish republicans, such as Gerry Adams and his departed comrade Martin McGuinness, have both been invited to No. 10 many more times than most Members of this House. There is a reason for that. People may not like it, but Irish republicanism represents an ideal that harks back to at least the 18th century, based on ideas of anti-feudalism and national democracy. It was conditioned by the partial defeat of empire 100 years ago and transformed by the emergence of the civil rights movement. These were ideas with mass popular support, but successive Governments refused to see that or accept it, even after Bloody Sunday. Finally there has been an official apology for Bloody Sunday, but no prosecutions.

As we celebrate St Patrick’s day in this debate, I express my concern about the dangers to the Northern Ireland protocol from current political debate. It is as if some people have learned nothing and are determined to repeat their mistakes. This time it is different. In the words of the great Robert Emmet, Ireland has survived to take its place among the nations of the earth, and everyone who values freedom should rejoice in that.

2.56 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Happy St Patrick’s day to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to colleagues across the Chamber and to friends of Ireland around the world. I give a big thank you to the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this debate. Anyone questioning the potency of outward-looking, culturally rich states with, by global standards, relatively small populations and their ability to penetrate the highest offices of the global system in Brussels and Washington need look no further than the Irish to see what can be done. It is great to celebrate the sons and daughters of Ireland in this Chamber, even though some of us would like to ply our political trade elsewhere. When I got elected two years ago, I was pretty confident that I would be the first double-o Doogan MP in this place, but sadly not. It turns out that in the late 19th century there was a chap from County Monaghan who beat me to it, but that is one for the record books.

[*Dave Doogan*]

I am Scottish. As you may have established over the past two years, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am very proud and motivated by that fact. However, I am of Irish stock, and I wear that complementary characteristic with great pride also, and this year I will take delivery of my Irish passport to underscore that I will not be stripped of my European citizenship, and I will also get through the airport quicker.

My family hail from Donegal, Ireland's premier and most picturesque county with the tallest mountains, the finest golden beaches, the sweetest turf smoke and the wettest bogs. It is the Irish county against which all others are judged. My mother and father came to Scotland separately working in service and in agriculture respectively, settling in Perth to raise six children. It was a rich childhood experience being part of the Perth community and the Perth Irish community and being pals with the kids who lived around about, but also with the kids who went with me to the Catholic school across town.

My mum raised us with the heavily repeated expectation of "We could do well for ourselves"—that we could do better than those who went before us with the opportunities of employment and education that we had. As kids and young adults, we were repeatedly told, "You have the ability." This immigrant ideology of ambition and betterment is not unique to the Irish diaspora—far from it—but it stood generations of us, the product of Irish immigration, in good stead.

Slightly contradictory, however, was the equal but opposite message that we also got from our parents, which was, "Don't get too big for your boots or somebody will cut you down to size"—life could often be complex at home. Perhaps because of that advice from my mum and her contemporaries, the sons and daughters of the four families who I grew up with in Perth—sons and daughters of the Irish in Scotland—have gone on to Spain, Japan, Taiwan, Australia, the US, England, Colombia, Bahrain and the Netherlands and back to Ireland. That is limiting it just to my first cousins; I am sure there are more that I cannot recall. The bulk of us remain on these islands in Scotland and England, however, which I know is not uncommon.

My dad was an agricultural and building contractor who came to Scotland to work the land as a teenager in 1938. He stayed in Great Britain for most of the second world war, during which time he was employed harvesting sugar beet and constructing the new runway at Biggin Hill airport in Bromley, which became a key RAF location in the battle of Britain. In half a century of contracting across Angus, Perthshire, Clackmannanshire and Fife, he created wealth, employment and capital, as did thousands of other Irishmen through industry based on their labour and their business acumen. These enterprises, the length and breadth of Britain, changed the face of our streets, building sites, agricultural production, pub trade, literature, professional football and energy production in the hydro schemes in Scotland.

Right hon. and hon. Members have touched on the prejudice faced by the Irish in some quarters. That was a real and ugly struggle faced by the Irish community and others. I will not dwell on that except to note that the Tunnel Tigers are a legendary Irish tunnelling corps, many of whom hailed from Arranmore island off the

coast of Donegal. They have been tunnelling their way under Great Britain for the last 75 years or more. They were a key component of the hydro schemes and dams in Scotland and of the tube lines in London, but strangely they received no mention in Scottish Hydro's official social historiography of the tunnel projects in the central highlands of Scotland. I am grateful to my friend John O'Donnell for campaigning on the issue and to my colleague Annabelle Ewing MSP for raising it in the Scottish Parliament.

Here on the western shores of Europe, Scotland has many close friends and neighbours, all of whom, bar our friends in England and Wales, are across the sea. Of those, Ireland is our closest and that closeness extends well beyond the realm of geography. The symbiosis of Ireland and Scotland goes back more than 1,000 years with the Gaels and their culture reaching across the channel to the western isles and into almost the entirety of the Scottish mainland. Although Gaelic culture may have been forcefully driven out of Scotland to great effect, we value the Scotland-Ireland relationship very highly.

Scotland's bonds with Ireland remain deep and strong. Ireland and Scotland are steeped in the tradition of education and shared learning that dates back to the time of St Colmcille, whose monastery on Iona provided the first centre of literacy in the region. For more than a millennium and a half, Ireland has been influencing life in Britain and I do not see any end to the positive influence of this proud independent nation.

3.2 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I speak for many of those celebrating the feast of St Patrick today when I say that we share the values embodied by his story—solidarity, care, kindness and compassion. We stand in solidarity with the people of Ukraine as they struggle to protect their right to live in freedom and peace.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this important debate to celebrate the strong cultural, political and business ties between Britain and Ireland and the immense contribution of the Irish diaspora in Britain. As he knows, as my local MP growing up, the contribution of the Irish community in Greater Manchester, of which we are both part, is immense. My mum is from Galway and my dad is from Belfast.

We await the most recent census data, but at the 2011 census, more than 430,000 people living in Britain identified themselves as Irish-born. That is only part of the picture: Bronwen Walter, emerita professor of Irish diaspora studies at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, estimated some years ago that the true figure for those with at least one Irish parent or grandparent was roughly 5 million. As we have heard today, the figure has now increased to 6 million. It is also said that, if someone's family has lived in Salford or Manchester for more than a generation, the chances are that they have Irish ancestry.

The huge Irish diaspora across the north of England has been recognised by the Irish Government, who have opened the consulate general of Ireland for the north of England. Its establishment reflects a strong commitment to developing the British-Irish relationship and it will strengthen the political, commercial, community and cultural ties between Ireland and the north of England.

Niall Gallagher, chairman of Irish Heritage, described the contribution of the Irish to cultural life in Britain as incalculable. On the contribution of the Irish community in Greater Manchester, Irish President Michael Higgins said that it had given the area countless talented footballers, vibrant cultural festivals, and talented students, writers and businesspeople. Indeed in Salford, it is asserted that it was the Irish community who contributed to the creation of Salford as a city in its own right. During the mid-19th century, there was huge migration of Irish people into the Salford area, partly due to the great hunger in Ireland, and in 1848 Salford Roman Catholic cathedral was consecrated, reflecting Salford's huge Irish population at the time.

It was also a huge proportion of the Irish community who built the Manchester ship canal, which spurred on the industrial revolution in Greater Manchester. Indeed, the same is true of the railways, the roads and even the channel tunnel. From the early days of industry to the present day housing estates and skyscrapers we see today, the immense contribution of the Irish diaspora to construction in Britain is undeniable. In our NHS, as of September 2021, there were 13,971 members of NHS staff in England reporting their nationality as Irish, including just under 2,500 doctors and 4,500 nurses.

The Irish diaspora has made its mark on culture, too. In Salford, from renowned playwright Shelagh Delaney, a pioneer in women's writing, who challenged the accepted views of race, gender and class at the time, all the way through to Shaun Ryder of the Happy Mondays, the list of those with Irish ancestry who have made their mark is endless. Interestingly, it is also said that the famous song about Salford, "Dirty Old Town", that many will be singing in the pub tonight, written by Salfordian Ewan MacColl, has all but taken on its own Irish citizenship. It is a staple favourite tune not just in Salford but in St Patrick's night celebrations across the world.

In political life, as we can see today from Members of Parliament who are representing the Irish diaspora, Salfordians and Mancunians with Irish ancestry are found in abundance across our political and council chambers, transforming lives in our communities. One of my favourite historical figures is a lady called Eva Gore-Booth, a famous Salfordian suffragette who was instrumental in the creation of the trade union movement, which spurred on the creation of the Labour party.

In business, commercial ties between Britain and Ireland are stronger than ever. When President Michael Higgins came to Manchester 10 years ago, he said that over 55,000 directors who are Irish sit on the boards of British companies. Irish people are present in nearly all the listed occupations of the census in Britain. They have risen to distinction in all professions. That number is of course even greater now.

But leaving all of these achievements aside, it is the everyday actions of people within the wider Irish community that I am so proud of—those who seek to care, nurture and build relationships within their wider community. We have so many amazing charitable and social organisations, such as Irish in Britain, Irish Community Care, Irish Heritage, the Irish World Heritage Centre in Manchester, Irish societies and clubs right across the UK, sports clubs, radio stations, dance and music groups, festivals and even welfare advice services. Of course special mention must go to *The Irish Post* and *The Irish*

World newspapers, which have been keeping the Irish community in Britain connected for decades—and I was forced to read them on a weekly basis by my mother to find out what was going on. So it is clear that the contribution of the Irish diaspora to all aspects of life in the UK is indeed incalculable, and that the warm connections between Ireland and the UK are going from strength to strength. As President Higgins himself said:

"The closeness and warmth that we laud today was founded to a large extent upon the lives and sacrifices of generations of Irish emigrants who settled in this country—generations of Irish people who came here and contributed so positively to nearly every aspect of British society, who did so much to make Britain what it is today while at the same time fostering understanding, tolerance and co-operation between our two countries."

Long may this strong bond continue, and Lá fhéile Pádraig sona daoibh—happy St Patrick's day.

3.9 pm

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on securing the debate and wish everybody a happy St Patrick's day. I am very proud of my Irish heritage. My nan Mary Higgins was born in Dublin before she travelled across the Irish sea to the greatest city in the world, Liverpool. I am privileged to represent Liverpool, the city where I was born and raised. I am a very proud Scouser because we are a world in one city, with communities hailing from all corners of the world. Three quarters of Liverpool's population has Irish roots and it is not for nothing that Liverpool is often referred to as the 33rd county.

The contribution of Irish working-class communities is immeasurable and has fundamentally shaped the soul of our great city into what it is today, from politics, to art, music, our unique sense of humour and life and soul of the party spirit. Many, of course, came to Liverpool in the great famine of the 1840s. 1.5 million passed through the port. Most were en route to America, but many settled, choosing to make Liverpool their new home and joining an already established Irish community. By 1851, the Irish-born population already made up nearly a quarter of the population. Those who came built much of the Liverpool docks and the canal system, while others staffed the shipping lines and worked on the quayside. The trade unionist and socialist James Larkin, Liverpool born of Irish immigrant parents, was pivotal to the 1913 Dublin lockout.

On every street corner, more evidence lies of the Irish community's footprint on the fabric of our great city. The beautiful Walker Art Gallery and the Liverpool World Museum were built by Ballymena-born William Brown and are now situated on the street named after him. Irishman Michael Whitty was the founder of the Liverpool police and later the fire service. The renowned Agnes Jones from County Donegal was the first trained nursing superintendent of the Liverpool workhouse infirmary. Famed for her work ethic, Agnes died tragically at the age of 35 from typhus. Florence Nightingale described her as

"one of the most valuable lives in England."

Before her came Kitty Wilkinson, an Irish immigrant from Derry, nicknamed Liverpool's saint of the slums because of her educational campaigning to teach the public about health and hygiene. As the only person in her Liverpool neighbourhood to own a boiler in the

[Kim Johnson]

1832 cholera epidemic, she invited all those with infected bedding and clothing to use it, saving countless lives. Soon after, she opened the first public wash house in Liverpool.

The Irish contribution to our Liverpool health service continued with Irish nurses targeted for recruitment to work in the new NHS. By 1971, it was estimated that 12% of all UK NHS nurses were Irish. John Lennon, Paul McCartney and George Harrison all hail from Irish ancestry, and the Irish still contribute massively to Liverpool and British culture: think of Roger McGough and Jimmy McGovern, to name just a couple, not to mention our two great football clubs, both of which employed Irishmen as their first managers.

Liverpool is a city that marches to the beat of its own drum, and we owe so much of our rhythm and spirit to the Irish settlers and their descendants over the centuries. We are proud to celebrate with them today on St Patrick's day.

3.13 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on securing the debate, which is an excellent opportunity to pay tribute to our friends from the island of Ireland and recognise their valuable contributions to mainland Britain.

The contributions of the Irish span every corner of Britain and every industry, so it is easy to forget the anti-Irish sentiment that was rife throughout even recent history, despite two former British Prime Ministers being born in Ireland. Even today, the Irish are not always painted in a positive light in the media. They are often portrayed comically as an outdated stereotype. It is shameful. Shameful too is the continuing and prevalent prejudice and racism aimed at the Irish Traveller community. The reasons behind those issues are for another debate on another day. I would like to keep my speech positive and celebratory, but I felt it was important to give that acknowledgement.

I start with contributions to the arts and ballet. Dame Ninette de Valois was born as Edris Stannus in County Wicklow, the garden of Ireland, in 1898. In 1905, she moved to Kent, England to live with her grandmother. At 10, she began to take ballet lessons. Her love for dance was apparent early on at a party with other children. Having watched another little girl dance, she demanded that she be allowed to perform an Irish jig. Edris took the name Ninette de Valois at the age of 13 as she began her professional training and made her debut in the west end. The name change reflected a public expectation of the kind of exotic name a dancer should have. In 1919, at just 21, she became the principal dancer for the Beecham Opera, which was at the time the resident company at the Royal Opera House. At 23, she joined the Russian Ballet, where she mentored Alicia Markova who would go on to become prima ballerina assoluta and one of the most famous British dancers of her time.

Ninette became the driving force behind ballet in Britain, establishing dance schools in London and Dublin. In 1956, they were granted the royal charter, so the schools became the royal ballet. She also, quite surprisingly, became very influential in the development of Turkish

ballet and helped to establish the Turkish state ballet at the invitation of Turkey's Government. Ninette is known as the mother of English ballet, despite her Irish nationality. She died in 2001 at the grand old age of 102 and with a legacy most dancers could only dream of.

Another woman who offered much to Britain, although in a different field, is Mary Morris. She left Ireland at 18 to come to London to train as a nurse at Guy's Hospital in 1939. Mary was a prolific diarist and in her diary recorded much of the war. She dated the "real war" as starting on 31 May 1940, when ambulances came filled with dirty and wounded soldiers from Dunkirk. Mary witnessed the battle of Britain in the sky, and nursed the wounds of pilots hurt in the battle. She also tended to the German prisoners of war.

It was during her time as a nurse that she met a Frenchman named Pierre, whom she described in her diary as

"slim and dark, with beautiful brown eyes and masses of Gallic charm".

Pierre invited Mary out to dinner and, despite strict rules around the fraternisation with patients, she accepted. She was reprimanded by her matron, but that did not stop Mary from spending more and more time with Pierre, visiting London and witnessing air raids. In 1944, Mary joined thousands of her fellow Irish nurses as a volunteer for the armed forces, where she was posted to Normandy and treated the wounded soldiers of the D-day landings. She described her ward as a

"multi-national microcosm of a Europe at war".

When the war was over, she settled in Britain with her husband.

Ninette and Mary were two very different women, with two very different stories but a common thread. What they offered to Britain, through their services to the arts or to the war effort, helped form the Britain we live in today.

A little closer to home, the migration of Irish workers to Glasgow and the surrounding towns changed our corner of Scotland substantially. Even before the great famine, fares to Glasgow from Ireland were cheap and there was a lot of work and jobs to be filled: labour jobs, mining jobs and a thriving shipbuilding industry. There were also jobs for skilled workers, too, such as in the handloom weaving industry. The Irish workers were right at the forefront of trade union activity, something often forgotten. The contributions of those workers shaped the city and areas like Lanarkshire where my constituency sits, and that should be recognised.

Most of us will have some Irish roots in our heritage. It is not uncommon and it is something we are all proud of. The Irish who came here contributed to our society in more ways than we can possibly cover. I am pleased that we have this debate today to give it recognition. There is no day more fitting than today, and I wish everyone a happy St Patrick's day.

3.18 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for initiating the debate and I look forward to the closing speech from my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who has so often represented the diaspora in this country and done so very well

indeed. I am proud to represent one of the largest and longest-settled Irish communities in Britain. The Irish presence in Shepherds Bush, Hammersmith and Fulham goes back many years before the 60 years that I have lived there, so it is not only first and second generation, but third and fourth generation Irish people who continue to make their home in that part of west London.

It goes without saying that despite the difficult times rightly mentioned by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), this has overall been an enriching and successful coming together of the British and Irish communities, and not just those communities but many other migrant communities. I often feel that the Irish presence in Britain was a pioneer and acted as somewhat of a glue and an enabler of integration across many different cultures. That is certainly true where I am.

I want briefly to highlight two organisations that have not featured much in the debate so far, but they are key to the success of the diaspora. One is the network of community, cultural and social centres across the country and the other is the Government of Ireland and the embassy here. In Hammersmith Broadway, I have the Irish Cultural Centre, which is

“the premier centre in the UK dedicated to the promotion and welfare of Irish art and culture abroad”

and

“the home of its best cultural events and Irish performances, films, music and theatre”.

and I know that is true because I read it on the front of its website only a few moments ago—those are the centre’s words, before Members start intervening on me.

Getting a building as prestigious and beautiful as that was a long struggle for the Irish community and their supporters. It goes back to the mid-1990s—we celebrated the 25th anniversary recently—and the foresight of my predecessor as MP and leader of the council, Iain Coleman, and Councillor Sean Reddin, who put together the funding. They built it, we enjoyed it for 10 years and then we did it all over again because a different council wanted to knock it down and sell off the land for profit. It was only through the intervention of the Shepherds Bush Housing Association, which put up the money for a housing development, that the centre was rebuilt bigger and better than it was before. It has been a huge success as a result of an alliance between the wider community, the council, others and the embassy, with the Government of Ireland putting in money at a time when money was extremely short during the financial crisis.

Above all, it has all been about the local Irish community. I am tempting fate by naming individuals, as inevitably one forgets someone, but there have been many heroes in establishing and keeping that centre and bringing it to life. I must mention Jim O’Hara, who chaired the trustees through many difficult years, and his successor, Peter Power-Hynes, the vice-chair Michael Kingston, Seamus McGarry, Ivan Gibbons and the wonderful centre managers we have had, the cultural director Ros Scanlon, and David O’Keefe who sadly died too young and was replaced by William Foote, who stepped into the breach as the manager. I should also mention—I am namedropping in a big way—that among the patrons of the Irish Cultural Centre are Adrian Dunbar, Fergal

Keane, Edna O’Brien, Dara Ó Briain, the noble Lord Dubs and the former President of Ireland, Mary McAleese. That is not a bad list for a local centre, but indeed it is not just a local centre.

Of course, built on the beauty and success of the centre and what it has to offer, we have had a whole procession of Taoisigh and Tánaistí and Government Ministers from both sides as visitors over the years, but something a bit special happened this week when His Royal Highness Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall came to visit. I do not often recommend the *Daily Mail* website, but if Members go to the website they will see the heir to the throne trying out his hand at Irish dancing, drum playing and drinking a pint of Guinness. That is well worth going to see.

The centre is a great success, but let us pay tribute to all those who have made it a success over many years. I have mentioned the Irish Government, and of course one of the visitors we had for Their Royal Highnesses was Adrian O’Neill, the current ambassador, who is sadly ending his five-year posting quite soon. He and his predecessors, Daniel Mulhall and Bobby McDonagh, have been huge supporters, not just in their presence—Irish diplomats are in a different league, which is one reason why Ireland punches so much above its weight; it has the most brilliant representatives abroad who really engage in that way—but in practical and financial support and encouragement, which has been fantastic over that time.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) quite rightly mentioned the Irish Traveller community, and he does a very good job chairing the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. Unfortunately, we have seen in recent legislation, such as the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, that the Government wish to make things more difficult for Gypsies and Travellers in this country, which is shameful.

By contrast, the Irish embassy supports the Traveller community, by inviting them to the embassy and visiting them around the country. Some years ago, I went on a visit to the Dale Farm site with a secretary from the Irish embassy. I cannot imagine many other countries doing that and extending their hand in that way. The Irish embassy is making sure that the entire Irish population in this country, whatever its roots, is dealt with in that way.

I thank everybody who has come together to make the Irish community in Hammersmith such a success, most of all the community members themselves. Let us not forget those who have enabled and supported them in doing so, including people outside the community, the Irish Government and the Irish embassy. We are grateful for all that they continue to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call SNP spokesperson, Patricia Gibson.

3.26 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I begin by thanking and congratulating the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) on bringing this debate forward, about which we had an interesting chat in the Tea Room. I am delighted to lead for the Scottish National Party on this debate on the Irish in Britain. I lead as a person born in Scotland of two Irish parents,

[*Patricia Gibson*]

although both now sadly deceased. I am proud of my Irish heritage and of the fact that I am first-generation Scottish.

Like others who have spoken in this debate, I was reflecting beforehand on the huge and often overlooked influence of the good people of Ireland on the UK. As Irish immigration echoes through the generations, there are a huge number of distinguished people who have Irish ancestry. It is really quite impressive when we think of people such as Daniel Day Lewis, A J Cronin, Matt Busby, Lorraine Kelly and Jim Kerr from the band Simple Minds. There are also people such as the late Sean Connery, Gerard Butler, Tom Conti, Susan Boyle and even Billy Connolly.

There is an impressive list of those who have found success in their respective fields in the UK who, like me, have two Irish parents, such as the singer Morrissey and the late Caroline Aherne, or those who have one Irish parent, such as Steve Coogan, Paul Merton, Julie Walters and Boy George. The list could go on and on. The UK would be a very different place without the contribution of so much Irish influence in a range of important fields. The depth and range of that talent is truly remarkable.

Irish emigration, especially to the UK, has been a feature of Ireland's society for hundreds of years, so it is no surprise that the influence of the Irish diaspora is woven into the very fabric of life in every part of the UK, as well as further afield. We can see that influence has been hugely positive because of the lists of names that I and others have read out today. We can see it in the fields of singing and song writing, literature, cinema and even, dare I say it, politics.

Many Members of the House have spoken of their pride in their Irish roots. Ireland has suffered the loss of some of its brightest and best to emigration, a sad feature of Scottish society as well. However, emigration from Ireland has reduced. Increasingly we see Ireland becoming an attractive place for immigrants and its population has been growing for some years, albeit slowly.

My own parents came over from Malin Head in Donegal, which is the most northerly part of Ireland yet still in the south of the country, in the 1950s, like so many others in search of work and a better life in Glasgow. They settled in Govan, where I grew up. My father worked as a labourer while my mother devoted her life to raising her eight children, of whom I am the youngest. Sadly, in the 1950s the atmosphere and attitude the Irish encountered was not always as welcoming as it could have been, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) and others have pointed out. Thankfully, things have improved. But my mother applied for a council house in 1954, and it was not until 1982 that her patience was finally rewarded.

