

Thursday  
12 May 2022

Volume 714  
No. 3



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Thursday 12 May 2022**

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# House of Commons

Thursday 12 May 2022

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## HM Passport Office Backlogs

9.33 am

**Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Home Secretary if she will make a statement on backlogs at Her Majesty's Passport Office.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Tom Pursglove)**: Due to covid-19, more than 5 million people delayed their passport applications in 2020 and 2021. With demand for international travel having returned, Her Majesty's Passport Office is currently receiving a higher number of passport applications than ever before; 9.5 million applications are expected in 2022 compared with approximately 7 million in a normal year.

Since April 2021, 500 new staff have joined and a further 700 will join by the summer. As a result, the vast majority of passport applications are being processed within the 10-week timeframe and more than 90% within six weeks. Less than 1.4% of the passports printed last week for UK applications had been in the system for longer than 10 weeks.

With a record number of applications in the system, customer inquiries have increased accordingly. However, the passport advice line, which is run by Teleperformance, is not currently meeting the needs of passport customers. Clearly, that is not acceptable. The Home Office has clear standards for the level of service that suppliers are expected to provide.

Her Majesty's Passport Office has engaged with Teleperformance at its most senior levels to emphasise the need to significantly improve performance as soon as possible. Alongside steps to bring the operation of the passport advice line, email and call-back functions within the required standard, Teleperformance is urgently bolstering staff numbers in response to the recent surge in customer contact, with 500 additional staff due to be added by mid-June.

We recognise that hon. Members will wish to raise cases and queries on behalf of their constituents, as is, of course, right and proper. Her Majesty's Passport Office staff have therefore been deployed to answer passport-related inquiries to the Home Office's dedicated MPs hotline and, for the most urgent cases, they will also be available to conduct in-person passport surgeries in Portcullis House.

Although we acknowledge that there have been issues with customer contact that must and will be resolved, I take the opportunity to recognise the work of Her Majesty's Passport Office staff who continue to ensure that the vast majority of passport applications are processed in under 10 weeks. Their efforts, alongside the

extensive work that went into preparing for record demand, have ensured that passport applications continue to be processed in higher numbers than ever before.

Across March and April 2022, Her Majesty's Passport Office completed the processing of nearly 2 million applications. As that output demonstrates, HMPO staff are firmly focused on maintaining a high level of service and are fully committed to ensuring that people receive their passports in good time for their summer holidays.

**Nick Smith**: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question.

I thank the staff working on the passport backlog, but many people across our country will not be satisfied with the Minister's response today. A constituent told me yesterday:

"It's terrible. We're due to fly out on Sunday but are still unable to get our youngest son's passport. Every time I phone I get passed to a different department, then hold, then the phone line goes dead."

Another told me:

"I've called 40 times in the past week, they cut me off every time. I don't know what to do and am breaking down at this point."

The facts are that there are long queues outside passport offices; that hours and hours are being spent on phone lines; and that families are afraid of holidays getting cancelled. This situation was avoidable. It was obvious that, when restrictions ended, people would need passports to get away.

The Prime Minister blames a *mañana* culture at the Passport Office. We need a strategy that improves performance and helps families now, not those flippant comments. During a cost of living crisis, telling people to spend an extra £100 per person to fast-track their application rubs salt into their wounds.

Yesterday, the Home Secretary told us of record passport delivery, which is good, but we need the facts today. How big is the actual backlog? By when will the Passport Office's too-long 10-week timeframe be down to the normal three weeks?

Deliveries are also delayed and other companies are having to help TNT. Its £77 million contract cannot be value for money, so will the Government be renewing that contract in July?

After years of covid, families finally want to get away this spring and summer. Instead, they face losing thousands of pounds if they cannot keep their holiday after the grief of chasing their passport. The Government need to do much, much better than this.

**Tom Pursglove**: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting in for this urgent question today and for the way that he approached his contribution.

I again thank HMPO staff for the tireless work that they are doing to issue passports as quickly as possible for people who have made those applications; in saying that, I am sure the whole House joins me. I can also confirm for the House's benefit that the service I referred to in Portcullis House is now live and available for colleagues to access to get help with these matters. Of course, it is also worth pointing out that the Minister for safe and legal migration—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the

[Tom Pursglove]

Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster)—issued a “Dear colleague” letter yesterday that provided further detail on this issue.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned specifics in relation to contracts. Of course, what I must not do is get into contract-related deliberations on the Floor of the House today, but it is of course right to say that, where performance issues arise, candid conversations are had about performance and what interventions are required to improve performance, where necessary. I again reiterate for the House’s benefit that the key reality is that, between March and April 2022, Her Majesty’s Passport Office completed the processing of nearly 2 million applications. The vast majority of passport applications continue to be processed well within 10 weeks, with over 90% of applications issued within six weeks between January and March 2022. Less than 1.4% of the passports printed last week for UK applications had been in the system for longer than 10 weeks. Those are the facts. He asked for the facts. Those facts have been provided.

There is of course an expedited service available for individuals where passports have been in the system for more than 10 weeks, and I would certainly encourage people to avail themselves of that service if that is the situation they find themselves in. Of course, if there are Members of this House who have specific cases they wish to share with Ministers, we will happily take those away and look at them if colleagues make contact.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Can my hon. Friend tell us how many people employed in the Passport Office are still working from home, if indeed anybody is still working from home? It seems extraordinary that they may be. Can he also expand on the issue of the 10-week limit? If there is a 10-week guarantee, why should people in respect of whom that guarantee is not delivered have to pay a premium? Is not the consequence of all this that people are now panicking and applying for their new passports three or four months ahead, thereby adding to the burden on the Passport Office? Can he assure the House that the 10 weeks is a guarantee, and that anybody who does not get their passport within 10 weeks will get compensation for any consequences arising therefrom?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. What I can say for the House’s benefit is that, on homeworking, it is fair to say that, as in society as a whole, business as a whole and Government, we are seeing staff returning to the office to work. Of course, people’s working arrangements are in accordance with the approach taken within the Government to these matters. There is the expedited process after 10 weeks for individuals who require it, where passport applications have not been processed within that timeframe. As I have said, 98.6% of passports are renewed within the 10-week timeframe. If he has specifics that he would particularly like to raise with Ministers so that we can take those away and look into them, we will very happily do so.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): The chaos at the Passport Office reflects the wider failures of a Home Office that is simply not fit for purpose under this

Home Secretary. The Government have had two years to prepare for a spike in passport applications after the pandemic. They were warned repeatedly about the possible backlog, but they have clearly not acted quickly enough to solve the problem. Can the Minister please explain why that is the case? Can he also tell us how many agency staff are now working to clear this backlog?

The Government have already changed the three-week target to a 10-week target. At the last urgent question on the subject, the Minister insisted that the 10-week target did not need to be adjusted. Given we now know that it is being repeatedly missed, is that still the case or has he changed his position? Can he confirm what the current average period from passport application to receipt of passport actually is?

Some of the cases colleagues are hearing about from their constituents are truly awful. In one case, a couple were trying to get back into the country with their new-born baby after the husband’s two-year work contract in France came to an end, but, having waited two months for a passport, they faced the daunting prospect of having to leave France without a passport for their baby.

The Minister will be aware of the problems MPs and their staff have had accessing any guidance from the Home Office helpline. Is that being addressed? The Prime Minister has threatened to privatise the Passport Office as a solution to this mess, but is it not the case that the privatised TNT courier service is already a major part of the problem, beset with long delays? Surely what we need is genuine leadership and strategy from the Home Secretary. The Home Office contract with TNT is due to end in July. Given its complete failures in delivering passports on time, can the Minister confirm whether the Home Office plans to renew TNT’s contract? Finally, given the thousands of pounds lost when holidays are cancelled, does the Minister accept that the Passport Office’s backlog chaos is making the cost of living crisis worse?

A Government who fail to plan are a Government who plan to fail, and the British people are paying the price for this latest in a growing list of Home Office failures.

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his contribution. I should make it clear that the 10-week timeframe is not guaranteed, but the expedited process is in place for individuals when it goes beyond 10 weeks. That is available and if colleagues raise specific cases with us directly I will happily ensure they are looked at.

On staffing, passport offices are of course based in seven locations across the UK, with 90% of staff based outside London. Her Majesty’s Passport Office staffing numbers have been increased by over 500 since last April and it is recruiting a further 700. As of 1 April, there were over 4,000 staff in passport production roles.

On the point about contracts, for the reasons I have set out, it would not be appropriate for me to get into the specifics of those contracts and their renewal, but I reiterate that it is right that we have candid conversations about performance against contracts. That does happen and it is happening in relation to these matters.

On the issue of Teleperformance, the provider of the passport advice line, we expect over 500 full-time equivalents to be added by mid-June compared with the position in

mid-April. There has been a recent and temporary issue with the passport advice line which means some customers may be informed that they have dialled an incorrect number. Teleperformance is working to resolve that problem as soon as possible with the carrier. The line opened at its usual time of 8 this morning. Customers who have a problem with the usual number can call an alternative number, and there is further information on gov.uk and the HMPO's Twitter account.

**Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for raising this urgent question. We have seen a number of cases where we are trying to get information and I have to be honest with the Minister: the phone lines we have at the moment as Members of Parliament are not fit for purpose. The advice hotline he has referred to is a general Home Office hotline; it does not always have information, and yesterday a member of my staff was on the phone for two hours and then got cut off. I need to be able to provide information to my constituents, who are getting incredibly stressed, so can we have a dedicated hotline on passport matters? I am very grateful for both the "Dear colleague" letter and the hub in Portcullis House, but can the Minister confirm that staff in the hub will have access so they can provide live updates from the system, rather than just general updates on the process?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am able to say yes to my hon. Friend in response to his question. I would certainly encourage him to take his cases to the Portcullis House hub to progress them accordingly and to receive the updates he seeks. I am grateful to him for raising that suggestion.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Scottish National party spokesman, Stuart C. McDonald.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for raising this question, because this mess is causing untold misery for people and families across the UK. It is not, as Members have said, about hard-working staff; it is about leadership and planning. On that note, I am worried that the Home Secretary just does not get the scale of the problem. Yesterday, like the Minister, she invited colleagues to send details of their cases directly. My inbox is bursting at the seams and is about to explode with the cases. If all 650 of us were to send our cases to the Home Secretary, she would never be able to look at her inbox again. Does the Home Secretary understand the scale of the problem? Does that complacency explain why it took the Home Office until April to flag up this issue to the public and warn them of the change in target times?

I welcome the new facility at PCH. However, on the phone lines, what are folk being charged for phoning? For example, I know that colleagues have noticed that their constituency office phone bills are going through the roof because staff are having to spend hours on phone lines. I hope that is not the case for members of the public. I seek reassurance on that.

We have been reassured that the Home Office expected this year to deal with 9.5 million British passport applications and had been planning for that, but something has gone wrong. Was it the estimate? Apparently not, given what the Minister said, so what went wrong with

the preparation? It is all well and good to be told that the Passport Office is processing higher or record numbers, but that is not the test—the test is whether there are sufficient numbers and that is clearly not happening. When will the Passport Office have enough staff to process sufficient applications?

**Mr Speaker:** I thought Ian Blackford had returned. [Laughter.] Come on, Minister.

**Tom Pursglove:** I am always grateful for the constructive way in which the hon. Gentleman approaches these matters. Calls are charged at the local rate. I set out for the House the steps being taken to boost capacity in Her Majesty's Passport Office but also in relation to the contractors that we work with to deliver these services. It is also the case that, after 10 weeks of proof of travel, within two weeks, the upgrade is free, should that be required. Again, I go back to the fact that 98.6% of passports are renewed within the 10-week timeframe and more than 90% are processed in just six weeks. However, it is right, in terms of the remainder, that we make the interventions we are making to improve matters. We want to see the best service possible delivered and that is precisely what those interventions seek to do.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is clear that all of us are being contacted by distressed constituents seeking their passports. It can be highly stressful for them to be chasing documents as they approach departure day—and business travel can be at even shorter notice than a planned holiday. I am encouraged to hear that significant recruitment is taking place at the Passport Office and that 1 million passport applications were completed in March alone—that is a good number—but will the Minister look at the progress being made with that recruitment? We clearly have a capacity issue, which we need to get through, and that will only be got through when we have boosted the capacity of those doing the applications.

**Tom Pursglove:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, I and ministerial colleagues recognise the distress caused when individuals cannot receive their passports in the timeframe that they seek. That is why we are taking steps to improve matters. On recruitment, I hear his point about trying to expedite this as much as possible. It is fair to say that we want to see progress made on that as quickly as possible, and I will certainly ensure that Home Office colleagues are sighted on his views. My hon. Friend the Minister for safe and legal migration has that at the forefront of his mind. We want to see that recruitment happen as quickly as possible.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question and to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) for securing it. I have already raised separately with the Minister that I have constituents who applied for a name change on a child's passport on 9 February. My office has chased it twice and we are nearly into week 15 of waiting for a response from the Passport Office. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mark Fletcher) about the MP hotline. This week, staff in my office have been cut off from the general hotline three times. I therefore welcome the PCH office. What reassurance can the Minister give us that the hotline will work properly and that calls will be answered?

[Chris Elmore]

Many Members' caseworkers are based in our constituencies, so the phone lines need to work. I plead with him to take up the particular issue of the child name change so that my constituents can travel in June on their long-deserved and very expensive holiday.

**Tom Pursglove:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. If he shares the details with me, I will happily take that case away and look at it as a matter of priority. On the hotline-related issue for Members of Parliament, I hope I can provide some reassurance in saying that, in the light of the increased number of passport-related queries to the MP hotline, it has been arranged for non-operational HM Passport Office staff to supplement the work of MP account managers and help to provide MPs with a faster service. Of course, that is in addition to the service available in Portcullis House, which I would encourage colleagues to use if they require it.

**Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con):** A few colleagues have already mentioned our caseworkers in our constituencies. I want to put on record my thanks to my caseworker team, especially Niall Hargreaves who spent nine hours on the phone to the Passport Office last week and did not manage to get through all day. I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging the unacceptable situation facing the Passport Office at the moment and for the 700 new recruits. Can he provide any clarity on when we expect the new recruits to start having an effect on the backlog?

**Tom Pursglove:** I join my hon. Friend in saying thank you to parliamentary staff who work for Members across the House. I, for one, know that my parliamentary staff work incredibly hard to support my Corby and Northamptonshire constituents. I know the same applies for colleagues, regardless of party, and the effort that is made to support us in our work. I can certainly appreciate the frustration they have felt when not being able to make contact or when calls have been disconnected. He is right to raise the increase in staffing. As I said, we expect 500 full-time equivalents added to Teleperformance resourcing by mid-June. The Passport Office is increasing staffing by 700 by the summer and, of course, there have already been 500 additional staff since last April. This is a priority. We are going to get on and deliver, because it is clearly necessary for the swift and expeditious delivery of people's passports.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Nick Smith) on applying for it.

Dozens of my constituents are now facing huge delays in getting their passports. In one particular case, my constituent applied for his passport to be renewed back in February. He sent his old passport by special delivery. Following many chases for updates, he was told that they had lost his passport, and that he should report it as being lost and pay an additional fee to have his new application expedited, which he did. By Friday last week, they still had not done anything and told him that he needs to say it has now been lost yet again. He is travelling in July. He needs to apply for visas. He has already spent thousands of pounds on his holiday. Will

the Minister agree to look at my constituent's case and see if we can get a resolution as soon as possible? I should also add that we all knew there would be a surge in demand after the pandemic and I really want to know why on earth the Government were not prepared for that.

**Tom Pursglove:** We do, of course, encourage people, as standard, to apply in good time for passports to be processed and to be available. The point I again make is that after 10 weeks of proof of travel, within two weeks the upgrade is free, but if the hon. Lady could provide me with the details of the specific case in question I will happily make sure it is looked at as quickly as possible for her.

**Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab):** I would like to stress to the Minister that this is not just an issue of people wanting to go on holiday. In my constituency—as you know, Mr Speaker, being so diverse as it is—people have families all across the world whom they have not seen since the pandemic. I have one elderly couple who applied before the new year, back in December. They applied, in fact, before Christmas. They were told that their passport was ready on 24 January, but that they had to send the old passport back in order to get it. By the end of March they still had not had it, by which time they had missed a niece's wedding and, sadly, a sister's funeral. It was only after multiple interventions that we eventually got the passport sorted at the end of last month. That is unacceptable—absolutely unacceptable.

The Minister said that 500 new staff were in place and 700 were coming, but what we really want to know is when will the Department be able to return to the three-week standard time that we all expected previously? That is the key issue and that is what our constituents need to know. He said 10 weeks from the end of June. We are way beyond the summer holidays by then. The backlog will have accumulated and those people will have lost the opportunity to go abroad. The key thing is when do we get back to that three-week period?

**Tom Pursglove:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who, as ever, puts his case forcefully but entirely respectfully. When there are compassionate or compelling circumstances, steps can be taken to expedite applications where appropriate. Some of the sorts of circumstances that he mentioned would potentially be eligible in that scenario. I cannot, of course, provide an explanation on the Floor of the House for his particular case, but I will take his wider point away. On the three-week target, I will ask the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who is responsible for passports, to write to the hon. Gentleman to set out the position and let him know his thoughts on that point.

**Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD):** This issue is undoubtedly causing huge anxiety. I have a case of a new mother who, when her daughter was born, wanted to register her for a passport immediately, because she wants the support of her family, who live in Egypt. She has been up all day and night trying to get a fast-track application. She could not find one, so she put in a regular application. She then did find a fast-track application and now she has been told, having secured the fast-track application for Saturday, that if she shows

up, she may not get the passport because the regular application cannot be withdrawn. We have tried everything for her. First, if she does show up, will she be able to get the passport on the fast track, and can I show the Minister the case just to make sure? Secondly, will he assure people that a common-sense approach will be taken in cases such as these and others, so that if someone finds a workaround solution, it will actually work?

**Tom Pursglove:** I would always want to see common sense shown in these matters. The hon. Lady suggests that it would be worthwhile to share the specifics of the case with me. I would certainly appreciate the opportunity to take this away and look at what we can do to assist and provide any appropriate guidance and advice.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): You might remember, Mr Speaker, that I raised the issue of delays with passports at business questions back in April. The Leader of the House expressed some surprise that I was getting upset about it back then, but I can honestly say to the Minister that the position since then has become much, much worse. He cannot really say that we did not know this was coming, because we were telling Ministers about it some weeks ago.

We have dealt with many dozens of cases from my office, but we still have about 14 cases that have not yet been expedited. The Passport Office advised that applications that are older than 10 weeks—of which we have several—and where travel is due to take place in the next two weeks can be expedited. In order to exercise that, applicants are advised to contact the passport advice line. However, as many Members have said this morning, constituents are doing that but they cannot get through, and when they do, they wait an inordinate amount of time and are then being cut off. It is just not good enough. British citizens cannot actually get their passport—even though it might be printed in Poland these days—to travel abroad.

Many constituents are reporting that they cannot get through and, at the time of the application, constituents were advised on the not appropriately updated website that the turnaround time would be five weeks—so the website was wrong at the time that people were applying. The Minister has to get a grip on this. When will the—

**Mr Speaker:** Order.

**Ian Mearns:** Sorry, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** These should be questions, not speeches—but I think the Minister has got the impression and the hon. Member has got the message across.

**Tom Pursglove:** There was quite a lot there, Mr Speaker, and I think that if I were to answer all of that, I would be at real risk of incurring your wrath. Two million passports were issued in March and April alone. The hon. Gentleman is a canny parliamentarian who took

the opportunity to raise this issue in business questions. He will have noted from my earlier responses the steps that we have been taking in that period to address this issue. We will see that work through. This is all about bolstering capacity and resource, but if he would like us to look at specific cases, I am very happy for him to share them with us so we can perhaps understand where he thinks the issues are.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I put on record my thanks to the Glasgow passport office, which has been most helpful to my caseworkers.

I have a constituent who has applied for a child's passport. The child is a dual national; as part of the application for a British passport, my constituent provided the child's Australian passport, which is in date. They travel next week, and my team have been urgently supporting them in trying to get, at a minimum, the Australian passport returned urgently. We were assured that that would happen, but the constituent was advised last night that it was not possible. My constituent has also faced some really poor treatment from call handlers on the advice line and is very stressed and upset by it. Please will the Minister intervene in this case and help me to get my constituent their passport?

**Tom Pursglove:** I certainly want the hon. Lady to share her constituent's experience with me and with Ministers in the Department, particularly the concerns that she raises about how the calls have been handled. If she shares those details with me, we will look at them in the usual way, but I am keen to understand the specifics.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his replies to questions this morning. May I put on record, in *Hansard*, my thanks to his ministerial staff and particularly to the Belfast passport office, for everything that they do?

May I put forward a constructive suggestion that may be helpful for our region and for others? Will the Minister outline whether he has considered allowing renewals to be fast-tracked in regional areas, such as by allowing the Belfast office to handle Northern Ireland renewals and especially children's first passports? Is there a way to further fast-track applications locally or regionally?

**Tom Pursglove:** I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the staff of the Belfast office for all their work. I also thank the Glasgow office, which the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned, and HM Passport Office staff around the country.

I will take away the hon. Gentleman's suggestion for how we might process future applications and share it with the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay. As with all suggestions from the hon. Gentleman, I am sure that he will want to consider it closely.

## Hong Kong Arrests Under National Security Law

**Mr Speaker:** I know that we are all a little rusty with urgent questions, so I remind hon. Members that the time limits are three minutes, two minutes, two minutes and one minute.

10.7 am

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith** (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the arrests of Cardinal Zen, Margaret Ng, Hui Po-keung and Denise Ho in Hong Kong on 11 May.

**The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly):** I thank my right hon. Friend for raising this incredibly important issue. The Hong Kong authorities' decision to target leading pro-democracy figures, including Cardinal Zen, Margaret Ng, Hui Po-keung and Denise Ho, under the national security law is unacceptable.

Freedom of expression and the right to peaceful protest, which are protected in both the joint declaration and the Basic Law, are fundamental to Hong Kong's way of life. We continue to make clear to mainland China and to Hong Kong authorities our strong opposition to the national security law, which is being used to curtail freedom, punish dissent and shrink the space for opposition, free press and civil society.

In response to the imposition of the national security law, as well as wider recent developments in Hong Kong, the UK has taken three major policy actions: on 31 January 2021, we launched a bespoke immigration route for British nationals overseas and their dependants; we have suspended the UK-Hong Kong extradition treaty; and we have extended the arms embargo on China to cover Hong Kong.

China remains in an ongoing state of non-compliance with the joint declaration, which it willingly agreed to uphold. As a co-signatory to the joint declaration, and in the significant 25th year of our handover, we will continue to stand up for the people of Hong Kong. We will continue to call out the violation of their rights and freedoms and hold China to its international obligations. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is in regular contact with her international counterparts on issues relating to Hong Kong, and we continue to work intensively within international institutions to call on China to live up to its international obligations and responsibilities.

As my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary stated in the latest six-monthly report, published on 31 March, the UK will continue to speak out when China breaches its legally binding agreements, and when it breaks its promises to the people of Hong Kong.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question.

On 11 May—yesterday—Chinese authorities arrested three trustees of the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund, which helped pro-democracy protesters to pay their legal fees. Although those three figures, led by Cardinal Joseph Zen, have apparently been released on bail, the bail requirements are very onerous and their passports have been confiscated. This is a huge abuse of human

rights. Cardinal Zen is, I believe, 96, and he has been a lifelong advocate of democratic causes in Hong Kong and mainland China. We should be looking up to this man, and considering the abuse that he faces. He has spoken out against China's growing authoritarianism under President Xi Jinping, including a Beijing-imposed national security law, and the persecution of members of many religions, including Roman Catholics in China.

The problem we have is this. A representative of my Government comes to the Dispatch Box, legitimately, and condemns all these actions in China, yet we lag behind others in sanctioning individuals under the Magnitsky requirements. The following people have already been sanctioned by the United States, and are involved in this process: John Lee, elected as Hong Kong's next chief executive; Carrie Lam, the previous head of the Hong Kong Government; Teresa Cheng Yeuk-wah; Xia Baolong; Zhang Xiaoming; Luo Huining; Zheng Yanxiong; Chris Tang Ping-keung; and Stephen Lo Wai-chung, a former commissioner of the Hong Kong police force. Not one of those people has been sanctioned by the UK Government. It is time to step up and make our position very clear.

I would also say to my right hon. Friend, for whom I have a huge amount of respect, that the 612 Humanitarian Relief Fund was shut down last year, and was opened up for inspection for "collusion". This needs to be investigated.

I understand that you wish me to finish my remarks, Mr Speaker, and I am about to do so. Let me simply say this: it is the important bit. There have been reports that the Government may well re-enact discussions about the Joint Economic Trade Commission, and even re-endorse the economic and financial dialogue which was previously suspended. I want an absolute undertaking from our Government that they will sanction those individuals, and that there is no way on earth that we will entertain the opening up of any trade or financial discussions with this abusive Government.

**James Cleverly:** My right hon. Friend speaks with huge authority on this issue, and he knows that when he speaks on any issue but particularly this one, I personally take notice and Her Majesty's Government always take notice. He will, I know, be frustrated by the sentence I am about to utter, but I think he will understand that, while we work closely with our international partners on sanctions of individuals, as our response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine demonstrates, we never discuss publicly any future sanctions designations that might be brought. Nevertheless, Her Majesty's Government and I will take very seriously the points that he has made, and the list of individuals that he has read out. He was right to highlight the importance of not just words but actions in opposition to actions such as those taken by the Chinese Government. We consider Beijing to be in a state of ongoing non-compliance with the Sino-British joint declaration, and I think that that will be borne in mind when we speak, or think, about any other agreements that might be entered into with that Government.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister, Catherine West.

**Catherine West** (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The arrests in the past few days of Cardinal Zen, Margaret Ng, Denise Ho, Cyd Ho, and Hui Po-keung



mark a disturbing new phase in China's relentless crackdown on the freedoms and liberties promised to the people of Hong Kong—in this case, freedom of religion or belief, which so many Members of this House hold very dear.

This phase has been marked by the rigged election of Beijing's hand-picked choice of Chief Executive, John Lee, in a one-person coronation. Mr Lee is known for his brutal policing policies during the pro-democracy protests in 2019, and we are now seeing the erosion of the remaining freedoms, including the freedom of religion or belief, that were enjoyed by so many Hongkongers. This will undoubtedly lead to a further exodus of young Hongkongers from the city in search of freedom and new lives elsewhere, away from Beijing's reach. We have long accepted that the promise of a high degree of autonomy for Hong Kong in the legally binding Sino-British agreement has been breached.