The poverty in which my parents lived and raised their family was scarring, as poverty so often is. Ultimately, it destroyed their health and led to their premature deaths. My father died when I was 15 months old and my mother died at the age of 54, 32 years ago. My parents could never have imagined that their daughter—the youngest of their eight children—would grow up to have the enormous privilege of securing a university education. They could never have envisaged that I would become an English teacher for 23 years and they could

absolutely never have believed that I would be elected to serve the good people of North Ayrshire and Arran—in this, or indeed any other Parliament.

Like the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), I recall going to school with a St Patrick's day medal and shamrock pinned to my school uniform—a ritual faithfully observed every year. But my story, like those of so many others in this House, is not unusual. Across much of the UK, those with Irish roots have sought to contribute and make their mark on the nations in which their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents settled—whether Scotland, England or anywhere else in the world. As my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Dave Doogan) said, the strong bonds between Scotland and Ireland are well known. Scotland can look to Ireland—a small, independent country—for both example and inspiration.

This year, 2022, is significant for Ireland as it marks 100 years of an independent, self-governing free state of Ireland. There is no doubt that the first steps of Ireland as an independent nation brought their own challenges, but surely no one can doubt that the journey, despite its challenges, has been worth it. The value of the destination has undoubtedly made the challenges of that journey worth bearing. I say that because, since her independence, Ireland has grown into a confident, prosperous country—one of the richest in Europe. Independent of the UK, it has prospered. It has a real sense of national pride and has found its place on the world stage as a confident, outward-looking, liberal, democratic, modern, prosperous and internationally respected independent nation of a similar size to Scotland. I very much echo the sentiments of the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott): prosperity and freedom are indeed linked. I look forward to her extending that sentiment to Scotland as well.

Those of us in Scotland who believe that Scotland, too, should become an independent nation see this modern island as a beacon—an example of the possibilities and potential that await Scotland when we take our future in our own hands. When Scotland does so, as I sincerely believe it will, we will, like Ireland, cultivate good relations with England, our near neighbour. We will cultivate that relationship as friends, allies and trading partners, I am sure.

Just as my Irish parents could never have imagined that their eighth child would go to university, become an English teacher and be elected to serve in Parliament, so too many would never have envisioned how far an independent Ireland has come in 100 years—how it has grown, prospered and earned the respect of its neighbours in the European Union and the wider international family of nations. Scotland can indeed learn much from Ireland's economic and social journey to the nation that it has become.

I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale for securing the debate and I wish everyone in Ireland, all those with Irish parentage in this House and beyond, and all those with Irish roots a happy St Patrick's day.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the shadow Minister without Portfolio, Conor McGinn.

3.34 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Tá áthas agus bród orm páirt a ghlacadh sa díospóireacht seo agus labhairt ar son pháirtí an Lucht Oibre—I am

delighted to be winding up the debate on behalf of the Labour party. Normally at this time on St Patrick's Day I would be up to my oxters in Guinness and beaten docketts, either at Cheltenham or in the Sheephaven Bay pub in Camden. None the less, it is a pleasure to be here in surroundings and company that might be seen as more eminent, but are definitely less craic.

Being Irish is something of which I am very proud and which is very important to me, and being Irish in Britain—this great country that has given me so many opportunities—adds another special and distinct layer to my identity and, I know, the identities of millions of other people. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) understands that deeply, and I thank him not just for securing this debate, but for his decades of work in supporting the Irish in Britain and furthering the cause of good relations between Britain and Ireland. I know that all the Members who have spoken today are similarly committed. Some of the members of the all-party parliamentary group on Ireland and the Irish in Britain—for instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and the hon. Member for Bolton North East (Mark Logan)—cannot be here today, but they also undertake such work.

I know that many of us will be thinking of our friend Jack Dromey today. He would be so proud that we are having this debate, and of course he would be actively participating in it by making what he would describe as “just seven brief points”. We also think today of many colleagues who took up the cause of the Irish in Britain at a time when it was certainly not politically advantageous, and on occasion was even personally dangerous. You and I, Madam Deputy Speaker, talk frequently of your great friend Sir Patrick Duffy, who was one such champion. I know that the whole House will want to send him our best wishes. He is the oldest living former Member of Parliament. At the age of 101, he is still active, and has written the story of his incredible life, from Mayo to NATO, in his autobiography.

Let me now turn to the subject of our community, its place here in Britain, and its role in strengthening relations between the Britain and Ireland. The first thing to say is, like British citizens in Ireland, the Irish in Britain have a special status. That has benefited us greatly, and although paths diverged when the UK left the EU, the maintenance of that unique arrangement is very welcome.

About half a million Irish-born people live in Britain. I use the term “Irish-born” specifically because, of course, many more people here have Irish parents and even more have Irish grandparents, as was mentioned by the hon. Members for Bury North (James Daly), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar). As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) and the hon. Member for Angus (Dave Doogan), the contribution made to British life by Irish people is enormous—economically, culturally, socially, in sport and, dare I even say it, politically; and also, of course, in public service.

Perhaps the last two years have shown more than ever the role of Irish people in every part of society here as we have come through the pandemic together. I am thinking of the thousands of nurses, doctors, clinicians, porters and cleaners in our national health service. I also think of the academics who researched and created

the vaccine, who included an Irishwoman, Professor Tess Lambe, and of the first person to receive it—Margaret Keenan, another Irishwoman. Then there were those in the community groups and centres, from London to Liverpool, who put their shoulder to the wheel to help those who needed that help, from providing companionship for older people to providing food parcels for families. The work of organisations such as our many Gaelic Athletic Association clubs and their volunteers was incredible, and the national charity Irish in Britain was to the fore in creating the Vaccine Le Chéile, or “Vaccine Together”, campaign to encourage take-up. I know that that community campaign was strongly supported and assisted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth).

This week alone showed me the strength, diversity and extent of the Irish community. Last week the British Irish Chamber of Commerce held one of its council meetings here in Parliament. Over the weekend the Taoiseach paid a visit, and was hosted in the City of London by the Lord Mayor, Alderman Vincent Keaveney, the first Irish citizen to have that role. On Sunday, the Liverpool Irish Centre hosted a lunch for Irish pensioners—and there are quite a few of them in Ireland's 33rd county of Merseyside, including some in my own constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson). On Monday morning I went with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition to the London Irish Centre, which provides welfare support and advice for those in our community who need its help and assistance, while the arts-related and cultural side of its work showcases the best of our music, language, drama and literature.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I could not be here for this debate because I had a debate in Westminster Hall that I had sponsored. I want to add my support for the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and the others who have spoken in the debate and for what they are trying to achieve. I am pleased to be supporting it through this intervention. Could I also ask a question? Would the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) support the request that I and others have made for the Republic of Ireland to join the Commonwealth?

Conor McGinn: I have a great deal of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says. He tempts me to stray into policy areas that are not mine, so I will pass on his comments to the shadow Foreign Secretary and ask for a response. But it was a nice try!

The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that, just on Tuesday, Their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), visited the Irish cultural centre in Hammersmith. I think they were even persuaded to take up the bodhran and play their part in an impromptu music session. Yesterday here in Parliament I was proud to co-host an event for parliamentarians with the Irish ambassador and CHAMP, the peace and reconciliation organisation. And of course today, on St Patrick's day itself, we are having this debate.

The position and prominence of our community has arguably never been stronger, but we have come through tough times and the impact of the troubles was felt

[Conor McGinn]

acutely by the Irish community here. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) said, many were shunned and subjected to anti-Irish racism, personally and through the press. We know about the prominent miscarriages of justice, but we also remember the treatment of the wider community as a suspect community and the impact of legislation such as the Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act 1974.

I am sure the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) would agree that, outside Northern Ireland, no group of people have benefited more from, or been more supportive of, the peace process and good relations between the UK and Ireland than the Irish in Britain. We still face challenges, however. We know that many of our fellow Irish in Britain still suffer health inequalities, for example, with higher rates of cancers and increasing mental health conditions. I know that the Minister has a keen interest in this. The Government have a duty to address that in the same way they would for other communities.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Does the hon. Member agree that the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill is a direct challenge to the recognition of the profound issues faced by the Irish Traveller community? This relates not only to Irish Travellers but to Irish citizens who travel through the common travel area. Perhaps he might challenge the Minister on that as well.

Conor McGinn: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I recognise and acknowledge the incredibly challenging work that he does to speak up in this House for Irish Travellers, and I hope he knows that he has my full support in that task, as does the Irish Traveller community.

We know that the impact of the UK leaving the EU has meant that there have been, and will be, testing times for the relationship between Ireland and Britain. The Irish community here has a distinctive role in helping to bridge those gaps and divisions when they arise and in ensuring that all of us in positions of political leadership strive to maintain the forward momentum of strong co-operation between two countries who should always be each other's greatest allies. In that regard, I want to commend the work of the Irish embassy here, under the stewardship of Ambassador Adrian O'Neill. I am also delighted that new consulates have been established in Cardiff and Edinburgh and in the north of England.

The Irish in Britain, like everyone, feel an affinity and sense of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. We can have no idea of what they are suffering, but many in our community have at least a sense of what it is to leave home, to miss home and to love their country. That is why it was so moving to see the local Ukrainian community take part in a St Patrick's day event with my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) at the Irish world heritage centre in Manchester as our honoured guests. Our Ukrainian friends also helped to lead the St Patrick's day parade in London. We will continue to be their strongest allies and supporters.

I conclude by saying what I said in my maiden speech some six years ago, which I feel still holds today despite all the ups and downs, challenges and changes. Where previously there was suspicion and mistrust, today there is friendship and co-operation between the United Kingdom and Ireland. There is no longer any contradiction in being Irish and British, or in having feelings of loyalty and affinity to both countries. The contribution made by the Irish in Britain to society here has helped to make that possible. It is valued and respected and it has helped to make this country the great nation it is. My home, head and heart are in Ireland and England, in south Armagh and St Helens. I am lucky, and all the better for it. Féile Pádraig sona daoibh go léir.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), who is a friend as well as a colleague.

I thank the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) for securing this timely debate on St Patrick's day, and I am delighted to respond. Unfortunately, I will perpetuate the stereotype, because I am second-generation Irish and my parents came from Ireland in the 1950s, my dad as a builder and my mum as a nurse. They came here not by choice but by necessity, because times were hard in Ireland. Many people left for Britain, Australia or America, and many never returned home—it was a difficult time.

Many colleagues mentioned that the welcome for the Irish in Britain was not always warm. My parents faced signs in windows refusing entry to Irish people looking for accommodation. They faced difficult, tough times. My dad, as a builder, did not benefit from the health and safety legislation and employment rights that we have today. We have a lot for which to thank the generation who went before us and who created the community here in Britain.

The community in this country takes many forms, such as the county associations that do tremendous work bringing together people from the same county. As young girls, we were all forced to go to Irish dancing lessons whether or not we were any good, and we travelled the country to take part in feises. The GAA's Gaelic football teams join communities together, as does the traditional Irish music scene, which we missed tremendously during lockdown when we were not able to listen to traditional music in our local communities.

The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) mentioned the work of publications such as *The Irish Post* and *The Irish World*, which I, too, was forced to read every week. I did not win many medals for Irish dancing, so my picture was rarely in *The Irish Post*, but we still read it every week.

Every summer holiday we made the annual pilgrimage to Ireland to catch up with grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. It rained a lot and we did not get much of a suntan, but we enjoyed our visits and would bring home Tayto crisps, Kimberley biscuits and Barry's tea—other products are available—to take a bit of Ireland with us to keep those memories burning. Things have changed: Tayto crisps now come in more than one flavour. The new generation of Irish in Britain come here for very different reasons. They come not out of necessity but

out of choice, and they are able to make a positive contribution to our country in so many ways, as many hon. Members have highlighted today.

The impact and influence of Irish men and women has been woven into Britain for a very long time. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) touched on the contribution of his family during the second world war, when Irish citizens served in the British armed forces. Irish citizens also helped literally to rebuild this country after the war. They built roads, railways, homes and factories to get this country back on its feet. People like my dad contributed to that and played a huge part in this country's future.

The Irish have also made a significant contribution to art and culture, whether it is Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, as the hon. Member for Rochdale highlighted, or broadcasters such as Sir Terry Wogan on the radio and television. My favourite Bond, on Her Majesty's secret service, was played by Pierce Brosnan.

The Irish have also contributed through sport. We have the captain of the England cricket team, and he is doing a tremendous job, but British talent has also been exported to Ireland in the shape of Jackie Charlton, who led Ireland to that famous penalty shoot-out in the 1990 World cup. As an Arsenal fan, I am ashamed to say that I did not think David O'Leary would score that penalty—we all breathed a collective sigh of relief when he did.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The Minister has the opportunity to answer the question I posed in my speech about the culture and diversity of language, whether it be a guid Scots Ulster leid in yer tongue or the Irish language Act, which was promised in the St Andrews agreement. Will she say something about the opportunities to build on that and bring it forward?

Maria Caulfield: I was going to touch on that, but I shall come to it now. The Government's preference is that the Northern Ireland Executive bring forward the legislation in the Northern Ireland Assembly, but in the absence of any progress on that the UK Government have been taking the necessary steps to introduce the legislation in Parliament. The legislation will faithfully deliver what was agreed in the New Decade, New Approach commitments on identity, language and culture. It will provide for the status of the Irish language and the development of the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition, and create the two commissioners and an office of identity and cultural expression, as negotiated with the Executive. Therefore, we want the Northern Ireland Executive to legislate, but the Government are committed to introducing the legislation if progress is not made.

With such a broad and significant influence on the fabric of Britain, it is extremely pleasing that we are able to celebrate with this debate today and to acknowledge that our relationship with the Irish Government has been critical in establishing and protecting the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland. I grew up in this country during some of the troubles and it was not easy for my generation either. Here we were seen as Irish people living in England, but when we went back for our summer holidays, we were English people in Ireland. Having an identity was difficult, because we actually belonged nowhere. With the progress made in the Good

Friday agreement and the Anglo-Irish agreement, peace, as the shadow Minister said, brought as much resolution for us as an Irish community here as it did to many parts of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. When there are celebrations of the peace agreement, we celebrate the hard work of people such as David Trimble, Gerry Adams, Martin McGuinness, Bill Clinton, George Mitchell, Bertie Ahern and Tony Blair, but we never mention my absolute heroine, Mo Mowlam. She did so much to bring those parties together—people who just would not get in a room and talk—throwing her wig on the table and banging heads together. I want to pay tribute to her, because she is the unsung heroine of the peace process and her legacy definitely lives on.

The Irish Government have remained an ally in maintaining peace and stability in Northern Ireland, and have played important roles as interlocutors in the subsequent agreements, such as the St Andrews agreement in 2007 and the recent New Decade, New Approach agreement in 2020. We greatly value that relationship, and the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach met only last weekend in London, ahead of the Ireland-England rugby match. Perhaps it was best that that meeting was before the match, rather than after it. I have a foot in both camps, so my team always wins, but the loyalty of the SNP may be tested on Saturday when Ireland could win the triple crown if it is successful against Scotland—we await that match with interest.

The Belfast agreement established structures to encourage and foster a strong relationship between the UK Government and the Irish Government. We will see a great example of that next week at the meeting of the British-Irish intergovernmental conference in Dublin, which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will co-chair with Minister Simon Coveney. I want to reassure colleagues in all parts of the House that the UK Government are committed to upholding and promoting the principles of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, which has provided the framework for Northern Ireland to prosper and develop. As someone who has seen in my lifetime the changes and challenges faced by the Irish community, in my parents' generation, my generation and the generation who are coming through right now, I see a bright future for British-Irish relationships and their going from strength to strength. We have shown how, together, we can get through the challenges of the past, and how today we have shared values and connected communities and the aspiration for future peace and prosperity on the island of Ireland. Once again, I want to wish everyone a very happy St Patrick's Day.

3.54 pm

Tony Lloyd: This has been a great debate. It has been a celebration—not simply of people who are very proud of their own claim to part of Ireland but, much more than that, of the role that the Irish have played. As the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who spoke on behalf of the SNP, rightly said: what would we be had the Irish not been here? Ours would have been a very different country.

People have rightly touched on the difficult times—the “No Irish, no blacks, no dogs” signs that were part of my city and my upbringing. Fortunately, we are now a long way from that. I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) that I have a friend, whose father was Jamaican and

[Tony Lloyd]

mother was Irish, who once said to me, “You know, the Jamaicans and the Irish are very similar—it’s just that on the Jamaican side of me I’ve got sunshine.” The rain in Ireland keeps it green, as it keeps large parts of Britain green.

This is a day of celebration, as St Patrick’s day always is. I will not speak for too much longer, as I do not want to keep my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) away from either the Guinness or the races.

I join the appeal of the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) in respect of the specific problems faced by Irish Travellers. It is an important issue that we should recognise on this day of celebration.

I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Kim Johnson) that it was of course the Irish who built the Manchester ship canal, which enabled the Guinness boat to travel up from Dublin. That made sure that for a long time we had Dublin Guinness in Manchester, not simply that from London.

My final point is simply this. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made an important point about the role of the Irish embassy, as did my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North. I pay tribute to the current ambassador, Adrian O’Neill. He has had a difficult time with covid and, without getting into the issues of Brexit, it has been a rocky few years since the referendum. It is in all our interests to make sure that we re-establish that good relationship. It is good for the Irish in Ireland, good for the British in Britain and good for the Irish in Britain. On this day of celebration, let us look forward to better times for all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): It has been a real pleasure to be in the Chair for this debate and to hear so many good friends spoken of in such warm terms—especially Sir Patrick Duffy who, as the shadow Cabinet member and hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) said, is the oldest living former MP. He is my constituent and a very dear friend. I spoke to him this morning and he was in fine form. He received a lovely letter from Mr Speaker on his 101st birthday last year. I wish him and everyone else a very happy St Patrick’s day. I also wish Sir Patrick a very happy birthday for his forthcoming 102nd birthday.

That was probably a complete abuse of my position, but nevertheless I wanted to do it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Irish diaspora in Britain.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before we come to the next Backbench Business debate, I reiterate that the statement from the Transport Minister will come immediately after that debate. If the debate finishes before 5 o’clock, the statement will be not at 5 o’clock but immediately after the debate.

Paid Miscarriage Leave

3.58 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to introduce paid miscarriage leave; notes that in the UK, two weeks parental bereavement leave and pay is in place after stillbirth, however there is no such support for anyone who has experienced a miscarriage before 24 weeks of pregnancy; believes that miscarriage is an extremely traumatic experience and that more support should be provided to families that experience such a loss; understands that the New Zealand Parliament unanimously approved legislation to give people who experience a miscarriage paid leave, no matter what stage a loss of pregnancy occurs; and further believes that the Government should follow suit and provide paid leave for people that experience miscarriage and allow families to grieve for their profound loss.

I am extremely grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important debate in the Chamber. I am also grateful to the Members in attendance today, to those who spoke passionately in last week’s Westminster Hall debate and to colleagues from across the House who backed my private Member’s Bill, many of whom have supported this issue for some time. Many thanks also go to the fantastic organisations that advocate for greater support for those who experience the trauma of miscarriage, including the Miscarriage Association, Mumsnet, Sands, the Ectopic Pregnancy Trust and many more. I also put on record my appreciation for the 40,000 people who have signed the petition calling for paid miscarriage leave and for those from all over the UK who have contacted their MPs to ask them to back the campaign.

This is an important issue that has cross-party support. I am only sorry that the debate falls on a Thursday when the Chamber is less populated than usual, but, given that many Members support the motion, I hope that we will see more progress from the Minister today.

One thing that has struck me throughout the campaign is the brave men and women who have told their story of loss to try to help others, and who have campaigned every day so that others do not have to suffer in silence, as they did. I wish to share one such story today. A constituent of mine said that

“it is not just the physical pain of that moment—it is the emotional pain that lingers.”

Those are the words of my constituent from Carlisle, who bravely shared her experiences with me last week. When she miscarried, she was the only woman working in her office—all her colleagues were men—and felt totally powerless to talk about her experience. Not only did she not feel comfortable seeking time off work, but she simply did not feel able to tell anyone in her workplace about what had happened to her. She spoke to me not only of the physical loss of the miscarriage, but of the mental impact of that loss. She said:

“You need time to recover from the physical element of what you have experienced. It can take its toll on the body. But I found the mental effects to be much worse. When you get the news that you’re pregnant, it is such a joyous time. You share it with friends and family, and you prepare yourself for the imminent arrival. So when you never held your baby, you still feel that it has been taken away from you. It is a loss and something that I mourned. Before I returned home from hospital, I made sure that my husband got rid of all the baby items that we had bought—clothes, toys, everything. I felt totally unsupported. I took a sick day on the

Friday when it took place and was back at work on Monday as if nothing had happened. I don't understand why there is just nothing in place to support women in these times of trauma."

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this matter forward. I have always supported her in her objective of trying to achieve this. I was there to support her when she had a debate in Westminster Hall. I am ever mindful of the fact that my mother had a number of miscarriages. She was back at work, as the hon. Lady mentioned, within days. My sister had them as well and was back at work very quickly. I had a staff member who had two miscarriages and she was also back at work very quickly. Does the hon. Lady not agree that the fathers of these wee lives also have a right to mourn, and that any paid miscarriage leave must also recognise the daddy and allow him to know that society does not expect him to carry on as if his whole world has not been completely shaken as well?

Angela Crawley: Absolutely. I thank the hon. Member for his point—a point that I was about to make myself.

The fact is that, for too many parents, the loss of a pregnancy is seen as a woman's issue. It is seen as something that affects only the mother. Sadly, too often, it is the fathers and the partners who lose out on that recognition of their loss and the ability to take leave. The loss of a pregnancy at any stage can be truly devastating, and, sadly, for some families, this experience may happen to them more than once, compounding the trauma of their loss. Without that recognition, the hopes and dreams that they had for their little life are gone—that is it. There are no legal rights, no forms of bereavement leave or pay, and, quite simply, no recognition that their little life existed.

One in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage and the experience of my constituent is not unique; it is shared by thousands of people every year. In a recent survey on miscarriage in the workplace, Mumsnet reported that there had been an increase in the number of women who labelled their experiences as poor or very poor—21%, up from 17% in 2019. Thousands of respondents cited a lack of support from their employer and a fifth of women said that they would have liked to take time off work following their miscarriage, but that they did not feel able to ask. These are incredibly difficult conversations to have with employers, and, just as my constituent highlighted, many women are simply not comfortable to do so or to share these experiences, and we are hearing the same experiences repeated time and again.

The Minister was right to say last week in the debate that good employers will take the appropriate action and treat the situation sensitively, giving staff the appropriate leave when required. However, the legislation that I propose is not only for employers; it is for the families up and down the country who cannot disclose a miscarriage, who feel pressured into going back to work too soon, and who feel shamed into silence. The Mumsnet survey showed that a resounding 96% of respondents supported the introduction of three days' paid leave following a miscarriage. I repeat that number: 96% of survey respondents who had recently had a miscarriage said they would support the motion in the House today for paid miscarriage leave. One respondent said:

"I felt pressure to be back and didn't allow myself any grieving time. It didn't do me any good."

Another added:

"You are replaceable at work. Your health and well-being for life should be a priority and workplaces need to change their attitudes and sickness policies, not make us burn the candle at both ends to fit into their policies. It's pregnancy related anyway and shouldn't be counted within sickness policy."

While the updated ACAS guidance recommends that employers should consider offering time off, there is no legal right to paid leave and no statutory requirement for employers to allow it. We are seeing more and more employers implement policies, and that is welcome. Many workplaces have introduced a dedicated policy of miscarriage leave, one of the many ways employers can give meaningful support to their staff at that difficult time. However, leaving the provision at the discretion of employers is driving inequality across the board. Too many workers are left without the support they deserve because paid leave is not statutory.

Comprehensive policies of paid miscarriage leave have been introduced in nations such as New Zealand and Australia, and just last month the Northern Ireland Assembly legislated to introduce paid miscarriage leave, making it the first place in Europe to do so. The Scottish Government have pledged to provide three days' paid leave following miscarriage, but the right to extend that provision to the private sector is reserved to this place.

While I recognise that three days' paid leave, or even two weeks, may not be enough, it is a meaningful recognition of the loss and the grief. We should aim to support our workforce adequately and adopt recognised international best practice. A UK-wide policy of paid miscarriage leave would ensure that parents receive the support they deserve in this tragic time, and that no one falls through the cracks of the existing system.

The Government's much-awaited employment Bill still appears to be some way from Parliament. Ahead of that Bill, the Taylor review of modern working practices has highlighted the changing demographics of the workplace and the need for a comprehensive employment law. There are more women in work now than ever before, and women's participation in the workplace has been growing quicker than men's over the past two decades.

Central to the Taylor review is the idea of putting employee health and wellbeing at the forefront of future employment legislation. That must include the provision of paid miscarriage leave. We must ensure that employment law protects and supports employees through such a serious life event. I do not believe the current legislation gives enough support to women and their partners through the experience of pregnancy loss in the workplace.

Indeed, I have asked the Minister when the employment Bill will be brought to the House and received no definitive answer. Families cannot wait for legislation that is not yet on the horizon. There is enough support across the House to bring forward a separate Bill on this issue, and I urge the Minister to introduce paid miscarriage leave.

Last Tuesday in the debate in Westminster Hall I raised the issue with the Minister once again. The response we heard was underwhelming. The Government continue to insist that sick pay or annual leave are acceptable provisions for those who experience miscarriage. They are not. Grief is not a holiday and it is not an illness. That response is offensive and unsustainable.

[Angela Crawley]

The Minister highlighted the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018 as evidence of action the Government have taken on this issue, but that Act does not make provision for those who experience a loss before 23 weeks and six days. Parents who experience the loss of a pregnancy before 24 weeks have no statutory right to paid leave, and that is wrong.

As many hon. Members will know, I have been campaigning on this issue for some time. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who first introduced the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill. When the Act came into effect, it secured two weeks' leave for parents who experienced that loss after 24 weeks, but, as I said, there is nothing in place for parents before that time.

The Minister's sympathy and understanding are welcome, but they are not enough. We must do more to ensure that all parents who experience the loss of a pregnancy are protected with such provision and to extend paid leave to those who experience a loss prior to 24 weeks. A specific statutory provision for paid miscarriage leave should not only cover the women experiencing the miscarriage, but their partners. It would also give a signal to those experiencing pregnancy loss that they have permission to grieve.

This is about more than changing policy; it is about changing workplace culture in the UK to account for real-life issues that affect the workforce. By legislating for this provision in employment law, we can help to tackle the stigma associated with miscarriage and facilitate a wider discussion on improved care.

I thank all the parents who have shared their stories of loss and grief with me in the pursuit of policy change. Pregnancy loss happens all too often, and sadly it ruins and destroys the joy that many expectant parents have. When pregnancy loss occurs, it is not only the loss of the pregnancy but of the hope and the dreams that expectant parents have, and it is an incredibly difficult time.

I urge the Minister to reconsider the Government's stance and invite him to meet me once again to discuss how we can move this debate forward. It is unacceptable that parents should have to take sick leave or annual leave; they are not sick and they are not on holiday. For too long, parents have suffered without the support they need and deserve. We must recognise the grief and loss that parents who experience pregnancy loss before 24 weeks face. I urge the Government to give serious consideration to introducing paid miscarriage leave across the UK and to support my motion here today.

4.10 pm

Allan Dorans (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to support my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and to speak in favour of her Bill.

Currently, legislation exists for paid parental bereavement leave where a baby is stillborn after the 24th week of pregnancy, but no such provision is made where a miscarriage occurs before that time at any stage during the pregnancy. The Bill would right that wrong. Whereas this debate will quite rightly focus on the care and rights of women, there are others who are clearly affected by

these circumstances. I therefore wish to speak particularly from the perspective of the father or partnership in the relationship.

In a BBC report in September 2021, a woman who had lost her baby at only nine weeks said about the possibility of paid leave:

"I think a lot of people would find paid leave very useful because it would give them time to be there with their partners who are going through a difficult experience."

It is understandable, given her traumatic experience, that she sees paid leave for her partner as being useful, essentially, for the mother. I am not suggesting that she was unaware of the shared nature of the trauma, but it reveals a common view that can obscure the suffering of fathers or partners. More recently, in an STV report in January 2022, a woman who had lost 10 unborn babies revealed her awareness of how vital it is for both parents to be allowed the time to understand what they have gone through, and regretted that she and her partner had not had time for themselves because they could not afford not to work. In a recent American research study report based on 386 partners, speaking of the effects of a miscarriage on a partner, an experienced senior social worker commented:

"We often deny and dismiss partners' vulnerable feelings of loss and sadness. It's very easy then for partners' often subtle feelings of grief to get lost in the more obvious and physical experience of loss their partner has experienced."

There is, regrettably, little research on the emotional reactions of partners after miscarriage. However, a study by University College London in 2014, with 160 partners, found as many as 85% suffering grief, sadness and shock, with nearly half of them saying it had caused sleep problems and had affected their work. Sadly, perhaps because of the need to return to work immediately, a quarter did not talk about their feelings at all with their partners, and nearly half did not share their full feelings for fear, they said, of causing their partner further upset. An earlier American study in 2010 found that couples who did not find the time to openly discuss the loss with each other were more likely to break up as a consequence. Current NHS UK advice on coping with a miscarriage reinforces the importance of partners being able to express their feelings openly, even, or perhaps especially, when they hold a more traditional view that their main role is to support the mother.

More recent research by University College London in 2020 suggests that for some the problems can be even more serious. Of 192 cases studied, 34% of the women suffered symptoms that could be described as post-traumatic stress disorder. While partners do not appear to suffer post-traumatic stress disorder as often as the mother, the research points out that with about 250,000 miscarriages in the UK every year, there could still be many thousands of partners living with it and requiring help and support.

All of this points to a need for greater attention and care for partners, but I feel sure it also points to the importance of paid leave and pay, regardless of the stage of pregnancy in which the miscarriage occurs. That would enable both partners to have the time to discuss fully with each other the shared trauma they have experienced and where necessary make arrangements for further medical assessment and treatment, free of the pressure to return to work.

The Scottish Government are committed to three days of paid leave for parents in the public sector who suffer miscarriage at any point during the pregnancy.

While the Bill asks initially for only three days of paid leave, it is hoped that, as we become a more enlightened society, the Government will recognise the benefits not only to the couples and families involved, but to society in general, and in due course consider extending the three days of paid leave even further. However, as the matter is reserved to Westminster, it cannot be imposed on the private sector without UK Government legislation. With full fiscal autonomy, countries such as New Zealand and Australia have already put in place paid leave for all parents affected by miscarriage at whatever point the tragedy takes place. The Northern Ireland Assembly has also recently given a commitment to introduce paid miscarriage leave following a consultation, with the policy due to come into force no later than April 2026.

In conclusion, it is time for the United Kingdom to have the vision to support this Bill, and I therefore urge the Government to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Just before we start the wind-ups, I would like to say that, as the House knows, there will be a statement following this debate on P&O Ferries. It was anticipated that it would come at 5 o'clock. It is now likely to be way before 5 o'clock, so any Members wishing to take part in that statement should make their way to the Chamber now.

4.16 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate. I wish we had more time today to discuss this matter, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Allan Dorans), too, who made a fine contribution. It will come as no surprise to the House that I will be supporting both my colleagues and what they have done.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East for the petition, which called on the UK Government to introduce at least three days of paid miscarriage leave for parents who lose a baby before 24 weeks of pregnancy. It received more than 40,000 signatures, which suggests that there is support among the wider public. On 21 June last year, she presented a private Member's Bill to change the law, which has its Second Reading tomorrow. She also secured a Westminster Hall debate on the issue on 8 March 2022, and there have been two early-day motions, one on "Miscarriage leave and employment policy", and another on "Miscarriage leave in Northern Ireland", which have been supported by Members from all parts of the House.

Mention has been made of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who led on the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill in 2018, which came into effect in April 2019. That secured two weeks of paid leave for all parents who lost a child up to the age of 18. She also launched a ten-minute rule Bill to make provision about leave and pay for employees where a close family member has died, and that is scheduled for Second Reading. My colleagues have a strong record on this area and I am proud to be associated with them. They have my full support.

Miscarriage is the most common kind of pregnancy loss, affecting around one in four pregnancies. The loss of a baby at any stage of pregnancy is an unimaginable tragedy, and our sympathies are with families who have

suffered a baby loss. In the UK, the definition applies to pregnancies up to 23 weeks and 6 days. Any loss from 24 weeks is called a stillbirth. If the baby is born alive, even before 24 weeks, and lives even for a matter of minutes, that is considered a live birth and a neonatal death.

There is no statutory entitlement to leave for anyone who loses a baby before 24 weeks. Will the Minister consider that matter? As he knows, I have pursued him regularly and rigorously in many debates covering his brief about the long-awaited employment Bill—we have waited at least four years for it. It will cover a host of issues, as he will be aware, not just those around the Taylor review, and could help many workers.

Too many workers are left without support due to cracks in the current system, which leaves paid provision of leave at the discretion of employers and can result in discrimination against parents in low-paid and part-time work. That is why it is vital for the Minister to carefully consider the call that my hon. Friends the Members for Lanark and Hamilton East and for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock have made today for paid miscarriage leave.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock touched on, the SNP Scottish Government are committed to matching the laws that have been introduced in New Zealand and introducing three days of paid miscarriage leave in the public sector in Scotland. That will be welcome, but as has been said, to introduce paid miscarriage leave in the private sector requires legislation in this place. I think there is support on both sides of the House to ensure that that happens.

The Scottish Government have committed to establishing a dignified and compassionate miscarriage service by the end of 2023, including by ensuring that maternity units have dedicated facilities for women who are experiencing unexpected pregnancy complications. As part of delivering that commitment, a scoping exercise will shortly be issued across all 14 health boards to help to establish current service provision for miscarriage care and the support that is available to women who experience unexpected pregnancy complications.

In addition, the Scottish Government are listening to the voices of those providing miscarriage services, women who have experienced miscarriage and organisations who support them through a series of roundtable discussions. I hope that the Minister has listened carefully to what my hon. Friends have said. I am sure that we will have support from the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I hope that the Minister will look positively at what we think is a sensible measure to introduce a policy of paid miscarriage leave across these islands.

4.22 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing and leading the debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I pay tribute to her campaigning on the issue, which has helped to put the matter firmly on the political agenda.

Understandably, it is sometimes difficult for us to talk about such issues, but as we have seen with the now annual baby loss debates, raising these subjects in an informed and sensitive way is a good way to challenge existing rules and assumptions and to make change

[Justin Madders]

happen. We know that any change of the type that we are talking about would help the thousands of parents who experience pregnancy loss every year. Of course it cannot reduce the pain and sense of loss that they experience, but by removing one barrier that they will face during the grieving process, I hope that it will prove to be of some use.

As hon. Members have said, pregnancy loss at any stage of pregnancy is a major source of grief and can have a significant impact on the emotional and mental health and wellbeing of women and their partners. We know that women who have experienced baby loss are at a higher risk of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. As we have heard, a survey carried out by the Baby Loss Awareness Week Alliance in 2019 found that 60% of parents who experienced pregnancy or baby loss said that they would have liked specialist psychological support for their mental health but were unable to access it on the NHS. We need to do better than that. We need to ensure that support is accessible to all women who have lost a baby and that the needs of their partners are also addressed.

Nearly two years ago, the Government introduced parental bereavement leave and pay for employed parents who lose a child under the age of 18 or who suffer a stillbirth from 24 weeks of pregnancy, but current legal provisions cover only those parents who lose a pregnancy from 24 weeks. There is no current entitlement to bereavement leave for a miscarriage, which is medically defined as a loss of pregnancy before the 24th week. If a pregnant person, their partner or a person receiving a surrogate loses a child before 24 weeks, only the pregnant person is entitled to leave, and that is only for the physical illness or sickness that they face.

In a recent debate on this matter, the Government pointed to other statutory provisions such as statutory sick pay for women unable to return to work because of ill health following a miscarriage, but, as we have heard from Members today, that is not adequate and does not provide the right support to women and their partners who experience pregnancy loss. Loss is loss whether it is at week 12, 18 or 24 of a pregnancy. The need to grieve will still be there.

However, looking at this on the basis that loss before 24 weeks is treated at the moment as sickness absence—putting aside whether that is the correct classification for such absence, and I think we can all acknowledge that a powerful case is being made that it is not—we all know that statutory sick pay is woeful. The rate is among the worst in Europe and it is not available to all workers. As we have seen during the pandemic, it is very hard for those on low wages, in insecure work, or the self-employed to access proper support when they are sick. Indeed, the Government have said they know sick pay needs to be looked at, so I hope the Minister can do so.

The Minister has previously suggested that in these situations annual leave could be used for miscarriage leave. The grieving process is of course not in any way remotely comparable to a holiday. For those suffering a loss, it is not something they would choose to do if they could avoid it, so I ask the Minister to think again about whether it is appropriate to ask people who have gone through such a traumatic experience to take a holiday. Is that the correct way to classify their grief?

The truth is that neither of the current statutory provisions is adequate. Bereavement is not an illness and it is certainly not a holiday. That is why Labour has committed to a right to introduce bereavement leave. We know that others support that. The chief executive of Sands, the Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Charity, said that miscarriage leave should be statutory. Indeed, as we have heard, in many places, it is: New Zealand and Australia have recently introduced paid miscarriage leave policies. Closer to home, following a public consultation, the Northern Ireland Assembly has legislated to introduce paid miscarriage leave by April 2026. As has been highlighted, Northern Ireland is leading the way not just in the UK but in Europe on this policy. Several companies including the Co-op and Channel 4 and trade unions such as the GMB have introduced miscarriage policies and periods of leave for all women who have experienced a miscarriage. We all applaud those employers for their forward-thinking policies, but can we all agree that the lottery of who you are employed by should not determine whether you are entitled to such leave? We should also reflect on whether Members, as employers, should be looking to make changes in this area. It is important that we recognise that, while there is some good practice out there, leaving it to employers to decide will lead to inequality and that, without statutory provision or legal rights to back up what is being asked for today, not everyone will receive the support they require.

We also know that there is considerable support among others for this change. Sixty-five organisations, representing 69,000 employees, have signed the Miscarriage Association pregnancy loss pledge, which

“asks that employers endeavour to create a supportive work environment, understand and implement the rules around pregnancy-related leave, have a policy or guidance in place and support people and their partners back to work.”

In a debate earlier this month, which has been referred to, the Minister agreed that those principles sounded like a “very sensible” approach “that employers should take”, but he also acknowledged that not all employers do that. If he acknowledges this support is not available to all, he must surely recognise that it is incumbent on his Government to do something to address that. We hope to hear him say today that there will be a commitment to equalising entitlement to bereavement leave to protect all parents from being forced to go into work when dealing with the loss of a baby, no matter at what stage of the pregnancy it takes place.

I think we can all agree that creating a supportive environment in these situations is important. Without it, parents may not want to disclose their pregnancy loss to their employer. That is a difficult conversation to have at any time with an employer. Parents can do without the added stress and anxiety of having to raise and possibly even negotiate a period of leave with their employer. To compound that feeling, they might have justifiable fears of workplace discrimination and so not raise the matter at all, with the result that they end up suffering alone, in silence, without receiving the support that they need at a difficult time.

I am sure we will hear the Government say they intend to bring in employment measures when parliamentary time allows, but, as the Minister knows, the scheduling of legislation is up to them, so the time is in their gift. In the last couple of years, we have seen

dozens of Acts of Parliament and thousands of statutory instruments, so it is a question of priority. The 2019 Queen's Speech had the promise of an employment Bill, but that was dropped by the time of the 2021 Queen's Speech. I hope that does not represent a downgrading of the Government's commitment to tackling the issue. Surely any Government committed to tacking and improving rights at work would want to do so at the earliest opportunity. As we will no doubt hear shortly in the statement on P&O Ferries, employment laws in this country are in desperate need of an upgrade.

To conclude, will the Minister set out when he will bring the employment Bill forward, and whether he will consider putting within it the provisions that we have debated?

4.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate, following the debate that we had in Westminster Hall, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to discuss this important and sensitive issue. It is so important that we hear the examples that she mentioned. We must give our sympathies to people who have lost a much-wanted baby at any stage of their pregnancy, including through miscarriage, and always reach out to them and support them. She spoke with much passion, as she always does on this issue, and I am grateful for her continued work to raise awareness of the significant impact of baby loss at any stage on those parents. I also thank everybody who contributed to the debate and supports the discussions around baby loss.

The hon. Member asked what the Government are doing to support people following a miscarriage. I am pleased to say that we have support in place for both employers and employees, to guide employers to do the right thing by their staff and to protect employees when they need to take time off. I have talked about how losing a baby at any stage is devastating and how those people need their employers to respond with compassion.

I want to set out briefly the wider work that the Government are talking forward on women's health, including in the workplace, because this is integral to the strategy. In March 2021, we announced the establishment of England's first women's health strategy, led by the Department of Health and Social Care. Health in the workplace, fertility, pregnancy, pregnancy loss and post-natal support will be priority areas in that strategy. As we have heard, damaging taboos and stigmas remain around many areas of women's health, and they can prevent women from starting conversations about their health or seeking support for a health issue, whether through medical help or help from their employers. When women do speak about their health, all too often they are not listened to. We are determined to tackle those issues. Women need to feel supported in the workplace, and those taboos are broken down through open conversation.

Our vision for the women's health strategy, which was published on 23 December 2021, sets out an ambitious and positive new agenda to improve the health and wellbeing of women across England. We will publish the full strategy later this year.

The Government have an active agenda on work and health more widely. One example of that is our response to the "Health is everyone's business" consultation published in July 2021, which sets out measures that we will take to protect and maintain progress made to reduce ill health and related job loss and to see 1 million more disabled people in work from 2017 to 2027. Those measures are part of the wider support system that I mentioned and are key steps in our effort to change the workplace culture around health and sickness absence. Changing that culture through opening up conversations in the workplace will benefit anyone who has health issues at work, including those who have lost a pregnancy.

So far I have talked about physical health, but for some people the feelings of grief and loss associated with a miscarriage are overwhelming and have an impact on their mental health. Our excellent national health service is there to support individuals when such feelings are particularly debilitating, or are likely to have a longer-term impact on their mental or physical health. We are expanding access to psychological and talking therapies within specialist perinatal mental health services, with 26 hubs due to open by April 2022. The hubs will offer treatment for a range of mental health issues, as well as bereavement services.

As part of the Government's commitment to build back better, we published our mental health recovery action plan, which is backed by an additional £500 million this financial year to ensure we have the right support in place. That is in addition to the £2.3 billion of additional funding we are investing in mental health services by 2023-24. We also remain committed to achieving parity between mental and physical health services and reducing mental health inequalities. We are making good progress, with investment in NHS mental health services continuing to increase each year from £11 billion in 2015-16 to £14.3 billion in 2020-21.

I know that the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) is specifically interested in, and always speaks passionately about, a leave entitlement for miscarriage. Parental bereavement leave and pay may not be that entitlement, but it does two important things. First, it supports parents who have suffered that tragic unimaginable loss we have talked about. Secondly, it sets a statutory baseline for employers, sending an important message that the Government expect employers to support their staff following any type of bereavement. That bereavement leave is available to parents who have lost a child under 18 or who have suffered a stillbirth after 24 weeks. That definition of stillbirth is a clinical one.

Miscarriage is undoubtedly a very personal experience and some people affected may want to stay at home, while others may prefer to continue to work or alternatively need time off later. That is why the Government support employers and employees to have those conversations about what is happening in their lives and what support they need, giving them the flexibility to have that approach. Employers are best-placed to understand their own people and to develop a solution that works for the individual.

There are really good examples of companies treating their employees with compassion and going beyond the statutory minimum we set. That is valuable to the employer as well as to the employee. Increased loyalty to employees can improve the retention rate. There is a

[Paul Scully]

bottom-line argument for employers, because after investing time in people it seems daft to then not give them the flexibility to keep them within the workforce. Rewarding them well will keep them productive if they feel a valued member of the team.

We heard about the pregnancy loss pledge, which is an excellent example of exactly what I have been saying: encouraging employers to show empathy and understanding towards people experiencing pregnancy loss, and having a supportive work environment where people can openly discuss their needs following a loss.

In this difficult economic climate, the Government are mindful of placing extra statutory burdens on businesses, but for those businesses that can go further we strongly encourage them to do so. We fully expect that in time others will follow that lead. On flexibility, I can give the example of ASOS, which has life events leave. In recent debates we have talked about endometriosis, neonatal care, other caring responsibilities, menopause and now miscarriage. All those things fit partly within the women's health strategy I was talking about, but in those life event situations it is absolutely incumbent on employers to value their people and show flexibility if they want the reward of their employees remaining productive and loyal in turn.

When it comes to helping employers to be sympathetic and supportive, one of our most important tools is guidance. We recently commissioned a significant update of the guidance on "Managing Bereavement in the Workplace". That includes a new section on supporting employees after a miscarriage before 24 weeks of pregnancy and offers examples of best practice. The guidance can be found now on the ACAS website. Flexible working is integral to this issue. Yes, it is not a replacement for leave, but having access to flexible working arrangements can be a really important tool to support those in employment who experience a difficult life event. Changing a work pattern can provide individuals with the flexibility they need to balance their work commitments with their personal lives during such challenging times. Having a statutory right to request a temporary or permanent working arrangement could therefore be beneficial to individuals grieving a miscarriage.

We have taken forward our manifesto commitment to consult on making flexible working the default unless employers have good reason not to do it. That consultation contained measures that would increase the availability and support the uptake of flexible working arrangements, including whether to extend the right to request flexible working to all employees from the first day of employment. We have received 1,600 responses and we are going through them now. We will issue our response in due course.

Justin Madders: I just want to clarify: is the Minister seriously suggesting that someone who has had a miscarriage should make a flexible working application, which could take weeks or months to resolve?

Paul Scully: I am saying that it is one of the tools for employers to value their people, which is why we want to ensure that we can have a tailored response to people's life events. I talked about miscarriage and we have also rightly talked about all the other areas, including women's

health and, indeed, men's health, whether that is mental or physical. Flexible working can be at the heart of wraparound care for employees, but it is not the only tool.

Chris Stephens: Those of us on the SNP Benches often accuse the Government of stealing ideas from their distant cousin, the Liberal party of Australia. Is this not a case where the Liberal party of Australia is correct and more progressive than this Government on paid miscarriage leave?