I am pleased that on previous occasions we have seen a lot of agreement in the House on this subject, and we strongly endorse the BNO—British national overseas—policy of the Government, but the arrest of opposition activists, including a 90-year-old cardinal, just days after the election of a hard-liner demands further action. I have these questions for the Minister, although I am sorry that the Foreign Secretary is not with us today. Will he make urgent representations to the Chinese embassy here in London? Will the Government consider the sanctions that the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) has so eloquently set out? Will the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office redouble its efforts to support exiled journalists, faith leaders and campaigners in order to ensure that independent reporting on the situation in Hong Kong can continue? Finally, will the FCDO work with the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ensure that those Hongkongers who have fled to the UK for sanctuary are welcomed and supported, and are able to report with confidence any safety concerns they may have about Chinese influence and activity here in the UK?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Lady for those points. The tone of her questions, probing though they were, reflects the concerns being expressed from right across the Chamber about what is going on in Hong Kong, and our desire to protect its people. She mentioned the election—or selection—process. On 9 May, the UK released a joint statement with our G7 partners and the EU, underscoring our grave concern about the selection process for the Chief Executive in Hong Kong and its part in the continued assault on pluralism and fundamental rights. The hon. Lady mentioned our commitment to freedom of religion or belief, and also to freedom of the press, both of which we regard as the foundation stones of a properly functioning society. She is right to highlight our collective concern about those in relation to the situation in Hong Kong. Finally, she mentioned her support for the Hong Kong people who have come to the UK. I take very seriously her point about protecting them. She is referring not just to our general duty to protect the citizens of this country, but the specific duty to protect these people from any repercussions. I will take that on board. I cannot give her a direct answer to that question, but the point she makes is valid and has been listened to.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** Can the Minister tell the House what steps the Government are taking to protect freedom of religion or belief in the light of the arrest of Cardinal Zen, a senior leader of the Catholic Church in Asia? Have there been any discussions with the Vatican about the arrest? Does the Minister agree that the deteriorating state of freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong must now be one of the concerns addressed at the UK-hosted ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief in July?

**James Cleverly:** I thank my hon. Friend for the work she does on this issue. She is famously passionate about it, and rightly so. She makes an incredibly valid point about this being a topic for the summer; it is inconceivable that it will not be a topic of discussion, although the agenda is not down to me. The Sino-British joint declaration is a legally binding treaty under which China committed to uphold Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and to protect the freedoms and rights of its people. This explicitly includes freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief, so my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this goes to the core of the agreement. We will call out China when it curtails those freedoms and, as I say, it is right that this should be brought up in international fora—both those centred on freedom of religion or belief and others.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the SNP spokesperson, Kirsten Oswald.

**Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP):** I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this urgent question. The direction of travel and the stifling of democracy in Hong Kong is obviously deeply concerning and something we should all deplore. Human Rights Watch said of Cardinal Zen's arrest:

"Arresting a 90-year-old cardinal for his peaceful activities has to be a shocking new low for Hong Kong, illustrating the city's free fall in human rights in the past two years."

That is correct. Rather than colluding with foreign forces, which is what they have been accused of doing, those arrested have simply helped the people of Hong Kong in the face of an increasing crackdown and autocracy.

Will the Minister pledge to the House that every possible diplomatic avenue will be explored to try to secure the urgent release of these four individuals, alongside other pro-democracy campaigners? Will he clarify what diplomatic discussions the UK Government have had on the situation in Hong Kong, and further outline the strategy to try to influence the situation? Finally, will he tell us more about the UK Government's assessment of the likely impact on democracy of John Lee's appointment?

**James Cleverly:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising those points, and for reaffirming the cross-party view of these arrests. On 9 May, the UK released a joint statement with the G7 and the EU specifically on the selection process for the Chief Executive. A co-ordinated international voice has the greatest impact, and we will continue to work with our international friends, partners and allies in calling out these situations.

We used our G7 presidency to highlight our concerns about Hong Kong, including at the Carbis Bay summit. The hon. Lady asked how we will move things forward; we consistently raise these concerns with both the Hong Kong authorities and the Chinese mainland authorities.

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Everyone in this Chamber knows that China seeks to project its power around the world in order to obtain the respect that it believes it is owed. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the arrest of Cardinal Zen does nothing but inspire the contempt of not only Catholics around the world, but all people who value freedom of religion?

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. It is not for me to give advice to the Government of China, but they freely and openly entered into an agreement with us. They are now in breach of that agreement. Countries around the world should look at the respect the Chinese Government have for the agreements into which they freely enter. We expect them to stand by the agreements they make, both on this issue and on the other issues in the Sino-British agreement.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers. He is a compassionate Minister who understands the issues very well, and I thank him for all that he has done and will do. The Home Secretary has identified protecting freedom of religion or belief as a foreign policy priority. These arrests indicate increasing restrictions on freedom of religion or belief in Hong Kong. If that is happening in Hong Kong, we must also worry about Christians, Uyghur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners in mainland China. What assessment has the Minister and his Department made of this case's long-term impact?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Gentleman is another Member in this House who speaks regularly and with great knowledge on this incredibly important issue. He is right to highlight that what is happening in Hong Kong may well reflect things happening in other parts of China that we do not see. The freedom of religion or belief is a foundation-stone freedom. It is the canary in the mine, as it were, and it is a key indicator of a Government's commitment to a whole range of other freedoms. The fact that this freedom is so visibly being curtailed in Hong Kong should draw our attention to other religious minorities in China, a number of which he regularly champions. I assure him that we will keep a close eye on not only Hong Kong but on places elsewhere in China.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): It is clear that the Chinese Government were watching the west's reaction to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. Members of this House have been sanctioned by the Chinese Government for doing nothing more than calling out human rights abuses in China, so surely the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) about the sanctions and the people to be sanctioned should be taken on board by the British Government, and his suggestion should be implemented immediately.

**James Cleverly:** My hon. Friend speaks with great passion. I assure him that his point is heard by the Government. I repeat what I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith): we do not talk about future sanctions designations. However, I absolutely hear the point about it being completely inappropriate for British

parliamentarians to be sanctioned, and we will listen carefully to the point that my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend have made.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important urgent question. I feel that in the five years I have been here, there has been a repeated deterioration in the situation in Hong Kong. Words are one thing, but action is something else. We should absolutely put in place sanctions, but Hong Kong Watch recently produced a report showing that dirty money gained through corruption—money that is being spent by families of officials from Hong Kong—is flowing in our economy. Will the Minister look carefully at that report, and commit to carrying out an audit of that dirty money, and to using the new powers in the economic crime Bill to root it out from our society?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady makes an important point about the economic crime Bill. That piece of legislation is being brought through the House specifically so that we can address dirty money that may be flowing through the UK, and I can assure her that the report that she highlighted will be read. This is not my portfolio, but I suspect it already has been read by those at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Minister for appearing in the Chamber to answer the urgent question. Does he consider the statements by Hong Kong's new leader John Lee about cracking down on "fake news" to be as worrying as I do, given the accusations of human rights abuses in the region? Have the Government yet sought engagement with Lee? How do they intend to apply pressure to protect democratic freedoms more broadly?

**James Cleverly:** Just like the protection of freedom of religion or belief, a free media is a foundation-stone freedom, and actions to curtail it are always something we look at carefully and closely. We have previously released statements about that appointment with our international partners, and I assure the hon. Lady that we will take very seriously actions that are being euphemistically described as a crackdown on fake news, because of course we recognise this for what it is: the curtailment of a free and open media.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps is the Minister actively taking to protect religious freedoms in Hong Kong, in the light of the arrest of Cardinal Zen? Will the Minister commit to working with his counterparts in the Home Office to ensure that UK police forces protect Hongkongers in our country from Chinese Communist party agents, as, shockingly, many Hongkongers are reported to have been followed or even attacked?

**James Cleverly:** The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important point. The offer we made to British nationals overseas in Hong Kong to come here and make their lives here was designed specifically to help protect them from persecution and danger. We absolutely see that the duty does not stop just because they are now in the UK, and I assure her that we take their protection incredibly seriously, particularly in the light of some of the things we are seeing.

## Business Question

10.29 am

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

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer):** The business for the week commencing 16 May will include:

**MONDAY 16 MAY**—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech, on making Britain the best place to grow up and grow old.

**TUESDAY 17 MAY**—Continuation of the debate on the Queen's Speech, on tackling short-term and long-term cost of living increases.

**WEDNESDAY 18 MAY**—Conclusion of the debate on the Queen's Speech, on achieving economic growth.

**THURSDAY 19 MAY**—General debate on transport, followed by a general debate on NATO and international security.

**FRIDAY 20 MAY**—The House will not be sitting. The provisional business for the week commencing 23 May will include:

**MONDAY 23 MAY**—Second Reading of the Public Order Bill.

**TUESDAY 24 MAY**—Second Reading of a Bill.

**WEDNESDAY 25 MAY**—Remaining stages of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Bill, followed by a general debate on Ukraine.

**THURSDAY 26 MAY**—My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will propose an Humble Address to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen.

Colleagues will also wish to be reminded that the House will rise for the Whitsun recess at the conclusion of business on Thursday 26 May and return on Monday 6 June.

**Thangam Debbonaire:** I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. If I may start with some parish news: Bristol Rovers 7, Scunthorpe nil. I am sure the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating Gasheads on that win and the resulting promotion to League One.

We were all sad that on Tuesday Her Majesty the Queen was unable to address Parliament. The glaring obviousness of her absence is testament to her unfaltering dedication to our country. We wish Her Majesty well and look forward to celebrating her platinum jubilee.

What a contrast between two constitutional figureheads: one is iconic, capable and the epitome of the high standards that the British public hold dear; the other one is the Prime Minister. Speaking of huge disappointments, I turn to the content of the Queen's Speech. The Tories promised renters reform in the previous two Queen's Speeches; in this week's—the third—there is a mention of a White Paper. The victims Bill has featured in four Queen's Speeches and three manifestos and is still only in draft form. Gazing into my crystal ball, I see the future: me, months from now, asking, "Where have those Bills gone?"

There is nothing in the Queen's Speech for women at work, or to close the pay, pensions or housing gaps that hurt women. There is no recognition of the rising child

poverty rates that affect children in constituencies of Members from all parties, including those on the Government Benches. Will the Leader of the House please explain why the Government seem to have ignored women and children?

Last week, people from Cumberland to Wandsworth told this Government what they think of 15 Tory tax rises in two years, the cost of living crisis, inflation up, taxes up, debt up and economic growth stagnant. As there is clearly space in the business, will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to the House with the emergency Budget that Labour has long called for and that people throughout the country so badly need?

On 29 March, the House passed an Opposition motion that instructed the Government to place all documents, emails and so on about questions relating to the appointment of Lord Lebedev—a subject so ably explored by my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—before the House by 28 April. I understand from advice given to me from clerks' quarters that because of Prorogation the deadline moved to this Tuesday, but either way it is still behind us.

When we debated that motion, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, the right hon. and learned Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), said in his closing speech that, puzzlingly, the Government would not vote against the Opposition motion because

"the common practice is not to vote on Opposition motions".—*[Official Report, 29 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 787.]*

That must have been a surprise for the Leader of the House who, as Government Chief Whip in the 2019 Parliament, whipped his colleagues to vote down 50 out of 68 Opposition motions on subjects ranging from protecting leaseholders from unsafe cladding and supporting the steel industry to helping small business, and much more. Perhaps he can tell his colleagues—including, perhaps, his Cabinet Office colleague—why he instructed them to vote against those Opposition motions. Importantly, will he tell us exactly when his Government will comply with the motion that this House approved on the documents relating to Lord Lebedev?

The cost of living crisis, 15 Tory tax rises and the Government refusing to comply with the requirements of this House—what a mess. I really missed Big Ben and his friends ringing out across Westminster. Yesterday, we heard them once more, and the resumption of those chiming bells seems particularly apt, because this Government are certainly out of time.

**Mark Spencer:** It is good to see the hon. Lady back in good form. May I join her in paying tribute to Bristol Rovers? It was an extraordinary result. I cannot help but reflect for a moment on the disappointment that Northampton Town must have felt at getting pipped to the post, but I am sure that we all wish them well in the play-offs to come.

The hon. Lady mentioned Her Majesty the Queen and the jubilee to come. I know that the whole country is excited by the prospect of the jubilee and wishes Her Majesty well for the coming celebrations. The jubilee can certainly unite us not only across this Chamber but across the country as we join in celebrating the incredible achievement of 70 years on the throne.

[Mark Spencer]

That, of course, leads us to the Queen's Speech. Undoubtedly, the hon. Lady is very keen to criticise what she described as, I think, "an empty Queen's Speech". We are proposing 33 Bills—33 Bills! This is the biggest legislative agenda that we have had for many, many Sessions. There is a huge amount in the Queen's Speech to help communities across the country, to boost the economy, to make our streets safer, and to recover from the covid pandemic. We will need a huge amount of time in Parliament to get through that huge agenda. I know that she will want to go further and do more, but, rest assured, the Government are driven and committed to improving the lives of our constituents, and the Queen's Speech is certainly a huge step in the right direction.

The hon. Lady made reference to the local elections. It is worth reflecting on the fact that a previous Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), had a net gain of more than 800 councillors, so with a gain of circa 100 this time for Labour it is a little bit of a bridge too far to convince us that it is connecting with the electorate. The electorate, I think, see through its fibs and see through its lack of a plan. They acknowledge that the Government have an exciting legislative agenda, are on their side and are doing a very good job.

Finally, the hon. Lady came to the Humble Address motion. She will be aware that we have committed to releasing that information. I think I can share with the House that there are a number of security challenges in that information, which has been gone through in great detail, but it will be released to her and the House very soon. [Interruption.] Very soon. She will not have long to wait.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that, despite some difficult elections elsewhere, in the London borough of Harrow we gained eight seats from Labour and took control of the council for the first time since 2006. Will he join me in thanking and congratulating the councillors who were elected across England, Wales and Scotland last Thursday, the activists and all the support people who did the hard work and the hard graft to get them elected and get representation across our councils?

**Mark Spencer:** I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in that. I pay tribute to all those elected, whatever political party they represent, and I wish them well in their careers as local councillors representing their communities. It is no surprise to me that the Conservative party made gains in Harrow, as Harrow has great leadership at its core under my hon. Friend. He is a true ambassador for his community and a great campaigner.

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to the SNP spokesperson.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): To that list, of course, we should add the Prime Minister, who sunk the Conservatives from second place to third place in Scotland, so well done to him.

I thank the Leader of the House for helpfully announcing the business up to the Whit recess. Try as I might, though, I could not find any scheduling of an emergency

budget. This must now surely be a priority as we learn today that the UK economy has contracted by 0.1% and that inflation is at a 40-year high. The whole of the UK is suffering from a cost of living crisis, yet the Government's priority is to give people in England the right to complain about a neighbour's garden shed.

I do not know whether the Leader of the House is joining his Cabinet colleagues at their bonding session in Stoke-on-Trent this afternoon, but we can only imagine what a joyous occasion that will be. I hear the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) is in charge of the kitchen arrangements; he is offering cooking lessons to help Secretaries of State ensure that their Cabinet salaries go just that little bit further. Who knows? There might even be cake, and it might even be made from scratch, because they have so much to celebrate. The Prime Minister is still in place—a big hooray from everybody on the Back Benches over there.

We must have a debate on comedy performances, because the Levelling Up Secretary is apparently providing the after-dinner entertainment. Following his rip-roaring, side-splitting success yesterday, he is going to give all his best regional accents in an attempt to upset just about all parts of the United Kingdom. But that is this Government, is it not—laughing while the nation suffers? They fail to take seriously the utter despair and desperate conditions of our constituents. The Tories may still be in power, but any moral authority they might ever have had is now well and truly gone.

**Mark Spencer:** I am not quite sure what questions or requests for debates the hon. Gentleman made there, but he did draw attention to the state of the economy. It is worth reflecting that, following a global pandemic, the policies of Her Majesty's Government meant that the UK economy grew fastest of any nation in the G7. That puts us in a robust place to assist with the global challenges of energy and food inflation. Putin's invasion of Ukraine has caused huge challenges around the world, with energy price spikes and the cost of food going up exponentially. That is something the Government take very seriously, and we have already invested £22 billion of support to help people through the cost of living challenges they face.

There is a lot more in the Queen's Speech that will continue to grow the economy and ensure that we move towards a high-wage, high-skill economy so that people can earn their way out of some of the challenges they face, but there is also support for those who find themselves in difficult circumstances, which the Government wholly understand. There will be more from this Dispatch Box; this is something the Government understand, and we want to try to help mitigate the impact of those global challenges.

**Harriett Baldwin** (West Worcestershire) (Con): During Prorogation, Mr Speaker, you announced that you would establish a Speaker's Commission to ensure that the workplace we are privileged to be part of is as secure and as welcoming as it could possibly be. Could the Leader of the House find some Government time in which hon. Members could debate some of the changes they would welcome in this place—including, I hope, a condemnation of the constitutional sexism we find in the other place, where one eighth of the seats are reserved for men only?

**Mark Spencer:** I know this is something my hon. Friend has long campaigned on, and she has tabled a private Member's Bill to that effect. Maybe she will be lucky enough in the private Member's Bill ballot next week to have another crack at that. I join her in welcoming your announcement of the conference you are hoping to pull together, Mr Speaker. We will work across the House, and I know there is cross-party support for trying to improve the way people are treated. There are structures in place and I am sure that, working together, we can solve some of the challenges we face.

**Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab):** Mr Speaker, I hope that you and the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating Gateshead Football Club, who were last week promoted to the national league from the national league north—a promotion secured, by the way, with a 2-2 away draw at Chorley, Mr Speaker. It is a great success, because the club was rescued by the fans, having been relegated from the national league for financial misdoings by the previous ownership. That is one reason why we need the urgent introduction of the governance provisions on football. I know there will be a White Paper produced, probably in the summer, but we want to see this done as a matter of urgency, because football is not out of the woods by a long way.

**Mark Spencer:** I realise that in praising Gateshead football club I am going down a rabbit hole of celebrating with all the football clubs who are seeking promotion through the play-offs. I see that the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) has been bobbing in his seat. I hope he is not going to encourage me to wish Huddersfield Town well through the play-offs as they compete with Nottingham Forest.

It is worth reflecting on the positive impact that football has up and down this country, not only in drawing communities together but in getting young people out of the house and on to sports fields, and keeping themselves physically, and mentally, fit.

**Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con):** One of the consequences of the employment Bill not being included in the Queen's Speech is that the vehicle to introduce neonatal leave and pay for 2023 is no longer available. Nobody wants to see another year where thousands of parents are not able to spend the appropriate amount of time with their premature or sick children. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for meeting me to discuss this and taking it so seriously. What steps will the Government now take to deliver this vital commitment on time?

**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend is undoubtedly an assiduous campaigner on this issue, as he has indicated. I have met him previously to try to assist him in his pursuit and will continue to try to assist him. He will be aware that the ballot for private Members' Bill will take place next week and I wish him well in that, as he may well be able to pursue the cause in that way. However, there will be other routes whereby we can work together, and I encourage him to continue to engage with Ministers going forward.

**Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** I have every confidence that Huddersfield Town will succeed in being promoted to the premiership, but I will leave it there.

I want to ask the Leader of the House about a housekeeping matter. At the time of the last jubilee, some of us fought very hard to get the fountain in the main court—a gift from both Houses of Parliament to the Queen for the silver jubilee—working, and we did that in time. At the moment, it still is not operating—could he do something about that?

Can we soon have a proper debate on those selfish communities, towns and cities that create much, much waste but do not want to dispose of it in their own patch, exporting it to other constituencies and other parts of the country? As the Leader of the House will know, energy from waste in every community could support 20% of our energy needs.

**Mark Spencer:** I think I am right in saying that there are plans to make sure that the fountain is working for the platinum jubilee, and that extensive work has recently taken place in that area of the Palace of Westminster. There is also the prospect of the unveiling of a new gift to Her Majesty from both Houses in the very near future, and we will all be able to celebrate and enjoy that.

I hear the hon. Gentleman's comments about waste, and clearly there are challenges in some communities. Disposal of waste is often a very controversial planning challenge for local authorities to overcome. Across Government and local government, we need to find ways to reduce waste and try to improve recycling. The Government are certainly committed to doing that, and I know he will continue to press the issue.

**Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con):** In response to a business statement last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) called for a debate on Labour corruption in local government, and I echo that call. The current leader of Crawley Borough Council, when he was a parliamentary candidate, arranged for a housing contract that did not include Unite the Union. Unite the Union then said that it was going to withhold funding from his parliamentary campaign. That resulted, at a cost of over £150,000 to the taxpayer, in the council having to renegotiate the housing contract to include Unite the Union in it. I will be referring that to the district auditor, but may I again call for a debate on corruption in local government among Labour councils?

**Mark Spencer:** I am sorry to hear about the challenges my hon. Friend faces in Crawley. I know that he will pursue this alleged corruption and will not allow people to get away with that if it is the case. He will have the opportunity to raise the matter directly with the Secretary of State at next week's Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions, and I am sure he will be in his place to do so.

**Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate on the worsening economic and civil rights problems in Sri Lanka, an island of 22 million people? Protests on Monday saw nine people killed and 200 injured, allegedly by supporters of the Rajapaksa Government. Clearly there will be a need for the International Monetary Fund to intervene. Will his Government ensure that any IMF intervention takes heed of the past travesties of justice experienced by the Tamil community in Sri Lanka?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Lady is right to raise that terrible situation, and I am certainly sorry to hear about what is happening in Sri Lanka. I know that she will continue to raise it in the House. There will be an opportunity at Foreign Office questions on 21 June to raise it directly, but should the situation worsen, I am sure Ministers in the Foreign Office will update the House.

**Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** Does the Leader of the House agree that it should be a priority in funding station improvements to ensure that all platforms, and therefore all trains, are accessible by all passengers? A bid to the accessible stations fund for lifts at Sandbach station to facilitate that should be strongly supported, as indeed it is by the local MP.

**Mr Speaker:** They could look at Chorley at the same time.

**Mark Spencer:** I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the campaign she has run. I, too, have campaigned in my constituency, as Mr Speaker has in his, to try to improve access to railway services for those with disabilities. It is certainly something that the Secretary of State for Transport takes very seriously, and he is trying to address it with funding and opportunities for bids for funding. I am sure my hon. Friend will take the opportunity at Transport questions next week to raise the matter directly with the Secretary of State.

**Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD):** The closing of post office services in North East Fife is a blight on our communities. In the past year, we have had, or are shortly due to have, post offices closed in St Andrews, Ladybank, Balmullo, Newport, Wormit and Leuchars, removing vital services. A part-time mobile service is doing its best to make up for those losses, but there is a lack of a dedicated vehicle. When will the Government make time for a debate in this House on the worrying decline in traditional post office services and the support that is not there for badly needed alternatives?

**Mark Spencer:** I am disappointed to hear that; I am a huge fan of the post office. Personally, I think they do a fantastic job. They play a crucial role in our communities, providing key services; and the Government set out access criteria to ensure that services remain with reach of all citizens. I think 99% of the UK population should be within 3 miles of a post office outlet so that they can access those services. I am sorry to hear about the challenges that the hon. Lady faces, and I will pass on her concerns directly to the Minister, and hopefully she will get some answers.

**Dean Russell (Watford) (Con):** Given that today is International Nurses Day, can my right hon. Friend advise me on how we can thank nurses across the country and especially in my constituency of Watford, not just today of all days, but throughout the year? Is there a way to do that formally and put my thanks on record?

**Mark Spencer:** My hon. Friend may well have just done that by raising it here in the Chamber. He is right to raise the great work that nurses do up and down this country, and I know that is supported across the House.

We never know when we might need the support of the NHS, and it is good to know that it is there for us in our moments of need.

**Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):** In the Leader of the House's football chat, he forgot to congratulate Manchester United on their victory over Nottingham Forest in the FA youth cup final last night. I am sure he will want to rectify that omission as a matter of urgency.

Moving on to more serious matters, a few weeks ago I met some constituents whose dog sadly died as a result of a fire in their home. The fire service says it was caused by a fault with a Hotpoint tumble dryer, but Hotpoint refuses to accept any responsibility. I am outraged that we have reached this point, forcing the family to look at legal action. Can we please have a debate on what more can be done to hold manufacturers to account for these kinds of faults?

**Mark Spencer:** I understand the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for celebrating Manchester United winning anything, which is a rare event these days. He went on to make a very serious point about tumble dryers and whether they are causing fires in people's homes. There are clearly a number of safety regulations that products in our homes should meet. It is worthy of further debate, and I am sure that he will be in his place to raise those matters with the relevant Ministers when they are at the Dispatch Box.

**Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con):** Telford's Princess Royal Hospital is still not doing elective orthopaedic surgery. Many of my constituents, such as Mr Graham Cotton, who is 68, are suffering severe and constant pain, having already waited since before the start of the pandemic for surgery. If a hospital trust decides not to do much-needed surgery, it is answerable to no one—not patients, MPs or Ministers. It has no responsibility or duty to find an alternative provider. May we have a debate on the accountability of the NHS? It is simply wrong that desperately needed care is not provided and that no one is accountable or responsible to the patient.

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is truly an assiduous campaigner on health challenges in her constituency and the whole of Shropshire. The Health and Care Act 2022 includes measures designed to improve accountability to enhance public confidence in our NHS. The Government plan to spend £8 billion over the next three years to tackle the elective backlog. Clearly, covid has given a number of challenges to the NHS and has caused those backlogs. The Government are committed to trying to resolve that and to helping health services catch up so that our constituents can get the operations they desperately need.

**Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP):** With apologies to Sir Winston Churchill, like

“the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone”,

the Northern Ireland protocol continues to plague Northern Ireland politics and affect our economy. There have been many reports in the media about moves by the Government to perhaps legislate directly to lance that boil. Can the Leader of the House give an indication about whether any movement is planned? Will it be

brought to the House, and how quickly can we expect action on that matter to ensure that businesses know what is happening?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As he identifies, the protocol was clearly a huge issue in the Northern Ireland elections. It is something that the Foreign Secretary has been pursuing for a long time by trying to encourage EU colleagues to come to the table to find a way forward. She will continue with those plans. The hon. Gentleman is right to identify, however, that if we cannot find a way forward, the UK Government will clearly have to consider options to overcome the challenges that communities in Northern Ireland are facing. Shoring up and supporting the Good Friday agreement is a fundamental desire of the UK. The Good Friday agreement must be protected, so if the protocol is damaging it, the UK Government will have to take action.

**Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con):** For the vast majority of our constituents, the largest purchase that they will make in their lifetime is a house for them and their family to live in. For my constituents living in Steinbeck Grange in Warrington, however, the opportunity to purchase a dream home has turned into a living nightmare. The Competition and Markets Authority has launched an investigation into the mis-selling of leasehold. Can the Leader of the House update us on where the CMA is with that investigation? Can we have a debate in the House on the opportunities to retrospectively fix the leasehold scandal that affects many people living in my constituency?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. That subject would make a good Adjournment debate if he were to apply. We welcome the CMA's action to tackle potential mis-selling and unfair terms, and the Government certainly want affected homeowners to obtain the justice and redress that they deserve. I know that my hon. Friend will play his part in drawing the House's attention to the challenges that they face. It is DLUHC questions next Monday, and I am sure that he will be in his place to raise the matter again directly with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

**Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab):** Every 22 minutes, someone is killed or seriously injured on UK roads, and police describe speeding as one of the fatal five. Last week, we learned that Nottinghamshire's police and crime commissioner, who was elected on a promise to tackle speeding on our roads, has admitted breaking the law five times in 12 weeks, including twice near a Nottingham primary school. What does that say about her commitment to road safety?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Lady will be aware that that case is ongoing, I think, so I am not going to comment on the individual court case. However, I would say that speeding is something that should be condemned. Local authorities, the police and the Government put measures in place to try to reduce speeds, particularly around our schools. As someone who has done an enormous amount of campaigning on speeding, certainly in the villages in my own constituency, I will continue to pursue those who break the law by speeding.

**Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con):** Spring brings the familiar sights of daffodils, newborn lambs and, less cheerfully, temporary traffic lights, as councils across the country rush to spend their annual roads budget before financial year end. Due to poor planning and communication between Derbyshire and Tameside councils, residents in Glossop have been subjected over the last few weeks to complete traffic gridlock as major roadworks have been approved on both of the main roads out of the town, which underlines the long-term need finally to build the Mottram bypass. In the meantime, can we have a debate on the way councils' roads budgets work and the need for long-term strategic planning over several years, rather than the annual chaos we see every spring?