Paul Scully: I am saying that we want to work with employers. We want to showcase the very best and to explain to employers—rightly—that any statutory limit we set is a minimum limit. Any sensible employer that values its people understands that very few businesses, if any, are anything without loyal, productive people. They can value them by showing increased flexibility, including through the examples that I gave of compassionate leave for life events.

Our consultation also talked about ad hoc flexible working and we want to explore how non-contractual flexibility works in practice. That can be done far faster than over the weeks talked about by the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). I have discussed the question with the flexible working taskforce, which will ensure that the role of ad hoc flexible working and the question of supporting women with health conditions are part of its considerations.

We have heard about employment measures and when they are coming to the House. I reassure Members that the Government are committed to building a high-skill, high-productivity and high-wage economy that delivers on our ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to work and grow a business. We will do that by continuing to champion a flexible and dynamic labour market and as we build back better we will introduce new employment measures to make it easier for people to enter and remain in work as soon as parliamentary time allows.

I extend my condolences once again to anyone who has experienced the loss of a baby. I understand and sympathise with the difficulties suffered by parents in this situation. I have highlighted some of the broad range of activity that the Government already have under way to support people in the workplace who experience difficult life events, including those who have lost a baby. It is also the case that employers have an important part to play because they know their employees and that a supportive workplace benefits both employees and employers, including on productivity and wellbeing.

I thank the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East once again for her contributions to the debate and I thank everybody who has worked hard to raise awareness of the impact of miscarriage.

4.43 pm

Angela Crawley: On behalf of everyone who supported the motion, the private Member's Bill, today's debate and the Westminster Hall debate, I want to say with no disrespect to the Minister, who I know has a very large brief, that I do not feel he is listening to the volume and weight of the people who have asked the Government seriously to consider miscarriage leave. It is essential, it

is important and without statutory provision too many employers will not make provision. It is fine to say that there is a gold standard and best practice, but when there is no statutory obligation too many employers will not do it. That means that too many families and too many parents will still suffer alone and in silence, and that is not good enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to introduce paid miscarriage leave; notes that in the UK, two weeks parental bereavement leave and pay is in place after stillbirth, however there is no such support for anyone who has experienced a miscarriage before 24 weeks of pregnancy; believes that miscarriage is an extremely traumatic experience and that more support should be provided to families that experience such a loss; understands that the New Zealand Parliament unanimously approved legislation to give people who experience a miscarriage paid leave, no matter what stage a loss of pregnancy occurs; and further believes that the Government should follow suit and provide paid leave for people that experience miscarriage and allow families to grieve for their profound loss.

P&O Ferries

4.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): With permission Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the developing issue with P&O Ferries. I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for having found time for me to make this important statement.

Earlier today, P&O announced its decision to make around 800 seafarers redundant on several routes across the UK. Let me say right off the bat: the way that these workers were informed was completely unacceptable. I will say more on that in a moment or two. While this is fundamentally a commercial decision for the company, I wanted to come to the House today to inform Members about our latest understanding of the situation and what is now being done.

In taking this decision to make seafarers redundant, P&O has also today informed us that it will be suspending services, for approximately a week to ten days, while it locates new crew. The affected routes are Dover to Calais, Larne to Cairnryan, Dublin to Liverpool and Hull to Rotterdam. I know right across the House will share my concern over the loss of these routes, but I should stress that P&O says they are only temporary and that alternative provision will be provided by other operators, to whom I am extremely grateful.

Passengers will still be able to travel to and from the UK, including across the channel, with freight coming in and out of the country. I understand that DFDS is stepping in to provide alternative services for passengers with valid tickets, and I would like to thank DFDS for its swift action.

However, I must warn travellers that they should expect some disruption over the coming days. I have asked my officials to liaise with the Kent Resilience Forum and the Cabinet Office to closely manage traffic in Kent over the coming days while P&O works to restore services. Today, the Dover TAP—the Dover traffic assessment project—has been activated, although as Members will know that is not all that uncommon, and there is some queuing on Jubilee Way, although the Port of Dover expects this to reduce over the afternoon. I have also asked officials to remain in close contact with other resilience forums around the country, as well as the devolved Administrations, in managing this issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we of course have long planned contingencies for such situations and disruption, particularly around the channel, and I do not expect the supply of critical goods and services to be impacted as a result of this decision by P&O, although queues on the way to Dover are more likely to occur at times. Modelling suggests we have sufficient capacity to handle the temporary loss of these P&O ferries.

Let me turn now to the issue of the seafarers. These are hard-working, dedicated staff who have given years in service to P&O. The way they have been treated today is wholly unacceptable and my thoughts are first and foremost with them. Reports of workers being given zero notice and escorted off their ships with immediate effect, while being told cheaper alternatives would take up their roles, shows the insensitive way in which P&O

[Robert Courts]

has approached this issue—a point I made crystal clear to P&O's management when I spoke to them earlier this afternoon.

As I told Peter Hebblethwaite, I am extremely concerned, and frankly angry, at the way workers have been treated today by P&O. As a matter of urgency I have asked my Department to liaise closely with counterparts in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that workers are being signposted to the most relevant support, and I am intending to call the trade unions immediately after this statement to discuss the situation with them.

There can be no doubt that the pandemic has had a devastating impact on the finances of many travel companies, including P&O. But while their finances are matters for them, and them alone, I would have expected far better for the workers involved. We will continue to engage closely over the coming days, and I commend this statement to the House.

4.49 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): The action taken by P&O Ferries today is a national scandal—a betrayal of the workers who have kept this country stocked throughout the pandemic. I have heard directly from the crew throughout the day: their lives upended, the jobs they depended on scrapped.

Workers are now left wondering how on earth they will put food on their families' tables. The management did not even have the decency to tell them face to face: they were told this life-changing news on a pre-recorded video. Images are circulating of what we are told are handcuff-trained security staff, some wearing balaclavas, marching British crew off their ships. This is not a corporate restructure and it is not the way we go about business in this country. It is beneath contempt: the action of thugs.

It is quite simply a scandal that this Dubai-owned company, which received millions of pounds of taxpayers' money during the pandemic has, without consultation or notice, upended the lives of 800 British workers, all while the profits of the owners, DP World, soared by 52% in the first half of 2021. We need a clear, unequivocal statement from the Government—no ifs, no buts. An overseas conglomerate cannot be given free rein to sack workers in secure jobs here in Britain at the click of a button and replace them with agency staff. The Government must not give the green light to this appalling practice. They must act now to secure the livelihoods of these workers, not signpost them to the Department for Work and Pensions.

This cannot stand. Will the Minister review any and every contract and licence that the Government have with P&O or DP World, to maximise leverage and force them to do the right thing? DP World runs two of the Government's freeport schemes. Will he consider terminating those contracts? Will he convene urgent talks with P&O and the unions to look immediately at what steps can be taken to safeguard these jobs? Will he confirm whether the Secretary of State received notification, as required under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992? Given that neither the workers nor their unions received notification, this action is clearly illegal.

Will the Minister act immediately and ensure that all those party to the decision are appropriately proceeded against? Will he join me in condemning Clyde Marine Recruitment and Interforce for the role that they have apparently played in today's events and investigate any action that can be taken against them? Will he outline the full extent to which other operators will be able to cover this unacceptable disruption? It is impossible to conceive that we have sufficient capacity to cover a loss of 10 days. Finally, will the Minister look at clawing back every single penny of taxpayers' money given to P&O over the course of the pandemic?

This situation must be set in context. For far too long, the Government have sat on their hands and chosen to side with bad bosses by failing to take action to outlaw fire and rehire. This is the cruel consequence of a decade of attacks on workers' rights. No more excuses: it is time for Ministers to keep the promises they have made, deliver workers' rights and outlaw fire and rehire without delay.

We are an island nation. British seafaring has been, and is, the envy of the world. We are rightly proud of the British sailors, ratings and officers, who make our fleet and whose name is known across the globe. What has happened is a straightforward assault on British seafaring. It cannot be allowed to stand. The Government must stand up, speak out and take action to protect the livelihoods of these proud workers.

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Member for her comments. She is quite right: lives have been upended and jobs scrapped. My sympathy and thoughts are wholly with the people who had this terrible news this morning. She is absolutely right about the video, which I have seen. I agree. This is devastating news, and to be shown a video on a television screen rather than told the news face to face is not how we expect loyal, hard-working workers to be treated. She mentioned crews being marched off; I have heard the same reports. I expect people to be treated with dignity and respect at all times, throughout their employment.

Employment laws apply, of course. It is difficult for me at the moment to comment in any detail on where that might be. I urge anyone affected to consider legal advice. Clearly that is something that they should do, but it is difficult for me to comment on that, particularly as this is a fast-moving situation.

The hon. Member asked me to review contracts that may exist. I have asked my officials to do that. I apologise, but I cannot give her any details at the moment, although I will be able to provide information to the House in due course if required. Conversations about freeports would have to take place across Government, involving, in particular, the Treasury and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The hon. Lady asked me to convene urgent talks with the unions; I will speak to them this afternoon. It is possible that that will be an initial conversation and then there will be others, but I need no persuading that that will happen. She hon. Lady mentioned illegality. I ought not to go into that, but obviously the Government have a number of concerns, and I urge people to take the advice that they will need.

The hon. Lady asked me to give details of the operations. As I have said, this is a fast-moving situation, but although I am assured that there is not likely to be an operations impact, I will be monitoring that closely. I

will give the hon. Lady more details when I have them, and if there are any steps to be taken, I will consider what they should be.

The hon. Lady spoke of setting this in context. I of course reject any suggestion that we have sided with bad bosses. I have made absolutely clear, today and on other occasions, that I expect people to be treated with respect at all times, and that is not the way in which these people have been treated. No one should be treated in the way in which they have been treated today.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about seafarers. We will continue to do everything we can to support British seafarers, and I hope to be able to give the House more details about that in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Thank you for allowing the statement, Mr Deputy Speaker. I also thank the Minister for delivering it so robustly.

P&O, that once great flag carrier of the seas, has made an appalling error. If it does not reverse that error immediately, reinstate the employees and follow proper process, it is hard to see a way back for it commercially. The parent company, DP World, needs to understand that the British public will not do business with companies that treat their employees with such contempt. Will the Government do everything within their power and influence, including tabling emergency legislation if necessary, to ensure that this appalling employment transaction cannot be completed?

Robert Courts: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I repeat that this is a fast-moving situation, and we are reviewing it both as it develops and as it exists. I will certainly review what arrangements exist as we go forward, and I can certainly commit myself to working with all Government Departments to consider what relationships we have with P&O. I will also try to see whether there is anything I can do in the particular circumstances with which we are dealing, although commercial matters affecting a company are primarily a matter for the company itself, within the constraints of employment law. In this country we have high standards of employment law, and we expect those standards to be respected and upheld.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Let me add that I agreed with every word that was said by the shadow Secretary of State and the Chair of the Select Committee.

Earlier today I said that the actions of P&O were deeply concerning, but as more information has emerged, it has become clear that those actions were shameful, insensitive and inhumane. The Government responded to the fire and rehire scandal with lip service and warm words, saying that fire and rehire was shameful but stubbornly refusing to back those words up with any legislative action. That inaction has had consequences. What P&O has done today in sacking 800 workers over Zoom with no notice or consultation, and dragging them from their place of work using handcuff-trained private security personnel, is well beyond even fire and rehire. Of course, our primary concern must be for the

traumatised P&O staff and their families. People are now jobless, having gone to work as they would on any other day. Will the Minister support the staff who remain aboard P&O vessels, and call on P&O to end its attempts to forcibly remove staff members?

The villain in all this is P&O and its parent company DP World, which is owned by anti-trade union oligarchs in Dubai who have a shockingly bad track record on employment relations. P&O's plan is for entirely new crews to operate vessels with zero or little time for acclimatisation. Does the Minister not agree that P&O's aim of resuming shipping with new staff almost immediately is reckless and unsafe? The Prime Minister visited the United Arab Emirates yesterday. Was there any discussion between him and the Dubai Government, the owners of DP World, about P&O?

The Minister said that while this is a commercial decision

“for them, and them alone, I would have expected far better for the workers involved.”

I agree, but I would also expect far better protections for our workers from the Government of the day. Can the Minister tell us if there is anything—anything at all—that the Government can do to intervene and help these workers? If there is not, does that not demonstrate, yet again, just how broken UK employment law is?

Robert Courts: I hear the anger and anguish expressed by the hon. Gentleman, and I know that he speaks on behalf of constituents and others he represents. I would encourage all employers in any event to speak to their hard-working, loyal, long-serving employees. I would certainly urge them to engage with the unions, which I hope would have been spoken to in advance in any such incident that would cause distress to workers and certainly in one such as this. I urge them to do that. On safety matters, this is still an evolving situation and there are clearly safety regulations that have to be applied and complied with in any case, no matter who is crewing a vessel. I would expect that to be the case. Clearly there will be no shortcuts as far as safety is concerned. We will continue to look across Government and speak to colleagues, and to uphold the rights that are clear in law to protect workers.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the way in which P&O Ferries and DP World have acted is shabby, disgraceful and utterly unacceptable? They have mistreated 600 loyal workers in Dover and in addition to this, they have brought traffic disruption and put at risk the economy and the trade routes through it. Will he meet me to discuss what more can be done to hold DP World and P&O Ferries to account for their disgraceful behaviour?

Robert Courts: I thank my hon. Friend for speaking out so powerfully and forcefully on behalf of her constituents, who will be anguished, hurt and distraught at the news they have been given today. She speaks for them and I thank her for doing so. I will of course meet her; I will meet any hon. or right hon. Member from anywhere across the House to discuss any concerns that they or their constituents might have. My hon. Friend asks me whether I agree that the way in which P&O has behaved is unacceptable? Yes, it is unacceptable.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): Does the Minister acknowledge that my constituency of Canterbury, and east Kent as a whole, will be particularly affected by today's shocking news? What urgent support will the Government give to all those affected locally, including the hundreds of P&O workers who have been treated disgracefully, as we have just heard, and who are now facing no pay packet at all in the face of the soaring cost of living? They do not want a work coach; they just want their jobs back. That is not to mention the beleaguered residents of east Kent, who will yet again have to bear the brunt of serious disruption to our daily lives. I am glad to hear that the Minister will meet MPs across east Kent; that needs to be done urgently. Thank you.

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Member for speaking out and making her constituents' understandable anguish so clear in this place. That has been entirely heard by me and I share it. She speaks with anger, and I have expressed that anger in person to P&O today, because of the effect that this news will be having on people living in her constituency and elsewhere, particularly at a time that is already causing much uncertainty for many people. I would be delighted to meet her and any other Members who would like to meet me to discuss what we might be able to do. I referred earlier to some signposting within the DWP. That support is available, and if there are other things that would be helpful, I would be happy to hear from her. She also referred to disruption. There may be some disruption, but the only happy side of that is that we have good, well-rehearsed procedures in place to deal with that. I totally accept this situation will cause inconvenience to her constituents, but I hope that the well-practised routines we have in place will keep that to a minimum.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): When I was the shipping Minister, I oversaw the maritime growth study that built on the sector's success. At its heart was the development of skills to build an even stronger merchant navy. This capricious, careless, callous decision by P&O flies in the face of all that.

Will my hon. Friend work with my old friends in the maritime sector, the RMT and others to recover any moneys granted to P&O during the pandemic and to ensure it reverses its decision? I will not let anyone tell me this is the free market. The free market put little girls in factories and boys down mines, and it put both at risk on the high seas. We thought those dark days had gone. P&O is either too dim to see it or too dastardly to know it.

Robert Courts: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about the skills that have been demonstrated by extraordinary British seafarers over many years. This is key to the Government's vision of what we want to achieve, and it is particularly important to me personally. We remain committed to doing what we can to support seafarers, and all the strategies the House has heard me talk about, from Maritime 2050 onwards, remain the case. Our focus on maritime skills remains. The Government are still determined to do all we can to develop British seafarers and to continue as a maritime nation, as we have always been. He can be assured that determination remains undimmed.

My right hon. Friend rightly speaks about employment rights, which are extensive in this country. They exist for good reason, they continue and the Government support them.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): As the MP for Liverpool, Riverside, I am disgusted by the actions of P&O today. Liverpool is one of the routes that will be affected by this action, and it is another example of fire and rehire by a despicable employer. Why have this Government stood by and ignored it? Actions speak louder than words, Minister, so let us take some decisive action against P&O.

Robert Courts: I entirely understand the hon. Lady's anger on behalf of her constituents. I am acutely aware that they will be affected. I caution her that we do not know all the circumstances yet. We do not know whether this is a fire-and-rehire situation or something else.

Kim Johnson: They have fired 800 staff.

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady is right, and I have been absolutely clear about my view of how that has been done. I am merely making a point about the contractual arrangements that exist. We need to understand that, and I will continue to work with her and others to see what we can do to help.

Peter Gibson (Darlington) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for coming to the House so swiftly. We are all shocked, outraged and appalled by the treatment of P&O staff, and I welcome his condemnation of these dreadful employment practices. Will he continue to update the House on this unfolding situation?

Robert Courts: Yes. I am acutely conscious that there are some details I have not been able to give to the House today because the situation is evolving, and there are some things that we do not know and I do not know. As and when I do know, of course I will give the required information, either verbally or in some other way.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I speak on behalf of my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) and the people of Hull, who stand united tonight in our utter disgust at what has happened to the seafarers who have been sacked by P&O. It is simply a lie that P&O must sack 800 British workers to survive. P&O paid out £270 million to shareholders last year while taking furlough money from taxpayers.

The Government have to be clear about whom they sack. They cannot just say this is a commercial decision. This is a choice between predatory employers that are sacking workers on Zoom in their levelling-down race to the bottom and our loyal, hard-working UK workers who are fighting for their jobs. Will the Minister instruct Dubai-based DP World to stand down the replacement crews, send their security muscle home and reinstate immediately those who have been sacked?

Robert Courts: I thank the right hon. Lady for speaking on behalf of Hull and the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and for Kingston upon

Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) to make their voices heard. Her question, of itself, shows the importance of the maritime sector to the entirety of our United Kingdom. There are hon. and right hon. Members from every corner of our United Kingdom expressing their anguish on behalf of their constituents and themselves, and she is right that furlough money will have been available to P&O. The Government have supported this company, as we supported the whole economy during the pandemic.

The right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) asks whether we are on the side of levelling down and a race to the bottom. No, we are not. I have been clear today that we expect rights to be maintained and supported. She asks whether we are on the side of hard-working workers. Yes, we absolutely are.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My background is in the travel industry and this is not how the travel industry behaves. P&O is a great British company, but can the Minister make it clear that there is a difference between P&O Ferries and P&O Cruises? P&O Cruises has nothing to do with this disgraceful incident. If the parent company of P&O Ferries has made British workers redundant to replace them with agency workers and then in a week's time expects to carry on as normal, the British public will not travel with it in any case, but surely the Minister should suspend its licences.

Robert Courts: I thank my hon. Friend for his expertise. He is absolutely right about the values of the wonderful travel industry that we have across the whole of the maritime, aviation, cruise and wider travel sector. His point about the distinction between P&O Ferries and P&O Cruises is accurate; they are separate entities and the two are not connected. He is right to make that absolutely clear and I thank him for doing so. I have made it clear that the behaviour we have seen today is absolutely unacceptable, and I will continue saying so. Not only that, but the British public will have noticed, as he rightly points out.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): We hear a lot of anger and sympathy from the Minister, but he is from the Government and the clue is in the title—they need to govern and take some action. We have not heard about any action whatsoever. It would be helpful to hear more from him on that. We have just been discussing St Patrick's Day and our relationships with Ireland. Has he had any discussions with the Irish Government or with Members in the Northern Ireland Assembly about the impact on both Northern Ireland and Irish trade?

Robert Courts: I understand the points that the hon. Lady makes. I am also keen to stress that I have come to the House as quickly as I can to make a statement, which means that I have not had that much time to act. I have already spoken to the management of P&O—I made sure I did that—and I have asked my officials to undertake a number of actions so that I understand the wider system that exists. I hope she will bear with me while that work takes place. I have not yet spoken to the Government of Ireland, but if that is helpful, I am happy to do so.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): This afternoon, I have heard people talk about British employment law and discussing this with other Governments overseas. However, the legislation that covers this area is simply the maritime labour convention, an international convention that applies not only to vessels ordinarily engaged in trade, but where a vessel is operating under the flag of a country that has ratified the MLC, which the UK has, or it is operating in the waters of a country that has ratified the MLC. That ensures that there are terms and conditions for seafarers, including those who may not be part of the navigation team on the ship; it applies to everyone, including on issues such as repatriation. Will P&O or indeed DP World be repatriating the crew and everyone on the ship? Will that be paid for by P&O? Alternatively, it can be paid for by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. If it is, will the Minister ensure that that money is repaid back to the British taxpayer?

Robert Courts: My hon. Friend raises a number of important issues. There are different legal regimes applying here, and things depend on which one is applying. One is employment rights, which we have referred to, but he is right to say that there is also the MLC. This will depend upon what circumstance we are looking at. It is not entirely clear exactly what has happened. I will continue to look at that. I would expect that any ramifications that arise because of decisions taken by P&O would be ones that it would put right and not look to the Government to do so.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): P&O Ferries' actions today, in sacking 800 workers via Zoom, are despicable and disgraceful, as has been said by Members from right across the Chamber. Of course we now need deeds, not just words. Some £270 million was paid in dividends and about £15 million paid in furlough. We need some teeth there. Those workers should be reinstated and that requires ministerial intervention. The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) referred to the arrangement with licences—well, let us get on with it and show solidarity with those in the RMT—National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—and all their families.

Robert Courts: The hon. Member is right that the behaviour we have seen today is unacceptable. I will be meeting the RMT later to hear what it has to say, and I will work constructively with it to see whether there is anything that I can do in support. He asks us to think about those affected and their families, and I of course entirely agree. I will talk to colleagues across Government and speak to the unions and those affected to see whether there are any further steps that we can take.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): I join other Members in saying that what has happened today is completely unacceptable. On the face of it, it also seems to me to be potentially unlawful, although I understand why the Minister will not want to say at this point whether he shares that view. I also understand that in the discussions that have already taken place today there has been doubt about what law applies, in relation not just to the individual workers but the company's obligation to notify the Government when it comes to redundancies. When the Minister has a better understanding of the legal obligations to the workers

[*Dr Kieran Mullan*]

and to the Government, will he update the House so that we can take an informed view as to whether the company has potentially broken the law?

Robert Courts: The important thing to understand is that maritime contracts can often be quite complicated. Different contracts can apply for different seafarers at different times. I do not want to be in a position where anybody is looking to me for legal advice from the Dispatch Box. That is not my role as a Minister. I urge everybody to obtain their own independent legal advice so that they can take any steps that are necessary. It is for lawyers to provide that assistance, not Ministers.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): For how long are the Government prepared to allow companies such as P&O to treat loyal workers with contempt while they leach off the UK taxpayer? The Minister will know that there is a £146 million deficit in the pension fund for P&O retirees, yet P&O's owners, DP World, just spent £147 million on sponsoring the European golf tour. After taking £10 million from taxpayers for furlough and demanding a further £150 million from the public purse to keep its operations going, the company paid out £270 million to shareholders in dividends and is now trying to fire 800 loyal workers. Does the Minister accept that P&O is taking him and the Treasury for fools? Does he regret the Government's failure to back the measures in my private Member's Bill that would have prevented these 800 seafarers from being treated so disgracefully?