**Mark Spencer:** I am sorry to hear of the challenges my hon. Friend is facing in High Peak. He will have the opportunity at DLUHC questions on Monday to raise those matters directly with the Secretary of State. I certainly share his frustration at times of sitting at temporary traffic lights, especially when, after finally getting through those traffic lights, it does not appear that anything is happening.

**Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP):** May is a very important month, and today, as well as being International Nurses Day, is the birthdate of Florence Nightingale. In addition, today is also my birthday—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]—a day I share with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, although, sadly, I have celebrated 12 more birthdays than he has.

Even more importantly than that, May is Melanoma Awareness Month. Melanoma is the most serious type of skin cancer, and protection from ultraviolet rays is key to lowering the risk of this disease. Cancer Research UK has found that skin cancer rates have more than doubled since the 1990s. Will the Leader of the House join me in lobbying the Chancellor to reclassify sun cream as an essential healthcare item, instead of a cosmetic item, thereby exempting it from VAT and making it more affordable for more people to protect themselves from the risk of skin cancer?

**Mark Spencer:** First, I wish Florence Nightingale, the hon. Member and the Chancellor of the Exchequer a happy birthday.

The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise melanoma as an issue in this House, and I thank her for doing so. The more we talk about it, the more people will be aware of a change in a mole or a growth on a part of their body that needs early detection. I think I am right in saying that the earlier we detect these things, the better the chances of the NHS being able to solve the particular problem. I hear her request to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I shall pass that on directly to him, and I am sure that, at a future Budget, it will be something he will consider.

**Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab):** This week is Mental Health Awareness Week, and the theme this year is loneliness. I would like to take this chance to thank organisations nationally and locally in my constituency, such as Age UK in Gateshead and the MHA—Methodist Homes—in the west of the borough for the work they do in tackling loneliness. Can we have a debate in Government time on the issue of loneliness to make sure that we are doing all we can to tackle it?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Lady for raising that important matter, and for raising the profile of the challenges that some people face with loneliness. I join her in celebrating the work of the many individuals and charities that do great work in this area. I certainly think it would be worthy of a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate. It is something on which I am sure she will continue to have support across the House and that she will continue to pursue.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): Leaseholders in Cambridge and across the country are continuing to suffer punishing insurance premiums. Their homes are safe, but because of the fallout from the issues around the removal of cladding and the EWS1 fiasco, they are punished. That is quite unfair, so can we have a statement from the Secretary of State—I do not mind whether it is in a scouse accent, an American accent or a Scots accent—to explain to us why my constituents are still suffering in this way?

**Mark Spencer:** The hon. Gentleman will have an opportunity at DLUHC questions on Monday when the Secretary of State will be at the Dispatch Box to answer any questions of that nature. The Government recognise the challenges facing people who have suffered from the miscladding, let us say, of their properties and we brought forward the Building Safety Act 2022 and other legislation to try to address those challenges.

**Barry Gardiner** (Brent North) (Lab): Yesterday at the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, Professor Lorand Bartels, professor of international trade law at the University of Cambridge, was asked about the ramifications for trade with the European Union if article 16 is invoked. In the afternoon at the Committee, the Minister for Trade Policy spoke passionately about the problems with the current checks in the Irish sea. However, she was unable to give an answer on the legal basis upon which article 16 could be invoked. May we have an urgent question from the Attorney General about the legal basis for the invocation of article 16?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and should there be any triggering of article 16 he should and would expect a statement from the Dispatch Box from the relevant Minister; I would be amazed if that was not the case. The Government would of course update the House on any changes, but there are currently no plans to trigger article 16. Our discussions with the EU continue over the challenges of the Northern Ireland protocol, but it is a challenge we need to overcome; I encourage the EU to work with us to protect the Good Friday agreement, but that needs to happen on a very rapid timescale because it does need resolving.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Syrian family of 13-year-old Firas were told in 2018 that they would be resettled to the United Kingdom, but they are still waiting and, heartbreakingly, that severely disabled kid died in Beirut with his family struggling to pay for medical care, food and clothes. Some 2,000 refugee families are currently in a similar situation according to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. The resettlement programme can be transformational but we must not leave families hanging on for so long. May we have an

urgent statement on steps to be taken to speed up the resettlement programme and help more families like Firas's?

**Mark Spencer:** I am sorry to hear about the challenges the hon. Gentleman outlined. If he writes to me on the specific case, I will of course raise that directly with the relevant Minister on his behalf. The Government have a great track record in supporting families coming to the UK and taking refugees not only from Syria but from Afghanistan and now Ukraine, and if I can assist him in his pursuits, I will do everything I can.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): The David Livingstone birthplace museum in Blantyre in my constituency has been nominated for the best permanent exhibition at the museums and heritage awards. The museum documents Livingstone's life and career, good and bad, and seeks to educate about Scotland's role in slavery and colonisation. Having visited a number of times, I can attest to the power of the exhibition. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the museum and schedule a debate in Government time on the importance of the arts and culture sector in educating communities?

**Mark Spencer:** I join the hon. Lady in that celebration; I was not aware of the Livingstone museum but it sounds interesting and I am sure tourists up and down the country will be making their way to her constituency to enjoy the exhibition. I join her, too, in celebrating all tourist attractions and museums; that is worthy of a debate and I am sure that if she were to apply for a Westminster Hall debate, many colleagues would want to participate.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for all the time he gives to answering all our difficult question; they are sometimes more difficult than others, but I hope he will agree with mine. In Ethiopia recent violent clashes between Muslims and Orthodox Christians have left at least 30 people dead and more than 100 injured. Will he join me in condemning the attacks and ask the relevant Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister to make a statement calling on the local authorities in Ethiopia to carry out timely, independent and transparent investigations into the attacks?

**Mark Spencer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, whom Mr Speaker always saves till last. I do not know why he does that—it feels a little bit like the good news story at the end of the ITN news. I saw that he was present for the urgent question to the Foreign Office Minister, when he also asked about religious oppression around the world. He is an assiduous campaigner on this topic and, at the end of his career—I think that is a long way away—we will all be able to reflect on the positive impact that he has had around the world on religious freedom. I know that he will continue to pursue those aims.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I just want to correct the record. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has already asked three questions today, and earlier he was called so early that he fell off his own chair. If the Leader of the House wants the hon. Member to be taken last, I will have to listen to him.



## Debate on the Address

3RD DAY

*Debate resumed (Order, 10 May)*

*Question again proposed,*

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, as follows:

Most Gracious Sovereign,

We, Your Majesty's most dutiful and loyal subjects, the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled, beg leave to offer our humble thanks to Your Majesty for the Gracious Speech which was addressed to both Houses of Parliament.

### Fairness at Work and Power in Communities

11.10 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):** I am pleased to speak in support of the Queen's Speech and the measures that it contains to make the United Kingdom stronger, healthier and more prosperous than before. The rising cost of living is a global challenge, and I know that this is a worrying time. The Government have made dealing with that challenge our top priority. Fundamentally, the only way to deal with it properly is to grow the economy, enable businesses to invest and create jobs, increase wages and increase productivity. However, we cannot achieve that overnight. That is why in 2022-23 we are providing support worth more than £22 billion to help families with the pressures in the immediate term.

The Government recognise that businesses are also concerned. Energy prices have increased globally, and there are supply-chain issues as the world economy recovers from the pandemic and adapts to the shock of the war in Ukraine. We will continue to keep the situation under review, recognising the current high level of uncertainty, and continue to monitor the ongoing impact on the economy. However, the UK economy is incredibly resilient and, with responsible management, we have seen it bounce back time and again—most recently from the pandemic with output above pre-pandemic levels. Unemployment is back below pre-pandemic levels and demand for workers remains strong. There are now more employees on the payroll than ever before.

A key part of our resilience is our strong, flexible and dynamic labour market. It is the envy of the world because it gives businesses the confidence to create jobs and invest in their workforce while giving workers more choice over who they work for and how often.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con):** Informal carers across the country will have been dismayed to hear that legislation to introduce the right to unpaid carer's leave was not in the Queen's Speech. It was a 2019 manifesto commitment and is a key pillar of the Government's adult social care reforms. Will my hon. Friend please let me know when that will be addressed?

**Paul Scully:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which she has done on a number of occasions, and rightly so. It remains a commitment of the Government to support unpaid carers, who do an amazing job in supporting their families and, importantly, supporting

the economy and other areas of social care through their work and their commitment to their families. We remain committed to unpaid carer's leave and indeed will introduce it when parliamentary time allows.

**Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP):** I have listened to the Minister's speech so far. He is talking about business being dynamic, but of course there are rogue employers out there. He promised a Delegated Legislation Committee on 25 January that there would be an employment Bill in the Queen's Speech—may I ask where it is?

**Paul Scully:** We remain undiminished in our commitment to balance, as I outlined, the flexibility of the labour market with protections for workers. Indeed, we have already been working on a number of areas. We have made really good progress in extending the right to a written statement of core terms of employment to all workers—we have made access to that a day one right—and quadrupling the available aggravated breach penalties used in employment tribunals to £20,000 as well as any number of other issues, many of which I will outline in the debate. However, we clearly want to do more, and we will do that as parliamentary time allows.

**Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab):** Talking about the protection of workers, would the Minister like to tell the House what protections were afforded to the 800 P&O workers who lost their jobs over a video call?

**Paul Scully:** I will cover P&O a bit later in my speech, if the hon. Gentleman will bear with me. While we celebrate the flexibility of our workforce and the employers that do the right thing, clearly, there are egregious examples, such as P&O. We continue to address those through the work of the Insolvency Service and through the harbours Bill, which was announced in the Queen's Speech.

**Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab):** Would the Minister extend the category of egregious employers to Asda, B&Q, Sainsbury's, Marks and Spencer and British Gas, all of which have reduced the terms and conditions of their long-standing members of staff on the basis of just 90 days' consultation? Is that any way to treat anybody?

**Paul Scully:** The hon. Lady has raised this issue on a number of occasions. She will have seen, not that long ago, my announcement that we are establishing a statutory code of practice that will allow a strengthening of the findings of tribunals on companies that are doing the wrong thing in terms of fire and rehire and going back on people's contracts in the way that she describes. What we want to provide, and what we have, is a labour market that rightly bears down on unscrupulous employers, protects those keeping to good working practices, promotes more competition in UK markets to build a high-skilled, high-productivity, high-wage economy, and promotes competition and choice so consumers have confidence in markets and businesses can compete on a level playing field. Our labour market is ranked among the top 10 countries, according to the World Economic Forum's global competitive index. We also have one of the best records on workers' rights in the world. Despite the

[Paul Scully]

pandemic, the labour market is strong by historical standards, with close to record levels and rates across the board.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that crucial to our recovery and crucial to our workforce is the ability of women to get back into the workforce and have hours of work that suit them? Why is it that childcare in this country is the most expensive in the developed world? When are we going to do something about that to liberate women to use their talent to the full?

**Paul Scully:** I happily agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said. The Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), is reviewing childcare to tackle exactly that point. It is so important, as he says, to keep women, and basically everyone, in the workforce who want to stay in the workforce and progress their careers. So much about the flexible labour market is to ensure that companies, which invest a lot of time, money and resource in their workplace, keep those people and keep investing in those people. Businesses are based on their people if nothing else, so it is important that women can stay. That was my point about childcare. The Minister for children is reviewing the issue with a sense of urgency and passion to do something about making childcare affordable, but also to ensure that good employers, and more employers, provide women with flexibility in the workplace to keep them in the workplace, so there are fewer career breaks.

The unemployment rate is at its lowest since 1975. If you are in work, you have the best chance of tackling the cost of living as a household. The employment rate is at its highest since comparable records began in 1971 and workforce participation is close to record high rates. Youth unemployment—that is, 16 to 24-year-olds—has bounced back to pre-pandemic levels and is now at one of its lowest rates on record. We continue to build on that excellent record. This April, we made sure that 2.5 million people received a pay rise by raising the national minimum wage and living wage. That was the largest ever cash increase to the national living wage and put more than £1,000 a year into a full-time worker's pay packet, helping to ease the cost of living pressures.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it is time to think about incorporating mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting to ensure that we reduce the disparities among black and ethnic minority workers?

**Paul Scully:** I am sure that the hon. Lady has read the report on the challenges in relation to this. We have seen how gender pay gaps have changed. There are complexities about ethnic pay gap reporting, but it is clearly an important issue. We will continue to work through that and encourage businesses to make sure that they pay a fair wage, and that starts with the lowest paid in the workforce.

The 2022 national living wage is now 42% higher than the minimum wage was in 2015. It is 60% higher than the minimum wage was in 2010. The Government have a commitment for the national living wage to equal two thirds of median earnings by 2024, providing economic conditions allow that. Additionally, we are

putting power into the hands of individuals and businesses to find and create work that suits their personal circumstances. On Monday, we confirmed our intention to widen the ban on exclusivity clauses, ensuring that the lowest-paid workers have the freedom to boost their income through extra work if they wish.

We also continue to level the playing field, holding unscrupulous businesses to account and creating an environment in which businesses can compete fairly. The Government are tackling appalling business practices, such as—as I said—the disgraceful behaviour of P&O Ferries in firing their employees without consultation.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I am very interested in what the Minister said about exclusivity clauses. How will he ensure that that does not simply encourage employers to keep wages low, knowing that, in fact, workers will then take on more and more low hours and low-paid jobs, effectively multiplying their exploitation?

**Paul Scully:** That is the careful balance that we in this place rightly have to achieve in our legislation. The entire philosophy behind removing exclusivity clauses is that it is for people on the lowest wages. They should not be bound to one employer. Clearly, people should not be forced to work in many jobs to earn a living wage. That is not the purpose of our proposals. We want to ensure that we remove discrimination by extending the protection against exclusivity clauses.

To come back to P&O, on 1 April, following a request from the Business Secretary, the Insolvency Service confirmed that, following its inquiries, it has commenced formal criminal and civil investigations into the circumstances surrounding the recent redundancies made by P&O Ferries. The Harbours (Seafarers' Remuneration) Bill that was announced in the Queen's Speech will protect seafarers working aboard vessels visiting UK ports by ensuring that the ports have powers ultimately to refuse access to ferry services that do not pay an equivalent to the national minimum wage to seafarers while in UK waters. That means that all ferry staff will receive a fair wage while in UK waters when operating regularly to or from UK ports, helping to avoid a legal loophole between UK and international maritime law that P&O Ferries ruthlessly exploited.

**Andy McDonald:** The Minister said a very important thing: that a criminal investigation had started. An assurance was given to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee that there would be advice on the legal position by 8 April. Will he please inform the House whether he has received that advice and whether a criminal offence has been made out?

**Paul Scully:** I said that the Insolvency Service would respond by 8 April, which it did, and that is why it has launched its criminal and civil investigations. That is ongoing.

We have also recently committed to producing a statutory code on fire and rehire practices to strengthen the rights of all employees. The new code will deter employers from using controversial tactics and from failing to engage in meaningful consultations with employees. The Government's approach is clear: when bad bosses do not play by the rules, we will act.

**Dean Russell** (Watford) (Con): Last year, I introduced the Tips Bill, which would be an important solution, supporting hospitality workers with the cost of living: it would ensure that employers could not keep tips given to staff, waiters and hospitality workers. May I have an assurance from the Minister that he will continue to support me in ensuring that the Bill goes through Parliament?

**Paul Scully:** My hon. Friend has done amazing work in raising the profile of ensuring that there is a fair system for tipping and that the tronc actually goes to those at the front end, who are often on low wages. As I have said, the primary purpose of our employment measures is to protect those who are at the lowest end especially. I reaffirm our commitment to building on my hon. Friend's continuing work in that area.

**Chris Stephens:** The Minister is being generous in giving way. He says that, where employers adopt bad practices, the Government will act, but it has been nearly five years since the Taylor review reported on issues such as zero-hours contracts and short-term shift notices. Once again, may I ask where the employment Bill is to tackle those issues?

**Paul Scully:** I will come back to the future of work in a second. The hon. Gentleman talks about zero-hours contracts, but we cannot just throw that term around as if it described a single exploitative work product. I have talked about how we have a dynamic and flexible labour market. Many, many people who are on zero-hours contracts like to be on them. There is still exploitation and there are still bad bosses out there, which is why I say that where there are bad practices we will act, but it is important that where businesses are playing fairly we salute them and support them in creating jobs and boosting our economy. We will all become poorer if the public lose faith in Britain's businesses.

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. I know that he is committed to improvements to the labour market; we have had many conversations about the subject. He talks about acting when bad bosses are not doing the right things. Are the Government still planning to act to outlaw the misuse of non-disclosure agreements and confidentiality agreements, which are too often used to cover up wrongdoing in the workplace? The Government have undertaken to do so.

**Paul Scully:** We have had some really good conversations about this. As I say, where we have said that we will act, we will. My right hon. Friend has talked often in this Chamber and in the Women and Equalities Committee, when she was its Chair, about pregnancy discrimination, which goes back to a point that I responded to earlier about keeping women in the workplace. Women should not have to suffer for taking career breaks. We need to make sure that investment in women in the workplace is not wasted, because frankly it makes no business sense to act badly in that area.

There is no growth without enterprise. The Queen's Speech sets out exactly how we will continue to boost economic growth across the country to address the cost of living and help to create the conditions for more people to have high-wage, high-skill jobs. The energy security Bill will not only accelerate our transition to

more secure, more affordable and cleaner home-grown energy supplies, but encourage the creation of tens of thousands of high-skill jobs across the country. The audit reform Bill will reduce the unfair impact of sudden corporate collapses on workers, pensioners and suppliers, and will help businesses to grow by reinforcing the UK's reputation as a great place to do business and invest.

The digital markets, competition and consumer Bill will protect consumers' hard-earned cash from scams and rip-offs and will help them to get better deals, promoting more competition in UK markets so that consumers have confidence in markets and businesses competing on a level playing field. The economic crime and corporate transparency Bill will strengthen the UK's reputation as a place where legitimate businesses can thrive, while ensuring that dirty money has no place to hide. All these reforms will improve our business environment and increase opportunities for the hard-working people of the UK to find jobs that suit them and their personal circumstances and that treat them fairly.

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): The Minister is being generous in giving way. He referred to the Harbours (Seafarers' Remuneration) Bill, and specifically to provisions to protect seafarers on ships entering UK ports. In the light of his remark about opportunities for well-paid, secure employment, will the same provisions apply to employment in the renewable energy sector on the UK continental shelf? There is the potential for many tens of thousands of new jobs, but the risk is that they will be offshored and will not go to British workers.

**Paul Scully:** What we are trying to do with the harbours Bill is resolve an anomaly between UK law and international maritime law. However, the hon. Gentleman has raised an interesting point, which will no doubt be explored during the progress of that Bill.

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The economic crime Bill gives us an opportunity to address the misuse of compulsory strike-off. I should be grateful if the Minister would make time to meet me, and some of the insolvency practitioner organisations, to discuss this phenomenon, which allows unscrupulous directors to use the practice to have their companies struck off without meeting debt and other obligations.

**Paul Scully:** I think I missed the first part of the hon. Lady's intervention, but I will happily meet her, or one of my colleagues will. The Minister responsible for corporate governance matters is in the House of Lords, but I will ensure that whatever meeting takes place is the most appropriate one for the hon. Lady. We do want to secure the confidence in our corporate governance to which she has rightly referred.

The Queen's Speech contains a packed and ambitious legislative programme, including a comprehensive set of Bills which will enable us to deliver on priorities such as growing the economy, which will in turn help to address rising living costs and get people into good jobs. We remain committed to introducing legislation to deliver on these manifesto commitments as soon as parliamentary time allows. Today the Prime Minister has asked my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) to conduct a review on the future of work. The review will build on existing Government

[Paul Scully]

commitments, mentioned by Members today, to identify and assess the key questions to address on that subject are as we seek to grow the economy after the pandemic.

Let me take this opportunity to remind Members that we have produced a raft of secondary legislation in recent years. We brought into force a world first in introducing a legal right to two weeks' paid bereavement leave for parents who suffer the devastating loss of a child, irrespective of how long they have worked for their employer. Furthermore, at every stage of the pandemic our priority has been to protect jobs and livelihoods, and to provide a fair deal for the hard-working individuals of the United Kingdom. We continued to take action, swiftly and decisively, when it was needed during the pandemic.

I have spoken today about how reforms in the Queen's Speech, and additional Government actions, will continue to improve our business environment and increase the opportunities for those hard-working people of the UK to find jobs that suit them and their personal circumstances and treat them fairly. Let me also make it clear that those opportunities will be spread across the country, driving local growth and regeneration. We are giving powers back to local leaders by devolving powers to Mayors and local government. We are giving local communities more tools to bring about regeneration, including a planning system that places beauty, infrastructure, democracy, the environment and neighbourhoods at its heart. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill will enshrine in law the Government's commitment to the 12 levelling-up missions giving power and opportunity back to those communities, and we are pressing ahead with our plans for the implementation of the White Paper "Levelling Up the United Kingdom".

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister has talked about more powers, and it is clear that more areas will be given powers similar to those currently held by, for instance, the existing combined authorities. Can he specify what those powers will be, for the benefit of those mayoral combined authorities? Will he set them out very simply, so that we all know what additional powers the Mayors will have?

**Paul Scully:** I am sure that the answer to that question will develop as the debate proceeds. I am not going to go through all the various powers now. Suffice it to say that what we will all see is devolution that matches the expectations of people and communities, so that we can create opportunities for good governance and ensure that local leaders shape their areas and their economies. Ultimately, levelling up is about levelling up people and levelling up lives. That will inevitably be reflected in infrastructure and transport, but it will also be reflected in governance which ensures that those who know those people best and can work with them most effectively can respond at a local, bespoke level.

We are also introducing legislation to give social tenants a more powerful voice with their landlords, and we are legislating to improve the quality of housing for private renters and making renting fairer for tenants.

This is a Queen's Speech which will ensure that we can continue to build back a better Britain after the pandemic, boosting our growth and our recovery so that every part of our country can thrive.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):**

Before I call the deputy Leader of the Opposition, I must point out that this is a very well subscribed debate and that in order to get everybody in, I ask that Back-Bench speeches are no longer than 10 minutes each.

11.34 am

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is a pleasure to face the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for the first time, but from what he has said today, I have to ask: where is the employment Bill that was promised? Where is it? The Labour party has a long and proud history as the party of working people and for working people. It is simple: we believe that people deserve a high-quality, secure job and a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. Everyone deserves a job that they can build their life on and the security to be able to start a family, no matter who they are or what job they do.

More than that, I believe that working people should earn enough so that they can have cash spare at the end of the week to enjoy the fruits of their labour and balance work and life. Going out for dinner or taking their kids to the cinema should not be a luxury item for people who are working. What a miserable vision of our country it is when older people who ride buses to keep warm are told that they should be grateful for that privilege, when 2 million people in our country cannot afford to eat every day and when a further 250,000 UK households face destitution in 2023. That is the Conservative Government in action, and it shows how we on this side of the House differ. We are not all the same.

The Minister opened the debate today by talking about the importance of growth, yet today's GDP figures show no growth in February and a fall in GDP in March. Working people across the country have been betrayed by the Conservative Government. The employment Bill that was promised to follow the withdrawal agreement has never happened. They did not get it done.

In yet another Queen's Speech the Government offer jam tomorrow while millions of people in our country cannot afford either to eat or to heat. This week, families needed to see a proper proposal from the Government to put money back in their pockets. Parents getting a late-night text to tell them their working hours and tearing their hair out organising last-minute childcare to cover their shift, and social care workers working two jobs who cannot afford to take a break or get sick, needed to see fair pay agreements or a basic minimum wage that is enough to live on. The bus driver who worked all through the pandemic but was fired and rehired on less money and longer hours needs to see the outlawing of this obscene practice. They need real help, right now. Instead, they get warm words and wishful thinking.

Time and again—in fact 20 times—Ministers promised an employment Bill that would protect workers and put an end to warehouses run like Victorian workhouses. They then promised they would make it illegal for bosses to sack long-standing staff members and then rehire them on worse pay and hours, to avoid a repeat of the P&O scandal. They promised that enhanced rights and protections were just around the corner. Well—mañana, mañana, mañana. Twenty times, Ministers have stood

at the Dispatch Box and said that we should await the employment Bill, and await it we did. Where is it? Three years now and we are still waiting.

Now we can see that the Government were never going to come good on that pledge. The promise to introduce a single enforcement body and take action on tips and sick pay—gone. The promise to consult on making flexible working the default without good reason not to—ditched. The promise to introduce extended leave for neonatal care—dropped. The promise to make it easier for fathers to take paternity leave—disappeared.

The promise to extend the entitlement to leave for unpaid carers to a week—abandoned. The promise to create a preventive duty against sexual harassment—missing. The promise to extend redundancy protection for pregnant women—nowhere to be seen. And the promise to end the cruel practice of fire and rehire—up in smoke. The truth is that this Government are presiding over a bonfire of workers' rights and breaking their promises left, right and centre. They pledged to enhance rights and protections at work, but yet again they have failed to deliver.

If the Conservatives were serious about spreading opportunity, prosperity and power across the country, they would start by introducing plans to pay people a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, but this Government have yet again failed to make the choices required to stand up for working people, because they are not on working people's side. While prices continue to skyrocket, we see no plans—no plans—to tackle the cost of living crisis. The Prime Minister said that more help is on its way, and then his own spokespeople and his absent neighbour at No. 11 furiously denied it, while Ministers took to the airwaves to put on silly voices and mock those who are struggling. This is not a serious Government.

The Government continue to try to pull the wool over our eyes, telling us that skyrocketing prices are just a global problem, that offering people help is somehow silly, that nothing can be done. But here is the problem: as bills soar across Britain, the Prime Minister is enforcing a tax-hiking Budget. He is the only G7 leader to do so. The Prime Minister and his Chancellor chose—they chose—to hike taxes on working people at the worst possible time, and they chose not to introduce a windfall tax on energy companies to help people with their energy bills. We need an emergency Budget now to sort out this mess and to tackle the cost of living crisis.

I constantly get mail from constituents who are struggling to make a pay cheque last until the end of the month. They all deserve better, a decent wage that is enough to raise a family on and to afford bread and, yes, some roses, too. Better pay would end the self-defeating low wage, low investment and low productivity cycle in which the country has been trapped for the past decade. Boosting people's income is not just the right thing to do for them; it is the right thing to do for our economy.

The fact is that, right now, people do not have the money to spend in our shops, businesses and local economies, so high streets are suffering. Places that were once a source of great pride are now a source of great sadness, as independent businesses are replaced with plywood shutters.

Britain's insecure work epidemic is not just punishing workers and communities; it is starving the public finances, too. New research from the TUC this week shows that

insecure, low-paid work costs the Treasury £10 billion a year in lost tax revenue and increased social security payments, which means less funding for our cash-strapped hospitals, care homes and schools. That is a choice—it is the Government's choice—and, under this Government, the people who worked to rebuild this country have been forgotten. In towns up and down the country, people are working harder and paying more but getting less every year.

In places like Stockport, where I grew up, families are suffering. While travelling across the country during the local election campaign, I saw at first hand how the Conservatives have frozen wages, overseen widespread inequality and increased poverty. From Bury to Bletchley, and from Barnet to Burnley, the people and places that once proudly powered Britain, that contributed to our economy, are being rewarded with low wages and insecure work. They are underpaid, underappreciated and undervalued. It is high time that the key workers who got us through this pandemic, and all other working people, were given the dignity and security at work that they deserve, but under the Conservatives, work does not mean security any more, and it does not mean fairness, either. That is why we have proposed a new deal for working people. Within the first 100 days of a Labour Government, we would legislate to introduce fair pay agreements, which would bring together workers and employers to agree terms in each sector, starting in social care.