Robert Courts: As I have said, we need to take stock of the situation as we understand it. The hon. Gentleman referred to fire and rehire; this may not be a fire and rehire situation—

Barry Gardiner: I said the measures in my Bill.

Robert Courts: I am happy to look at what the measures in his Bill were, but we need to understand exactly what has taken place. I agree with his wider points about the actions that P&O has taken at the same time as treating its workers this way. Treating long-serving, loyal, hard-working, skilled people in this way cannot be defended.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to make this statement and compliment him on the tone with which he delivered it, but the Government clearly must do more to protect British workers. He mentioned 800 redundancies, but the jobs are not redundant: the reality is that those 800 British-based seafarers are going to be replaced with 800 overseas seafarers who will work for cheaper rates. It is an absolute and utter disgrace. People anticipate that the Minister and his Government will do something about this to prevent it from happening again in future. If they do not, other employers—such as Heathrow airport or anyone else—could go down a similar route. Did the Prime Minister discuss P&O Ferries' plans with anyone from Dubai-based DP World during his recent trip?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member is quite right to draw attention to the fact that we have and will continue to have a need for seafarers. We are a maritime nation

and we depend on such links for connections in respect of people as well as in respect of freight. The hon. Member is of course right about that. I am passionate about championing British seafarers, about their skills and about ensuring that more people have the ability to benefit from a fascinating, rewarding and enjoyable career. I will continue to work with my colleagues to see what more can be done on that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I, too, thank the Minister for coming to the House on this matter and for the tone that he has adopted. I am sure that we all share the feelings that this is completely despicable and unacceptable behaviour by the company. Rather than just signposting people to help, have the Government considered taking this company into public ownership, in the way that they have with previous companies, such as railway or aviation companies, to ensure that the jobs are protected and that our vital transport link with the continent is protected? Have the Government considered that and if not, why not?

Robert Courts: The hon. Lady is not drawing direct comparisons. As I understand it, this is not a company that is at risk of immediately ceasing operations, so the parallel she seeks to draw is not entirely accurate. I can be absolutely clear that, while commercial decisions have to be taken by companies, they should engage with people, they should consult, they should discuss things with them, and, at all times, they should treat them with the respect that they deserve.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The news today is terrible for the workers and their families, and I pay tribute to them and to the RMT union. I notice that the Minister did not answer the question of my good friend, the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris), regarding the Prime Minister being on tour in west Asia and being in the United Arab Emirates—DP World is based in the United Arab Emirates. Has the Prime Minister had a discussion with DP World or any of the proprietors regarding the situation? If not, why not? Does he also agree that it was short-sighted and unreasonable of the Government to block the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) on banning fire and rehire?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member will have noticed that this announcement was made only this morning, so, clearly, this is something that has come as a shock to the entire House. I hope that that clears up that matter for him.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I think that we can all agree that being sacked over Zoom with no notice and no consultation is barbaric. It also shows how broken our employment laws are in this country, because these people are being told that they are being made redundant when there is a group of workers waiting to replace them standing by the dockside. It is the fact that these workers are already in place that shows how pre-prepared and cynical this was. P&O had clearly been working on this for some time, so can the Minister tell us when it first informed the Government of its intentions?

Robert Courts: The hon. Member is probably right that P&O had been considering this for some time. The Government was first informed of this yesterday evening.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Other trade unions will be looking on at this, thinking that it is P&O workers today, and, if this stands, it is their workers tomorrow. Some of us with long memories can remember other flashpoints in industrial relations, such as Grunwick and the miners' strike, which became very big disputes indeed. We do not want that around our ports. The simple way to avoid that and to avoid seeing workers being forced aside for the police to allow people through so that P&O can continue business as usual is to take business away from P&O at our ports. Have the Government considered that?

Robert Courts: As I said when I answered the shadow Transport Secretary, I have asked my officials to understand what level of contractual engagement Government have with P&O. I do not yet have that information, but that is under way as we speak. None the less, the hon. Gentleman draws a wider point around the importance of engagement. We do not want to see disruption, and we do not want to see any difficulties with industrial relations that cause wider problems. I have been absolutely clear that the way that workers have been treated today is absolutely unacceptable. P&O should have spoken to the unions. I have told it that it should be speaking to the unions. I do not think that it has done so, but I will certainly be doing so later today.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Today DP World has inflicted the ultimate pain on workers by sacking them on the spot. They are safety-critical workers in a safety-critical industry; they cannot simply be replaced. Will the Minister ensure that no ship sails with agency staff crewing it in the future? Will he ensure that he works with Nautilus and the RMT so that our shipping industry is put in a safer space than it is in today?

Robert Courts: I thank the hon. Lady for rightly drawing attention to the critical importance of safety. As I said earlier, there are no two ways about safety: any ship sailing has to be safe. I have total confidence in those at the Maritime and Coastguard Agency who regulate maritime safety. That will continue to be the case and they will continue to ensure safety in the same way they always do. I have total confidence that that is the case, no matter who is crewing which vessel under which company at any one time. She asks whether I will work closely with the RMT and Nautilus. Yes—I am due to meet them after this statement, and I will listen to what they have to say, but of course at any time I will seek to work closely with the unions and all right hon. and hon. Members.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): First, I express solidarity with the RMT and Nautilus workers refusing to leave their ships. Will the Minister properly and fully condemn the use of balaclava-wearing, handcuff-trained security in any forcible removal of workers? It is like going back to Victorian times. Secondly, will the Government use their full powers to prevent P&O ferries from using British waters at all until this matter is justly resolved?

Robert Courts: I have been absolutely clear about my view of the way that workers have been treated today. I cannot comment on specific circumstances until I have had them confirmed—I have seen things reported on social media, as has the hon. Gentleman—but I have been clear that the way workers have been treated is absolutely unacceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the Minister for coming to the House at incredibly short notice and responding to questions from MPs.

Educational Assessments

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

5.27 pm

Mrs Flick Drummond (Meon Valley) (Con): I thank Mr Speaker for allowing me to bring this important debate to the Chamber, and I thank the Minister for being here, particularly much later than expected, to respond.

The Minister will be aware that I have been working on this important issue for some time. It is something that I am passionate about and wrote about in my *One Nation* paper in summer 2020. It is not just me: we now have five commissions reporting on the reform of educational assessment, so this is a good moment to debate the merits of reforming our present system.

Even before covid, 21st century society was rapidly changing, but our education is still stuck in the 20th century. Even its original architect, Lord Baker, argues that it is due an overhaul. Covid has given us the chance to re-look at various policies, not least how we assess our children. We need to grasp that chance.

As Professor Bill Lucas, co-founder of *Rethinking Assessment*, states:

“Across the world assessment is not working. We are not evidencing the kinds of dispositions and capabilities that society increasingly wants. Educational jurisdictions are placing too much reliance on high-stakes, standardised testing. They are testing the wrong things in the wrong ways. High-stakes assessment is having a damaging impact on the health and wellbeing of students and it is not giving universities, colleges or employers the kind of information they want.”

Let us unpick those words. What does society want from education? Our assessment system currently dominates our entire schooling, influencing what is taught and how it is taught. As Professor Lucas says, we have a system focused on performance in a narrow range of high-stakes academic standardised testing.

It is important that I say that standards are vital, but increasingly employers do not understand the myriad qualifications and whether they are gold standard or not, especially when GCSEs are reduced to a milepost in a young person’s journey to 18, when they leave for university or work. The House of Lords’ Youth Unemployment Committee states:

“Skills gaps and shortages are clearly a major driver of youth unemployment and damage labour market productivity”.

The Times Education Commission’s interim report has been very focused on asking employers what they are looking for, and they agree that young people are not coming out with the life skills that would help in the workplace.

We have a knowledge-based curriculum, but we also need to build skills into the curriculum. It does not have to be a binary choice of knowledge versus skills; we need to marry powerful knowledge with the skills and attributes needed to apply them to real life. Are we testing the wrong things in the wrong ways? The figures seem to show that we are. A third of all students every year do not get grade 4 and above, which is considered a pass. As 613,000 young people took GCSEs last year, a third of that means that some 200,000 young people did not make the grade—a huge number. They are leaving education without substantive qualifications because

our system fails those learners, who are better served by practical, technical and vocational ways of learning and assessment.

The Department for Education says that exams are the fairest way of everyone being tested the same. Really? Is that why girls do so much better? In 2019, 72% of girls received grade 4 or above GCSEs and only 63% of boys—a 9% difference that has not changed over a number of years. Are we saying that girls are much cleverer than boys, or is the reality that this is not a fair way of assessing everyone? We know that girls and boys learn differently.

I became increasingly concerned about the failure of our assessment system when I was the MP for Portsmouth South. I heard how many young people at college were taking their maths and English GCSEs over and over again. That seems ridiculous. Surely there is a better way of engaging pupils in maths and English that makes sense to them and enables them to achieve a certain level, not necessarily through an exam—I stress that I am not against exams, but against what I consider to be unnecessary exams at 16 that are narrowly focused when we are expecting young people to stay in education or training until they are 18. It would make far more sense to assess young people at 18, especially when there is ample evidence that assessment at 16 does not work and is harming our children. Professor Lucas says exams at 16 cause

“a damaging impact on the health and well-being of students”.

Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, professor of psychology and cognitive neuroscience at Cambridge University, has done a huge amount of research into how teenage brains develop. She spoke to us at a fringe event at the Conservative party conference in 2021. She says that high-stakes exams put huge pressure and stress on teenagers, reducing motivation during a critical time during their development. The yearly Children’s Society’s “Good Childhood Report” raises young people’s mental health as an issue. In 2018, children aged 15 in the UK had the greatest fear of failure and the lowest life satisfaction in school of children across 24 European countries. The 2021 report found that school, followed by friendships and appearance, continue to cause the greatest dissatisfaction in adolescence. In the Children’s Commissioner’s Big Ask survey, young people highlighted that stress related to high-stakes exams or assessment remains a significant concern to them.

Not just young people but parents and teachers are concerned. Of course, we all have to cope with stress and deal with it throughout our lives, but not when it is going to have a big impact on the future of a young person. For the record, I do not accept that the term “snowflake” is fair in any way for this generation. It is simplistic and lazy, and makes no allowance for the complexity that young people face today.

The last point in the quote is about education and employers not receiving the kind of information that they want. A YouGov poll commissioned by the Edge Foundation in 2020 found that 92% of teachers agree that the assessment system needs to recognise the full range of a young person’s strengths and skills through more than just written exams, especially as they place an emphasis on rote learning to the detriment of developing the skills and attitudes needed for work.

The Times Education Commission has been very clear that employers would like to see skills as well as knowledge. We are talking about skills of how to tackle

and deal with any challenges during a lifetime, as well as other softer skills, including the value of oracy and team work. For example, disadvantaged children's spoken language development is significantly lower than that of their more advantaged peers, although spoken language is one of the strongest predictors of a child's future. However, the concentration and time spent on written exams does not allow for this development. That cannot be right or fair. Employers say that personality is more important than qualifications, and those of us whose exams were a long time ago know there is absolute truth in that, so why is it designed out of our present assessment system?

We are not just talking about exams at 16—it starts much younger in primary schools. SATs dominate year 6, and I am afraid there is teaching to the test to the exclusion of a wider curriculum. Pupils are reassessed when they get to secondary schools in any case. People say that SATs are needed as a measure of school accountability—really? We have Ofsted, and there are many ways of judging schools, such as quality of teaching and professional development of teachers for starters.

Parents do not look primarily at results when they are choosing a school—in fact, that is at the bottom of their list. They want a school where their child will be happy, achieve their potential and enjoy learning at the same time, alongside a wide range of activities. That is why so many people decide to pay to send their children to independent schools when they can afford it, but this is ridiculous as it is possible for every state school to do all of this. That is important because the Government's Industrial Strategy Council highlighted that, by 2030, 7 million additional workers could be under-skilled for their job requirements. The skills gap is costing UK companies £6.6 billion a year.

Some people feel that education should be about inspiring young people through a knowledge-based curriculum only, or, as I would put it, learning information that they may never look at again. That is one argument, but it should be mixed with learning how to learn, learning skills that will make our children lifelong learners because it makes sense, learning because it interests and engages them and learning for the love of learning, rather than for a narrow set of exams. The Department for Education's employer skills survey and findings from the CBI and other organisations, such as the World Economic Forum, all point to employers looking for skills such as problem solving, communication, self-management, team working, creativity, numeracy and digital skills. Those are not soft skills that come at the expense of knowledge. Knowledge is only useful where individuals have the skills to interpret and communicate it.

So what is the answer? I know this is not going to happen overnight—certainly not under this Government, although we will hear what the Minister says—but we will need to move gradually to a new system to give teachers, parents, young people and employers confidence in the changes. I am not calling for some radical seismic shift, but we must recognise that there is substantial evidence that there is a better alternative and work towards it—one that is multi-disciplined, offers a broad and balanced portfolio of assessment and blends the best of knowledge and skills.

The OECD and the programme for international student assessment, or PISA, are currently developing assessments to be used across the world, for example, in

collaborative problem solving and creative thinking. The international baccalaureate model is used in 5,000 schools in more than 150 countries. There is good practice and systems out there that we can look at to design our own assessment at 18. We should have a 14-to-18 curriculum without a break for GCSEs which, as I have said, are no longer fit for purpose. We should have a broad and varied curriculum that enables young people to find their own path, whether that is academic or vocational with exams and/or assessment, be that a final assessment or continual assessment throughout those four years.

We should have a portfolio of achievement that includes English and maths in a format that is relevant to what that student wants to do; taking part in the National Citizen Service or Duke of Edinburgh award scheme and other organisations that bring character and skills; and a transcript that shows what a young person is really like, not just their ability to pass or fail national exams. That is particularly important in terms of equality. Young people from deprived and lower-income backgrounds often require more time and resources to realise their potential, and a more diverse and expansive range of subjects than the narrow curriculum we impose at present. An extended school day would help with that, too.

University technical colleges are already following the 14-to-18 model. They have been remarkably successful in identifying how an education can inspire and engage young people. I visited the Portsmouth UTC, which has been going for five years. Entry is by ballot and it has three applicants for every place. It gives young people the skills for the world of work, and those who do not go to university mostly go straight into higher-level apprenticeships. Time and again, it is a success story for those young people and it is in operation right now in this country.

A good education has the power to change lives and open doors to greater employment and lifelong learning. It leads to better health choices and active citizenship. Good teaching inspires and, crucially, assessment reform must give power back to teachers so that they can do what they were trained to do—impart a love for their subject to the next generation, rather than teaching to the test. If we do not change, we will continue to fail millions of young people in this country, including many from disadvantaged backgrounds. We will continue to struggle against our international competitors because we will lack the 21st-century skills that we need to be global Britain.

With the right focus and commitment, young people from all backgrounds, who are engaged and who know that the point of their assessment is to realise their ambitions, will flourish, but they need time to study the subjects in which they are interested—academic or vocational—in depth, over four years. That would set up many more of our children for a lifetime of work and learning. We need to start working on a system that works for them as we enter the second quarter of the 21st century and as young people face all the challenges of this complex world.

5.41 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): I genuinely congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) on securing this debate and on the enthusiasm with which she has put

[Mr Robin Walker]

her case. She has written extensively about examinations and assessment and she is a passionate advocate for children and young people.

There is a great deal on which we can agree, such as understanding the importance of young people's mental health, the importance of skills as well as academic rigour in the system, and the importance of balancing opportunities across vocational and academic routes. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend that we do not want schools to be teaching to the test and that we want pupils to be engaged in activities as well as learning from which they can benefit.

I fear that we are fated to disagree, however, on exams and assessment reform. We stood on a manifesto that promised to ensure that

“every pupil gets the qualifications they need for a prosperous future, while learning in an environment where they will be...fulfilled.”

It is vital to me that qualifications align with our broader vision for education. The Government are clear that young people should be able to access a broad and balanced academically focused curriculum up until the age of 16. We believe that pupils should be introduced to the best that has been thought and said to familiarise them with the essential knowledge that they need to be educated citizens and to ensure that as many children as possible can lay claim to a rich intellectual inheritance.

Key to that, of course, is ensuring that they have the numeracy and literacy skills to access that broad and balanced curriculum by the time they finish primary school. GCSEs provide the basis for an academically focused curriculum from 14 to 16 and it is our ambition that, by 2025, 90% of pupils will sit a core set of academic GCSEs known as the EBacc.

We have taken steps to ensure that pupils have the opportunity to study high-quality vocational and technical qualifications alongside that core from 14 to 16. We have improved the quality of non-GCSE qualifications at key stage 4 by introducing a new approvals process for technical awards. Only those that meet our stretching requirements and are reviewed by Ofqual will be recognised in key stage 4 performance tables alongside academic qualifications.

With that broad grounding, all students, regardless of background, are prepared to fulfil their aspirations post 16. Pupils can specialise by choosing from a range of high-quality academic and technical qualifications and routes that then become open to them. As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, the academic route is not the only path to success, which is why it is important that a range of assessment types and pathways is available, drawn from our rigorous and evidence-informed blend of qualifications, to ensure that all students can achieve their full potential.

Alongside A-levels, we have introduced T-levels. Our 10 new T-levels are being taught, including digital, construction, education and childcare, and healthcare science. More than 20 will be available from 2023 and they give students a clear path from their studies to their chosen career. We are also streamlining and improving the quality of post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The Minister is both diligent and thoughtful about these matters. The key thing is that many people's

tastes and talents take them down a practical route, yet we are still labouring under the illusion that the only way to gain accomplishment comes through academic prowess. The simple fact of the matter is that, as he suggested, we need to recognise that fewer people should be studying those degrees that confer neither intellectual rigour nor economic value. People should be studying practical, vocational, technical subjects for their own benefit and fulfilment and for the national interest.

Mr Walker: I do not disagree at all with my right hon. Friend, and he will see that some of the work our right hon. Friend the Minister for Higher and Further Education is doing with the university sector is about recognising precisely that, but I do not think that is an argument for removing GCSEs at the age of 16; it is an argument for ensuring that those vocational routes are available.

As we all know, the past two summers have seen unprecedented disruption to the familiar routine of exams and assessments. Teachers and school and college leaders across the country have coped amazingly well with the pandemic and with its associated disruption to exams—and I want to take this opportunity to again thank them from the Dispatch Box for their herculean efforts—but we know that exams are the best and fairest way of judging students' performance.

Exams provide a shared understanding of what students know and can do—an even playing field with everyone being assessed on the same thing at the same time, independently. We know that exams and the preparation leading up to them can be motivating and lead to improved learning. Beyond that, exams provide students with an objective and accurate gauge of their progress and understanding of subject matter, which can inform their choices about where to go on to next. Exams are the most objective measure, which is why non-examined assessment and coursework is used only where knowledge, skills and understanding cannot be tested validly by an exam. Examples of this would include coursework in GCSE and A-level art and design. For all those reasons we are committed to exams continuing to play a crucial role in our education system, and we are firmly committed to their reintroduction this summer as we emerge from the effects of the pandemic.

Over the course of the last 10 years our reforms to secondary and further education qualifications have created a gold-standard exam system that is respected around the world. Our qualifications exports in 2018 were worth £3.3 billion to the UK economy; this points to a model of success of which we should rightly be proud.

My predecessors in the Department reformed and strengthened GCSEs from 2013 to address concerns from higher and further education institutions and employers that the previous qualification did not adequately prepare young people for the demands of the workplace and higher studies—points my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley made. Our reformed GCSEs rigorously assess knowledge acquired by pupils in key stage 4 and are in line with expected standards in countries with the highest-performing education systems.

Our reforms strengthened GCSEs in a number of ways. Qualifications became linear, with exams sat at the end of a two-year course so that less time is spent preparing for modules and resits and more time is spent on teaching and learning. My hon. Friend raised the

point about teaching for tests. I have frequently discussed that with Ofsted, which takes it very seriously; its new inspection framework encourages schools to keep a focus on the breadth of curriculum, particularly at key stage 3 and earlier, and discourages teaching to the test.

Ofqual was formally established as the new independent regulator in 2010, with a statutory responsibility to maintain standards. It put in place robust arrangements to maintain standards, which led to year-on-year stability in grades over a long period. Ofqual also introduced a new grading scale, from 9 to 1, with 9 the highest and 1 the lowest grade, in place of A* to G, to signal that the standard of qualifications had changed and to allow greater differentiation of performance at the top end. In 2017 Ofqual also introduced a national reference test to capture improvements in attainment in English and maths so that these could be reflected in grading.

GCSEs serve a critical function as a measure of attainment and a vehicle for progression, and they do so because they are recognised and trusted. They have strong public recognition, with support from 75% of those surveyed as part of Ofqual's most recent public perceptions and confidence study. That trust stems from a long history in this country of assessment at age 16, which has existed since at least 1918 when the school certificate was introduced, through to the introduction of O-levels in 1951, CSEs in 1965 and GCSEs in 1988.

Mrs Drummond: That was fine when young people were leaving at 16 because they needed some qualifications to take into the workplace, but we are now expecting all young people to stay in education or training until 18, so does it not make more sense to shift that exam at 16 to 18?

Mr Walker: That training can of course include the workplace, such as through apprenticeships and the vocational route, so I have to disagree fundamentally. It is important that young people have those opportunities to continue studying in school or, for those who are not suited to school, to go on to a vocational route to pursue further study and development of their careers in the workplace.

We know that half of students change institution at the age of 16, and it is because they have a shared and recognised qualification that they can transition easily post-16. GCSEs equip students to move directly into employment or apprenticeships at that age with a qualification in hand. GCSEs are long-standing, credible and well respected. At the same time, as I mentioned, we have worked with higher education providers and employers to reform A-levels to ensure that they better meet the needs of higher education. That includes decoupling the AS-level to reduce the assessment burden and enable A-level students to spend more time learning and developing their depth of understanding of subjects. Reformed GCSEs support reformed A-levels, and reformed A-levels support higher graduation rates in three-year degrees from our internationally recognised universities, with four British universities currently in the top 10 globally and 17 in the top 100.

I turn to vocational and technical qualifications, which we all recognise are important. From our reforms to the way in which grades have been awarded in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, we have sought to ensure parity between those receiving vocational and technical

qualifications and those receiving GCSEs and AS and A-levels. As I mentioned, the new T-levels have been developed in collaboration with employers so that students can get the specific training, knowledge and skills required for their chosen career. Not only that: they include a nine-week high quality placement in a relevant industry, giving students first-hand experience of work during their studies.

Alongside the introduction of our T-levels, we are streamlining and strengthening the quality of all other post-16 qualifications at level 3, making the system easier to navigate and more responsive to employers' needs. The changes that we are making will give students a clear route map to the high-quality technical and academic choices available—choices that they can trust to lead to rewarding careers.

My hon. Friend mentioned the role of UTCs. The Government are committed to providing young people with technical skills and knowledge to progress into further and higher education, apprenticeships and employment. Indeed, strong university technical colleges such as the outstanding UTC in Portsmouth to which she referred are succeeding in equipping their students with those vital skills.