We are ambitious for our country, and our ambitions do not stop there. Labour will strengthen the protections afforded to all workers by ending qualifying periods for basic rights, which leave working people waiting up to two years for their basic protections. Labour will end this arbitrary system, and will scrap qualifying time for basic rights such as those on unfair dismissal, sick pay and paternity pay. With a Labour Government, working people will have rights at work from day one, but this not just about workers; so many businesses play by the rules and try to do the right thing but are undercut by the offshore and the unscrupulous. Many of them are the small and medium-sized businesses that are the backbone of our local and regional economies, and they deserve better, too. We would scrap business rates to help our high streets flourish. Just today, Deliveroo and GMB union have reached a groundbreaking agreement, which shows how innovation and a voice at work can go hand in hand. It is good that there are successful businesses that understand the value of trade unions in a modern economy.

This Government could also learn a lesson or two about the role of women in our economy. Having been a single parent, I know only too well the challenges of trying to balance work with being a good mum—of running from work to the school gates, and of missing out on parents evening. Rather than stacking the odds against working parents, Labour would deliver stronger family-friendly rights. Labour will ensure that all workers have the right to flexible working as a default from day one. During the pandemic, so many workers have shown how flexible they can be, and we should build on that flexibility. We are committed to extending statutory maternity and paternity leave, introducing the right to bereavement leave, and strengthening protections for pregnant women by making it, as a default, unlawful to dismiss them within six months of their return to work. Labour will set stronger family-friendly rights in stone.

[Angela Rayner]

We will also put mental health on a par with physical health in our workplaces. This week is Mental Health Awareness Week, and Ministers would do well to remember it. Labour will also act to close gender, disability and ethnicity pay gaps. This Government's programme is completely lacking in any plans to tackle the inequalities facing black, Asian and minority ethnic people, which were so visibly exposed by the covid-19 pandemic. Yet again, the Government have reneged on their promise to introduce ethnicity pay gap reporting, ignoring calls from both the CBI and the TUC.

**Andy McDonald:** My right hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does she share my admiration for Baroness McGregor-Smith, and the work that she did to persuade many companies to embrace pay gap reporting, though that was thwarted by those on the Government Benches? Is it not a sad indictment of the Government that business, the TUC and everybody else are way ahead of them on this issue?

**Angela Rayner:** I thank my hon. Friend, not only for his work on Labour's plan for employment, but for the crucial point he makes. This Government's pattern of behaviour is to not work with or listen to anybody at the moment. It is all about rhetoric, rather than working collaboratively to make things better for the people of this country. It seems that nobody is immune to that these days, whereas once it was just a select few who the Government felt were partisan in their views. The ideas of quite a lot of people are now frozen out, and it seems the Government are not willing to listen.

Our country is riven with inequalities, which we on the Opposition Benches are focused on fixing in order to ensure that the working people who create our nation's wealth get their fair share of it. Meanwhile, the Government propose a Procurement Bill that looks increasingly unworthy of the name. We need a Bill that allows us to use Government contracts to support British businesses, so that we can make, buy and sell more in Britain. As we recover from the pandemic, we have a chance to seize new opportunities to shape a new future for Britain—opportunities to give people new skills and jobs here in the UK, to invest in local businesses, and to help our high streets to thrive again.

A Labour Government would ask every public body to give more contracts to British businesses, using social, environmental and labour clauses in contract design. We would work with colleges and universities to make sure that we hone the skills and apprenticeships that we need for the jobs of the future. The Tories have cynically abused procurement rules and handed out millions of pounds of public money to their mates; Labour will use public procurement to support good work and good British businesses. From good green jobs in tidal power and offshore wind, to fintech, media and film, we must grow modern industries to build a long-term economy that provides good jobs and is fit for the future.

**Mr Sheerman:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that closing down Channel 4 in Leeds by selling it off will be a mortal blow to the creative industries in the north of England?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree. The frustration is that people in the north and in the midlands—areas like the one I represent—have been told that there will be “Levelling up, levelling up, levelling up,” yet at the first sign of any sort of sprig of help for our economy, they trash it by taking away the support that is there and doing something that really does not add up to levelling up and supporting our great industries in the north and in the midlands.

**Chris Stephens:** My Unison comrade makes an excellent point. Does it not also apply to the Government's ludicrous decision to close Department for Work and Pensions offices, and now to close Insolvency Service offices throughout the UK?

**Angela Rayner:** I thank my Unison colleague and friend, who I have known for many years, and who has fought for working people and great public services for many years. Yes, I absolutely agree with him: it does not make sense. The theme I have highlighted throughout my speech is that the Government say one thing, but it is always jam tomorrow, and their actions are completely divorced from what is happening on the ground.

The Conservatives have had 12 long years to make the changes that our country desperately needs to secure our future, but they have failed. All the while, we have seen the watering down of workers' rights, and rogue bosses such as those at P&O taking advantage of our lax rules while Ministers stand idly by. Instead of an employment model that delivers for working people, the Conservatives have ushered in a race to the bottom on the backs of working people. Outsourcing, zero-hours contracts and agency work have driven down pay, standards and conditions for everyone across our whole economy.

Labour's approach is to offer people real help right now, and a vision for the future of work in which working people enjoy dignity and are treated with respect. This is what is missing from the Government's programme: real help right now, when people need it—a vision for a better Britain, with a more secure future. Work should provide not just a proper wage that people can raise a family on but dignity, fairness and flexibility. Labour will make Britain work for working people. This Conservative Government have not got a plan—they have not got a clue. Ministers claim they are getting on with the job, but they are failing Britain's workers and their communities today.

11.55 am

**Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): It is always a pleasure to speak in this House, but it is a particular pleasure for me today, as it is 30 years to the day since I stood on almost the same spot to give my maiden speech in the House of Commons. It is a pleasure, too, to speak in a debate about the communities up and down our country.

Nothing undermines the stability of our economy, community and families more than inflation. It inevitably hits the poorest in society hardest, and it is therefore a moral as well as an economic hazard. As Milton Friedman said, inflation is taxation without legislation, except that no one wins, including the Treasury.

As a result of the covid-19 pandemic, the global economy suffered a negative supply shock, with an initial fall in output followed by an increase in prices. That has affected a wide range of global commodities,

but nowhere has the effect been felt more than in the energy sector. The complication here is that the current surge in prices is the result not of a single shock of the pandemic, but of a number of supply and demand factors that have affected the market in recent times. Members who are interested in a detailed analysis of this subject should read the report by Carlos Fernandez Alvarez and Gergely Molnar, written and published by the International Energy Agency, because it answers the question that many of our constituents are asking us: why has energy suddenly become so expensive?

At the beginning of the pandemic, fossil fuel prices fell to their lowest in decades. That was followed by a strong rebound as the global economy recovered, and it was exacerbated by a cold winter in the northern hemisphere and lower than average wind generation in Europe. However, the main driver of price increases has come on the supply rather than the demand side. The commodity price collapses of 2014-15 and then 2020 resulted in diminished investments in oil and gas, which increased the vulnerability of the sector. Governments across the world have failed to sufficiently scale up clean energy sources, renewables and technologies to fill the inevitable gap.

Those problems were exacerbated by the recent lockdowns, which pushed essential maintenance work from 2020 into 2021. That led to restrictions on supply just as demand was quickly recovering. That was particularly true in the UK and the Norwegian sectors of the North sea. Similar problems affected the gas industry. The global economy has seen an unavoidable inflationary shock, but—and there is a big but—we can be sure that this is not the whole story when it comes to the price rises that British people face today, not only in energy but across a range of commodities. How can we be so sure? If we look across the global economy at the variability of inflation rates, we see a very large difference. In Japan, which imports all its fossil fuels, the latest inflation figure shows a rise to 1.2%. China is 1.5%. While inflation in the eurozone has surged to 7.5%, Switzerland, a European but non-eurozone country, has inflation of 2.5%. In the UK, we are above 7%, and the US is 8.5% and rising, so something other than energy prices has been behind our inflationary phenomenon.

In fact, we have two different inflationary surges—that of global commodity prices, as I mentioned, which affects everyone, and that of monetary inflation, which afflicts those countries where central banks have allowed persistent increases in the amount of money in circulation relative to existing output. The group-think mentality of central bankers in the United States, the eurozone and the UK has reinforced the idea that they have stumbled on some kind of monetary alchemy that makes it is possible to continually expand the money supply, unrelated to output, without creating inflation. Perhaps that is an uncharitable view, and they knew all along that they would create inflation but were simply responding to their political masters. However, that raises questions about the independence of the central bank in the first place. Either way, it is a wholly unacceptable position.

It is almost universally accepted that the first duty of Government is the protection of its citizens. As a former Defence Secretary, I am only too aware of the many external threats to the safety of our people and our country, but there are other threats that I believe we

have a right to be protected from: the debasement of our currency, the erosion of our earnings and the devaluation of our savings. I believe it is fundamentally wrong for Governments to engage in structural profligacy, spending excessively across the economic cycle and passing ever-larger amounts of debt on to the next generation.

I also believe it is the duty of central banks to safeguard the value of our money and our savings. The Bank of England persisted beyond any rational interpretation of the data to tell us that inflation was transient, then that it would peak at 5%. It has consistently underestimated the threat.

There are three things I would like to see. First, the Treasury Committee should launch an investigation into why the Bank of England so comprehensively underestimated the inflationary threat; secondly, the monetary policy report should go back to being the inflation report and thirdly, the Government should think about what guidance might be given to the Bank of England on considering and reporting monetary stability.

I will say a word about the Government's forthcoming Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. We all understand the need for housing targets. We must have social mobility, ensuring that the next generation can participate in the benefits of home ownership. We need more affordable homes to allow young people to continue to live in the communities in which they grew up. However, targets for housing must be just that—targets for local authorities, not instructions to local authorities. I am delighted that the Government seem to have changed the direction of travel to move in a much more rational direction than previously.

We must also accept in planning that local authorities have competing priorities. To give one example, in my North Somerset constituency we accept that we need to have more housing and that the Government will set targets, but at the same time the Government say, understandably and correctly, “Don't build on the green belt”, and, “Don't build on floodplains.” That limits the space to build further housing. I would like to hear the Government make very clear that, where local plans are being constructed and conflicting priorities are being applied to them by Government, it is the local authority that will get the benefit of the doubt when it comes to the Planning Inspectorate.

That brings me to the issue of the green belt itself. According to the Government's national planning policy framework, the green belt serves five purposes:

“to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.”

**Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab):** In order to secure that supply of land for building houses that the right hon. Gentleman spoke of, does he agree that it would make sense to reform the Land Compensation Act 1961 so that local authorities can purchase land closer to its existing value, rather than its hoped value?

**Dr Fox:** That is certainly something that we should look at. The passage and the Committee stage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill are opportunities

[Dr Fox]

for Parliament to genuinely reform our planning laws to make them sensible for a 21st-century country. We must ensure that in that Bill, not only is our green belt protected, but the Government increase those protections. Once our green belt is gone, it is gone forever. I believe it is our duty to steward the green spaces in our land for future generations.

**Siobhain McDonagh:** Is the right hon. Member aware that there are large tracts of green belt close to outer London train stations that are not green and are not accessible and that, if developed, could lead to 1 million more homes precisely in the areas where people need them?

**Dr Fox:** We should be having far more housing built in our urban areas. One of the great hopes I have for this Bill is that we will see housing built closer to where people can go to work so that there is not so much pressure on the transport infrastructure. It has been our tendency in recent times to build commuter belts where people therefore have to travel into our cities. Getting mixed development in our cities, thereby regenerating them, would take a lot of pressure off the transport system.

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Dr Fox:** I do not have time—I apologise to my hon. Friend.

We need reform of land banking. The system that we have at the present time, where big developers buy land, get permission for 200 houses, build 40 and wait for the price to rise before they build the rest, results in planning blight. It results in big land banks for the developers. It means that people who live in our communities do not know what is going to happen. There are a number of solutions. My preferred one would be that if developers have not built out the permissions they have, they should not be allowed to apply for further planning permissions in the same local authority area. We absolutely have to deal with this problem, because it blights communities up and down the UK.

The levelling-up agenda is about extending opportunity to people in all parts of the United Kingdom. In regenerating our great northern cities, we have an opportunity to take pressure off the overcrowded south where housing and transport demand is too high. We need better employment opportunities spread across the country in what I would call a rebalancing of Britain. We have a great chance to have a win-win for all parts of the United Kingdom. However, unless we are able to tame inflation, none of our ambitions will be realised.

12.6 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): In giving some thought to what I might say today, I thought that the best way I could say, “Where is the employment Bill in this Queen’s Speech?”, would be to quote the Scottish TUC, which absolutely got it right:

“20 times the Tory UK Government promised to bring forward an employment bill. Absolute silence in today’s State Opening of Parliament. True to form, Tories have shafted workers and armed bad bosses. Devolve it already.”

I could not say it better than that. The Minister has given us all sorts of promises about an employment Bill, as he has been doing all year, like many other Ministers. We cannot believe anything that he says in relation to the employment Bill, because it has not been forthcoming. He promises and promises and clearly cannot convince the UK Government to actually deliver—if he even believes it should come through at all. There are so many reasons why we need an employment Bill—why it is absolutely vital and more so today even than it was when it was in the Conservative manifesto back in 2019 or when the Taylor review was published more than five years ago. It is desperately needed because of the cost of living crisis that we are seeing and the absolute pain that our constituents are going through. The Conservatives might want to try to rebrand it as a cost of living crunch, but it is an absolute crisis that people are struggling with every single day.

The first thing that we would like to see in the employment Bill is a proper living wage and the removal of the age discrimination within it. The living wage is not actually enough money for people to live on. The UK Government have continued to call it a living wage, but it is a minimum wage rebranded as a pretend living wage, because people cannot afford to live on it. We can see that from the fact that the Child Poverty Action Group has said that 72% of families with children where at least one parent works are struggling to afford food. If this Government were committed to making work pay, those people would not be going to food banks. They would not be in poverty while working. They would not have to have so many jobs, including zero-hours contracts. Because they have so many jobs that are so low-paid, they do not meet the thresholds for things like auto-enrolment or statutory sick pay. They do not get any of the benefits that people should get with work because the work is not paying. We see the level of stress, pain and mental health suffering that this is causing people. If the UK Government decide that they want to put employers first, ahead of employees, then surely they should recognise that employees having no money and living with that level of stress makes them worse employees. If that is the key thing for the UK Government, they should be trying their best to improve lives for employees by making sure that work actually pays.

We would like to see flexible working requests available from day one. The UK Government have promised to look at that. Some 29 months ago, they said they would look at neonatal leave and pay. Where is it? They said they would look at making flexible working the default 29 months ago. After 29 months, nothing has happened. There is nothing in the Queen’s Speech about that. They said 43 months ago that they would like tips to go to workers in full. Where is the legislation? They said 54 months ago that they would evaluate shared parental leave. We have been waiting 54 months for UK Government action on that, and they have failed and failed again, and they failed this week in the Queen’s Speech.

The Government have said that they want to look at redundancy protections for women. That was mentioned by the deputy leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), who made a very good speech that I agreed with the vast majority of. We need to see new mums being given that protection. Having been made redundant when I was



pregnant, I know how painful and difficult that situation is. We need to see those protections in place for new mums.

The reality is that the lack of action by this Government has enshrined inequalities and means that the gender pay gap and the gender pension gap will continue to grow, because women are more likely to be on low pay and low hours, working a number of different jobs and not being put into auto-enrolment. The UK Government are making things worse for this generation of workers and future generations of pensioners, as well as for current generations of pensioners.

We saw some action in the Queen's Speech on fire and rehire specifically for seafarers—it is not actually in relation to fire and rehire, but the P&O issues that there have been. Although I welcome the Bill, and I am glad that action is being taken on low pay for seafarers, it is not for all seafarers; it is for ferry seafarers. It covers only people who work on ferries, and it is not any broader than that. Representing a port in my constituency, I am keen to hear the Government explain how they will indemnify ports having to take action against large boats and large companies. How will the Government ensure that those ports are not put at risk by the action they should be taking? I agree that action should be taken, but I do not want this to land in the lap of the ports and for them to be left holding all the responsibility. The UK Government should be taking action to press for changes in maritime law to ensure that everybody who is in a boat or ship within our seas is being paid a living wage, not just those on UK-flagged boats.

We are five years on from the Taylor review. Why did the Government bother doing the Taylor review? What was the point in all the money, time and hard work that went into it? Nothing has happened and nothing has come of it. Nothing has changed for people working in the gig economy or for people working in companies where they are pretending to be self-employed. Those changes have not been made. People are still living with the level of uncertainty that the deputy leader of the Labour party mentioned, getting texts the night before saying, "Your shift is being cancelled", or suddenly being given an extra shift that they somehow have to find childcare to cover. They are still living without the benefits of having a pension, sick pay and all those things that workers should have to be able to live lives and not just live to work. We all should be aspiring for our constituents to be able to live, to enjoy living and to have fair work that they can go to.

I want to mention the Brexit freedoms Bill, which has a hilarious name. It is about taking back control—which is ironic—to the UK Government. It is about taking back control away from Parliament and taking back control from having things in primary legislation and moving it to secondary legislation, ensuring that the UK Government can do what they want to remove the protections put in place by EU law. The only reason why we have the level of workers' rights that we have, and the only reason why we have been saved from the Tories' untrammelled reductions in workers' rights, is EU law. The Brexit freedoms Bill will undo that. It will allow them the absolute power to do what they like with our workers' rights and to ensure that employers are put first rather than employees at every possible opportunity. The Government must absolutely commit not to roll back workers' rights—not that it will mean anything if

they do say it, but it would be useful for us to be able to repeat it back to them—and to increase the protections in place for workers. The promises that they have made need to come through.

We have been asking for years for employment law to be devolved. I would love for the Labour party to back us in that call. If it did not back us on this, it would feel a bit like it was willing just to let us sink with the rest of Britain. It would be very nice for the Scottish Parliament to have control of this area, because we could make a positive difference to workers in Scotland, even though we have a Tory Government and even though the Labour party is letting down workers in Scotland by failing to call for employment law to be devolved. We have made these cases on behalf of our constituents and the people of Scotland: we want employment law to be devolved.

The longer that this Tory Government continue to refuse to devolve employment law; the longer they continue dismantling the protections in place for workers; the longer they keep coming on television saying things like, "People are using food banks because they can't budget", or, "People should just work a few more hours and that will be great; that will reduce the need for them to have the £20 universal credit uplift"; the longer they continue to refuse to increase benefits by anything close to inflation—the Scottish Government have increased benefits by almost double what the UK Government have increased them by this year, and the Scottish Government have a child poverty action plan in place—the stronger the case they are making for independence. They are making that case stronger for the Scottish people, who can see the two Governments working on their behalf. They can see the Scottish Government enshrining fair work and principles in every single thing we do and putting the wellbeing of the population first in every single thing we do, and they can see the Tories doing everything they can to dismantle those protections, to reduce social security in real terms and to ensure that people do not have enough money to live on, and they can see them to step up to solve the energy crisis. The case for independence is getting ever stronger, and the Conservatives' continued failure is bringing the reality of independence much closer every single day.

12.17 pm

**Mrs Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): This Queen's Speech is all about driving growth in our economy. Although the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) may have disagreed with that in her speech, that is what is best for working people throughout the United Kingdom, because a strong economy will give us secure jobs, good wages and the most overall certainty for the future. I suggest to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman), who spoke for the Scottish National party, that when it comes to wellbeing, certainty is incredibly important as well, and having a strong economy, as the Government are focused on, is at the heart of that.

For too long, the economic powerhouse of the UK has been focused on an extremely small part of our country: the south-east of England and London. The Government's levelling-up mission directly addresses that problem. Today, we have seen the announcement of faster recovery in the UK compared with the US, Germany and Italy, but we have to make sure that that recovery spreads beyond a very small part of our geography,

[Mrs Maria Miller]

because the cost of living rises that have been referred to in many speeches today affect everyone. The Government need to make sure that when it comes to solutions, they reach everybody.

I suggest that the Government need to pay great heed to the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), because he is right that one lever they can pull in their response to the challenges that we face is to make changes around inflation. It is very much within the Government's gift to make those changes to bring inflation more under control. When we look at the different levels of inflation in countries around Europe, we can see how the fiscal responses that Governments make have driven those changes inherently.

The cost of living problems that we are struggling with need to come first and foremost in the eyes of every Minister, regardless of Department. The flagship Bill of the Queen's Speech, the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, is fundamental to Conservative values. It is all about giving everyone the opportunity to succeed, regardless of where they live or the geography they are in. Spreading the prosperity of our country more evenly is crucial to our future.

That is not a new challenge. I gently say to the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), that regional policy has a chequered history in this country and we need to ensure that, as the Bill sets out, we have regular monitoring of the effectiveness of levelling up. My constituency of Basingstoke has been named as one of the top 10 most levelled-up boroughs in the country, which is because we have excellent local government in our borough and county councils and we have had significant investment in our local infrastructure. More than £80 million has been invested in our roads, our school places have been expanded and we have high levels of employment.

I want more places in our country to be like my constituency, and I hope the Bill will help that to happen. That comes not just from a positive sense of wanting to support other constituencies around the country, but from self-interest, because we cannot continue to overly focus the growth of our country on such a small geography. Basingstoke built four times as many houses in the last 40 years than other communities across our country, and that cannot continue. We are being asked to build another almost 20,000 houses in our next local plan, because the algorithms punish people who have been successful in building new homes, which cannot be right.

We need to shift growth. If the Government are really going to achieve levelling up, they cannot allow the south-east to continue to be a hothouse of house building. They must make a change, and they need to direct planning inspectors to look more closely at the challenges that over-developed areas such as mine face so that we can deal with issues such as community cohesion, which we simply do not have time to tackle when we are building so many houses. The Government must appreciate that levelling up is far more than geography. It is fundamental to Conservative values that we give everyone the opportunity to succeed, regardless of where they are born, their parents, their gender or their disability.

I gently point out to the Minister that conversations around the employment Bill cannot be dismissed. There are a number of issues that the Government, through their own research, understand to have been areas of important labour market failure in this country, such as maternity discrimination; the misuse of non-disclosure agreements; the importance of flexible working in increasing our productivity; and unpaid carer's leave, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) has spoken about and is central to our adult social care policies, and parental leave. All those things need to be addressed, and the Government must set out how they will be dealt with in the absence of an employment Bill.

This debate is also about stronger communities. One way to strengthen our communities is by strengthening our education system. I am delighted that there is a Schools Bill in the Queen's Speech. I welcome the focus on raising standards and on specific things such as home-school children being on a register so that we know that every child in this country is being cared for correctly.

I also suggest that the Government look again at the way in which relationship and sex education is being rolled out. It became everybody's concern when, a year or so ago, Everyone's Invited was a front-page news item; we were all concerned about the culture of sexual abuse among school-age children. I found it curious that the Government asked Ofsted, which is responsible for the roll-out of relationship and sex education in our schools, to investigate that problem, because it should have been monitoring that roll-out, which, according to many, has been much slower and less successful than it should have been. Despite the provision of such education having been law for three years, just one in three young people in our country have learned about how to tell whether a relationship is healthy, including online, and just one in three have learned about the harm of pornography. The Minister needs to consider how we review Ofsted's effectiveness in monitoring the roll-out and whether others should be involved in that, given the current failures in that direction.

I am delighted to see a draft victims Bill in the Queen's Speech. I particularly hope that recognition will be given to the way that the Online Safety Bill will increase the number of victims in the justice system or just outside it. Given that seismic increase, we need to look for ways to ensure that there is funding, perhaps on a "polluter pays" principle from social media companies, to pay for the additional support that is needed.

I welcome the modern slavery Bill, which addresses a weakness in the current system and proposes to increase the accountability of companies and organisations driving modern slavery out of supply chains. That was a key recommendation of the report that the Government commissioned from me, Lord Frank Field and Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss when we reviewed the Modern Slavery Act 2015 three years ago.

In conclusion, I very much welcome the Queen's Speech and the Government's focus on levelling up, but we must ensure that we do not limit our ambitions and that we focus on levelling up around the geography of the United Kingdom. We will level up Britain and Northern Ireland if we treat everyone fairly and give everyone the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their gender, their disability, their parentage or whether they

are parents or single people. I welcome the measures in the Queen's Speech but the Government need to carefully consider how they can deliver on the important changes in the workplace that the Minister and I have spoken about for many months.

12.26 pm

**Mr Clive Betts** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I obviously want to contribute on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which was mentioned in the Queen's Speech and has now been introduced, and the measures on social housing, which the Select Committee have been dealing with in recent months. First, however, as a constituency MP, I ask: where are the measures in the Queen's Speech to address the cost of living crisis that is affecting all our constituents?

When we talk about levelling up, we should recognise that those in the greatest poverty, who were struggling before energy bills rose, are struggling even more now. Frankly, they look at the eye-watering profits that have been announced in recent days by BP and Shell and wonder why we are not taxing those super-profits to help to cushion the effect of rising prices on their bills and households. The Government have not given an adequate answer to that.

To return to levelling-up issues, I have two major concerns. First, where is the money? That has been a challenge right the way through. If the Government are about levelling up, they are about levelling up Government spending across the piece. Pots of money—levelling up pots, high street pots and town pots—will not make any real difference by themselves, particularly in the context of the massive cuts to local government funding that the poorest areas that need levelling up have seen in the last 10 years.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities sort of got that message; the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O'Brien), got it when he came to the Select Committee; and Andy Haldane got it even more—he basically said that we should not have those individual pots of money. We need proper resources and proper budgets to be given to our Mayors, combined authorities and local authorities to spend according to the needs of their area.

I ask the Minister for Levelling Up Communities, the hon. Member for Saffron Walden (Kemi Badenoch), what levelling up really means in financial terms. Does it mean that the Chancellor has an extra sum of money to announce which will be spent in our poorer areas to bring them up to the level of the richer parts of the country?

One particular example is the buses in South Yorkshire. I see my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) in his place, who, until recently, was the Mayor of South Yorkshire, previously the Sheffield city region. I thank him for the excellent work he has done on behalf of the region, and my constituents in particular, over the last four years. He knows that the amount of money spent on bus services in London is about 10 times per head more than it is in South Yorkshire. We have the powers to run our bus service in the same way, but not the money.

I say to the Minister that this is about either an extra sum of money that the Chancellor will have to find or diverting money from the richer areas to the poorer

parts of the country. It has to be one or the other. How can we level up and get equality of funding unless we either find additional funding to bring the poorer areas up or transfer money from the richer areas to the poorer areas? It has to be one or the other. What are the Government going to do? Currently, they are really doing neither.

Secondly, I ask: where are the powers? Earlier, I asked the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), what additional powers are in the Bill to level up and give more authority to combined authorities, Mayors and individual local authorities. He could not answer the question because actually there is no answer. I cannot claim to have read every single one of the 196 clauses in the Bill and the 17 schedules to it, but I cannot find any mention of extra powers. I have found mention of other areas that currently do not have combined authorities, particularly county areas, getting them in the future, which is welcome, but I cannot actually find any additional powers.

The Select Committee has been much more radical. We have said that we should look at this the other way around: should not all decisions be made at local level unless there is a good reason for making them at national level? When the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Harborough, came to the Select Committee, he said that that was a bit radical. Well, it is, but I actually think we need a radical solution to deal with the fact that we are one of the most overcentralised countries in western Europe. That is the reality. There really is not any fundamental change here to alter that, and I am sure we will come back to and press that as a Select Committee.

There was going to be a major planning reform a few months ago, was there not? The previous Secretary of State announced it: the Government were going to tear up the planning rules and start again. It has now come down to a few clauses in the Bill. I am not dismissing that, because I think there are actually some quite good proposals in there. *[Interruption.]* Well, they are quite good because I think the Government have come round to the view the Select Committee took, which is why they are probably quite helpful. First, we have got rid of the three zones. It was never going to be possible to rewrite every local plan in 30 months, and we have got away from that situation.

We have, I think, moved to a situation where we are going to have simpler processes for local plans, and I think that is welcome, although we have to look at the detail of how they will be worked through. They will be digitised, and that is helpful. In clauses 50 and 60, I think, we have got to a point where, in individual planning applications, the local plan is going to be given greater weight, and I think that is helpful as well. There will be a degree of certainty for communities and for developers—both are important.

We have to get more of the public engaged in the local plan process so that it actually means something, because currently people tend to get engaged once a planning application comes in for a site near them. We have to change that, and get the community to look at where houses should be built and where other developments should take place in the area as a whole through the local plan. That does mean helping authorities, which are being stripped of resources in their planning

[Mr Clive Betts]

departments, to undertake more work in getting all local plans up to date and in place in the next couple of years. I am generally not in favour of ringfenced grants, but I think there is a case for having a one-off grant to planning authorities to enable them to do a real job of getting local plans up to date and getting their community engaged in them to take some of the heat and some of the contention out of the planning process.

There are a couple of issues of slight disappointment. One, which the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) mentioned, is the issue of build out. Why are the Government not taking measures in this Bill against those who get planning permissions—there are hundreds of thousands of them around the country—and then do not build the houses they have permission for? Why are we not penalising them for that? Ministers have argued the case for that in the past, but there is nothing in the Bill to do it. Why not? We had the Letwin report, which recommended something like this, years ago, and it still has not been done.

When we began talking about planning reforms with the previous Secretary of State, the whole idea was to build more homes. It was said that the planning system was holding everything up. I think build out is a key issue there that the Government have not addressed, but where has the target for 300,000 homes a year by the end of this Parliament gone? That was the Government's target. Would the Minister for Levelling Up Communities like to say whether it is still the Government's target to build 300,000 homes a year by the end of this Parliament? That seems to have fallen off the agenda, and that is really disappointing because we do have a housing crisis in this country.

To again be complimentary to the Government, I think they have listened when it comes to the whole problem of compulsory purchase. Local authorities have been complaining about the very difficult process they have to go through, and if we are going to see real regeneration and redevelopment of our city centres, as the demand for retail floorspace drops, we are going to need easier compulsory purchase powers. I think they are in the Bill. I do not know all the details, but at least the Government seem to have listened and to have taken that seriously, which is to be welcomed.

On social housing, I welcome the improvements to regulation that are going to come. We have not seen all the clauses, and the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), is coming to the Select Committee on Monday to talk further about that. The Select Committee has seen and heard of some appalling examples of the really awful conditions that some social housing tenants are living in. The housing ombudsman has done some excellent work on mould and dampness in homes, and every local authority should be taking that into account.

I would say that, yes, in the past—and the Grenfell inquiry has highlighted this—there has been an attitude that social housing tenants are somehow second-class tenants in second-class housing, and we have to do everything we can to improve the standard of housing. There was also the idea that people did not really want to be social housing tenants, did they, so we would not build any more council houses and housing association

properties. I am pleased that the Secretary of State said the other day that he wanted to see more social housing built, but again, where is the money? Where is the money? The Government are going to have to put in more grant to get the social housing built. If we are going to build the 300,000 homes we have talked about, at least 90,000 of those—probably more—are going to have to be social housing, and we are nowhere near that. I just say in passing that I hope the changes to the infrastructure levy in the Bill do not mean a reduction in the number of social houses built by developers, with the ending of section 106 agreements. That is another challenge.

Finally, on private renting, I welcome the Government's commitment. Okay, we can be disappointed that we have not actually got a commitment to produce legislation, and I would have hoped for at least a draft Bill, but this issue is complicated and we must get it right. In particular, we must get right that landlords cannot use rent increases as a way of forcing out tenants when they do not have section 21 powers to rely on. One thing the Select Committee has pressed for, which the Government have not committed to, is the idea of a housing court. A housing court would simplify procedure to help both the good landlords and the good tenants—the good tenants being harassed by bad landlords, and the good landlords whose bad tenants will not pay the rent—to have a simplified way to get redress. I hope the Government might look at that again.

Overall, there are real problems with the cost of living that simply are not dealt with by the Government. On levelling up and regeneration, I would just ask: where are the powers and where is the money? Yes, there are some good details that we want to work through with the Government—on planning, compulsory purchase orders and social housing regulation—but there are still many challenges not addressed in the Queen's Speech that we will need to come back to.

12.37 pm

**Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). I agree with him about one thing, which is that the Government need to show a lot more conviction in expressing their opposition to windfall taxes. They are a simplistic solution that always end up hurting hardest the ordinary people who work in this population. I am against windfall taxes, and if I have time I will say a little bit more about that later.

Who would dare to criticise the content of the Gracious Speech delivered in Her Majesty's platinum jubilee year? I am certainly not going to criticise it, but I would like to begin by drawing attention to some omissions from it. I referred to one of them in an article carried in today's "ConservativeHome", headed "Harm from Covid vaccinations. Don't leave victims behind." That is a reference to the need for changes to be made to the vaccine damage payment scheme. Currently, the maximum payment under that scheme is £120,000, which has not been increased since 2007. By way of comparison, as my hon. Friend the Minister on the Front Bench will know, industrial injuries disablement benefit has in the same period gone up by 39%. When I discussed this with my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), the Minister for vaccines and public health, she indicated that she took the point and understood

that something needed to be done. I hope that in responding, the Minister will be able to say what is going to be done and why the Government believe it is fair that this level of £120,000 should continue to remain unchanged since 2007.

The newly formed vaccine injured bereaved UK organisation, vib.uk, which has been established in the last few days is also calling for much wider changes to the vaccine damage payment scheme. I think they are absolutely correct and in the article to which I have referred I explain why I support its suggestions for fundamental reform of the scheme to make it more flexible and relevant to the plight of those who have suffered as a result of doing the right thing by getting vaccinated.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Unfortunately, I missed the article this morning but I will be sure to read it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the biggest issues with this scheme is the length of time it takes for decisions to be made? People are waiting a significant length of time even to get an initial contact with the vaccine damage payment scheme. Does he agree that that is one of the key things that needs to be fixed?

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Absolutely, and I have been campaigning for changes since I first raised this issue in the House last September. In the article I refer to the fact that at the meeting I had with the vaccines Minister on 21 April she told me that, at last, an organisation has been appointed to carry out the administrative job of assessing the claims. There are now over 1,300 claims and the first assessments have not even begun, but I am told they will now begin on 16 May. The new organisation that has got the contract is committed to dealing with 1,800 such assessments each year, which is an indication of the extent of this problem. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) rightly says, it is appalling that we have had to wait for so long, and only last autumn the Prime Minister was assuring a correspondent that people who have suffered vaccine damage should not be ignored and left to suffer in silence. So I very much agree with the hon. Lady on that point and again commend the article to her.

Another significant omission from the Gracious Speech is any reference to the promised changes from RPI to CPI as the measure for calculating the maximum annual increase in charges for pitch fees for park home residents. This issue is dear to my heart; I have been chairman of the all-party group on park homes for many years, and the Government have outstanding, overdue business not just on that aspect but on dealing with the issue of rogue operators in that field.

When I was first elected in Christchurch—25 years ago, Madam Deputy Speaker—I would never have been able to contemplate that we would have a Conservative Government presiding over the highest levels of taxation in a generation and with inflation raging at 10%. I note from the Gracious Speech that the

“Government will drive economic growth to improve living standards”—[*Official Report*, 10 May 2022; Vol. 714, c. 4.]

and I hope I am right in concluding from that that the Government are not going to introduce any further tax increases. Yet there is talk, even from some of my Conservative colleagues, about new tax increases: so-called windfall taxes. Describing a tax as a windfall tax does not make it any less of a tax and I am concerned that

the Government still seem to be flirting with the idea of ever higher taxes despite all the evidence showing that windfall taxes would be a further disaster.

**Mr Sheerman:** I have been in the House rather longer than the hon. Gentleman and I remember when the first windfall tax was introduced; it was by the Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. She made very good use of a windfall tax on the banks, which had made a very big profit. I thought it was a very good innovation; what is wrong with Thatcherism these days?

**Sir Christopher Chope:** As with so many things about Thatcherism, the Labour party tried to copy it and, when Gordon Brown introduced a windfall tax, it was such a disaster that ever since Governments have decided that windfall taxes are a very bad idea. I was not in the House at the time, but the justification for the windfall tax to which the hon. Gentleman refers was that the Government had pushed up interest rates in response to rising inflation, so the banks had received a windfall benefit. Those arguments are nothing like those prevailing at the moment, where we need to encourage our oil and gas industry to invest, rather than disinvest, in our economy. Instead of windfall taxes, the Government should be talking about paying back to taxpayers some of the windfall receipts of tax revenue. VAT receipts are now expected to be £47 billion in the coming year, £9 billion more than predicted. So the case for removing VAT on energy bills completely and scrapping green levies on energy bills is overwhelming. It could be financed from the windfall receipts.

I am concerned that throughout this debate there has been insufficient reference—indeed, hardly any reference—to the issue of productivity, which is fundamental if we are to get the economic growth we need. However, I congratulate the Government on, it seems, being on the threshold of completing Brexit, resolving the issue of the Northern Ireland protocol and ensuring all those restrictive practices we continued to sign up to after we left the European Union can be removed. If this Government are able to finally deliver the full Brexit, they will have my full support.

12.47 pm

**Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): For 30 years, Susie Dent from “Countdown” has admirably been the country’s dictionary and thesaurus expert. When searching for a missing word, there can be few more reliable sources and it was thanks to Susie that I recently discovered the word “snollygoster”: not a character from “Harry Potter”, but an unprincipled person in office motivated by personal rather than public gain. Imagine making it to Downing Street and then spending your time doing anything to clutch on to power, rather than using your privileged position to change the lives of others.

Out in the real world, families are desperately worried about the cost of living crisis and how they can possibly stretch their salary to the next payday. They turned on the news this week in the hope that help was on its way, but, Madam Deputy Speaker, it isn’t. It is the duty of a Government to find ways to help, such as by introducing a one-off windfall tax on the oil and gas producers that have unashamedly declared that they have more money than they know what to do with. Instead, the Prime Minister’s focus is on smearing his opponents, planting

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

dead cat distractions and proposing policies designed not to solve problems but to sow division to make people point at this Chamber and say, “You are all the same.”

But this is no game. Around one in seven adults live in homes where people have skipped meals, reduced meal sizes or gone hungry. And that is before inflation rises even further and energy costs soar even higher in October. Far from the days of D:Ream, without intervention, things can only get worse.

As ever, I listened particularly closely to the housing announcements in the Queen’s Speech. They were surprisingly prominent, but, as always, the devil is in the detail. Despite the fact we have 1.15 million households on social housing waiting lists across our country, the Secretary of State announced yesterday—between his ridiculous impressions—that the Government’s manifesto commitment of 300,000 new homes a year has been scrapped. Fast forward 24 hours and No. 10 says that is not the case. So I ask the Minister to put on the record whether the target still stands.

A cynic might link any scrapping of the house building target with the scale of the Government’s failure on the issue: there were just 5,955 new social rent homes last year, one of the lowest on record. At that rate, it will take 192 years to house everyone on the waiting list. Where is the ambition? Where is the political will?

House building commitments aside, I was reassured finally to read of progress for social housing tenants who are living in disrepair and battling endless hurdles in their fight for a safe and habitable place to live. Last year, my constituent Kwajo Tweneboa bravely partnered with journalist Daniel Hewitt and ITV News, which reported on the appalling conditions in which Kwajo, his neighbours and thousands upon thousands of social housing tenants were living. I am extraordinarily grateful to all involved for their determined pursuit of progress.

As it stands, to make a complaint and see it through to its conclusion, a social housing tenant requires the patience of a saint, the tenacity of a five-star general, an endless amount of phone data, a laptop for emailing and a postgraduate degree in bureaucracy. It is a world regulated by an authority that does not even the power to inspect a property, or speak to a resident—all thanks to the coalition Government, who completely abolished the Audit Commission and the housing inspectorate in the bonfire of the quangos. A decade on, we all need to talk about reinventing the wheel. However, I am relieved that the Government have finally seen the error of their ways. A strengthened regulator does not build a single new home, but it is an important step in finally giving a voice to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities.

I turn to workers’ rights. Ministers promised 20 times to deliver an employment Bill to enhance workers’ rights, but there must have been a page missing in the Queen’s Speech because I could not find a word to turn that rhetoric into reality. Just weeks ago, the Government told us how shocked they were about what happened at P&O and how that must not happen again—but it will. The Bill’s omission is all the evidence needed to show the importance with which the Government consider the issue. Until the practice is banned once and for all, fire and rehire will continue to be the model template

for the biggest organisations to restructure and save funds; it is completely naive to think otherwise. The next scandal is just around the corner and the absence of an employment Bill plants the responsibility clearly at the Government’s feet.

I close with one final word from Susie Dent’s dictionary: perendinate, which is the marking of time by continually putting something off until the day after tomorrow. The reality for all those in insecure work, desperately waiting on social housing lists or choosing between heating and eating is that they simply cannot wait that long.

12.53 pm

**Richard Drax** (South Dorset) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I welcome the Queen’s Speech, which is a timely intervention if ever there was one. On apathy, last Thursday is a warning that many of our voters see us as rudderless and lacking ambition and vision. That is a shame after we led the world in fighting the pandemic and given we are leading the support for a battered Ukraine—I commend the Prime Minister for both. It was an extraordinary coincidence that, on 24 February, when all restrictions were lifted, Russia invaded Ukraine. Since then, the world has faced soaring costs, shrinking revenues and shaky alliances, with fuel and food shortages threatening global stability. What concerns me is that, while we defend freedom and aim for recovery, our nation struggles with ever-weakening institutions and toxic culture wars, and citizens are struggling with the consequences of a cost of living crisis.

The future seems less certain now. Our economy, blighted by covid and lockdowns, is not reigniting as fast as we would like. Unbelievably, we, the Conservative party, are presiding over the steepest taxes since the 1940s and the highest sustained spending levels since the 1970s. That is not the Conservative way, nor is it the way to cope with a stumbling economy. High taxes stifle enterprise, aspiration and, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), productivity. They also risk low growth, stagnation and unemployment. This week, the Bank of England warned of impending recession and 10% interest rates driven by higher energy prices.

These are difficult times, but every cloud has a silver lining and, as Conservatives, this is the time to be radical and to return to our vote-winning philosophy of less state, low taxes and sound public finances. If ever there was a time to loosen the screws, this is it, and the Prime Minister knows it. He said that

“this moment makes clear our best remedy lies in urgently delivering on our mission to turbo-charge the economy, create jobs and spread opportunity across the country.”

Hear, hear. So let us get on with it, Prime Minister.

The Chancellor, of course, must fulfil his role. The promised tax cuts in two years will be too little, too late. We will have lost the electorate, who, burdened by high taxes and debt, will turn to a ruinous socialist Government, possibly in coalition with the SNP: the ultimate nightmare scenario. I accept that legislation on its own cannot solve the cost of living crisis, which has been caused to a large extent by events outside the Government’s control, but we do have the power to cancel the increase in national insurance, remove VAT from domestic fuel and reduce fuel duty even further.

The power to control our own economy is one of the major reasons I backed Brexit, and I am generally delighted by measures in the Queen's Speech to, at last, fully exploit our new-found freedom. About time, too, as hardcore remainers are still out there and only too eager to highlight any difficulty that we face. While I am on the EU, despite the lack of a specific Bill, I am glad to hear that the Government will prioritise support for the Good Friday Agreement and its institutions. Unless the EU compromises further, we must rewrite the Northern Irish protocol to ensure that Northern Ireland is genuinely and unquestionably back in the United Kingdom. The current system is not working and endangers all that so many have worked hard to achieve, namely, peace and prosperity.

I am also relieved—I think that is the right word—to see at last a Bill that aims to conclude the appalling witch hunt of our Northern Ireland veterans. I do not want to commit myself any further at this stage as the devil will be in the detail. While I am on our armed forces, I would be failing in my duty not to warn the Government once again against impending cuts to the Army. Regrettably, Ministers appear persuaded that Ukraine's success against overwhelming odds proves what a small, flexible and manoeuvrable army can achieve on the battlefield, but the Russians have shown, fortunately, how inept they are at combined operations, so that is a false comparison. I am told that mass is no longer necessary, but an Army of 82,000 is not massive and, for sustained operations against a peer adversary—God forbid what we may face in future—numbers will count in any future conflict.

I return to the Government's direction of travel. Their adviser has said that it is time to “scrape the barnacles off the boat.”

I have some sympathy with the Opposition about the lack of an employment Bill, but, as an employer myself, I would say that we are already riven with legislation from top to bottom. The danger of imposing more is to disincentivise employment rather than encourage it, while quite accepting that employees should have rights—of course they should. On flexible working, yes, if it works for the employer, the employee should be allowed to work flexibly, but it should not be a right. That is all we hear so often from the Opposition Benches—right, right, right, right. What about responsibility? It is the employer who takes the risk to employ someone and give them a life chance, a career and a salary, not the employee. A balance should be adopted, with not necessarily so much weight on one side

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Richard Drax:** If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will not. I am going to plough on. There are a lot of people who want to speak and I do not have much longer left.

On housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) spoke such sense. The Bill to ensure that locals have more of a say is to be welcomed and I really am backing that. Far more imagination, less density, more green space and supporting infrastructure is needed in the planning system. It is failing every single time. Affordable homes must be affordable. I have seen examples where developers have really taken the care to build affordable, friendly, safe and warm homes

that look nice. All too often, sadly, I see larger developers building homes that seem to fall apart within a year. That has to be changed.

There was no mention of the NHS, but as I have said repeatedly, I believe that although it serves us well and I wish it to continue, it needs to be overhauled. As Allister Heath pointed out in a recent article in *The Daily Telegraph*, which I thought was very good, all reform is stymied by the lie that any improvement is privatisation by stealth. It simply is not.

I am delighted, too, that protestors will finally be challenged when gluing themselves to each other, roads or anything else they can find and stopping people going about their daily lives, jobs, medical appointments or whatever they want to do. I am delighted that, at last, that Bill has come forward.

In conclusion, there is much to welcome. I do not believe that a huge number of Bills—this point has been picked up—is always necessarily the right thing. My father was a great believer in less is more. What matters is the significance of a Bill and what it delivers, rather than the number of them. Having said that, I support many of the Bills in the Queen's Speech.

However, I must end by warning the Government that we must return to our traditional Conservative philosophy if we are to turn the country around, regenerate the economy and, importantly, win the next election. That means giving people more of their own money, especially during hard times. What happened to the Singapore-style low-tax economy we boasted about, hoped for, fought for and were looking to deliver, which will create the wealth, prosperity and jobs we all need? It is there for the taking now and I urge the Government to grab it.

1.3 pm

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I was reminded by my staff that I have been present at 42 Queen's Speeches—this is the 42nd. May I say how concerned I am that the Government seem to be downgrading Parliament all the time? I cannot remember one of these debates without a Secretary of State on the Government Front Bench defending the Queen's Speech and the elements within it. As a long-serving Member, their consistent and persistent downgrading of Parliament worries me very much indeed.

The Queen's Speech is deeply disappointing. So many things have been missed out. I disagree with almost everything said by the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), except—Madam Deputy Speaker, I am sure you would like some bipartisan remarks—on the strength of our Army. I have stood up in this Chamber for a long time to say that it was dangerous to have fewer than 100,000 personnel in our armed forces. We are now planning to go down to 72,000 at a time when the world is a very worrying place and we have to take that very, very seriously indeed. It is what is missing from the Queen's Speech that worries me so much.

One of the greatest challenges we have is health and social care. We have been promised, have we not, a Bill and firm Government action to do something about social care. I do not know about Doncaster in your constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, but in Huddersfield one big problem in the health sector is that people are taken into accident and emergency and into hospital but cannot be released because there is no suitable

[Mr Barry Sheerman]

supported housing for them in our communities. There has been nothing about social care and, on housing, nothing about building appropriate housing for supported living. That is a very big miss in this Queen's Speech.

The other big miss is a moral miss. The fact of the matter is that all of us in politics know that our country has been in terrible trouble. Our constituents have had a tough time. They have had covid, years of austerity and now the higher cost of energy to heat their homes and the higher cost of food to fill the tummies of their children and other members of their families. That traumatic background is the truth of it. I was expecting a Queen's Speech that said, "This is a national crisis. Let us get together and sort it." What is missing in this debate is honesty. We are promised lower taxation. All of us know in our hearts that somebody has to pay to put the country right and to do all the things we want in health and social care, and to rebuild the welfare state that was found wanting as we faced covid. This country has one of the lowest rates of unemployment benefit. People who never thought they would lose their jobs or be made unemployed were shocked when they realised how weak the support was for their family.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Sheerman:** In a second.

I meet a lot of people who are earning pretty good money, professional people with good salaries, and they tell me, "We should be paying more tax." They say, "We want a decent society, so we want to pay more tax." Can I just put that on the record? Let us be honest with people. If we want a decent welfare state, decent services and decent local government, we must be willing to pay for them.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Sheerman:** Two minutes.

We have demoralised so many people on the frontline. I do not use that in a military sense; I mean our health workers, nurses, doctors, care workers and local authority workers who do everything to make our local society and local community viable and decent to live in. They have all felt undervalued. They have all felt that nobody really values the service they provide, whether emptying bins or running schools. When local government had decent resources they did believe that, and we believed that that was the right thing to do.

We were expecting great things from the Queen's Speech, but we do not have them. We have an environmental crisis. We have had COP26. We have aspirations to say that the other great challenge, apart from health, is our environment. We have a country where in many of the communities we represent we are poisoning children, poisoning pregnant women and poisoning our constituents with the filthy air they breathe. Nothing in the Queen's Speech will meet that challenge—there was very little to touch it. There was little reference to a cleaner transport system. That is not enough when, as we were reminded only yesterday, we face global warning and climate change and we will get the increase in temperature that

will eventually destroy life on this planet. Nothing in the Queen's Speech will address that. It is as though it does not exist and there is no threat.

As well as health and social care, there is education. I am very proud that I went to the London School of Economics, both as an undergraduate and a postgraduate, and our motto was "to understand the causes of things". When I look at the causes of inequality in our country, I immediately see education and levels of child poverty. I worked with Tony Blair and his 1997 Government and, as we remember, the main thrust of the campaign was "education, education, education". We know from the system we have had that if we want to tackle underprivilege, poor attainment at school and poor attainment of skills, we have to invest in early education—in pre-school and early years—and in supporting families in literacy, numeracy and using the English language. The fact is that there is nothing in the Queen's speech about levelling up. Where is the determination to bring back children's centres? Where is a policy like the one we used to have to try to give every child a proper chance in their lives? It is not there. It is an appalling missed opportunity.

Turning to some positive things, we have seen cross-party unity in how we have faced covid together and we have had cross-party co-operation on the support for Ukraine—thank goodness—so surely there are things that we could have done in this Queen's Speech. We could have agreed that we need 500 sustainable towns and cities in this country, based on the United Nations sustainable development goals. That would have lifted us up and given people the chance to roll up their sleeves and change their environment, not just on a global level, but in their communities locally. That is what is missing. We have wonderful vision, passion and commitment in some areas, but this Queen's Speech has failed to deliver on the environment, education and aspiration, and I am very sad that that is the case.

1.12 pm

**Dean Russell (Watford) (Con):** If I may, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will pause for a moment; I hope Members will join me.

That was just five seconds, but imagine if that had been an hour, a week or a month in which we had no one to speak to and no one to listen to us. Loneliness is one of the worst parts of the injustice in our society, and we have an opportunity, as a nation and as parliamentarians, to tackle it.

Although the first year of the pandemic was such an awful time, a lot of light was brought out during that darkness. I was fortunate to go out to campaign and work with local charities, including One Vision, of which I am now a trustee, Small Acts of Kindness, the Salvation Army and many others. In the first year, I found myself in a rather bizarre situation in that I delivered more bags of shopping to vulnerable people than I did political leaflets. That was so important, because it was not just about taking food to people; when we were knocking on people's doors, there was a sense that they knew that somebody cared. For me, that was about feeding their soul and their spiritual needs as much as it was about feeding their stomachs—I know, because I certainly have one to feed.

During that time, I saw communities getting on and supporting one another, helping their neighbours, and looking up from their phones and seeing the doors that



they had perhaps not seen neighbours behind for a long time. People's action to help and support one another was so important. It was about the community acting not just on behalf of national or local government, but on its own behalf. There is a huge role for that. I was pleased, therefore, that trying to cut more red tape was part of the Queen's Speech so that there is more levelling up at a local level and communities have more say in what they want to do and where they work.

Mental health was a big aspect of that. I was pleased that mental health first aid in the workplace was raised in the opening speeches today; I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill on that a year or two ago. I have continued to lobby and to work on that with Government to ensure that people in the workplace can speak to somebody—just as they would ask for first aid if they cut their thumb—and be signposted to the right guidance and correct information to tell them how to support themselves if they have mental wellbeing or even mental health issues.

That is so important because, in the post-pandemic world, we need to start having a holistic view of a person, and that includes their mental and physical health. We need to ensure that there is justice and fairness in the workplace. That is why have I been pushing my Tips Bill since last year. It would make sure that people who work in hospitality—they make up a big part of my Watford constituency—could fairly access the tips that they are given by people who want to thank them, and that businesses were not allowed to take that money from them. I will continue to push that, and I intend to move forward with another such Bill again this year, post Queen's Speech.

I have seen the important role of creative services in the hospitality sector. Often, bars and restaurants are part of theatres, and in Watford, we have a fabulous theatre called the Pump House, which is celebrating its 50th year. I have seen the creativity there; it is a place where young people are given hope and the opportunity to unleash their skills, and to level up—because levelling up is not just about planning and building; it is about people's future and opportunities. I think about when I was growing up. As a kid, I never thought that I would visit London. I definitely never thought that I would visit Parliament and that I would one day be an MP. I want to reach out to kids like me and say, "You know what? Wherever you live in the country, there is an opportunity for you to level up, to unleash your potential and to inspire others in your community."

There is also the built environment. In Watford, we have lots of debates about planning and how we make sure that we do not have overdevelopment. Tall buildings are one of my concerns, and I have been pushing that with Government. Local people should have a say in what happens in their community and on their streets, and especially about the height of buildings. I was pleased that the Queen's Speech seemed to indicate that people will have more say on a street level, and perhaps even street votes, so that they can say, "This is what I want in my area and to happen on my street." Building beautifully is very much part of the answer.

This Queen's Speech is also about tackling really serious issues. I am pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who is responsible for homelessness, is on the Front Bench because, through our work with him, we in Watford have managed to get rough sleeping pretty

much down to zero during the past two years. We will always need to continue to work on that, and to make sure that people are being supported. However, we do not just want to get people off the streets; we want to give them opportunities and ensure that they are not just surviving, but thriving as they look to the future. The Queen's Speech offers an opportunity to do that.

As well as thinking about the built environment for the next generation, we should also think about the virtual environment. Last year, as a member of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, I was much involved in the cross-party work done across both Houses to scrutinise the Bill and come up with suggestions. The Government took on board 66 suggestions from our report, and I look forward to the Bill passing through Parliament, because when we think about mental health, exercise or how people work together as a community, we need to look at the way the world is going; things are being done much more virtually and technologically. Kids are not like I was 30 or 40 years ago; they see the world in a totally different way. They see not just the community on their road, but the whole global community. We need to ensure that people who want to do them harm are prevented from doing so, but still need to enable innovation and opportunity.