I turn to the immediate arrangements for qualifications. We recognise that students taking exams this year will have experienced disruption caused by the covid pandemic, so we have rightly worked closely with Ofqual to put in place a package of measures to recognise that. The measures will include unprecedented support to ensure that students can fairly demonstrate what they know and can do. They offer the right balance to account for the disruption students faced while providing students, teachers, schools and colleges with the consistency and independence of assessment and familiarity that exams deliver. The package of measures this year includes advance information on the focus of exams in most subjects for GCSE and AS and A-level students; a choice of topic or content in some GCSE exams where advance information is not provided; exam aids for use during some GCSE exams; and a range of adaptations for students taking vocational and technical qualifications depending on the purpose of the qualification.

In balancing public confidence in qualifications with fairness, Ofqual has also confirmed that 2022 will be a transition year to reflect the fact that we are in a pandemic recovery period and that students' education has been disrupted. In 2022, the aim will be for grades to reflect a midway point between 2021 and 2019, with national results likely to be higher than pre-pandemic levels, providing a safety net for those of this year's students who might otherwise have missed out on a grade. We are confident that those measures, alongside the direct investment of nearly £5 billion in education recovery, provide a pathway for a successful return to normal exams and assessments in the academic year 2022-23.

My hon. Friend rightly mentioned the importance of mental health. Exams and other assessments are an essential part of ensuring that young people have acquired the knowledge and skills that they need to study. The Government are clear that education providers should encourage pupils and students to work hard, but not at the expense of their wellbeing. I recognise that exams, like other things in life including job interviews, moving house or having a first child, are by their nature stressful,

[Mr Robin Walker]

but when pupils receive the right support, many find the level of stress from exams manageable—and actually a certain level of stress can be a motivating factor. Schools and colleges should be able to identify signs of exam-related stress whenever they emerge and be in a position to respond appropriately.

Research shows that there is a clear difference between exam stress, which is not necessarily a bad thing, and anxiety, which is a cause for concern. Clearly, we do not want young people to be in a situation where pressure tips over into mental health problems. That is why we have provided schools with a wide range of training and resources to help them support pupils and students' wellbeing. Our recent £15 million wellbeing for education recovery and wellbeing for education return programmes have provided free expert training, support and resources for education staff, helping to promote and support the wellbeing and mental health of pupils and students as they recover from the impacts of the covid pandemic. Ofqual has also issued guidance on coping with exam pressure. The information provides some techniques that students can use to help to alleviate or lessen anxiety they might have about exams, and it can be accessed through Ofqual's website.

My hon. Friend mentioned primary assessments. We think it is vital that primary assessments go forward this year, not least because we want to ensure that that data is available to look at the impact on learning from the pandemic and that we can work across the system. However, I can confirm to her that we will not be publishing comparative data between schools this year, which I know has been a concern for the sector. Recognising that school tests and assessments will be returning for the first time since 2019 without the adaptations we have in secondary, the results will not be published in league tables.

Mrs Drummond: If that is successful, will the Minister continue it in future years? One of the problems that make the stakes high is that schools are put in league tables. That is why they are teaching to the test, because,

obviously, they want to appear higher up in the league tables. If it is a success this year, will it be carried on so that we do not have league tables anymore?

Mr Walker: The specific measures we are taking this year are in recognition of the pressures the sector has faced. We will, of course, review their impact as we go forward.

I am grateful to have had the opportunity to debate this very important issue this evening. I must be clear that there are no plans for new wholesale reform of GCSEs and A-levels, which are internationally respected and enjoy high levels of public support. I am proud of the strides that this Government and previous Governments have taken to boost the quality of our technical and vocational qualifications. Our reforms since 2010 have already made a lasting improvement to qualifications, ensuring that they reflect the knowledge and skills pupils need to progress. Our GCSE and A-level reforms were substantial and designed to last, but some of the reforms to qualifications were quite new when the pandemic started. I am determined to continue the great work of my predecessors and embed them into our system. I am also acutely aware that schools, colleges and our brilliant teachers will benefit from a period of stability as we recover from the effects of the pandemic.

As we gear up for the return of exams this summer, I will close with a reflection on what that will mean for students across the country who are preparing for them. For the first time in two years, students in my constituency of Worcester, as well as in my hon. Friend's constituency of Meon Valley and along with those up and down the country, will have the chance to demonstrate what they have learned through public exams. I am pleased that through their hard work and the hard work of their teachers, they will have the opportunity to secure the valuable qualifications they need to progress to the next stage of their careers.

Question put and agreed to.

5.56 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 March 2022

[CHRISTINA REES *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Gender Specific Religious Persecution

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered gender specific religious persecution.

It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall, and I am very pleased to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. We often seem to be in these two roles in such debates; you as the chairperson and me as a participant. I am also very pleased to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), in her place. I am not sure whether this is the first time that we have been in this type of debate together. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in his place, because he understands these issues. We are always assured that he will positively and helpfully deliver the response that we seek.

I am always mindful that Thursday afternoon is sometimes what we refer to as the graveyard shift. The fact is that from Tuesday there has not been the same level of whipping, which indicates that many people are away. It does not lessen the importance of the issue. We had sought to have the debate earlier to tie in with International Women's Day, but the opportunity did not arise.

I am very pleased to see my two colleagues and dear friends, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron), who is the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, and the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. We know the great work that she does. We say that because it is true, not for any other reason. She works energetically on these issues and we are very pleased that she is in that post. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and I requested the debate jointly, so we are particularly pleased to be able to speak in it. I thank her for her continued advocacy for vulnerable women and girls around the world.

The debate is incredibly timely. Earlier this month was International Women's Day, which offers time to take stock of how far we have advanced the rights of women; all of us in the House are committed to that goal. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the advances that need to be made—where we have got to and where we need to be. Sadly, the strides that we need to take to ensure freedom of religion or belief for women and girls are significant. There is a lot more to do, as others will illustrate when they have an opportunity to express themselves. It is a time to look back at what has been achieved and to look forward to what we want to achieve.

Although violations of freedom of religion or belief can affect any member of a minority religious community, religious persecution is not gender blind. Women and girls from communities suffering from persecution based

on religion or belief face a double vulnerability: not only are they at greater risk of freedom of religion or belief abuses, but those abuses often have a greater impact on the lives of women and girls than on men. Everyone present will be aware of the Christian advocacy organisation Open Doors, which describes how gender specific religious persecution is hidden, violent and complex. Unfortunately, it is too often ignored by policy makers, non-governmental organisations and local authorities.

I will give a couple of examples; unfortunately, they are sometimes hard to listen to because of the graphic detail, even without getting into all the things that have happened, but these are the experiences of young girls. The first case is that of Meera Bhat, a 14-year-old Hindu girl from Mirpur Khas, Pakistan, who just a few days ago was abducted and forced to marry her abductor and to convert from Hinduism. Just this week, we had a chance to meet some Hindu representatives and to discuss some of the things that are happening to them. We in the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief intend to take those matters forward. There will be further engagement between us and them, and we will collectively try to act on what is happening to some Hindus in Bangladesh, in particular—that young girl, Meera, however, is from Pakistan.

Meera was abducted, forcibly married and forced to change her religion. When any child is abducted, there should be outrage, but in this case, there did not seem to be. To say that she was forcibly married is to put it politely; in reality, this 14-year-old girl was brutally raped. Do we hear about such abuse of power, abuse of religion and abuse of human dignity in the news? No, we do not. That is why this debate is so important and why the three Members present—the hon. Members for Congleton and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, and I—as well as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North, and the Minister, have a duty to respond to, highlight and deal with these issues.

All too often, these cases are flagrantly ignored by the international media, just as they are by the local authorities where the crimes take place. A culture of impunity seems to prevail. The recent report from Aid to the Church in Need, "Hear Her Cries", found that up to 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are abducted in Pakistan each year, many of whom are forcibly converted and "married". I say "married", with inverted commas, because it is certainly not a marriage that is agreed to and certainly not when that person is an underage girl. To make matters worse, that number is likely to be a conservative estimate, so it could be even more than 1,000, which greatly worries us.

Very few of these girls' names ever make it out of Pakistan, although we might hear of it through the APPG, as will the special envoy, the hon. Member for Congleton. For us, it is incredibly difficult to hear of the grief, pain and agony of vulnerable young girls and parents unable to respond. Early reports in Meera Bhat's case state that when her parents approached a judge, he sided with Meera's abductor, because he had recorded a video of her renouncing her faith. That was under duress, but if the courts are sympathetic to the case, they seem to turn a blind eye to some of the things that happen.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Much of Meera's case is uncertain and we do not know what the future holds for her. However, her parents are worried for her, as we in this House are, and I am putting the case forward for wee Meera Bhat. All too often, confessions such as Meera's are manipulated, coerced or forced; those involved are abused, sometimes violently. At the end of the day, she is a 14-year-old girl, taken from her home and family, and violently and repeatedly abused.

To highlight the importance of responding to such cases, I will also draw the attention of the Minister and all Members present to the abduction of Farah Shaheen, a 14-year-old Christian girl whose abduction shares many similarities with Meera's. Farah was kidnapped from Faisalabad on 25 June 2020 at the age of 12. That is hard to take in, particularly for me, as a grandfather—my oldest grandchild is a wee girl of 12—when I look at the innocence of Katie and think of the 12-year-old girl in Pakistan who was abducted, kidnapped, and abused. How would I feel, as a grandfather, a parent, or as one of the family members? Farah was forcibly married—which basically means that she was raped—and forced to convert to Islam.

During months of sexual enslavement, she was shackled and forced to work long hours cleaning animal dung in the yard of her abductor, a man named Khizar Ahmad Ali. Farah stated:

"I was chained most of the time...It was terrible. They put chains on my ankles"—
on a wee 12-year-old—
"and tied me with a rope."

She tried to cut the rope and escape. She tried to get the chains off, but could not manage it. She prayed every night, as a Christian girl would do, asking God to help her—a desperate plea, a plea for help, when there is a society that seems to think that Hindus and Christian girls do not have rights, but they do.

Her father, Asif Masih, highlighted the impact that this time had on his daughter, saying:

"Farah has told me she was treated as a slave...She was forced to work all day, cleaning filth in a cattle yard. They repeatedly raped my daughter."

Her father must have been beside himself with anxiety and concern. He continued:

"She was in trauma after being subjected to physical and medical torture."

Eventually—thank goodness—on 16 February 2021, after a lengthy court process, Faisalabad district and sessions court ruled that her marriage was unlawful on the grounds that she had not been registered properly. She was allowed to go home, at long last, but the abuse, kidnapping and physical torture had all taken place.

This case illustrates how authorities often turn a blind eye to gender specific persecution. After Farah's abduction, it took the police three months to even file a first information report, which starts off any police investigation in Pakistan. It was three months before they even got off their chairs to do something, while Farah's parents and family were desperate to know what was going on. The investigation was dropped, with no action taken against the three men who were involved in Farah's kidnapping and abduction. Even the eventual court ruling was a civil matter rather than a

legal one. Where is the legal support in Pakistan for young Hindu and Christian girls? It does not appear to be available.

Despite the horrors that Farah endured, her abductors were let off with absolute impunity, which I find incredibly difficult to take. If I feel like that not as a family member but as a concerned person and Member of Parliament who wishes to raise these issues, how much more did her parents feel that? Not only was Farah denied justice for the atrocities committed against her but the groundwork was laid for further abductions, because others will say, "They got off. We can do the same, because ultimately we can get away with it," and the evil men who consider such cruelty know they will not face repercussions.

I should have declared an interest at the beginning of the debate, Ms Rees, and I apologise for not doing so. I am very pleased and privileged to chair the all-party groups on international freedom of religion or belief and on the Pakistani minorities; indeed, it is humbling to do so.

I remind the House that these are not isolated issues, but two cases of 1,000 girls such as Farah and Meera who endured this abuse in Pakistan last year. As I said, I think that is just the tip of the iceberg. Unfortunately, such tragedies are not unique to Pakistan. Open Doors reports that of the top 50 countries featured in the world watch list for 2022—it was just released in January; the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) sponsors it every year—88% cited the forced marriage of women and girls as a form of religious persecution. Tellingly, no country reported its use against men, because, more often than not, it is men who abuse young women and young girls.

In Afghanistan, the rights of women are severely limited because of the Taliban's extreme interpretation of sharia law. However, some women experience further challenges, especially those belonging to religious or belief minorities. Men may suffer from verbal and physical abuse in public places due to their external identity—perhaps because of a turban or a beard—but women also fear abuse, and women and girls from minority religions remove themselves from the male gaze or keep themselves under the radar, either by remaining indoors or covering themselves entirely in a burqa when they are in public. It is also no secret that women suffer sexual violence. As we see so often with sexual violence in today's world, men seem to think they can do what they want. We need to have strict, hard laws to make sure that they know they cannot.

The nature of religious dress for women of some religions leads to them facing greater difficulty in exercising their right to freedom of religion or belief. At least 11 states in Europe, Africa and south Asia impose public restrictions or bans on Muslim head coverings, despite the fact that some women regard them as an integral part of their faith or identity. It is about protection and what their religion tells them to do. Women may also feel under great pressure to conceal or perhaps underplay their religious identity to make themselves less identifiable as belonging to a religious group or being more moderate in their outlook.

Religious dress may seem a trivial form of infringement on freedom of religion or belief, but wherever violations of that nature take place, grave examples of forced marriage and sexual exploitation are not far behind. Forced marriage, and the sexual exploitation of women

and girls, is a tactic to stem the growth of religious minority communities and is under-reported and under-recognised, despite its enormous scale. In 2020, at the peak of the covid-19 outbreak around the world, Open Doors reported that the No. 1 pressure point for women was forced marriage. When people say, “I do,” it is a commitment by both parties, but in the cases that we are discussing here, there is no choice for the young girl at all, regardless of whether she is a Hindu or Christian. It seems that the law of the land in Pakistan and other countries is biased towards the male part of the marriage.

Forced marriages, and the weaponisation of sexual violence, is a tactic that devastates religious minority communities. Children born of forced marriages and forced conversions are often made to take on the religious identity of their perpetrator, and they are left with a legal religious identity that is difficult or even impossible to change. Sadly, in many cases around the world, survivors of rape and sexual violence face ostracisation from their community, often leaving such women either unable to marry and have children or forced to leave the community and be cut off from support networks. Heartbreakingly, in some cases that has resulted in survivors returning to their abusers, as there is no safe place for them to go. How sad it is that they have to go back to an abusive relationship because no one else will take them—none of their family members will reach out, and no one in society will say, “Can we help this young girl and make life better for her?”

The tactic is seen in many countries, but perhaps the starkest recent example—it is still fresh in my mind and those of hon. Members—is the 2014 atrocities committed by Daesh against religious minorities, including Yazidis and Christians. When I think about the brutality that we witnessed, I have an ache in my heart for the Yazidi women and young girls who were abducted and have never been seen again. Daesh specifically targeted religious minority women and girls through the use of abduction, exploitation, rape, sexual violence and forced marriage in an attempt to annihilate religious diversity and establish its caliphate. Many of the women and girls abducted by Daesh in northern Iraq in 2014 are still missing, and one of my requests to the Minister is to find out what has happened to those 2,763 Yazidi women and children. Unfortunately, no real effort has been made to locate them or to ensure that they have been rescued and reunited with their families, despite the collapse of the Daesh caliphate in 2019.

According to survivors, girls abducted by Daesh fighters were trafficked to Syria and then to Iran by Iranian soldiers. What can we do to help? How can we make inquiries or carry out investigations to see whether we can return the Yazidi women and girls to their families and reunite them with those who love and miss them? If it is true that Yazidi girls were trafficked abroad, they could now be in a range of possible countries—perhaps a dozen countries or more. I am grateful to Lord Alton of Liverpool for calling on the UK Government to investigate the situation and engage in a dialogue with the Iranian Government to clarify the issue and to ensure the safe return of the Yazidi girls, if they have indeed been trafficked to Iran.

I welcome the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and others. I put on record my thanks to the Minister, the Secretary of State and all the civil servants who worked industriously hard behind the scenes. Sometimes

things do not happen at the speed we would wish, but we are greatly encouraged by the release of Nazanin. We saw on TV this morning her reunion with her husband and daughter, with all the family. We must put on record our thanks to her husband for his perseverance in highlighting this issue through hunger strike. We also thank the Government for working in the background. I saw the Minister speaking about it on TV this morning. The deal is a confidential deal, and we understand that, but we have got her home, and there has been great rejoice.

We are still waiting for answers on the Yazidi girls in Iran. Other states must follow suit and engage the Iranian Government in seeking the truth about the whereabouts of the Yazidi women and girls. The Yazidi girls and others like them need to be reunited with their families. I remember meeting some of them here in the House back in 2015, I think, and their stories were hard to comprehend—the violence, cruelty and complete disregard for their rights. They were abused physically and emotionally.

States must do much more to ensure the safe return of trafficked women and girls. International organisations need to support and guide states through this process or, indeed, accommodate it. It is imperative that women and girls who have endured horrific abuse are found, rescued, and allowed to go home. There will be rejoicing when the 2,763 Yazidi women and girls are returned home, reunited with their family and able to have the joy of the life they once had, if possible.

The vast majority of Daesh fighters are only prosecuted for terrorism-related offences. They need to be charged with more. It is important that we seek justice for these women. Daesh fighters must be prosecuted for their other crimes, which include murder, kidnapping, forced marriage, trafficking and other forms of sexual violence. That was one of the recommendations of the 2019 Truro review, which our Government have pledged to enact in full. Unfortunately, we have not seen much of that yet. Perhaps the Minister can give us an indication of where we are with that. It is important that the review’s recommendations are delivered.

In many parts of the world, the acts constituting human trafficking, and the subsequent enslavement and abuse, are not investigated and prosecuted. In cases where domestic courts are not equipped to prosecute, the international community needs to come together to ensure that courts can fulfil their legal duties, even if that means resorting to the establishment of international tribunals. I believe that if something is necessary, we should do it. We all share in the duty to deliver justice for these women.

Last year the UN found that ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidis, including through the abduction, forced marriage and conversion of Yazidi women and girls. In November 2021 a German court found that Taha al-Jumailly was guilty of crimes against humanity and genocide, citing the abduction and killing of a five-year-old girl. I have five grandchildren: three girls and two boys. How could anybody do that to a young girl? The court also cited the forced trafficking of her mother. They killed her child and then sold her into slavery. These crimes do not bear thinking about, but we must highlight the issue. Sadly, we too often do not. Today we have the opportunity.

[*Jim Shannon*]

Let us not deceive ourselves into thinking this is a matter for countries to deal with internally. The UK has an obligation under the convention on the prevention and punishment of the crime of genocide to prevent such crimes from escalating. The Truro review recommends that Her Majesty's Government seeks to prosecute Daesh members not only as terrorists but as perpetrators of sex crimes against Yazidi and Christian women. This has not been done. I encourage the Minister and my Government to address this before the report's third-year review this summer, which is only a few months away.

I welcome the commitments that Her Majesty's Government have made to promote gender equality and address discrimination around the world, including the Foreign Secretary's announcement of the creation of a summit focusing on preventing sexual violence against women. We welcome that really significant step, as well as the proposal to build a new consensus on viewing sexual violence in conflict as a red line. The more we become aware of it, the more we want to stop it. I cannot stop it myself—none of us can individually—but our Minister and our Government can take steps to make it happen.

More needs to be done. Victims of gender specific religious persecution are so often overlooked, and I am sorry to say that the compounding elements of religion and gender are too often ignored by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. I urge Her Majesty's Government to make defending women and girls in religious minorities a core value that should encompass all areas of foreign affairs, including our trade policy. We should ensure that all new trade agreements—indeed, all existing trade agreements—include human rights provisions that consider any religious or belief-based persecution and its gender components.

We need to ensure that UK overseas aid and development programmes include safeguards to recognise the signs of gender specific religious or belief-based persecution. They should be aware in particular of the risk of abduction, forced marriage and the conversion of girls from religious minority communities. I gave two examples earlier, one of a Christian girl and one of a Hindu girl. Wherever that is happening, we need to do something. That is particularly important for Pakistan, where abuses are rife, yet it is the largest recipient of UK overseas development spending. I believe it is time to make that aid conditional; it is time to add protections that make sure that religious minorities—be they Hindu, Christian or any other ethnic group—have protection. Aid spending can be a method to do that.

More needs to be done to help find and rescue the 2,763 Yazidi women and children who are still missing. There is an ache in my heart when I think of them, and I know there is an ache in other Members' hearts as well. We have a duty to help them, to find out where they are and to try to bring them home to the place where they once lived in safety. Survivors need to receive adequate assistance, including medical and psychological help, financial support to set up their homes again, and access to justice. Those who abused them must face justice. That is needed to help rebuild their lives. Impunity for those crimes must be tackled; there has to be accountability in that process. I believe we owe it to

those religious communities around the world. I believe we owe it to women and girls for what they have endured. It is time to bring it to an end.

1.58 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I hope the Minister will forgive me for repeating several of his points. However, given that millions of women around the world are suffering those abuses, those points bear repetition.

Freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, extending to everyone, everywhere, without distinction of any kind, be it race, ethnicity, gender, political or other opinion, or economic or social status. The three main components of FORB are the right to have a religion or belief; the right to change it; and the right to practice it. Unfortunately, millions of people around the world are not able to do those things freely.

While religious persecution against men tends to be focused and often public, such as killings during conflict, religious persecution against women is more likely to be complex and hidden. However, it too can be very violent. Global FORB violations against women, as women, can be characterised in three words: complex, violent and hidden.

Despite the often distinctive nature of FORB abuses of women, which are often sexual, until recently much of the research and data on FORB has been gender blind, possibly because the majority of official representatives of religion and belief communities across the world are men, and because their experiences have been used as a default reference. Yet, in many societies, men and women live very different lives. Women all too often do not have the same access to resources. They are assigned different roles. Many women do not exercise the same autonomy as men, even in relation to religion or belief practices in their local communities, let alone in other ways.

It is becoming increasingly clear that the factors that result in religious persecution against women are many and complex, and we all, including those of us who work on FORB much of the time, need to better understand those factors. Some work has been done by the FCDO in response to recommendation 5 of the Truro review, but not enough. I put that on the record, as the three-year deadline for reviewing the independent Truro review will be upon us at the beginning of July. But not enough work has been done.

That is why I am grateful to Aid to the Church in Need and Open Doors for their recent reports, "Hear Her Cries" and "The Persecution of Christian Women and Girls". They are moving and critical. When I read "Hear Her Cries", as a woman, I cried. I brought a copy for the Minister and I implore him to read it. It is heartrending.

Recommendation 5 of the review, which was accepted by the FCDO, states—I read it into the record, as we, fortunately, have the liberty of time in this debate:

"Bolster research into the critical intersection of FoRB and minority rights with both broader human rights issues (such as people trafficking, gender equality, gender based violence especially kidnapping, forced conversion and forced marriage) and other critical concerns for FCO such as security, economic activity, etc. recognising the potential for religious identity to be a key marker of vulnerability."

The particularly important part is its final sentence:

“Use such research to articulate FoRB-focussed policies to address these issues.”

That sentence poses a critical question, one I hope will be considered by the independent reviewers of the Truro review. How has any such research done by the FCDO been used to augment, amend or develop Government policies over the last two and a half years, so that the UK can better help tackle the tragic global phenomenon of widespread FoRB violations against women and girls? What changes have been made to FCDO policies?