There are great opportunities and great things coming forward, but I urge the Government to push forward with my Tips Bill, because it is a great opportunity to tackle the cost of living and help people on low incomes to get the money that they have been given and deserve; to ensure that we push forward with mental health first aid and awareness in the workplace, and that people at work are supported and signposted to the right guidance; and to ensure that when we look at society, we look at the entirety of communities, not only in the built environment and in our neighbourhoods but online, so that people are safe, and so that this Government can support them in aspiring to be the best they can be. I support this Queen's Speech.

1.20 pm

**Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab):** Fairness at work should be an absolute basic right. I am sorry if that offends the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax).

**Richard Drax:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Nia Griffith:** The hon. Gentleman did not wish to give way to the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald), so I am afraid he will not get the opportunity to intervene now.

Everyone should have a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, but that is simply not happening in Britain today. Far too many people who are working hard, often taking on more than one job, still cannot make ends meet. They are constantly worrying about how they will provide for their family and pay the next bill, and they often have to go short on heating or eating. Furthermore, low wages are clearly linked to the scourge of insecurity at work. There is insecurity because of zero-hours contracts, with no guarantee of work each week and therefore no guarantee of income, and because of the growth of the fire and rehire culture, in which it seems that even long-standing contracts with loyal workers can be ripped up at a moment's notice, as we saw in the appalling P&O scandal.

[Nia Griffith]

Fairness at work is important not only for workers, but for responsible business owners and companies. No one benefits from a race to the bottom. Good firms and employers who are trying to do the right thing should not have to worry about being undercut by rogue companies that cut corners, depress wages and ride roughshod over health and safety. Good companies recognise that they benefit from fairness at work. A workforce that is treated properly and remunerated fairly and feels secure at work is more productive and loyal, which is good for recruitment and retention. As other hon. Members have highlighted, fairness at work also saves the public purse on healthcare bills and social security bills.

I am absolutely appalled that the Government have not included any form of employment Bill in the Queen's Speech. We have had promises of an employment Bill time and again. The Prime Minister himself purports to condemn fire and rehire culture, yet even after the P&O fire and rehire scandal, which should have been a wake-up call, there is nothing in the Queen's Speech that addresses the many issues with employment law.

Not only are the Government showing utter contempt for workers in this country, but they are out of step with employers who want to do the right thing. Businesses have come to Parliament to celebrate paying the real living wage: only a couple of weeks ago, Mary Portas was here with businesses that are part of the better business Act campaign, which were keen to say how implementing fairness at work means having a happy, loyal workforce. When the Welsh Labour Government give support to a business, they require it to demonstrate not only its prospects for growth, but its commitment to net zero, to workers' rights and to workers' mental health and wellbeing.

In opposition, it is sometimes difficult to visualise the things we propose, but the Welsh Labour Government are actually implementing our better deal for carers. It was a Welsh Labour party manifesto commitment in last year's election to make sure that by the end of this Senedd term, all care workers would receive the real living wage, which from April this year is £9.90. It is absolutely right that carers be properly paid and that we value the people they look after, including people who are elderly, people who have particular difficulties, children and young people. What we pay care workers is a measure of how our society regards and treats the people they care for.

Such a policy cannot be implemented overnight. It has to be properly planned so that it can be budgeted for, which is not easy when the Welsh Labour Government have been hit year after year by cumulative real-terms budget cuts from this Tory Government. Nevertheless, the Welsh Labour Government set to work straightaway with stakeholders to work out how the policy could be brought about, and they have made the money available from last month. Some care workers are employed directly by the public sector, but where services are provided by private or third sector providers, the Welsh Government have flagged up the fact that those who commission them, namely local authorities and health boards, will need to build in an uplift accordingly.

I mention that policy to show what can be done when there is real will to do it. It is just one example of putting into practice something that makes people's lives better and is the right thing to do. When it is

carefully planned with the providers, when the additional costs to the public purse are recognised and when it is properly implemented, it can be done, and done well. There is a real contrast between the Welsh Labour Government, who are improving the wages of carers, and this Tory Government, who are not addressing fairness at work at all, and have made no mention of a Bill about it in the Queen's Speech.

There has also been an appalling failure to do anything to help people with the cost of living crisis. As hon. Friends have pointed out, the Opposition have made many suggestions, including a windfall tax on the gas and oil companies to give immediate relief to our constituents with fuel bills. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers has shown that there can be workable solutions that give employers some flexibility without using zero-hours contracts; they have negotiated guaranteed minimum hours per week or per month with some employers so that at least workers know that they will get regular pay. These are all practical actions that we are taking even though we are not in government.

What we would like from the Government, of course, is improved workers' rights, an end to fire and rehire, proper rights from day one at work so that everybody is treated properly and cannot just be thrown on the rubbish heap, family-friendly working hours, an improvement to the reforms made to date, stronger union rights and proper ways of negotiating pay and conditions with the workforce—and not only all that, but a complete change in attitudes to procurement. The Government have been failing miserably, with appalling losses to the public purse. Their dreadful audit report contrasts with the clean audit report on the Welsh Labour Government's purchasing during the covid crisis.

We want to ensure not only that purchasing is done fairly and that we have an anti-corruption commissioner to oversee it, but that the procurement process looks at the value of our businesses and companies in this country and does more to make, buy and sell British. When we were in the European Union, it was absolutely possible—even if there had been restrictions under EU law, which there were not—for the social benefit clause to be invoked when giving out contracts to companies, so how much truer that is now! It is perfectly possible to take social value into account, which is exactly what we should be doing.

The Government also need an industrial strategy that ensures a supply chain working towards our strategic objectives. We need an energy policy that means building our own wind turbines, rather than having to rely on imports. We need to think ahead and have a strategy that works, that builds in the supply chains, and that buys British, so that we can provide more high-quality jobs. The combination of high-quality jobs in a secure economy with secure rights for workers in work, wherever they are in the private or public sector, is the way forward.

1.29 pm

**Tom Randall (Gedling) (Con):** I welcome the measures in the Queen's Speech. Given that it contains more than 30 proposed Bills, there is much to talk about, but this afternoon I will confine my remarks to three points about housing.

The term “property-owning democracy” is well known, but perhaps less well known is the name of Noel Skelton, the Conservative MP who coined the phrase and the

underlying concept in 1923. That concept was later built upon by Sir Anthony Eden, who skewed it towards the home rather than industrial property. Skelton's and Eden's thoughts have formed the backbone of Conservative domestic policy ever since, and rightly so.

The theme of today's debate is empowering communities. They are strengthened, I submit, when residents are financially and emotionally invested in where they live, and that is something that home ownership achieves; but there is a tension. Prices have put homes out of reach for many, supply does not match demand, and for those on the property ladder, significant change in the form of development threatens—in their eyes—to fundamentally alter the character of the community in which they have become so emotionally invested.

Growing up on the edge of Arnold, in my constituency, I saw this at first hand. Nottingham, one of England's greatest cities, was on my doorstep, but a few hundred yards up the road were the Hobbucks, an area of woodland and hedgerow with open countryside beyond it. Some of that has been built on, and, while there is now a Hobbucks designated nature reserve protecting some of the land under Gedling Borough Council's local plan, other areas have been allocated to housing. Similarly, on the other side of the constituency, residents of Gedling village fear that development means they will become subsumed into the Greater Nottingham conurbation. Bridging this conflict is a key challenge for the Government, if not the key challenge for our generation, and I welcome the inclusion in the Queen's Speech of several pieces of legislation on the subject.

I suggest that one way of making development more palatable for the public would be ensuring that what is proposed will look nice. I start from the rather cynical position that most if not all post-war architecture is ugly, and that were all post-war buildings to be removed, our towns and cities would look no worse and some might well be much improved. I therefore welcome the renewed emphasis on design and beauty, and, locally, I particularly welcome the money that Gedling Borough Council has received to fund and support a 12-month programme to enable the council and neighbourhood planning groups to produce exemplar design codes. I have not yet received from the council the details of how it will spend the money, but I hope it will result in better, more beautiful building in Gedling.

I also want to speak about a problem that affects some of those who have bought their houses: estate rent charges. It is relatively common for private estates with freehold houses to include a provision in the deed of transfer that places a duty on the owners to contribute to the maintenance of the estate's communal areas and facilities, such as green spaces, play areas or roads. However, as I have been told by residents of the Spring Park development in Mapperley, problems arise when it is thought that the management company is not offering value for money or doing the work that is required. Freeholders' rights are limited in this regard, and indeed they do not have rights equivalent to those of leaseholders. The Government have promised to take action—the Queen's Speech of 2019 contained a promise to give homeowners new rights to challenge unfair charges, which was repeated in a written answer in February this year—but as far as I can tell there is nothing about it in this Queen's Speech, and I see no evidence that the problem will be addressed in the current raft of legislation.

If I am right about that, I hope that the Government will consider reform in this Session of Parliament, and I hope to be able to explore the issue in more detail in the House.

Let me conclude on a more positive note. I welcome the announcement that reforms of the planning system will, in the Government's words,

“give communities a louder voice, making sure developments are beautiful, green and accompanied by new infrastructure and affordable housing.”

I look forward to scrutinising that further, particularly in relation to houses in multiple occupation. Residents of Netherfield, in my constituency, are concerned that developers are turning Victorian family homes into HMOs accommodating several people, with a consequent increase in traffic and a reduction in family housing stock. I have asked the council to make an article 4 direction, which would subject any such conversions to a planning permission application, but the council has demurred, citing possible legal challenge. If the Government's proposals allow the people of Netherfield to take back control of their neighbourhood, that will be for the better.

I broadly welcome the proposals in the Queen's Speech, and look forward to scrutinising them further in the current Session.

1.34 pm

**Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): For the first time in four years, I will not be declaring an interest as the Mayor of South Yorkshire. I will, however, take this opportunity to congratulate my successor: I know that the new Labour Mayor, Oliver Coppard, will be a tireless champion for our region.

Working with a dedicated team to improve people's lives was an immense honour and a great privilege, and I am proud to say that South Yorkshire is in a much better position now than it was when I was elected back in 2018. We created a renewal fund of half a billion pounds. We set up an ownership hub, the first of its kind anywhere, to support co-operatives and employee ownership. We invested heavily in cycling and walking as part of an integrated, accessible and sustainable transport plan. We gave young people affordable bus fares, and began the work of bringing our buses back under public control. We agreed a groundbreaking flood prevention strategy, and started work on a housing retrofit programme. But for all the good that we achieved, I also saw just how much potential was being wasted.

After a while, we learn to read the small print in all the promises. The flagship shared prosperity fund will eventually reach £1.5 billion a year, but not until 2024, which means that it will be worth significantly less over its lifetime than would otherwise have been the case. Meanwhile, the levelling-up fund, which replaces the local growth fund, will do so at a reduced level. The Government promised £3 billion for bus renewal, but delivered just a third of that. South Yorkshire got nothing at all—but then, so did the majority of places that applied. It is levelling up for the lucky few.

All this can be measured against a baseline of deep cuts in council coffers: that, right there, is the reality behind the rhetoric. As for devolving control, most cash still goes through inadequate, politicised, short-term, competitive pots. That makes strategic planning impossible, and wastes precious time and limited resources.

[Dan Jarvis]

It is only fair to say that the levelling up White Paper did set out some welcome, albeit modest, aspirations. No one on the Labour Benches will oppose efforts to increase life expectancy or eradicate illiteracy. As it stands, however, those aspirations are just that— aspirations—and, with no details on how they will be funded, we will not arrive where the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities wants to go on the current trajectory. He is not present at the moment, but I can tell him that if he wants to be this generation's Michael Heseltine, he needs to change course.

I accept that none of this is easy. We are dealing with entrenched socioeconomic problems, decades of chronic underfunding, and layer upon layer of patchwork approaches. It will take a lot more than a commitment to ensuring that everyone can benefit from *al fresco* dining—however laudable that may be—to transform our economy. Let me tell the House, in a constructive spirit, what I think needs to change.

The first item is funding. If the Secretary of State needs an example of where levelling up has succeeded, he should look to German reunification. It is estimated that €2 trillion was spent on the project between 1990 and 2014. Most East German federal states are still the largest recipients of investment from central Government. Despite huge progress, East Germany has still not fully closed the gap with the former West Germany, but its GDP per capita is now higher than Yorkshire's.

Secondly, there is the issue of control. We need an increase in fiscal devolution and a major shift towards allocating central funds according to automatic, genuinely fair formulas. We must let go of the purse strings and trust local decision makers.

Thirdly, there is the question of powers: we need a step change in devolved powers, with skills, transport and policing among the priorities. Regional governments need to be in the driving seat of a local industrial strategy. That does not mean one size fits all. Greater power and funding must be integrated with wider reforms, both here at Westminster so that the centre also reflects the place of regions and nations, and locally to ensure that stronger local and regional government is held accountable. Finally, on democracy, we need basic safeguards for the continued solidarity and redistribution between the nations and regions that make us a United Kingdom and against a race to the bottom on standards or tax. If we can do all that, we will have built not an empty façade but a solid foundation for our country's future.

1.40 pm

**Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con):** It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I think it was correct for the Prime Minister to make the cost of living so central to the Queen's Speech. I appreciate that some steps have been taken by the Government already, and I appreciate the fiscal position that the Government face is challenging, but I am of the view that more needs to be done, and I am glad that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have indicated that this will be the case. I will be watching the situation with interest. Like many colleagues, I have knocked on huge numbers of doors across my constituency and other local areas in the last few weeks, and we have had conversations with people who are struggling to get

by at the moment. Of course, that will also be supplemented with our surgeries and casework, so I think we really need to grapple that.

There was much I welcomed in the Queen's Speech. One of the other issues that always comes up for me is our town centre. It is of great concern to many of my constituents, who feel that the town centre has gone downhill. It is our main civic place, and it is something of great passion. The most frustrating thing about the town centre at the moment is that it does not quite seem to work, even though we have so many brilliant small independent businesspeople and entrepreneurs trying to make it work. Just this Monday, I was fortunate enough to have the Chancellor of the Exchequer in Ipswich, and he met a number of those business owners. We went to Microshops in Carr Street, which is basically a pop-up facility so that local people who have an idea can get a foothold and try it out. If it works, it works, and if it does not, it is less high risk. For most of them it has worked, and 17 small independent businesses are now in there, and a number have got other premises in the town or are expanding. I was very pleased that the Chancellor was able to meet them.

There are too many significant buildings in Ipswich that are empty and have been allowed to collect dust for far too long. It is very pleasing to see that, in the old post office building that had been empty for years, the Botanist, a quite high-end cocktail bar, has opened up. Speaking of *al fresco*, it has lovely outdoor seating spilling on to the Cornhill. I was pleased to be able to attend its soft launch and its hard launch. At the first one I had completely non-alcoholic cocktails, and at the second one I was convinced to have one alcoholic cocktail. I very much advise everybody to go there if they are in Ipswich.

I welcome the measures relating to compulsory rental auctions and the powers that local authorities can use. Sadly, it has been too difficult to get many of these important buildings back into use, and as much as I would like to just blame the Labour council for all that, it would be wrong for me to do so because it is far more complicated than that. Often it is the owners of these buildings who, frankly, have not done enough. The owners of the building on Carr Street that is now the home of Microshops deserve credit for showing the initiative to get that going, but it is frustrating that it has taken so long to get off the ground.

To get our town centre thriving again, we also need to try to address my constituents' concerns about the persistent antisocial behaviour in the town centre. Many of my long-term Ipswich residents do not go into the town centre, particularly at certain times of night, because they do not feel safe or secure. Having a good, high police presence in key parts of the town is important. If large groups, invariably of young men, are gathering and drinking alcohol when they ought not to be, and making inappropriate lurid comments to women of all ages going into the town centre, we need the police to be incredibly hands-on and interventionist to disperse and disrupt those groups and enforce the no-alcohol zones. That has not been happening to the extent that I would like, and that desperately needs to be addressed. Our town centre is of immense importance to my constituents.

Another key point that I was pleased to see in the Queen's Speech was the issue of the small boat crossings. It is right that as a country we are being as generous as

we are to refugees fleeing from Ukraine, as we were to those from Afghanistan. A number of constituents have taken in Ukrainian families, and it is the same for colleagues across this House. That is a tribute to them. It is the right thing to do, but of course it will place significant pressure on many of our public services. That is just a reality. We already have quite a long council housing waiting list in the borough, and the pressure on that over time will likely go up as a consequence of this, but it is still the right thing to do. The extra money we provided for school places was the right thing to do.

The challenge is made much more difficult when we have a parallel illegal flow of, invariably, young men arriving here from another safe European country. The reality is that those individuals who are coming here illegally and not claiming asylum in the other numerous safe countries they have come through are working directly against the interests of some of the most desperate families who are fleeing persecution. The more we can state that, the better. That is very much my view, and it is important that the Government have gripped that. Actually, I think it is the view of most of the country, who make the distinction between those fleeing areas of persecution and coming here and those who have refused to apply for asylum in France and other safe countries. It is important that we draw that distinction.

**Kirsten Oswald:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Tom Hunt:** I will not be taking an intervention on this topic from the SNP. *[Interruption.]* I am so terrified of their illogical arguments that I could not possibly counter them.

The movement away from the Human Rights Act is also very welcome. A British Bill of Rights is a step in the right direction. Frankly, if we are subscribed to an international treaty that prevents us from being able to control our borders and therefore be a sovereign country, of course we need to review our membership of it—*[Interruption.]* I understand that Labour Members will find that difficult to understand, because most of them support open borders and do not believe in border controls, but I think that this is where most of my constituents are at.

I also want quickly to touch on the Public Order Bill, which I think builds on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. I was immensely frustrated by the Just Stop Oil protests, as I know most of us were—at least on this side of the House. People who were trying to get to work and go about their daily business were being disrupted by those self-righteous individuals who had no concern for the effect their reckless behaviour was having on others. I really struggle to explain to my constituents why, when individuals are carrying out criminal damage at petrol stations or chaining themselves to public buildings, our police force cannot just get in there and immediately remove them. Why are we dancing around? Just get on with it! Frankly, the stronger we can be in that area, the better.

The Public Order Bill is the right thing to do, but of course it would be voted against by the Opposition, who do not support it and who probably side with the reckless behaviour of those individuals. I know for a fact that the eastern region was one of the worst affected parts of the country during the recent protests. Only the seventh petrol station I went to had petrol, because of

that behaviour. I had vulnerable constituents contacting me whose carers could not get to them because they could not fill up their motor vehicles. We should be completely intolerant of these reckless protesters, and I am pleased that the Public Order Bill will get us closer to that.

On a final note, I was pleased to see the point about education and opportunity for all. That is an objective that I, and the vast majority of Members in this place, believe in. On the topic of special educational needs, we have obviously had the Green Paper, which has been published. I have heard it referred to by some as a very, very Green Paper, which took a very, very long time to bring forward. The SEND review took too long, but we are where we are; we have a Green Paper in front of us and there is much in it that is positive. My desire is for that to happen as quickly as possible, so I urge the Government to place a huge priority on the SEN Green Paper, having the consultation and talking to stakeholders, but putting the action in place as soon as possible. Certainly in Suffolk, and in other parts of the country, there is a postcode lottery when it comes to SEN provision, and too many young people with great potential who have learning disabilities are being let down. We can never put enough money into SEN, as far as I am concerned. It is always an investment.

On the whole, I welcome this Queen's Speech.

1.50 pm

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): In Her Majesty's platinum jubilee year, it is an honour to make my first contribution to a Queen's Speech debate. I very much look forward to celebrating the platinum jubilee with my constituents.

The topic of today's debate is fairness at work and power in communities, and as I am sure the House would expect, I will focus on rural communities. I am incredibly proud of my rural community of North Shropshire. On Sunday, I was lucky enough to attend a "Songs for Ukraine" concert in Oswestry involving nearly 200 local schoolchildren, brilliantly hosted by Ukrainian sixth-formers Lisa and Myra, showcasing the amazing talent of young performers from across North Shropshire and bringing together hundreds of families to raise over £11,000 for vulnerable people fleeing a dreadful war. This is North Shropshire at its best.

It is abundantly clear to me that rural communities like mine and so many others across the country, from Shetland to Somerset, feel taken for granted by this Conservative Government. "Levelling up" is a catchy slogan we have heard time and again, but there is very little of substance for those in rural areas, and I am afraid that the Queen's Speech offers nothing to help them. In fact, the Government compiled a 140-page background briefing note on the Queen's Speech, but the word "rural" is used only four times, and two of those were in a list of Government Departments.

I will describe the situation in the lovely town of Market Drayton, which is a fantastic place to visit for those who can get there. It is a pretty, medieval town with attractive buildings and, since fairly recently, a large amount of housing development, but it has only one, very infrequent, bus service, which is being reduced. By the end of August, there will be no weekend bus services at all. Those who do not drive will have to rely

[Helen Morgan]

on friends and family to make the 25-minute journey for out-patient appointments at the hospital in Telford. A taxi costs more than £50 and, on the minimal public transport available, the round trip will be in excess of four hours. It may as well be an island. Young people here struggle to access work, let alone achieve fairness when they get there.

Limited and decreasing public transport is not unique to Market Drayton. Across the market towns of North Shropshire and the rest of rural Britain, isolation from work, social opportunities and health services are limiting opportunity and quality of life for rural communities, which need access to reliable bus services.

Colleagues might think that the Government are on this—after all, they committed to “bus back better”—but I am afraid to report that this is yet another catchy slogan with no meaning. How many times does the briefing paper on the Queen’s Speech mention buses? Have a guess. The words “bus” and “buses” appear once, which highlights this Government’s complete disregard for rural communities like mine that are seeing their local public transport cut to the bone. The “bus back better” funding, as with other levelling-up funding, has been allocated via a bidding process in which money is apparently allocated with very little direct reference to need. There is nothing for Shropshire.

Since being elected in December, much of my time on the Floor of the House has been spent on ambulance waiting times, so I will not repeat the shocking stories of dangerous delays, but I note that a report by the all-party parliamentary group on rural health and social care and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care found stark levels of inequality between rural and urban areas when it comes to health and social care services. This resonates strongly with the emails in my inbox from concerned constituents who are struggling to access GPs, dentists and even domiciliary care in an increasingly centralised model.

There is a theme emerging for rural communities in which critical infrastructure—whether public transport, adult social care, community ambulance stations, banks, post offices, swimming pools or even driving test centres—is being shut down, centralised and removed from where it is most urgently needed. If we need anything in our market towns and villages, we are expected to get in our petrol car—there are no electric charging facilities—and drive to reach the most basic services. Those who cannot drive, for whatever reason, are being isolated in these rural islands. They are far from empowered, and I am afraid that voting on their neighbour’s extension will not compensate for waiting 17 hours for an ambulance when they need one.

The Conservatives have taken rural Britain for granted. The farming industry forms the backbone of the rural economy, producing our food, protecting our countryside and gluing rural communities together, but the Government are dicing with its future. Offering trade deals to countries with lower standards and phasing out the basic farm payment scheme before its replacement is in place would be bad enough, but there has been no response at all to the rising costs of feed, fuel and fertiliser that are leading farmers to shut up shop altogether.

When many of these critical businesses are facing the biggest challenges for a decade, the Conservatives are cutting their lifeline, taking their votes for granted and

refusing to consider other options, even in the short term, to save this critical industry, but they have cut taxes for banks. That shows us all we need to know about the Conservatives’ commitment to rural Britain: cuts for farmers, shortages in healthcare, cuts to public transport and tax breaks for bankers. We have 140 pages, thousands of words and barely a mention of rural Britain and the problems facing it.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are proudly championing rural Britain. We have tabled an amendment to the Humble Address that focuses specifically on rural issues. We are calling on the Government to protect farmers from the effect of new trade deals that would lower environmental and animal welfare standards. We are urging them to use this Queen’s Speech to reverse the closure of rural ambulance stations and to do far more to tackle the chronic shortage of GPs, dentists, consultants, nurses and the other clinical professionals that we so desperately need. We are calling on the Government to protect our rivers by preventing water companies from dumping raw sewage into them, damaging our wildlife and reducing our access.

I am proud to represent the rural constituency of North Shropshire. In my very biased view, it is the best rural constituency in Britain. The people there are caring, creative and extremely resilient, but the Conservatives are taking the good, hard-working people of rural Britain for granted. Far from levelling up, they are risking decline. I urge them to think again and to act now to prevent that from happening. Act now on the crisis in rural healthcare, of which dire ambulance response times are simply a symptom. Act now to save our farming industry and improve our food security. Act now to improve the services and transport infrastructure that are critical to growing the rural economy. And act now to give rural constituencies the fair deal they deserve.

1.57 pm

**Kate Green** (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) in her first Queen’s Speech debate.

There is a gaping hole at the heart of Tuesday’s Queen’s Speech, as it fails to address the desperate circumstances of families who are, frankly, facing destitution. Yesterday’s report by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research shows the devastating effect of soaring bills and real-terms benefit cuts, and it should be a wake-up call for the Government. I implore Ministers, and especially the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to take the emergency action that is needed now to protect those families from poverty.

Of course the Government will say that work is the best route out of poverty, and of course I agree that it should be for those families who can work, but low wages and job insecurity mean that, for many, it is not. That is why the failure to include an employment Bill in the Queen’s Speech is so devastatingly disappointing. It leaves pregnant women, new dads, unpaid carers, those who need to work flexibly, people from minority communities and disabled people without the protection to which they should be entitled. It allows unscrupulous employers to continue with fire and rehire practices that even the Prime Minister claimed he found unacceptable. So what we have is the rhetoric of levelling up but inadequate action to support our local communities.

Regenerating local economies is essential to achieving the Government's levelling up ambitions, enabling these economies to attract and retain successful businesses and creating good jobs for local people. As colleagues have said today, education and skills will be essential to ensuring that people are equipped to take those jobs, so I particularly wish to speak about two Bills that are relevant to that: the Schools Bill; and the higher education Bill.

The Schools Bill paves the way for all schools to become part of multi-academy trusts. Most secondary schools in my constituency and almost all primaries are not in MATs currently, so this implies a lot of structural upheaval. I am all for families of schools supporting one another to raise standards and narrow attainment gaps, but we know that it is the quality of teaching and school leadership, not structures, that drives school improvement. So how will Ministers ensure that we have the local infrastructure in place to support local school leaders? Rightly, the Government's levelling-up agenda focuses on the importance of locality, and I acknowledge that some large MATs have shown that they can work in partnership with local organisations and communities, but how will Ministers ensure that all national multi-academy chains are responsive to all the local communities in which each of their schools are located? That goes to questions about accountability and transparency. For example, MATs can pool their funding, reallocate it to different schools right across their chain or put it into reserves, so how are we going to secure the accountability to local communities that MATs serve and ensure that funds reach local pupils?

Like other colleagues, I welcome the focus in the Schools Bill on attendance, and I am pleased that colleagues from across the House and in the House of Lords have had their pleas for a much more rigorous approach to children missing from school rolls being responded to. But we can do more than simply act to register children. The Commission on Young Lives has pointed to the need for an "inclusion" approach to supporting all young people to succeed in school, with schools working in partnership with youth and community workers and community organisations; this is about a local, community-led approach to keeping children in school.

Turning to the higher education Bill, let me first put on record my interest as a member of the governing body of Manchester Metropolitan University. Our universities are vital to our global reputation and fundamental to the success of our local economies where they are located, and not just in our traditional university cities. So there will be much interest in local communities in the details of the lifelong loan entitlement, as the devil will lie very much in the detail. It will be particularly important that students can obtain the advice to make the right subject choices at school, to plan their route through their post-18 education and to use their lifelong loan entitlement to access the right courses as their career needs develop. It will also be important that our skills strategies and higher education strategies for those communities are aligned with the way in which students make their lifelong loan entitlement choices. In the meantime, the Government have sought to reassure us that minimum entry requirements, student numbers caps, and the reduction of funding for foundation courses, will not disproportionately affect students

from disadvantaged backgrounds and from black and ethnic minority backgrounds, or universities catering predominantly to commuter students. Yet the Institute for Fiscal Studies, and indeed the Department for Education's own impact assessment, has sounded the alarm that that is exactly what will happen. No one wants students to experience poor-quality teaching or to leave university without the skills they will need to succeed at work or in life, but if students of all backgrounds are to have the opportunity to access and make the most of university education, it will be important that the Government and the Office for Students develop a careful approach to address the concerns that exist about course quality and outcomes. That means understanding in detail what is happening on individual courses and student destinations, protecting the university foundation courses that are an integral first step in the undergraduate journey for some students and recognising the impact that failure of a local higher education institution would have on local students and on the wider economic position of that community.

I echo the comments that have been made today about housing supply and I do so particularly in the context of my borough of Trafford, where we have a desperate shortage of housing for local families, extremely high private rents by the standards of the north of the country, far too many families still living in overcrowded or substandard homes, and too many in unsuitable, poor-quality, temporary accommodation. We desperately needed a holistic strategy to secure the housing supply that we need for today and into the future. Instead, what we get again and again are stop-go approaches—on targets, on planning law and on developer obligations. I hope that the Government will listen carefully to the pleas made by the Chair of the Select Committee this morning and others to secure both the right strategy and the right funding to enable local authorities such as mine to secure the housing we need to meet the needs of local families.

Finally, I wish to say a little about the economic crime Bill. I was glad to have the chance to raise this issue with the Minister during the opening speeches. I am pleased that the Bill will provide Companies House with more effective investigatory and enforcement powers, and that the registrar is to become a more active gatekeeper. That will, of course, also require more resources. Let me particularly emphasise the need to strengthen the approach taken by Companies House to compulsory strike-off, which is too often used by unscrupulous directors to avoid complying with their obligations, by allowing a company to be struck off for non-compliance with information requirements and those same directors then going on to establish new companies again and again to carry on their business. I would very much like to see a much more proactive approach from Companies House where it ought to be aware of numerous and repeated failures by companies with common directors to file the legally required documents. I hope that the economic crime Bill will give us an opportunity to address that.

2.7 pm

**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green). The Queen's Speech contains the most dispiriting programme of legislation that I have known during my time in Parliament. Following a

[*Andy McDonald*]

pandemic that has ripped through our communities, killing upwards of 175,000 of our fellow citizens, and as we now face a cost of living crisis, with people being left in the dreadful situation of having to choose between heating their home or eating, this Government have proposed a programme that will do absolutely nothing meaningful to help. Instead, they have decided to spend the next year enacting what can only be described as some of the most reactionary and authoritarian legislation in living memory. It follows a raft of recent laws passed at the very end of the last Session designed to drive a coach and horses through our civil liberties: the Elections Act 2022 contained measures to deter people from voting; the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 banned noisy protests, and criminalised Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities; and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 gave the Home Secretary powers to strip dual citizens of their British citizenship without notice, in contravention of the UK's international obligations, criminalising many of those seeking asylum, who now risk being shipped off to Rwanda thanks to the Home Secretary's cruel and inhumane scheme.

The Government have now said they intend to bring forward yet more draconian laws to stifle our democracy: the Orwellian "Bill of Rights" is pure doublespeak. a terrifying attack on our hard-won human rights laws; the Public Order Bill is an outright assault on peaceful protest, and tries to push through a matter that has already been voted down by this Parliament; and the boycotts, divestment and sanctions Bill seeks to criminalise a legitimate form of political dissent, while also smearing the campaign for Palestinian human rights. It ought to worry any person who cares about this issue, or about other human rights abuses, climate activism, the arms trade, or indeed any expression of solidarity with oppressed peoples struggling for justice across the world. Not one jot or scintilla of those Bills will do anything to support hard-pressed families facing the cost of living crisis, including the many thousands living in poverty in Middlesbrough. They will have been sick to the pits of their stomachs—as I was—to have heard from those on the Government Benches yesterday that their crises are of their own making and because they cannot budget, cook properly and manage to live on 30p a day.

One thing that could have been of help to working people is the introduction of the long-promised employment Bill. Since legislation was announced three years ago, Ministers have committed to bringing forward a Bill no fewer than 20 times, yet when it came to the Queen's Speech on Tuesday, such a Bill was nowhere to be found.

Whether in respect of the lies about widespread law-breaking under the Prime Minister's own roof or the hollow promise to make Britain the best place to work, why should the public have any trust in a word that Conservative politicians have to say? It appears that measures that had been announced—such as the creation of a single enforcement body, offering greater protections for workers; provision to make flexible working the default; and the extension of redundancy protection to prevent pregnancy and maternity discrimination—have all since fallen by the wayside. The Government are clearly more focused on attacking those protesting against the climate catastrophe or the crime of apartheid than they are on caring for those who are most in need across our country.

The strengthening of employment rights and protections is critically urgent, yet the Government are not taking the necessary steps to address the stark imbalances of power in the workplace. The sorry situation we now find ourselves in was made plain for us all to see in March this year, with the unlawful and utterly disgraceful decision of P&O Ferries bosses to make almost 800 of their workforce redundant over Zoom in a pre-recorded message, having chosen to break the law and not consult or engage with trade unions, as required by the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992. Those loyal and hard-working seafarers, some of whom had been with the company for decades, were removed from vessels by security guards with handcuffs, while agency workers on as little as £1.80 an hour were brought on board to replace them.

Ministers have heralded the proposed harbours (seafarers' remuneration) Bill as a silver bullet to protect seafarers from such bully-boy tactics on the part of rogue employers, yet the British Ports Association and the TUC have dismissed the plans as unworkable or insufficient. The announcement of a consultation process means there will be further delays. All the while, as the Government kick the can down the road, they have freely admitted that P&O Ferries has got away with forcing out its unionised workforce, either by making them redundant or through the pernicious practice of firing and rehiring seafarers on less-favourable agency contracts.

Back in March, the Prime Minister said that his Government were taking legal action against P&O Ferries bosses; well, we are two months on, so where is it? Ministers could and should have immediately taken concrete action to seize the vessels, reinstate the workers and impose unlimited fines on the company. Instead, those on the Government Benches have sat on their hands as hundreds of lives and livelihoods have been turned upside down, because when it comes down to it, the only thing that matters to them and their fat-cat friends is profit, not people.

The Government's inaction has not just let P&O Ferries off the hook: it has given other businesses the green light to trample over workers' rights, and that will continue for so long as the situation exists in which law-breaking is good for a company's bottom line. This "break the law and pay people off later" Bullingdon Club mentality runs through the upper classes and establishment in our society. Be it the bosses of big business or the Prime Minister, they know that they can get away with acting unlawfully, either because they will not get caught and held to account, or because they know that if they do, they will still come up trumps in a system that always has their backs.

If the situation is allowed to go on without correction, it will not just be operators across the maritime industry that feel compelled to follow suit, spelling an end to any residual UK maritime workforce; we will see a race to the bottom right across the economy, as businesses take the lead from P&O, knowing that they can blithely commit crimes of corporate thuggery, and decimate workers' rights and protections in the process.

If we are to see an end to this corrupt, immoral system, in the first instance we need a strengthening of employment rights and protections, including the total outlawing of fire and rehire tactics. Legislation must be passed that stops such injurious industrial practices being profitable. The fact that the Government stood in the way of the private Member's Bill introduced by my



hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) in the previous Session, and their failure time and again to vote in favour of motions to outlaw fire and rehire, has done much to create a culture of impunity among predatory exploitative businesses that will use “greed is good” opportunities to steal a march on those good and decent businesses that behave ethically and care for the people who work for them.

If we are to rebalance the economy, improve wages and save working people and those most in need from bearing the brunt of soaring inflation, now more than ever we need a new deal for working people, as we set out in the Green Paper that we published last year. Our programme would not only outlaw fire and rehire tactics but transform the world of work. It would ensure that people were treated with dignity and respect, and address the imbalance of power by unshackling trade unions to do their job: bargaining for and protecting their members. I am gravely fearful that the Government plan to move in the opposite direction and further weaken working people’s rights and protections.

The provisions that have been outlined in respect of the so-called Brexit freedoms Bill to amend, repeal or replace retained EU law—including, I expect, those laws that protect workers’ rights—are deeply concerning. The Minister for Levelling Up Communities is not in her place, but I wanted to offer her the opportunity to intervene and state categorically that the Government will not permit regression on a single piece of employment legislation, be it on the transfer of undertakings regulations or limits on working time. We will get no answer, but this is a dark and desperate moment. I can only assume from the Government’s continued refusal to rule out such measures that our fears are well founded.

This is the moment for working people across the country to realise that, far from representing their interests, this Government are coming after their rights, which generations have fought so hard to win. If we on the Opposition Benches can come together, hopefully with some Government Members, in opposition, we stand a chance of defeating the Government’s devastatingly draconian plans and the betrayal of working people that lies within them.

2.18 pm

**Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): My constituents in Enfield North want a Government who deliver for them. They want the financial security they need in the face of the cost of living crisis, the prosperity of a thriving high street, and the respect of properly funded local services that can deliver for them. The Queen’s Speech offered none of those things. It is wrapped up in an empty slogan that provides nothing to the people of my borough—a borough that has the 11th highest rate of child poverty in the country, and where one in five workers is on low pay. Enfield also has the highest rate of private rental evictions of any borough in London, mainly due to section 21 notices, which the Government have been promising to reform for years, but have failed to—yet we are still ignored.

It has become abundantly clear that the Government will not be levelling up this country. It smacks of total arrogance to talk about a “Medici-style renaissance” of our town centres when inflation is at a 30-year high. Only by our getting money back into people’s pockets will high streets and town centres, such as mine in Enfield North, be able to thrive again.

When it comes to levelling up, it is as if Enfield was the land that time forgot for this Government. Since 2018, Enfield Council’s budget has been cut by £70.2 million. The council has tried to work with central Government to help make up some of that shortfall through applying for the towns fund, the levelling up fund, and the community renewal fund. The result? A grand total of zero extra funding for Enfield—not a single penny. Frankly, after the emptiness of the Queen’s Speech, what hope do we have of that changing any time soon?

With more than 88% of the towns fund being allocated to areas with Tory MPs, is it any wonder that people in my borough are somewhat cynical about the Government’s agenda? The levelling up Bills in the Queen’s Speech are still desperately lacking in ambition, and as thin as the White Paper. The substance amounts to little more than the Government marking their own homework; there is nothing by way of new money or new ideas. Power could not be further away from the communities who are having to compete with each other over pots of funding sporadically handed out—or not, in Enfield’s case—by Tory Ministers. If levelling up is to mean anything, it should be about empowering local communities to take decisions in their own interest. Under this Government, it means paying lip-service to communities up and down the country, while continuing to hoard power in Whitehall.

Enfield, like the rest of the country, cannot carry on with more of the same. We need action to deal with the cost of living crisis now. We need a far more fundamental rethink of our economic settlement, with real power handed to communities. We need much better than what this Government are offering to the people of Enfield North and to the whole country.

As I have mentioned, the Government have been talking about abolishing section 21 for many years, but we are still waiting. Thousands of people in Enfield North are being evicted from their home for no good reason, and that puts pressure on local council housing lists. With thousands on the housing waiting list, it was very surprising that the Secretary of State for Transport intervened to stop a housing development on the car park next to the station, in order to protect parking facilities. It is absolutely beyond belief. Not only do the Government not have a plan to tackle the housing crisis, but they are actively preventing local authorities from dealing with the crisis; it is really disappointing. This Government continue to fail Enfield North residents on everything from housing to levelling up.

Finally, local councils, including mine, are doing a great job of delivering public health programmes focused on preventive measures. However, the funding formula for public health spending in local authorities was devised in 2013 and has not been reformed since. That means that boroughs such as mine are not getting the funding that they so desperately need to deliver preventive measures for their communities. It is unfair that my borough receives £39 per head, when the borough next door receives £139 per head. The disparity is ludicrous and there is no good reason for it. This was an opportunity for the Government to provide a fair funding formula, so that the residents of Enfield are not let down, but they have failed to do that. This Government do not fail to disappoint. The levelling up Bills do not deliver for Enfield, and, as I have said, everything that has been set out in the Queen’s Speech is just really disappointing.

2.25 pm

**Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark). I will concentrate much of my speech on employment, which is ironic, given the collective industrial action that appears to be taking place on the Conservative Benches. I just hope that the ballot was conducted in a legal way.

I may be alone in this, but I am disappointed that the hon. Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) is no longer in his place. The anti-immigration rhetoric that he was using is in stark contrast to the reality of the situation. I do not believe that any human being is illegal. When we use words like “illegal” about fellow human beings, we are on very dangerous ground indeed.

In stark contrast, though, I have been in tears of joy over the past few days, but I can assure Members that it is not over the Queen’s Speech. I am delighted to say that it is over the great news of the council elections. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, the good people of Glasgow South West are among the most sophisticated electorate in these islands. In the Greater Pollok ward, they hit it out of the park. They have elected the great Roza Salih, who becomes the first refugee elected as a councillor in Scotland. What a wonderful achievement that is for this “brilliant young woman”, as the First Minister of Scotland said. This is someone who has served with distinction in the Glasgow South West constituency office. She was so good that she has been promoted twice: she is currently the office manager, and has helped to serve constituents diligently. She will make a fantastic councillor. Is that not something, when we hear the rhetoric from some on the Government Benches about “immigrants”? They use this anti-immigrant language, when we have a brilliant young woman who is now engaging in public service. That is why I want asylum seekers to be given the right to work.

The Blair Government made a mistake when they stopped asylum seekers having the right to work. It is absolutely scandalous that we allow asylum seekers to live on the equivalent of what I was earning as a youth trainee with Strathclyde Regional Council 30 years ago. It is not right. After a period of time—say, six months— asylum seekers should have the right to work and make their contribution to this economy.

**Andy McDonald:** The hon. Gentleman is right to focus on this issue. The Government’s Homes for Ukraine scheme has a lot to recommend it, if only it worked properly for everybody. It is absolutely right that people should have recourse to public funds and to work, but surely that should apply to every refugee; it should not simply be restricted to one group. I am delighted that this group has that, but should it not go across the board universally?

**Chris Stephens:** I agree with the hon. Member. People who seek sanctuary in this country want to make a positive contribution across these islands. There should be a right to work.

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman’s comments about his office manager who has been elected to Glasgow City Council; I was on a Unite trade delegation with her many years ago and know her well. On his point about refugees and asylum seekers, does he agree that the Home Office has serious issues when it comes to dealing with those

people, not only under the current Home Secretary, but under the former Home Secretary and former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who was the architect of the hostile environment against people of colour? The Home Office has had long-standing issues under this Conservative Government, and it needs root and branch reform.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for that. I should say, if I have not already, that Roza is indeed a Unite activist and former member of the Scottish Trades Union Congress general council, Scotland’s workers’ parliament, and she was indeed in Cuba with him on a delegation.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Home Office must be one of the most dysfunctional Government Departments—I know it is a competition, but we only need to ask people who are looking for a passport at the moment. I associate myself with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman); she was quite right about the challenges around EU law and EU workers’ protections. I mentioned Strathclyde Regional Council earlier, which the Tory Government decided to abolish, and I remember when TUPE was good legislation and protected workers on that basis.

I will focus my remarks on my first intervention on the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). The fact that the Government picked the Under-Secretary of State to lead for them on fairness at work tells us a lot about their priorities.

Many hon. Members have talked about the promised employment Bill, so I will quote directly from a Delegated Legislation Committee. On 25 January—Burns Day, not a date anyone Scottish can forget—at 10.46 am, the Under-Secretary of State said:

“Clearly, the employment Bill, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West knows, is primary legislation. It will be announced, when it comes forward in parliamentary time, in the Queen’s Speech.”—[*Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 25 January 2022; c. 24.*]

I believe *Hansard* is accurate, and the record has not been corrected in any way. That tells us that an employment Bill is not a priority for this Government, and I want to know why it is not.

Many hon. Members have spoken, and we hear regularly on the Work and Pensions Committee, about the impact on women and black and minority ethnic workers of unfair working practices and indignities at work. That starts with zero hours contracts. We had the Under-Secretary of State telling us that zero hours contracts are a good thing but simultaneously that they are exploitative. They cannot be both. Perhaps we should take on the argument that zero hours contracts are a good thing and people want them. Let us only allow zero hours contracts where there is a collective agreement with a recognised trade union, and then we will find out how many people actually want them.

There is no legislation on short-term shift changes, as many hon. Members have said. People can turn up to their work expecting to have a five-hour shift, only to be told they have to work 10 hours that day or, worse, to be told that there are no hours for them to work that day, while they still have to pay out transport and childcare costs. We need legislation to tackle that and to ensure that, where it happens, it means double time for workers.

There is no protection where a company ceases trading. We had a good example in Scotland where a hairdresser operating out of a hotel upped and left for Portugal, leaving the workers with no wages. Those workers had no protection at all. They went to the hotel to ask for wages and the hotel said, “Not our responsibility.” I want to see legislation to fix those sorts of issues, because that is the reality of what is happening. The pandemic amplified those issues. They did not go away with the pandemic; the pandemic emphasised them. I am sure my friend the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) would agree, because he and I have proposed similar legislation on this.

We really need to sort out the status of workers in this country. There are far too many workers who are bogusly self-employed. That leads to the double hit of people being caught up in the loan charge scandal as well, because they think they are directly employed and they are not. I remember sitting here in the debate on the private Member’s Bill, the Employment and Trade Union Rights (Dismissal and Re-engagement) Bill, when we were promised there would be a better way of doing it, and I do not see that either.

I will conclude with two quick things. I am concerned at the Government’s changes, announced just before the end of the last Session, that will make sanctions on benefit claimants easier. That is going the wrong way, and I believe it goes against what the Government promised. They promised they would start introducing warnings before sanctioning people. We were given commitments that that would be the case, but those commitments seem to have disappeared.

**Marsha De Cordova:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the excellent speech he is making. On the subject of sanctions, does he agree that all the evidence shows that sanctions and conditionality do not work, especially when they pertain to disabled people, and that the Government should be seeking to scrap the sanctions regime?

**Chris Stephens:** I do want to see the end of the sanctions regime, and I agree that conditionality is not working. As a bare minimum, the Government could introduce what is known as a yellow card or warning system before someone is sanctioned, rather than people just turning up and being sanctioned because they were five minutes late. We are politicians, and we are late for meetings all the time—that is just the way the world works. Would we be sanctioned for being five minutes late? I do not think so.

Lastly, I join others in supporting the principle of freedom of peaceful assembly. It was a year ago that fellow Glaswegians and I were on Kenmure Street to stop the Home Office taking away two people in an immigration van. I congratulate the good people of Edinburgh on stopping an immigration raid last week. The principle that people are able to assemble freely and peacefully must remain in these islands.

I support and join with my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North: we need employment law to be devolved to the Scottish Parliament if this Government will not act. If they will not act, when the people of Scotland get a choice and they look at employment law, they will choose independence over this Government any day of the week.

2.37 pm

**Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab):** I pay tribute first of all to Her Majesty the Queen. It was a great sorrow to me that she was not able to give the Gracious Speech in person earlier this week. We have been privileged to live in the Elizabethan age. Most Members of Parliament serve many sovereigns; we have had the privilege of only serving one.

The Elizabethan age began as one of upheaval after the second world war. It became an age of opportunity and equality with the Labour Government and the equalities Acts from the 1960s. Now, however, it is becoming an age of insecurity—insecurity of income, insecurity of housing and insecurity in health, food and work.

Since the Prime Minister boasted last year that the UK was the fastest-growing economy in the G7, it has become the slowest-growing economy in the first quarter of this year. Indeed, we now find that we are the fastest-shrinking economy. We have gone from 0.8% growth at the beginning of this year to -0.1%. That is a shrinking economy.

The Bank of England projects 10% inflation by the end of the year. Meanwhile, real wages have been falling and 2 million people are going without food for more than a day, sometimes because they do not have the money to buy it, sometimes because they do not have the money to cook it and sometimes because they do not have the will to take it out of the mouths of their children. *[Interruption.]* It is shameful, as my hon. Friends say. We are the fifth-richest economy in the world, and it is shameful.

Let us examine these insecurities. This year’s Queen’s Speech, coming from any Government with any compassion, would have put at its core a right to food, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) has been calling for for months. That should have been at the very centre of the Gracious Speech, because we cannot feel that we are doing our job as politicians, and I hope that Government Ministers feel that they cannot be doing their job as a Government, when there are people facing hunger on that scale in our country and when so many of our fellow citizens—millions—are reliant on food banks. This is not the Britain that we should aspire to be part of, and it is certainly not the Britain that any Government Minister should aspire to be a Minister in charge of. The insecurity in income is extreme, and it has been exacerbated by the fact that, even on the Government’s own figures, 900,000 individuals, many of whom have disabilities, will become worse off as a result of the transition from legacy benefits to universal credit. That is why the Government should have had at the heart of the Gracious Speech the need to restore the £20 cut to universal credit to protect the income of those adversely affected and to make sure that any recovery was not on the backs of the poor.

There is insecurity in work. This debate is entitled “Fairness at Work and Power in Communities”. Well, as so many of my colleagues have said, the gaping hole at the centre of the Queen’s Speech is the fact that there is no employment Bill, promised 20 times by Government Ministers—no legislative solution. I almost felt sorry for the Minister who opened the debate, because, as must have been obvious to so many of us, he was

[Barry Gardiner]

embarrassed because he knew that what had been committed to—what had been promised—had just slipped away, and he knew that he had no power to do anything about it. But there are people in the Government, in the Cabinet, who did have the power to do something about it, and they failed. These choices should have been made in the Queen's Speech to protect people in work.

This week, 127 people at Richmond upon Thames College—the entire teaching staff—were told, “You're fired unless you sign a new contract taking 10 days off your entitlement. Go away and think about it.” Of course, because of the trade union legislation it was not possible for the union to fight back immediately—it had to consult, ballot and notify. But it has balloted, and, on an 88% turnout, 97% voted in favour of strike action, because the situation is disgraceful. Yet the management of the college are now calling in those workers one by one, putting pressure on them by saying, “What are you going to do if you don't have a job because you're failing to sign this new contract? What are you going to do at the end of the week if you can't pay your rent or feed your kids—if you're one of those people who need to use food banks?” That is the pressure that is being put on people by insecurity in employment. That is why all the things that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) talked about—all the things that he put together in the employment rights green paper—are so vital if we want to have equality and fairness at work, as the title of this debate says we should. We do not have it; we need to.

There is insecurity in health. I tabled an amendment to the Queen's Speech in which I talked of the 6.1 million people who have been referred to a consultant and are waiting for treatment. Today that figure was uprated by 300,000, with now 6.4 million people who have been referred to a consultant still waiting for treatment, over 2 million of them waiting more than the 18-week maximum period and 300,000 waiting for more than a year. When the Minister winds up, let them not say that this is because of the pandemic, because we already knew that it was building up. The figure was 4.43 million before the pandemic even started—and that was because of a decade of underfunding of our health service.

We have insecurity of income, we have insecurity at work, we have insecurity in health, and we have insecurity in housing. How many times have we had to stand in this Chamber and talk about the plight of those trapped in accommodation where there are known fire safety defects? They are unable to move on with their lives, unable to sell—partly because the EWS1 forms but not only that—unable even to get insurance on their properties, and being charged through the nose by unscrupulous managing agents for scaffolding or waking watches. They wait just to get on with their lives. They cannot have a new child because they do not have the bedroom space. They cannot separate if they want to get divorced. They cannot move to go to a new job. Their lives are frozen because of the failure of the Government to act.

The insecurity that climate change puts over all our lives needs to be tackled in a comprehensive housing policy. For all the talk about a windfall tax—and we should talk about it—the cheapest energy is the energy that we do not use, so we should insulate the 19 million homes that need insulation. The Government have known this for years. Every Select Committee of this House

has told them what to do and there has been complete inaction. Where in the Gracious Address is the real sense of commitment to tackling this as part of the housing crisis? There has been a 38% rise in street homelessness and a net loss of 22,000 social homes across England. We need the Government to tackle the housing crisis.

Looking to the second part of the debate's title—“Power in Communities”—how do we give power to communities? By making their lives secure and by enabling them to stand up for themselves. That means having security of income and security of health, and it means someone having the security of having a home they are confident in, where they do not feel trapped and in danger.

Power is something that resides in land. It is extraordinary that 1,000 years on from the Domesday Book in 1086, half of the land of the United Kingdom is still owned by fewer than 6,000 individuals. That is why we urgently need land reform. I was delighted when the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) this morning agreed with me that we need reform of the Land Compensation Act 1961 so that councils can buy land at a price closer to its existing value, rather than its hoped-for value. That would free up land in this country for housing, but we need to go much further.

We need to look at what Milton Friedman—quoted by the right hon. Member this morning—described as the “least bad tax”. He was referring to the land value tax. Unless we challenge the 1,000-year land ownership that has given so few people in this country the power over their communities—I note that one such magnate spoke earlier in the debate—and give that power back to the people through a genuine programme of land reform, we will not have the right to talk about power in communities and fairness in our society.

2.51 pm

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who gave an outstanding and incredibly powerful speech.

The Queen's Speech was a real opportunity for the Government to reset and to deliver legislation that would increase living standards, create communities of opportunity and remove social inequalities. Instead, the Government decided to put political and party interests over the interests of people, but the public clearly see that. They are tired of this out-of-touch Government, and that is why the Conservatives suffered losses in last week's local elections, including losing Conservative flagship councils such as Wandsworth Borough Council, which was won by the Labour party. That has provided us with the opportunity to show how a Labour-run administration can do things differently, being ambitious for everyone. I know that the new Labour leader and councillors of Wandsworth Borough Council will do an excellent job in serving the people of Battersea and Wandsworth.

The Government speak of levelling up, but in reality they are levelling down. Growth has stagnated under the Conservatives since 2010; meanwhile inflation is predicted to rise to 10% later this year. Research by the Resolution Foundation found that average earnings are forecast to be just £2 a week higher than they were before the financial crisis, leading to this Parliament being the worst on record for living standards.

Across the country, people are seeing their household incomes and purchasing power fall, and many are falling into poverty, especially disabled people and women—and we know that many of these groups are experiencing some of the worst impacts of this cost of living crisis. Just this week, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research said that a further 250,000 households face destitution, which would take the number of people in extreme poverty to 1.2 million.

London, our wonderful city, is one of the most prosperous regions in the UK. However, a lot of people are still struggling with the high cost of buying or renting and the high cost of living, which is reflected in high levels of poverty, especially for children stuck below the poverty breadline. In my constituency, people are experiencing huge increases in their energy bills. We know that 55% of them are spending more on transport and 69% are spending more on groceries. The Tories' national insurance tax rise is also set to hit people's incomes. That is the reality for many people not just in my constituency but across the country.

A pro-growth and in-touch Government who governed in the people's interest would have changed direction and introduced an emergency Budget that included a windfall tax on the oil and gas companies, but this Government are not serious about helping people. It is clear that they are not committed to levelling up, as shown by them leaving out a vital piece of legislation—the employment Bill.