Some good Government-funded work has been done by the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development. It states four reasons why women from religious minorities may be especially vulnerable to FoRB abuses. I will summarise them briefly. First, when women are poor, and they belong to religious minorities in societies where people from a different faith are often viewed as “other”—someone different or alien—they can be particularly powerless. They can expect very little support from society as a whole. I will give an example later of a migrant woman from Qatar.

Secondly, CREID says that in some societies the bodies of women who belong to religious minorities are being used as battlegrounds in wider political and geostrategic struggles. That can lead to them being targeted for ideological reasons. Their vulnerable position in society makes them even more vulnerable. An example, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford, are the Yazidis in and around 2014. We also know of the Uyghurs in China; we have heard terrible stories about them being sexually abused and undergoing forced abortions.

Thirdly, some forms of sexual grooming of girls and women can be motivated by ideology. This was demonstrated in the example given by the hon. Gentleman, which I will refer to later, of forced marriage and forced conversion being justified by ideology from other faiths.

Finally—although not finally in terms of my speech, Ms Rees—women can face stigma and discrimination in their own communities. Tragically, women who have been subjected to sexual violence are often seen as bringing shame on their community and they can be targeted for honour-based violence from their own families and community. That is why it is critical to work with whole communities, including religious leaders, to challenge the acceptability of religiously motivated violence against women and bring about social change.

We have to make more explicit the links between gender, religion, marginality and poverty. Women in many countries appear to be victims of not just double but triple forms of persecution: they are women; they are of a particular religious or belief group; and they have low socioeconomic status and live in the margins. Those different layers reinforce each other, making women particularly vulnerable.

It is insufficient for us to say that we must raise awareness of the intersection of those vulnerabilities—we must be moved to action. Otherwise, religiously marginalised, economically excluded women will continue to fall through the cracks, experiencing appalling inequality, discrimination, persecution and violence, which will continue to be overlooked, ignored or minimised. I hope that the conference the UK is hosting on 5 and 6 July 2022 on freedom of religion or belief will promote

some practical steps as to how we can address that issue and, working together with the international community concerned about FoRB, encourage both Governments and civil society to do so.

I will unpack those thoughts a little. I am grateful to Stefanus Alliance International for providing an example of the complexity of the causes of FoRB abuses against women by way of a migrant woman in Qatar. There is already a lack of legal protection for Qatari women in general. Christians are a minority group in Qatar; they do not enjoy the same level of rights and freedoms as the majority Muslim population. A foreign Christian woman working as a maid in Qatar can often have her immigration papers confiscated by her employer; she therefore has little or no hope of legal protection should he abuse her. That is just one example of the multi-layered intersectionality of human rights violations for women, and why women can be particularly vulnerable to FoRB abuses.

Another example of the differences between men and women in terms of FoRB violations is that when they occur against women, they are often hidden. Tragically, the abuses are often perpetrated within a woman's own home, which is, of course, where women spend much of their time—in the private sphere. Sadly, such abuses may even be perpetrated by her own family or community. Practices such as female genital mutilation, sex-selective abortion, female infanticide, forced marriage, child marriage, sexual violence, marital rape, honour killings and the denial of access to work can all fall into the category of religiously motivated FoRB abuses.

If a woman converts to another religion, she may well face additional challenges from her own family, such as physical or emotional torture to persuade her to deny her new faith. She may be excluded from family social networks, which can have severe consequences for a woman when they are her main—and sometimes only—social contacts. Leaving the family will not be an option. When a woman's educational opportunities, and therefore her job opportunities, may also have been limited, she is financially dependent on her family. Sadly, any chance of recourse to justice can also be severely limited for her. Too often, we hear of the police taking no action, or of local courts taking no action at all when a young woman who has been forcibly married, for example, applies for justice.

Sadly, perpetrators of sexual violence often receive no evident public repercussions. In too many places, the impunity related to such crimes makes the continued targeting of women by others for their religious beliefs a low-risk activity. The sexual violence experienced by many women often remains unreported because of stigma and shame. Sadly, it is one of the most common forms of FoRB violations against women and many underage girls. The female body becomes a battlefield used by perpetrators to control a woman's personal faith or faith communities at large.

I am aware of one young woman who has been in hiding for well over a year as she is in fear of her abductor, who forcibly married her—by which we mean rape, and often continual rape. She is too frightened to come out of hiding for fear of the whole community. Rape is widely used as a weapon of armed conflict, as we heard and saw in 2014, as the Syrian conflict affected the Yazidis. Thousands of Yazidi women were abducted and held as sex slaves by ISIS soldiers. I heard of

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a young woman called Ekhlās, who was captured by ISIS soldiers. When she asked them, “Are you going to murder me?”, they said, “Oh, no. We’re going to make you suffer much more than that.” They took her as a sex slave.

Those women have faced challenges if they have tried to flee captivity or reintegrate themselves into their communities, which have practices and regulations on pre-marital intercourse or interreligious marriages. As we now know, some 2,700 such women, many of whom have children, remain missing to this day. I would appreciate it if the Minister could update me—perhaps not today, but in due course—on what practical support and resources have been applied to help those women since the answer I received on 26 October last year, when I last raised this issue.

Rape can even be used outside conflict in disputes between religious groups. As the Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development says, sexual grooming of girls and women can be motivated by ideology. Shockingly, it can sometimes even be used with the appearance of respectability. Each year, hundreds of Christian, Hindu and Sikh girls are reportedly abducted and forcibly married, and it is justified by ideology.

“Hear Her Cries”, a report by Aid to the Church in Need, relays brave women’s accounts of their kidnapping, forced conversion, sexual victimisation and unimaginable suffering. I, too, was going to read out the account of little Farah, aged 12, who was abducted from her grandfather’s home in that way, but the hon. Gentleman has already done so. That report should do more than just move us to tears; it should move us to action.

Tragically, although men are more likely to be killed as a result of religious persecution, they are also more likely than women to be celebrated as martyrs, whereas women, who are more likely to be subject to sexual abuse, are not rewarded the same honour. Their complex trauma is often additionally burdened with re-traumatisation in the form of isolation and rejection from their own faith communities. The blame falls on the victim, suffering continues long after the event, and counselling is unavailable.

What can we do to address all that? I will ask the Minister to consider a few things. We must ensure much wider humanitarian assistance for such women, and more extensive training in specialised trauma counselling. There need to be targeted programmes of aid for women and girls who face vulnerabilities as women of faith or belief, with those factors clearly recognised as criteria of vulnerability by UK aid. Women need to be involved in designing and implementing aid and other support programmes. There needs to be strengthened dialogue and co-operation between women’s rights activists and FORB activists to help to overcome a perception that achieving FORB for all women is incompatible with women’s rights.

We need to call out authorities in countries, including Governments, at the highest level. I implore the Minister to do so whenever the opportunity occurs. We need to call out abuses when authorities turn a blind eye or, tragically, even at times condone action, such as where local policing or the country’s legal system fails to protect women subject to FORB abuses. We must ensure that steps are taken against perpetrators to hold them to account and end cultures of impunity. We must learn to

better identify early warning signs to avert atrocities and work with others in the international community to do so. We must challenge those Governments who have put FORB in their constitutions or signed up to international treaties, such as article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights, but do not apply them.

We must gather data to better understand the double or triple jeopardy of women who are members of religious minorities—often also among the poorest and most vulnerable in their societies. More dialogue must be promoted within and across religious communities, including women at all times, to reflect on traditional practices, such as patriarchal ones, that have a negative impact on FORB. We must help women in local communities to voice their concerns. We need to look at how we can use the declaration of humanity, which was launched by Lord Ahmad, our Human Rights Minister, during the pandemic. It has not, perhaps, had the profile and subsequent impact that it could have. There is more to do. Will the Minister say how the UK Government, which commissioned it, could help to take that forward? The three-year deadline for implementing the Truro review, which was a manifesto commitment, will shortly be upon us, but that is no reason not to continue working on recommendation 5 and all the others. We must not stop just because the three-year period of the Truro review ends this July. Much more needs to be done.

From my experience of working on FORB in depth and detail over the past year and three months or so, as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, I do not believe that championing FORB and calling out its abuses across the world is sufficiently embedded in the culture of the FCDO. Experience has shown me that the FCDO, both at desks here and at posts in countries, needs to be bolder and more public in calling out specific cases of FORB abuses—not least those relating to some of the women we have heard about today. Inadequate advocacy is being provided for individual cases of concern. I am not being appropriately encouraged to undertake it. Tailored responses are not being provided to me when I raise individual cases of concern. Generic remarks in response to my raising such cases, such as, “FORB is a key human rights priority for the UK,” are simply not good enough.

Nor is the argument that it is better to raise such cases in private good enough. I have been concerned about one such case for almost a year and a half, and officials are aware of it. Still the poor girl continues to suffer. Arguments that raising a case by name could put an individual woman in danger, when she is already effectively being imprisoned under risk of mob violence, are unacceptable, particularly when so-called “in private” advocacy appears to yield little result. In one such case, I was asked not to name a young girl who had been abducted because it might put her at risk. She had been abducted by Boko Haram. She was at risk. Her family wanted her case to be raised. It is very interesting that today we are celebrating the freedom of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, whose plight has not been out of the public domain for six years.

I will close with the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the architects of the 1948 universal declaration of human rights. She said:

“Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual

person; the neighbourhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.”

2.20 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Rees. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who shows such dedication to freedom of religion or belief in his work throughout Parliament. He has made a magnificent impact in his role as chair of the APPG, not just across the UK but internationally, and is greatly respected and esteemed by colleagues of different parties in that regard.

It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is doing tremendous work. We are so privileged to have her as the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, which is at the heart of the work she does and something that she champions in Parliament, across the UK and internationally. My constituents are delighted that she will be visiting us in a couple of months to speak about this work in East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, because they feel it is so important.

When we celebrate International Women’s Day, we talk about the progress that we have made in the United Kingdom, which is fantastic. I have certainly had more opportunities than my mother did, and my mother had more opportunities than my grandmother did. We have made significant progress, and we all hope that our children will have better opportunities. I have two girls of my own, and I want them to succeed at whatever makes them happy in life, but we cannot forget those across the world who live under the fear of persecution, whose opportunities are dashed and whose ability to contribute is curtailed purely because they are believed to have the wrong religion or belief in the country they were born in.

It is an honour to be speaking here today. The subject matter is very grave and disquieting. The debate was inspired by *The Forgotten Women*, a recent event held by Aid to the Church in Need and Open Doors, two charities that support persecuted minorities. It was held on International Women’s Day and raised awareness of the many women from religious minorities who suffer grievous persecution because they are deemed to be of the wrong faith. I have worked with the Catholic charity Aid to the Church in Need for many years, and I have been very humbled to read its “Hear Her Cries” report, which is about the kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual victimisation of Christian women and girls. The report presents disturbing findings that have to be acknowledged and acted on in the higher echelons of Government, both nationally and internationally.

According to the Christian Association of Nigeria, 95% of women abducted by Boko Haram in Nigeria are Christian. In Pakistan, research by the all-party parliamentary group suggests that 1,000 Christian and Hindu girls are abducted each year to be forcibly converted and married. Other research says that 1,000 girls are abducted every year from the Sindh province alone, so we think this might be only the tip of the iceberg.

When I was on the International Development Committee, I had the privilege of meeting the Bring Back Our Girls campaign and the abducted Nigerian girls’ mothers, who were devastated that they had sent their children to be educated at school in good faith. They wanted the best for their children, as we do for ours. Those girls did not return. Some girls have been returned, but more have been taken.

What are the Government doing? It is one of the countries we donate the largest amount of aid to. My constituents want our aid money to go to Governments who want to tackle inequality and ensure that the most vulnerable are protected, and that, where that is not happening, the Government seriously question their commitment to working with those Governments. Raising those issues repeatedly and ensuring that action is taken is the very least we can do.

I would like to present a case study that demonstrates the brutality and injustice that women have to contend with. Rania Abd el-Messiah’s case was featured in Aid to the Church in Need’s “Hear Her Cries” report. She vanished from the village of Mina in Monufia Governorate on 23 April 2020. A few days later, a video was released on social media. Rania, a devout Christian, who was active in her local Coptic Orthodox Church, appeared wearing a Muslim al-amira headscarf, saying she had converted to Islam nine years previously. She said she had left her home of her own free will, taking her jewellery with her. She then recited the Shahada, the Islamic profession of faith.

Rania’s family were very suspicious, particularly as, contrary to what she said in the video, none of her jewellery was missing. Her brother Remon said:

“She was definitely kidnapped and forced to make that video.” He added that she had been “threatened and coerced”. Her family also claimed that the police knew where she was being held. No progress was made, though, until the local diocese, led by Coptic Orthodox Bishop Binjiman of Menoufia, took up her case. After protests and a threat to leave a Government-backed interfaith initiative by the Menoufia Assembly of Priests, Rania was eventually released.

Rania declared that she had not converted to Islam, which was backed up by Al-Azhar, the Islamic authority that registers conversions to Islam, which argued that in Islam, there can be “no compulsion in religion”. Bishop Binjiman later confirmed that Rania had indeed been kidnapped, having been forced into a car by two women. He said the police had told the family not to talk publicly about the case, adding that he was aware of 15 similar cases of kidnapping. During the almost three months that she was held, she was both sexually and psychologically abused by her captors.

It is clear that Christian women like Rania and those of other religious minorities are being persecuted because of their faith, but how often do we hear their stories in the press? What are the UK Government doing to help women like them, and what are the United Nations doing? If MPs from all parties do not raise our voices, then women from religious minorities will continue to be the forgotten women in the fight against gender-related violence.

In a case study from Mozambique, Aana—not her real name, but the one in the report from Aid to the Church in Need—gave an insight into the fate faced by Christian girls in Mozambique when kidnapped by

[Dr Lisa Cameron]

Islamic extremists, who are currently waging an insurgency in the country. After her release, she said that Christian girls were given a choice: convert to Islam and marry a fighter or become a slave. She said that

“those who were Christians and who didn’t want to convert... would be chosen by the soldiers to be slaves.”

This was confirmed by Father Fonseca of Pemba Diocese, Mozambique, who said that Christian girls face a real threat of abduction, rape and forced conversion and marriage, because the fighters

“are able to do anything. They can do what they want.”

He added:

“Christian women are being kidnapped, not all alone but with other women. It is a phenomenon taking place where the terrorists are, where the fighting is taking place.”

The hon. Member for Strangford described the case of Farah Shaheen, a Christian girl living in Pakistan who was kidnapped. I was going to raise her case, but he has covered it in great detail. It highlights the need to review the work that is being done in conjunction with the Government of Pakistan to ensure that the most vulnerable have assistance and receive our support and UK aid. As I said, people in my constituency and, I am quite sure, people across the United Kingdom want to make sure that the most vulnerable receive the aid, and that cases of persecution and injustice are dealt with by the Governments that we are assisting.

I note that in response to the APPG’s 2021 report on the situation in Pakistan, Lord Ahmad, the Foreign Office Minister, expressed the UK Government’s disappointment that draft legislation criminalising forced conversions had stalled in Pakistan’s Parliament in 2021. The UK Government say that they have regularly raised the issue with the Government of Pakistan, but what action are they taking and what further work can be done in this regard?

Before I finish, I will briefly ask the Minister, will he build on the recommendations made by my colleagues today? Perhaps—I hope that, as treasurer of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief, I am not speaking out of turn—we could meet Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials to ask them about the programmes that are under way to address freedom of religion or belief. I say that because it is clearly an important cross-party issue and it is something that we believe we could lend not just support but some weight to. We are very keen to meet those officials involved in that work, to ensure that action is being taken and that there are regular reviews of progress.

When we think about the freedoms that we have today, we can see that we have come a long way. However, collectively—working together—we can help not just those women in the UK who are affected by the issues that we are discussing today, and who are very important in all our constituencies, but internationally, those women and girls who experience persecution due to a lack of acceptance of their religion or belief, doing all that we can to support their needs at this crucial time.

2.31 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Rees.

May I start by wishing all those who are celebrating them a happy Purim, happy Holi festival—for tomorrow—and a happy St Patrick’s day for today?

It has been an absolute privilege to hear the powerful speeches here in Westminster Hall today; each case that was cited was as heartbreaking and shocking as the others. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) for their leadership in this area. Along with other Members of this House, they have fought for the rights of persecuted religious minorities with dedication and heart. The all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief is an invaluable resource in pushing these rights forward. We have our own desperate problems with violence against women and girls in the UK, which we must attend to, but we cannot take our eye off the rest of the world. With Members such as the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady in the House, I know that we will not do so.

I also thank and pay tribute to the work of organisations such as Open Doors, which was mentioned. However, nobody else’s courage can ever match up to that displayed by the very people who are being persecuted. Today we have heard stories of women and girls who have stood tall in the face of death and danger, while continuing to worship in such dangerous environments. It is clear to us that the perpetrators of such crimes against women are not motivated by genuine religious faith. These atrocities are driven not by a pursuit of God but by a pursuit of power, an often masculine determination to enforce patriarchy to the extreme.

Female genital mutilation continues to be used as a weapon against young women and girls. It has absolutely no place in any culture in 2022, regardless of religious belief or practice. It is misogynistic torture, which causes physical injuries and lifelong psychological damage. Along with the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Lady, I should be grateful to hear from the Minister what action Britain is taking to end this grotesque practice worldwide.

As we heard, families across Nigeria remain heartbroken for the daughters and sisters who were stolen from them. Boko Haram is pursuing war against women’s rights to freedom of religion, education, employment and marriage. What hope are we offering to those families and to the girls themselves?

Jim Shannon: I asked a business question of the Leader of the House yesterday in order to highlight the killings of 50 men, women and children in the Democratic Republic of Congo. I was hoping that the Minister who is here today would perhaps be able, in responding to that, to give us some indication of any help that we might be able to give the authorities in the DRC, to try to find the perpetrators of those killings and to offer the authorities there some support.

Sarah Owen: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I hope the Minister has taken notes of all the questions that have been asked today.

The past year has reminded us what horrors the Taliban could inflict upon women and girls in Afghanistan, starting with banning girls from schools, with such devastating impact. When the overseas aid budget was slashed, warnings were raised that it would be to the

detriment of girls' education worldwide. Can the Minister assure us that providing safety and education to girls, including those suffering from religious oppression, is still an objective of this Government? Christians are also at intensified risk in Afghanistan under the new regime, and Christian women face being forced into marriages and conversion. Will the Minister please tell us whether there are still asylum routes open to Christians and to women and girls fleeing persecution in Afghanistan?

In China, the Chinese Communist party regime flattens anyone and anything that challenges the prescribed ideology. Christians are forced underground and risk detainment just for owning a Bible, and in Xinjiang, as we have heard, Uyghur Muslims are victims of genocide due to their religion and ethnicity. While thousands of Uyghurs are known to be slaving away in cotton fields, particular brutalities are saved for women: they have been sexually assaulted, tortured, had their children stolen from them, and been forcibly sterilised. The Chinese Communist party is motivated by the same principles as the Taliban, Boko Haram, Islamic State and others—the ruthless pursuit of domination. Faith is not a factor in this religious persecution, only power. Although the Government conceded last year that what is under way in Xinjiang is genocide, there has been very little change in our national response. Every day the Uyghur Muslims face ethnic cleansing, and other religious minorities, including Christians, live in fear of being found out by their oppressive Government. Will the Minister advise us on what steps are being taken to address the dangers faced by those minorities in China?

Human Rights Watch has highlighted Government policy in India as reflecting bias against Muslims. Since October 2018, Indian authorities have deported over a dozen Rohingya Muslims to Myanmar, including women and children, despite the risk to their lives and their security. In May 2019, the Government revoked the constitutional autonomy of India's only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir. They deployed additional troops, detained thousands of people and cut off phone and internet connections, with women and girls reporting rapes, attacks, and living in a constant state of fear.

The world risks looking more divided than ever at a time when there is no Department for International Development. Although we were promised that the cuts to international aid were temporary, that budget has not been restored. What hope does that give women and girls around the world who need our help? What future is there for our own humanitarian interventions, and what damage has this done to Britain's standing on the world stage, especially when this is all compounded by a Prime Minister who has chosen to visit Saudi Arabia following the execution of 81 people?

As I mentioned, faith is by and large a force for good in the world, and a very powerful one—just look at the way that people of faith are stepping forward to lead the welcome for Ukrainian refugees, just as they did for Syrians, Afghans and Hongkongers. Throughout the pandemic, churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras and synagogues served their communities with compassion and hospitality. We are lucky: we live in a country where community cohesion may not be perfect, but everyone has the right to express their beliefs in freedom and safety. That should not be a privilege; it should be a basic human right. Female believers here are largely

protected from forced marriage, FGM and other abuses and have access and rights to healthcare, including reproductive healthcare.

However, there have been shocking increases in Islamophobia and antisemitism, and again, women and children in schools have borne the brunt of them. Muslim women have increasingly been subjected to horrific Islamophobic abuse in the streets and online, and even death threats. There have also been approximately 2 million antisemitic tweets in the UK; that is on one platform alone, so it would be good to hear what the Minister has to say about tackling the rising religious persecution that we are seeing in our own country.

This summer, we are due to host a global summit on freedom of religion or belief in London. It is very welcome that the Foreign Secretary has marked the issue as a priority in her brief. However, as hosts of the conference, we must be able to lead with integrity. That means using the full range of the financial and political resources that we have to intervene in religious persecution of all kinds.

I have posed many questions to the Minister today, as have other speakers. I will give him the opportunity to respond. I know there will be consensus that we have a moral duty to intervene in these areas of gross violence, suppression and misogyny. That is clear in every debate that we have on religious persecution. My hope is that we no longer need to keep having these debates to encourage our Government to make the interventions needed.

2.40 pm

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Rees. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this debate. He speaks on the topic with great passion, compassion and knowledge, particularly as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) fulfils a dual role. I have no doubt that if she were not acting as party spokesperson in this debate, she would speak with similar passion and conviction. I thank her for the custodianship of the FCDO office in Scotland.

I think that this is the first time I have responded to a debate with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), in attendance, so I welcome her to her post. It would be remiss of me not to commend also the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). I will mention her later in my remarks. I congratulate her on her role as the Prime Minister's envoy in this important area.

Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right but, as has been highlighted by all speakers today, it is denied to millions of people around the world. Attacks on this freedom go hand in hand with other human rights violations and abuses. Religious persecution is of course not limited to women, but the simple truth is that, as in so many other areas, the plight of women is often worse. As we have heard, it is not just religious persecution but the use of sexual violence that makes the situation even more horrific, painful and pernicious. A number of speakers have highlighted specific examples of where women have been recipients of the most appalling sexual violence and abuse. As the hon. Member

[James Cleverly]

for Luton North says, it is done in the name of religion, but it has nothing to do with religion. We have to recognise that.

The recent report from Aid to the Church in Need shone a light on how women and girls are particularly vulnerable to being targeted with sexual violence, using religious belief as an excuse. Some have been forced to convert, often under pain of death. In the face of such grave attacks on human rights, it is up to the world's democracies, including the United Kingdom, to champion freedom for all. That is why we continue to work in close co-ordination with our international partners on a range of measures, from our work through the UN to call out violations of human rights and support those affected, to aid projects working at the grassroots with communities and religious leaders to protect the rights of minorities. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon is leading those efforts as the Minister for Human Rights and the Prime Minister's special representative for preventing sexual violence in conflict.

In November 2020, Lord Ahmad launched the declaration of humanity, which united leaders from many faiths and beliefs in a common front, and called for the prevention of sexual violence in conflict and denounced the stigma faced by survivors—a point that the hon. Member for Strangford made. In some cases, the stigma prevents women and girls seeking refuge in the families they grew up in. The declaration attracted strong support, and more than 50 leaders from countries including Iraq, Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka have thus far signed it. I know that Lord Ahmad works closely with the Prime Minister's special envoy, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, on that issue—I am going to embarrass her now, so I hope she is prepared for this.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton is a powerful advocate, and I admire her hugely for that. She is strongly engaged with advocacy groups, including Open Doors and Aid to the Church in Need, which recently hosted an International Women's Day event. As she said at that event, we must continue to call out countries that fail to take action, while continuing to work at the grassroots level to effect change. We know that communities are stronger when everyone is included, so I will highlight some projects that are already making a difference around the world.

The hon. Member for Strangford and others mentioned Pakistan, where we are funding programmes to protect women and girls, including in religious or belief minority communities, from forced marriage and gender-based violence. We are working with community leaders at village level to try to change social behaviours. On changing the position of the Government, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow mentioned the stalling of legislation. We will continue to encourage Pakistan to pursue the right legislation, but legislation and governmental action alone are not enough, which is why we seek to influence at grassroots level as well as through the official development assistance funding that we provide for Pakistan. We have supported the Government of Pakistan to set up eight courts to provide child-sensitive justice to victims of child abuse, child trafficking and child marriage.

The plight of Afghanistan was raised. We backed the UN Human Rights Council resolution to establish the mandate for a special rapporteur to monitor and report on the human rights situation. That includes the challenges faced by women and girls from religious, or indeed non-religious, communities. We are directly supporting the United Nations population fund activities to prevent gender-based violence, and we launched, with the International Rescue Committee, programming specifically designed for the protection of women and girls. The hon. Member for Luton North asked about the resettlement scheme. We are providing 20,000 women and girls and others at risk with a safe route to resettlement in the UK, and we are on track to resettle an estimated 5,000 this year.

The situation in Syria remains grave, but we are working to support women and girls affected by human rights violations and abuses, including the right of freedom of religion or belief, through our national action plan on women, peace and security. We have allocated £22 million to the United Nations Population Fund in Syria to support this work.

The awful situation in Iraq was raised by several hon. Members, particularly the persecution perpetrated by Daesh. We have seen horrific crimes perpetrated by that group. Many women are still living in difficult conditions because they have children born of sexual violence and they face significant barriers to rejoining their communities due to that stigma. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton took a leading role in pushing for the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance statement calling for minority communities displaced by Daesh to be allowed to return home in a safe, voluntary and sustainable way.

The situation in China was raised with great passion by the hon. Member for Luton North. We must keep the situation in Xinjiang in the public eye. The evidence of the scale and severity of the human rights violations being perpetrated against the Uyghur Muslims is far-reaching and paints a truly harrowing picture. As the hon. Member said, there have been reports of forced sterilisation and testimonies of rape, torture and the forced separation of families. Such terrible violations of human rights must be called out and highlighted on the international stage. That is why the Foreign Secretary challenged those violations in an address to the United Nations Human Rights Council earlier this month.

The hon. Member for Strangford and others asked about the situation in north-east Nigeria. There are ongoing attacks by terrorist groups, including Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa, which cause immense suffering to Muslim and Christian communities, as the terrorist groups seek to undermine community cohesion and split communities apart. It is something that the UK Government take a close interest in, and we continue to work with the Nigerian Government on the matter.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow spoke about those girls who were taken by Boko Haram, many of whom have still not been returned and their whereabouts is still unknown. We condemn unreservedly the abduction of those girls. We continue to call for and work towards their release, and we will continue to work with the Nigerian Government on those cases, as well as on other well-known cases.

Looking ahead, the United Kingdom will host a freedom of religion or belief conference in July, as has been mentioned. It will be a critical moment for us to drive collective action and promote respect between different religious, and indeed non-religious, communities around the world. Planning is under way, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton will play a key role in helping deliver that. We know that she pushes us hard in the Department. She works with great passion and alacrity, and I am sure that my officials and ministerial colleagues will not thank me for saying this, but she plays an incredibly important role in ensuring that we work with the same speed and passion as she does, and she holds our feet to the fire. My hon. Friend is perhaps not exactly what the Prime Minister envisaged for the envoy role. Nevertheless, she plays an important part, as does the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Luton North, and members of all-party parliamentary groups. This has to remain a collective endeavour.

Dr Cameron: Could the Minister update us on whether, as members of the all-party parliamentary group, we could visit the Department to hear directly about the work being done?

James Cleverly: I shot a quick look across to my officials, who will have heard that request. To be completely honest, at the moment the situation in Ukraine means that we are still in response mode, so the normal generosity of spirit demonstrated by my Department is being stretched somewhat. However, we recognise that this is an important issue, and we will seek to find a time to liaise as soon as possible.

Fiona Bruce *rose*—

James Cleverly: I suspect that the cavalry is about to ride to my rescue.

Fiona Bruce: I would be delighted to facilitate such a meeting in the Department.

James Cleverly: Told you.

This is a shocking and painful issue, especially when we hear specific cases such as those brought up in the Chamber today—they are harrowing beyond belief. People who already have the least power and the most suppressed voices in their communities and societies once again find themselves the target of misogynistic persecution, attack and sexual violence in the name of religion, although it is not honestly driven by that religion.

We will continue to champion freedom and democracy around the world. Freedom of religion or belief and gender rights will remain at the forefront of our international efforts as a Government.

Christina Rees (in the Chair): Jim Shannon now has a couple of minutes to sum up.

2.57 pm

Jim Shannon: Thank you very much Ms Rees. First, I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I thought it certainly showed the power of the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) that, when she said she would be happy to facilitate that meeting, the Minister instantaneously agreed. I thank the Minister for being so accommodating. The hon. Lady referred to forced marriages and gender-based violence and the fact that when someone is poor, they are even more vulnerable and chastised more for their religious belief. She also referred to women being financially dependent on their husbands and said that the female body has become a battlefield.

As always, the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made a good speech. She gave us many examples, referring to the kidnappings in Egypt and Mozambique. The most vulnerable have our support and assistance, but very often they do not have it when they need it. The hon. Lady is absolutely right.

I am very pleased to see the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) in her place, with her energy and commitment. What she said was so important. She referred to girls' education and safety, and she referred to cases in Nigeria, Afghanistan and China of Christians and Uyghurs. She said that ethnic groups' right to worship must be protected.

I thank the Minister for his positive response to the issues that we wish to see in place. He shared plenty of good thoughts that we wish to take on board. He referred to many countries as well, with the special rapporteur in Afghanistan and the case in Pakistan, where protection for women and girls needs to change. He referred to women and girls in Syria and money that was set aside to help there, and to ISIS and Daesh in Iraq. He also referred to China.

I always like to conclude with a Scripture text—I think it is important to do so, because that is what drives us in this Chamber. I will quote 1 Peter, chapter 2, verse 16:

“Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.”

I think that we have done that today. I am aware that we are not here for our own purposes—we are here for the purposes of the man above. For me, that is what it is all about.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered gender specific religious persecution.

3 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 17 March 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Housing Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Eddie Hughes): Supported housing plays a vital role in delivering better life outcomes and improved wellbeing and health for many vulnerable people.

The Government are committed to ensuring that supported housing is good quality and meets the needs of its residents. In recognition of its importance, the Government are investing £11.5 billion in much needed supply through the affordable homes programme, which includes delivery of new supported housing for older, disabled and other vulnerable people.

However, we are aware of a minority of landlords who charge high rents for poor quality accommodation and little or no support.

I wish to inform the House of the Government's intention to bring forward measures to put an end to unscrupulous landlords exploiting some of the most vulnerable in our society.

We have no intention of penalising those providers who operate responsibly. We are clear that measures must be as targeted and proportionate as possible to protect supply of housing across the board.

Our intention is to take forward a package of measures that will include:

- Minimum standards for the support provided to residents to ensure residents receive the good quality support they expect and deserve in order to live as independently as possible and achieve their personal goals;

- New powers for local authorities in England to better manage their local supported housing market and ensure that rogue landlords cannot exploit the system to the detriment of vulnerable residents and at the expense of taxpayers; and

- Changes to housing benefit regulations to seek to define care, support and supervision to improve quality and value for money across all specified supported housing provision.

We will introduce any measures requiring legislation when parliamentary time allows.

We will work closely with local government, sector representatives, providers and people with experience of supported housing as we develop these measures to ensure they are fit for purpose, deliverable and minimise unintended consequences for the providers of much needed, good quality supported housing.

Alongside these proposed measures, today I am announcing that we will provide £20 million for a supported housing improvement programme. Funding for this three-year programme will be open to bids from all local authorities and build on the clear successes of the supported housing pilots. The pilot authorities were able to drive up the quality of accommodation and support to residents. They also improved value for money through enhanced scrutiny of housing benefit claims to verify that costs were legitimate and reasonable.

The supported housing improvement programme will be vital to drive up quality in the sector in some of the worst affected areas immediately, while the Government develop and implement longer-term regulatory changes. The bidding prospectus for the programme will be published in due course.

This package of proposed measures will tackle poor quality and poor value for money in supported housing and improve outcomes for individuals, while preserving good quality provision run by responsible providers.

[HCWS696]

TREASURY

UK Suspension of Exchange of Tax Information with Russia and Belarus

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Frazer): Today I am announcing that the UK is freezing tax co-operation with Russia and Belarus by suspending all exchange of tax information with them, as part of the UK's wider response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The UK exchanges tax information with Russia under the convention on mutual administrative assistance in tax matters, and Russia and Belarus under bilateral double tax agreements. Tax information is exchanged as part of collaboration to address tax compliance risks.

Suspending exchange of tax information means that Russia will not receive information under any of the UK's exchange of information agreements: exchange of information on request (EoIR), common reporting standard (CRS) or country-by-country reporting (CBCR). Belarus is not signed up to the CRS or CBCR, so only EoIR information is being suspended.

It is not appropriate that the UK undertake co-operation that would lead to the economic benefit of Russia, or Belarus, which has aided and abetted Russia. The suspension of tax information exchange will ensure the UK is not supplying Russia and Belarus with information that could lead to an increased tax benefit or yield for them. This action is not expected to materially impact the UK's ability to address tax non-compliance as we continue to exchange tax information with our extensive treaty network.

[HCWS697]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Online Safety

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Ms Nadine Dorries): Today the Government are introducing the Online Safety Bill. For most people, the internet has transformed relationships and working environments, but illegal and harmful content appearing online is a growing problem. This groundbreaking Bill will keep users safe while protecting freedom of expression and democratic debate online. Under the new laws, in-scope services will need to:

- Tackle criminal activity—There will be no safe space for criminal content online. Platforms will have to remove terrorist material or child sexual abuse and exploitation quickly, and will not be allowed to promote it in their algorithms.

Protect children—The strongest protections in our new laws are for children and young people. They will be protected from harmful or inappropriate content such as grooming, bullying, pornography and the promotion of self-harm and eating disorders.

Enforce their terms and conditions—The largest online platforms with the widest reach, including the most popular social media platforms (category 1 services) will need to set out clearly what harmful content accessed by adults is allowed on their sites, and enforce their terms of service consistently, while protecting freedom of expression and democratic debate.

The strongest provisions in our legislation are for children. All companies in scope of this legislation will need to consider the risks that their sites could pose to the youngest members of society. This Bill will require companies to take steps to protect children from inappropriate content and harmful activity online, including from content such as pro-suicide material. The Bill will also require providers who publish or host pornographic content on their services to prevent children from accessing that content, including using age-verification technology where appropriate.

Furthermore, this Bill will ensure companies take robust action against illegal content. We have included a new list of priority offences on the face of the Bill, reflecting the most serious and prevalent illegal content and activity, against which companies must take proactive measures. These will include, amongst others, revenge pornography, fraud, the sale of illegal drugs or weapons, the promotion or facilitation of suicide, people smuggling and the illegal sex trade. The Bill will also introduce a requirement on in-scope companies to report child sexual exploitation and abuse imagery detected on their platforms to the National Crime Agency. This will ensure companies provide law enforcement with the high-quality information they need to safeguard victims and investigate offenders. The updated Bill will also tackle scam adverts, by requiring the largest platforms to put in place proportionate systems and processes to prevent fraudulent adverts from being published or hosted on their service.

This legislation will not prevent adults from accessing or posting legal content. Rather, the major platforms will need to be clear what content is acceptable on their services and enforce their terms and conditions consistently and effectively. We have refined the approach to defining content that is harmful to adults, so that all types of harmful content that category 1 services (the largest online platforms with the widest reach, including the most popular social media platforms) are required to address will be set out in regulations subject to approval by both Houses. This will provide clarity about the harms that services must address and will reduce the risk of category 1 services taking an overly broad approach to what is considered harmful. In addition, these companies will not be able to remove controversial viewpoints arbitrarily, and users will be able to seek redress if they feel content has been removed unfairly. Both Ofcom and in-scope companies will have duties relating to freedom of expression, for which they can be held to account. Category 1 services will also have duties for democratic and journalistic content. They will need to set in their terms and conditions how they will protect this content on their platforms explicitly. This will ensure that people in the UK can express themselves freely online and participate in pluralistic and robust debate.

The Bill provides Ofcom with robust enforcement powers to take action when platforms do not comply. Options available to Ofcom include imposing substantial

fines, requiring improvements and pursuing business disruption measures (including blocking). The Bill also includes criminal offences for senior managers who fail to ensure their company co-operates with Ofcom, and gives them the information they need to regulate effectively. The Government have also announced additional information-related offences, including ensuring employees do not give false information during interviews, which will further help ensure that companies give Ofcom full and accurate information. We will bring these criminal sanctions into force as soon as possible after Royal Assent (generally two months, in line with standard practice), to further promote strong compliance.

The threat posed by harmful and illegal content and activity is a global one and the Government remain committed to building international consensus around shared approaches to improve internet safety. Under the UK's presidency of the G7, the world's leading democracies committed to a set of internet safety principles. This is significant as it is the first time that an approach to internet safety has been agreed in the G7. We will continue to collaborate with our international partners to develop common approaches to this shared challenge that uphold our democratic values and promote a free, open and secure internet.

We are grateful for the extensive engagement and scrutiny of the Bill from the Joint Committee, DCMS Select Sub-committee and the Petitions Committee, which has helped us to create a framework that delivers for users and maintains the UK's reputation as a tech leader. The Bill is sustainable, workable, and proportionate, and will create a significant step-change in the experience people have online.

We are also publishing the response to the report of the Joint Committee on the draft Online Safety Bill alongside publication of the Bill, and we thank the Committee once again for its work and its recommendations.

[HCWS691]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health Update

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

I have today laid a departmental minute proposing to provide an indemnity that is required urgently in respect of a Department of Health and Social Care established non-statutory, independent inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the offences committed by David Fuller (DF) at the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, and their national implications.

The inquiry will be split into two phases:

an initial report, on matters relating to Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, reporting by the middle of 2022, and

a final report, looking at the broader national picture and the wider lessons for the NHS and for other settings, reporting by the middle of 2023.

It will review DF's unlawful actions, how he was able to carry these out, why his actions went apparently unnoticed, and will make recommendations with the aim of preventing anything similar from happening again. We expect the inquiry to publish a progress update as soon as possible after Easter recess.

In November 2021, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced the inquiry (*Official Report*, 8 November 2021, volume 703, column 23) to be chaired by Sir Jonathan Michael. The Department of Health and Social Care will indemnify the inquiry insofar as the chair or any other member of the inquiry who has acted honestly and in good faith will not have to meet out of his or her personal resources any personal civil liability, including costs, which is incurred in the execution or the purported execution of his or her inquiry functions, save where the inquiry member has acted recklessly. This indemnity will cover the entire duration of the inquiry's work, from November 2021 until when the inquiry submits its final report, expected in 2023, and for an unlimited period after that date. However, we believe there is a low risk of the indemnity being called upon beyond five years of the inquiry having reported. There will be no cap placed upon the indemnity, so the maximum exposure is strictly unlimited. However, any losses are not expected to exceed a value of £3 million based upon the best estimate currently available at this stage of the inquiry's work. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle which mirrors the standard indemnity for board members described in "Managing Public Money". If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before Parliament, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or by otherwise raising the matter in Parliament, final approval to proceed with incurring the liability will be withheld pending an examination of the objection. The indemnity is expected to come into force on 26 April 2022, subject to the approval of Parliament on this basis.

Copies of the departmental minute have been laid in both Houses.

[HCWS692]

NHS Charging Exemption: Ukrainian Residents

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I want to update the House about further measures this Government are taking to step up their response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which continues to see hundreds of thousands of people who ordinarily live in Ukraine forced to flee their homes and seek safety and support in other countries.

Today I want to announce new legislative measures in England to exempt Ukrainian residents from NHS charging so that they can access the NHS on broadly the same basis as someone who is ordinarily resident in the UK. We will apply these exemptions retrospectively from 24 February 2022 to further protect people.

Current overseas visitor NHS charging legislation requires us to recover NHS secondary care treatment costs from anyone who does not ordinarily live in the UK, unless an exemption applies to them. Primary care and A&E services and certain types of treatment—including for most infectious diseases—remain free to all, regardless of a person's home

We have therefore now amended the charging regulations to allow everyone who is ordinarily resident in Ukraine, and their immediate family members, who are lawfully in the UK to access NHS care in England for free, including those who transfer here under official medevac routes.

This will cover all potential treatment needs, except for assisted conception services, to align with the existing exemption for those whose immigration health surcharge fees have been waived. Those who will benefit from this additional exemption include:

Anyone who uses an alternative temporary (less than six months) visa route outside of the family or sponsorship routes

Anyone who chooses to extend their visit or seasonal worker visa temporarily, without going through the IHS system

Anyone who is in the process of switching visas (which could take some time to process).

We have applied a six-month review clause to this policy and it is our hope that this will help not only to provide security and peace of mind for the NHS and those in need, but to remain open to further developments.

Ukrainian residents who are in the UK unlawfully are not covered by these measures but will remain within the scope of existing provisions within the charging regulations. This means that not only treatment needed immediately, but any treatment that cannot safely wait until the overseas visitor can be reasonably expected to leave the UK, must never be withheld or delayed, even when that overseas visitor has indicated that they cannot pay. Some NHS services will remain exempt from charge for all overseas visitors, such as primary care, A&E services and treatment of infectious diseases.

This Government continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with our Ukrainian friends and we are proud to continue to offer support for Ukrainian residents in our country.

[HCWS695]

Liberty Protection Safeguards and Mental Capacity Act Code of Practice

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): This is a joint statement with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for of Justice.

Today, the Department of Health and Social Care, and the Ministry of Justice have launched a joint public consultation on an updated statutory code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act and on proposals for the implementation of liberty protection safeguards. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 provides an empowering legal framework for people who cannot make certain, specific decisions about their own lives. This includes some people with dementia, learning disabilities and autism.

The liberty protection safeguards were introduced in the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019. They will protect people aged 16 and above who are, or who need

to be, deprived of their liberty to enable their care or treatment and who lack the mental capacity to consent to these arrangements. When a person needs to be deprived of their liberty, this must be done with the greatest of care and respect for that person and their rights. It is the Government's intention that the liberty protection safeguards will replace the deprivation of liberty safeguards and will provide specific protections when people are deprived of liberty in any setting, in England and Wales.

In 2019, MoJ also announced a review of the Mental Capacity Act code to reflect changes in law and practice since its publication in 2007. We undertook a call for evidence to help us decide which aspects of the code needed updating or improving. Acting on feedback from stakeholders, we have decided to merge the Mental Capacity Act code with guidance on the liberty protection safeguards. Liberty protection safeguards implementation and practice will therefore be fully informed by the important principles of the Mental Capacity Act.

The elements of the new code that do not directly concern the liberty protection safeguards do not contain new policy or legislation, but rather reflect recent changes in related legislation, organisational structures, good practice and terminology. Following the call for evidence, officials at the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice have worked in partnership with experts to co-produce the new code. This has involved substantively revising and adding new illustrative scenarios to make the code more accessible. It is important that the new code is informed by, and useful for, people who work with the Act and those who are affected by it.

Alongside the new code, we are also publishing additional draft documents, which set out, in detail, how we think the liberty protection safeguards should be implemented and operate. This includes six sets of regulations, information about workforce training, a proposed data specification for national reporting, and an updated impact assessment. We welcome views from everyone with an interest in the liberty protection safeguards on the plans set out in these documents.

Once we have carefully considered feedback to the consultation, we will publish the Government response and the final drafts of the code and liberty protection safeguards regulations. The code and regulations will then be laid in Parliament. People who work with the Act and those who are affected by it will need sufficient time following the publication of those final documents, to prepare for the implementation of liberty protection safeguards.

We had hoped to be able to fully implement the liberty protection safeguards by April 2022. Given the impact of the pandemic on the sectors and professionals who will be called upon to implement these important reforms, we have had to reconsider this aim.

We have committed to an inclusive public consultation lasting 16 weeks from 17 March to 7 July. We expect that responses will be very detailed and will take time to work through to get the liberty protection safeguards right. We are going to set a new fixed date for liberty protection safeguards implementation post consultation to ensure that there is adequate time for implementation.

We look forward to the consultation ahead and will update Parliament when we publish our consultation response.

Advance Care Planning: Universal Principles

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): The Government are announcing today the publication of the "Universal Principles for Advance Care Planning", a document jointly published by a coalition of partners in response to the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) report into the use of do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation (DNACPR) decisions taken during the covid-19 pandemic.

We would like to firstly thank all of the partner organisations involved in developing the document, which sets out six high-level principles for advance care planning in England. This work has been produced for the benefit of patients and those important to them, as well as practitioners and organisations involved in supporting advance care planning conversations and making sure their outcomes are honoured. By working together on developing and publishing the principles, partner organisations will ensure a consistent national approach to advance care planning.

We would also like to thank the CQC for its continued work in this area, as well as patients, their families, representatives and staff who continue to share their experiences on such an important and complex issue.

Planning for future care is an empowering act that allows people to feel confident their wishes will be considered if they are ever unable to fully participate in decision making. By having good quality conversations about future treatment in advance, individuals will have a greater sense of control over their ability to live and die well.

The joint publication of the universal principles demonstrates the commitment that all of these organisations have to ensuring good practice is embedded across the health and care system. It demonstrates the importance of all people, their families or representatives, clinicians and professionals sharing an understanding of the role good advance care planning conversations, including DNACPR decisions, play in high-quality personalised care.

This piece of work has been overseen by the DNACPR Ministerial Oversight Group, which was established to look in depth at the issues raised in the CQC's report and to oversee the delivery and required changes of the recommendations. The universal principles published today represent a culmination of all the hard work this group and its working representatives have put into addressing the issues highlighted in the report.

The Government and NHS England have remained clear that the inappropriate application of DNACPRs is unacceptable in any circumstance. It is important that those organisations that are responsible for taking the universal principles forward at an operational level do so to implement clear and consistent best practice across all settings, ensuring everyone receives the high-quality personal care they deserve.

The "Universal Principles for Advance Care Planning" can be found here:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/publication/universal-principles-for-advance-care-planning/>

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