The employment Bill could have protected workers' rights, outlawed bad practices such as fire and rehire, and even introduced proper mandatory pay gap reporting for disabled people and people from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. That is a choice and a failed promise that the Government have made several times.

The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill lacks ambition and is incredibly thin on detail. Communities will have to compete for small pots of money handed out by central Government. If the Government were serious about tackling inequalities and levelling up this country, they would seek to give real power to communities. There is evidence across all areas that levelling up is not happening, as shown if we look at the Government's policies on Brexit, industrial strategy, employment, housing, education and equality.

As for the Brexit freedoms Bill, research and many conversations with my constituents show that Brexit has created more red tape and regulations that are hurting economic growth and having an impact on business and people's lives. The Government must be honest with businesses about the true cost of Brexit. Why will they not publish the real economic impact of Brexit, for which the Opposition have been calling? Furthermore, when the Minister responds, she needs to reassure the House that the Bill will not seek to row back on the rights that many have fought hard for.

We need to support businesses such as those in my constituency, which are key to local growth, innovation and investment in our communities. The Queen's Speech showed, however, that businesses cannot afford the Conservatives, because there was nothing to deal with the high costs and soaring energy bills that businesses face. The Government should do what Labour have been calling for, and what Labour would do, and scrap business rates as we know that they are outdated.

On the regeneration of our high streets, there was no mention of how the Government will protect essential face-to-face services that many of my constituents rely on, especially disabled people. Since the Conservatives took power, more than 6,000 bank branches have closed, including some in my constituency, which has left thousands of people without access to banking services. We know the role that banks can play on our high streets.

The social housing regulation Bill will be successful only if reforms deliver high-quality, zero-carbon, genuinely affordable new homes in places that desperately need them. The Government have rowed back on their 300,000 target, but we do not know whether they will stick to it or whether they are throwing another promise down the drain. When it comes to social housing and those commitments, which can be welcome, the devil will be in the important detail as to whether the Bill will lead to better standards in social housing, especially after decades of under-investment by the Tories in Battersea and Wandsworth. Will the Bill ensure that tenants' voices are heard, and will it provide them with effective redress?

It is good that the Government have committed to a renters reform Bill, including a ban on no-fault evictions, but again, the devil will be in the detail and in the timing of its being enforced. There are now 1 million more people living in private rented accommodation.

We are nearly five years on from the Grenfell fire, but yet again, in this Queen's Speech there is no protection in law for those leaseholders having to pay tens of thousands of pounds in fire safety remedial costs. The Government have missed two opportunities to address this shortcoming. In the Fire Safety Act 2021 and the Building Safety Act 2022, there was nothing to tackle this injustice and really help so many leaseholders—many in my constituency, but leaseholders up and down the country—who are living in homes that are unsafe and who are unable to move on with their lives, sell their properties or even just enjoy family life.

On education, the Schools Bill contains no plan to really support children's recovery from the pandemic. We know that targeting the disparities that black, Asian and ethnic minority children and disabled children face, especially when it comes to exclusions and off-rolling, have not been addressed. Essentially, after the pandemic, it would mean so much more, if the Government are really serious about actually levelling up this country, if this Queen's Speech made reference to the disproportionate impact the pandemic and the cost of living crisis are having on black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, women and disabled people, but yet again there is nothing in it to protect those groups of people.

Finally, instead of empowering people, the Government have focused on taking away hard-fought-for rights through the Public Order Bill and replacing the Human Rights Act 1998, which was introduced by the last Labour Government, with a British Bill of Rights. That rings alarm bells in everybody's ears, particularly on the Opposition Benches, as we know that those will just be steps to try to reduce our hard-won and hard-fought-for rights.

I will say it again: this is not about levelling up; it is levelling down. The levelling-up agenda is a myth. It has nothing to do with removing inequalities or tackling the many burning injustices. It has division and culture wars written all over it, and it aims to divide our

[*Marsha De Cordova*]

country into rural versus metropolitan or London versus red wall areas. The Queen's Speech has shown that this Government are all about bluster and empty promises.

3.2 pm

**Mary Glendon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): The announcements made in the Queen's Speech do nothing to increase the trust that the people of North Tyneside have in the Tory Government, nor to alleviate their concerns about the rising cost of living, which is starting to bite really hard in North Tyneside. I have heard from so many of my constituents who are hurt and angered by the antics in No. 10 during partygate, while they rigidly followed covid rules. They were unable to be with relatives in hospitals or care homes and, worst of all for some, were not able to be with them in the last hours of their lives.

To add insult to injury, included in the estimated £4 billion of fraud in the furlough scheme is the North Tyneside Conservative party, with a furlough claim for a member of party staff who continued to work during lockdown. When I raised this sorry state of affairs with the Prime Minister at PMQs, he simply brushed the issue aside. Fortunately, the incident is now being properly investigated.

In North Tyneside, we have an excellent Labour council, led by our outstanding elected Mayor, Norma Redfearn. Thanks to the hard work of Norma, her cabinet and council officers, the council has fought hard to keep many important and vital services in place, despite fierce cuts from the Government. As a result of Government policy since 2010, North Tyneside has had to make savings of £131 million. The core spending per dwelling is only £1,984, compared with the average of £2,155. In this financial year, the council received £63.5 million of revenue support grant—a cut of 81.4% since 2014.

While the Government are making much of their levelling-up agenda in the Queen's Speech, the reality is that their levelling-up plan has given North Tyneside—where unemployment runs at 6.5%, almost 2% above the national average—category 2 status while the Chancellor's leafy Richmond constituency has been given category 1 status. Our area also missed out on the potential of 60,000 new jobs and £2.6 billion in new investment with the Treasury refusing freeport status; that affected the area from Blyth down to Wearside. I will never get over the missed opportunities from that, and nor will the people in our area. Of the 45 towns that received towns fund money, 39 were in Tory areas, leaving behind towns like Killingworth and Wallsend in my constituency.

The Tory Government have already failed the north-east on transport, cancelling the High Speed 2 north-east leg, refusing crucial upgrades to the east coast main line, and scrapping Northern Powerhouse Rail. Along with the North East chamber of commerce, I lament the fact that the transport Bill has no good news for our area. We all know good transport links are key to job creation and investment and surely should be part of any levelling-up agenda.

Despite promises, the Government have not given us a cast-iron guarantee that the electricity cables over the Tyne will be buried below the water or raised to allow

world-renowned companies in Wallsend and along the rest of the Tyne to bring in potentially millions of pounds more in contracts and thousands of jobs. Smulders in Wallsend employs 600 people; it is desperate to have something done about the cables, and we have been pleading with the Government since 2017—again, no levelling up here, or, in the case of the cables, levelling down.

Far from levelling up in the north-east, the Government are levelling down the region, as in total we receive less from the levelling-up and shared prosperity funds than we did from the EU per year. With so many doubts and concerns about levelling up, perhaps the Government should listen to the chief executive of IPPR North, who warns that they

“must prioritise turning the levelling up rhetoric into reality... People need to feel the benefit of ambitious action with full accountability on this critical agenda.”

The IPPR is urging the Government to make themselves fully accountable by including in the Bill a new independent body outside London to hold the whole of Government to account against legally binding levelling-up missions. I hope to see that there will be some degree of levelling up and I want to see a level social and economic playing field for North Tyneside and the whole north-east. I doubt we will get that in this Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, but what we will see, I hope, in the not too distant future is a Labour Government who deliver for our area and keep their promises to the north-east.

3.8 pm

**Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): We meet today with our constituents struggling more than they have in my entire lifetime, and that comes off the back of a very difficult decade or more for people in my community, with anaemic growth in the economy, virtually no wage growth, stagnant pay and of course ever-increasing bills. Millions of people across the country have been just about managing for a decade, whether by not going on holiday, not buying things, having hand-me-down clothes or parents missing out so their kids can eat. They have been just about keeping their heads above water for a long period of time, but in the last six months that has changed for that entire category of people with startling speed. Millions in this country and many in my community have seen their viability blown away by the increase in their bills, whether through inflation, in energy bills or at the petrol pump. I do not like the “cost of living crisis” as a frame because it does not nearly state how serious it is. It is a poverty crisis.

When the Government set out their agenda, there should have been a helping hand for working people to get them through their hour of need, but, yet again, true to form, they have been unable to meet the moment. They could have introduced a windfall tax on oil and gas companies to take hundreds of pounds off the energy bills of millions, but they chose not to. They could have taxed online retailers fairly and given our struggling small and medium-sized entities discounts on their business rates, but they chose not to. They could have finally done the right thing and cancelled the national insurance rise, but again they chose not to. What we have instead is more of the same, with high taxes, high inflation, low growth and low pay.

In my community, low pay is a disease. Last Friday, I attended an event at the Jubilee LEAD Academy in Bilborough in my constituency. Its inspiring young students

asked me to come to hear about their campaign to secure the real living wage—the proper one—for care workers. Many of them had parents who worked in care and saw the toll that hard work coupled with poor pay took on their lives. Many had relatives who were recipients of care and they saw how hard life was for those who ensured that their loved ones were looked after. They wanted to see those care workers looked after as well. They are fighting for better pay and the Government should listen to them. Those are six, seven and eight-year olds in a primary school who are well ahead of the adults chosen to lead the country. Instead, we get a promise of jam tomorrow, but there is no value in jam tomorrow when there is not bread today.

Just as pay is a core part of decent work, so is security. It is now five and a half years since the Taylor report and two and a half years since the 2019 Conservative manifesto promised employment legislation. We have heard Government Ministers promise an employment Bill 20 times. In opening the debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), said that the Government's commitment was "undiminished". I say gently—he is a good man and I like him a lot—that they cannot promise an employment Bill 20 times, fail to deliver it in the Queen's Speech and say that their commitment is undiminished. That is simply beyond imagination. I am old enough to remember the commitment to the UK being the best place in the world to work—where is that in the Queen's Speech?

Instead, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) raised so passionately, we are stuck with fire and rehire: a Victorian practice that is alive and kicking. In two years, we have seen it used on a large scale by British Airways, British Gas and P&O, and three times the Government have missed the opportunity to do something about it.

We should be cheered by the news this morning that Deliveroo and the GMB have reached a recognition agreement. That shows once again that the timeless and long-standing values of trade unionism are as relevant as ever in the modern economy. That will be good for Deliveroo's staff and for its business. It is a partnership; one does not come at the expense of others. However, the Government should be introducing employment legislation rather than hoping that the answer for people in low-paid work is to work longer and harder, taking more jobs, operating in the wild west of zero-hours contracts and bogus self-employment—colleagues raised that—and not really knowing what they will earn from one week to the next. According to the TUC, the failure to act in this area is costing the Treasury £10 billion a year. What could we do with that £10 billion from people in regular employment paying tax and not reliant on social security? We could meet 40% of the social care budget from that alone.

If we want to talk about fairness at work, we should be chasing a more resilient economy and one that is less volatile to the markets. One of my passions—colleagues can look at my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—is building a co-operative economy with a new model of ownership. We know that co-operatives are more resilient. We got little hope or optimism from the Queen's Speech, but we can look outwards to find that in the co-operative economy, because those businesses are at the coalface of the current crisis.

Co-operative and mutual enterprises are putting people before profit and supporting the vulnerable while the Government do not do their bit. They are building a fairer and more inclusive economy, but they need help. They could do so much more. We ought to have a Minister in Government who leads for co-ops. We should strengthen the credit union movement and support our building societies in providing affordable and accessible banking in all communities. We could have had a Marcora law, as they do in Italy, so that when a business is on the verge of collapse, workers have the right to buy it out. Instead of money being spent on employment benefits, resilient businesses that pay well could be putting that financial firepower back into communities, retaining good jobs, and keeping the economy going and thriving. Instead of money going to nondescript, distant and disinterested shareholders, we would be giving millions of working people a say in their own life and the services they use. That is a very exciting future, and the co-operative economy could do so much more in that area.

Instead, however, we see more of what has given us this decade of lost national growth. I am less excited about GDP than I am about what is in the pockets of my constituents. Their pay packets are, in real terms, less and less every month. That issue has grown exponentially in recent months. We should have had action to help them. Instead, we have vague promises of help in the future. That will not do. It is not good enough, and that is why I think there has been such anger about that, as there is on the Opposition Benches. We have to do better by our constituents.

3.15 pm

**Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): On International Nurses Day, I want to thank all nurses in Stockport and across the world, but in particular the members of Stockport Unison health branch, with whom I have a very good relationship. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and in particular to my trade union membership.

I associate myself with the comments made from those on the Opposition Benches regarding the cost of living crisis. Energy bills have gone up significantly. People on low incomes are impacted disproportionately, and it is they who need most support. The Government are failing our communities. I was in Blackpool on Monday last week for the USDAW—Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers—conference, the retail workers' trade union. Before I cover the issues some of the retail workers mentioned to me—I am a former retail worker myself—I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for all the work he has done on the "Freedom from Fear" campaign that USDAW has been running to protect shopworkers from verbal abuse, physical assault and all the terrible things that happen to shopworkers. Retail workers tend to be some of the lowest-paid people in our economy. They tend to work long hours and are often employed on zero-hour contracts. I am grateful that USDAW represents them.

There are two key points from a survey of retail workers on the cost of living that USDAW has sent to Members of Parliament. Two recommendations the trade union is making are a reduction in VAT from 20% to 17.5%, and an urgent and fundamental overhaul

[Navendu Mishra]

of universal credit. Several Opposition Members have already raised issues with universal credit and how it is having a negative impact on several people. I hope the Minister and other Government Members will listen and do something about that issue.

On the cost of living, Sue Peck from Stockport Car Scheme wrote to me recently. In case Members are not familiar with local car schemes, Stockport Car Scheme in Heaton Moor in my constituency is a door-to-door transport service for people living in Stockport who struggle to access public transport. Community transport schemes such as Stockport Car Scheme are always for a social purpose and never for profit. They support people who have mobility issues, cognitive impairments, disabilities, long-term health conditions and sensory loss. They use volunteer drivers, who source their own cars, to take people to their destination.

Stockport Car Scheme is calling for an immediate review of the approved mileage rate that can be claimed by volunteer drivers. There has been a significant increase in fuel costs, coupled with inflation, and that is having a negative impact on volunteer recruitment and retention. The approved mileage allowance payment was last reviewed in 2012 at 45p a mile. However, the RAC Foundation says that the cost of motoring has increased by 25% since 2012, and that is before we take into account the increase in fuel costs because of the crisis in Ukraine caused by Russia's invasion. The higher fuel prices are having an impact on Stockport Car Scheme and, I am sure, services across the country, as some drivers feel they are unable to continue volunteering due the extra cost burden on them. I therefore hope that the Government will review that.

The issues with waiting lists have also been raised and are significant. Several charities, including Cancer Research UK and Macmillan, do very important work to support cancer patients' families and communities. Cancer service provision across the UK often can be a postcode lottery. If someone lives near a hospital that has had capital investment and, sadly, they have cancer, or their loved one has cancer, they will be treated with the latest medical equipment. However, if someone's hospital is older, perhaps they will not be that lucky. We need to tackle that. Cancer Research UK conducted research recently and informed me that 65,000 people in England are left waiting to find out if they have cancer. That is simply not acceptable in one of the world's richest economies.

On waiting lists, I want to tackle the issue of NHS dentistry, because it has been deliberately underfunded by this Government, and that is pushing people into completing DIY remedies at home, often in a lot of pain. Yet again, it is a postcode lottery. In some areas of the country, people might be lucky enough to find a slot or two with their local dentist on an NHS placement, but otherwise, people have to pay an extremely large amount of money, and not everyone can afford to.

If you will allow me, Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to read out a piece of casework that I received regarding dentistry. I will quote it word for word:

"I have gum disease to the point all my teeth are very loose I have tried and tried to get a nhs dentists as I don't work due to mental health issues. I stayed in my bedroom for six years I just couldn't get out. To go private they want 64 pounds for me just to

be seen. Then so much for my teeth to be taken out and then dentures. I have just started to get out with the help of my sport dog. If I loose my teeth I will not go out again. I have phoned so many nhs dentists and got know where. I'm on a list at King's Gate House but that could take years. I really appreciate the waiting list but I will not have any teeth by then. I would really appreciate your help. I have phoned all the people I can. And I just don't know which way to turn. I hope you can help me."

It is actually quite upsetting to read that and to speak to that person.

Dentistry is a very serious issue. It has an impact on people's physical health and also their mental health. We need to see the Government come forward with a plan. The British Dental Association has done really good research on this issue. I urge the Minister and the Government to pay attention to this issue, and to tackle it properly.

The housing crisis has also been covered by several colleagues. The local housing allowance is simply not adequate enough for the current rates in Stockport. Stockport is a fantastic place to live, but if people cannot afford a mortgage—the house prices have significantly increased anyway—rents are extremely high as well, and the housing allowance from the Government is simply not enough. There were 33,000 fewer socially rented homes built last year than in 2010. There has been a huge increase in private renting, with households paying even higher rents, and rough sleeping is up by 141%. I go back to what I said earlier: the UK simply cannot afford a Conservative Government. These stats are terrible.

There is some positive news on housing. I have two local charities that do excellent work. Mr Jonathan Billings recently set up the charity EGG—Engage Grow Go. He is a long-standing campaigner and worker in the housing sector, and he is doing really good work on that, so I am really pleased to have his guidance and support. Also, the Wellspring, a local institution in Stockport, has been helping homeless people and supporting them for several decades.

There are so many cases that I could mention, but I will mention just one briefly—I know that other Members want to get in to speak. This is from a woman who, sadly, was recently bereaved—her partner passed away. She has lived in a one-bedroom apartment for 44 years. I will read out the casework:

"She and late partner live in 1 bed apartment since...1970s. Therefore it is a protected tenancy. She informed the Landlord of the death of partner and Landlord"—

immediately—

"tried to increase rent by 86%. The Landlord (son of original Landlord) did not realise that to increase rent in a protected tenancy he would have to apply to the 'RENT OFFICE' for consent and valuation."

There is no progress on this case yet, but she has lived in that property for 44 years. Very little work or maintenance has been done to the property, and in her words, it is a "hovel". She is very worried, as she is currently paying only £350 a month, and there is no way that she could afford the new rent, or even the rent on social housing. What are people like her supposed to do when they cannot afford the rent? There are more than 7,000 households on the waiting list for my local housing provider, Stockport Homes, so it will take several years for her to get anywhere. Where are these people supposed to go?



I usually have lots to say about buses, but I will try to keep myself from going down that rabbit hole. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers is running a campaign to protect transport workers and ticket officers because there have been attacks on them in several places. In his former role, the current Prime Minister closed down ticket offices on the Transport for London network. We need to protect these jobs to ensure that people who have mobility or health issues can seek help and support on the platform if they need it.

There is a significant issue with the lack of disabled access and the lack of safety tiles at train stations. Network Rail says that 41 stations across the country will see a change, and there are a couple in my constituency that will have work done, but progress is not quick enough. Stockport constituency is in the north-west, where only 16% of train stations—the worst proportion in the UK—have accessible ticket machines. Similarly, only 18% of our ticket offices are accessible, compared with the national average of 21%, and only 8% of station toilets are national key toilets, compared with the national average of 18%. Those figures are simply shocking. The Government talk a lot about decarbonisation and levelling up, but when it comes to supporting people to get on the public transport network, they simply do not do enough.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): Legrave station in my constituency of Luton North is in exactly the same position: 1.8 million journeys a year were made from that station before the pandemic, but there is no lift access and no accessibility at all. It is about time that we saw the levelling up of our stations as well as our towns.

**Navendu Mishra:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need fewer public relations exercises from the Government and more investment in our communities.

I welcome the fact that Greater Manchester Combined Authority, led by Mayor Andy Burnham, is introducing bus franchising, which will mean lower fares and more reliable services. It will also mean that private bus operators cannot cherry-pick the most profitable routes and leave communities disconnected, so it is very good news.

I assure you that I will finish very shortly, Mr Deputy Speaker, but first I must get back to trains. Stockport station, the only mainline station in my constituency with trains to Manchester, Birmingham and London, is Victorian and is pretty much falling apart. When it rains heavily, the platforms flood. The lift is often broken, which makes life uncomfortable for passengers and gives the staff a difficult time. I hope that the Government will announce significant investment in northern train stations, in addition to those in Luton—north first, if that is okay.

I am proud to have three maintained nursery schools in Stockport constituency: Hollywood Park, Larkhill and Freshfield. They do a really important job and communities across our country benefit from our maintained nursery school system, but sadly National Education Union research reveals that there are only 389 such schools left in England, of which many are located in the most deprived areas in the country. I pay tribute to the hard work of our good friend the former Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who led the campaign to protect maintained nursery schools in Birmingham

and across England. The solution is targeted support. The Government need to come forward with a funding formula that will support schools for the next decade, rather than with year-on-year solutions that create uncertainty and stress for the community.

I could say a lot more, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I do not want to disadvantage other speakers, so I will leave it there. Thank you for calling me.

3.28 pm

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): I will concentrate my remarks on fairness at work. I am more than happy to declare my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a proud member, and indeed the chair, of the Unite parliamentary group and a proud associate member of many trade union groups.

I believe that working conditions and fairness at work are a reflection of the power balance in society.

I recall that, just before Prorogation, the Chancellor reacted angrily to questions about his own family's finances, but at kitchen tables in my constituency in the north-east of England they are not talking about offshore trusts and bank accounts in the Cayman islands. The talk among families at kitchen tables in east Durham is about increasing fuel prices, the cost of living, higher prices for food and other staple items, and having to pay more tax. There does not seem to be much discussion about hiding assets in offshore tax accounts.

Of course, the Government could help, but they choose not to. Politics, and party politics in particular, is about choices. I was quite impressed by the Government's pledge, in response to the Gracious Speech, to make the United Kingdom the best possible place in which to live and work, but the facts belie that. We have had over 12 years of Conservative government. Many Conservative Members refer back to the last Labour Government, but I think it reasonable to assume that if the Conservatives had any intention of actually improving the quality of life, particularly for working people, there were ample opportunities to achieve that over a period of 12 years.

I was incredibly disappointed that, despite numerous assurances given to me and to my good friend the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), my hon. Friend—and good friend—the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) that an employment Bill would be included in the Queen's Speech, that has not happened. There are 38 Bills, but sadly there is nothing for workers.

I think that fairness at work means being paid enough to be able to participate in the economy, and to buy your own food rather than being dependent on food banks. When my parents were small—my mother is celebrating her 86th birthday today, and I wish her a happy birthday—there were soup kitchens. Those have now been replaced by food banks. I do not think that food banks are a sign of economic success; I think that they are a sign of economic failure. Sadly, they also confirm that work does not always pay. There are many people in insecure, low-paid work who, sadly, are having to rely on food banks in order to put food on the table and feed their families.

I think that job security means being able to turn on the heating without being worried about whether you can afford the bill, or being able to give your child

[Grahame Morris]

access to decent clothing, housing or even the internet. These are not luxuries; they are the basic essentials of a functioning modern economy in the 21st century. As a trade unionist, I believe that good businesses—and there are many examples of good businesses—should be standing side by side with their employees, as budget pressures and higher inflation are likely to lead to more industrial disputes and higher pay demands. People who are in work will obviously try to secure better pay rises.

There have been opportunities for the Government to act. On many occasions the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who opened the debate, has condemned the bully-boy tactics of fire and rehire and unscrupulous employers. But then, incredibly, he himself talked out the private Member's Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North, who is no longer in the Chamber. I am delighted to learn that Lord Woodley has been successful in the private Members' Bill ballot in the other place, so there will be another opportunity to raise this issue.

We have had strong words from the Government, but sadly no action. We have witnessed the disgrace of P&O Ferries sacking British workers, breaking our laws and hiring private security firms to manhandle seafarers off the ships. The Queen's Speech delivers the harbours (seafarers remuneration) Bill, but one thing it has been able to do is to unite the unions, the ports and the employers in criticising this plan as ineffective and unworkable. When the Transport Secretary said that he would "stop at nothing" in order to take P&O Ferries to task for its blatant disregard of UK employment legislation, I do not think any of us actually expected him to do nothing. We thought he would do something. This shows that the rich and powerful can break the law with impunity, whether it is the senior management of P&O or the Prime Minister, because it seems to many people that the system is built to protect the powerful and ignore their wrongdoing. Meanwhile, many working families in communities such as mine in Easington are struggling.

Police officers' retirement plans are in tatters because of Government pension changes, and prison officers are leaving their jobs every day because of the terrible pay and the awful and reducing terms and conditions. The hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) expressed regret about the Government's failure to support his Tips Bill. I also want to express regret that the Government did not support my Bill on prison violence, which aimed to place a duty on the Prison Service and the probation service, including private operators, to minimise violence in the workplace.

**Dean Russell:** I would just like to clarify that the Government and the Minister have actually has been incredibly supportive of my Tips Bill, and I know that work is continuing to ensure that it comes through, but I appreciate the nod and the mention from the hon. Gentleman, and I appreciate his support.

**Grahame Morris:** The hon. Member is very kind, and I appreciate the tip. I was under the impression that Ministers supported my Bill, because they were nodding as well, but unfortunately that was not the case. Anyway, I wish him every success.

I was talking about the way the Government have treated prison officers. They ignored the pay review board, they expect prison officers to work until they are 68 and they ignore the issue of workplace safety. In fact, they seem to be normalising workplace violence. So many prison officers are leaving the service that the Ministry of Justice itself has estimated that almost 87,000 cumulative years of prison officer experience have been lost since 2010. That loss of knowledge and experience is a problem that is replicated across many aspects of the public service. It is making workplaces less efficient and more insecure, and if we need proof, we need only to ask any constituent who has reported a crime, applied for a passport, sought to review a driving licence, reported antisocial behaviour to the council or is in urgent need of an ambulance. There are many examples of the Government's mismanagement, lack of investment and simple lack of care for many of our communities. Under the Conservatives, the poorest are expected to work harder and longer and to receive less. This is a Government who seem to reward bad businesses such as P&O Ferries, and those who cheat, deceive and refuse to pay their taxes are rewarded.

3.38 pm

**Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): In looking at the issue of power in our communities from a Scottish perspective, we cannot ignore this Government's clear hostility to devolution in Scotland and the return of some powers to our country. They have clearly forgotten that it was devolution that revived any sort of Tory presence in Scotland after they lost all their seats there following the 1997 general election. Nevertheless, we hear that in 2020 the Prime Minister told a group of his MPs that the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament had been a "disaster" and a "mistake". The Minister for Brexit Opportunities stated that he believed the constitution was vandalised with devolution and that the Tories must undo it. So I suppose it is no surprise that this programme for government includes more outright assaults on the devolved settlement. Take the ironically named Brexit freedoms Bill, which seeks to remove and restrict retained EU laws. This Bill, we are told, is to extend and apply across the UK, but many retained laws are incorporated into Acts of the Scottish Parliament. Many, indeed, focus on the standards this UK Government seem so determined to gut. Surely it should be for Holyrood to decide on their future, not this place and certainly not this Government.

The eternal quest of most Conservative Governments, the fabled bonfire of red tape, is promised so often but never really delivered. Indeed, we have seen the pile of red tape multiplied many times over by Brexit-created snarls, but the Prime Minister now promises a bonfire of retained EU legislation. That will see standards slump as the Tories rip away legislation that has protected Scottish interests for almost 50 years.

Brexiteers have never shied away from hacking at workers' rights, as we have heard from numerous hon. Members today. We in Scotland certainly do not trust this Government to maintain even our current standards in areas such as workers' rights, food and the environment, and we have heard why from Conservative Members.

Remember, this is the Government who appointed the former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott to the Board of Trade. Apparently, he once bragged that

he was able to fast-track international trade deals because he is not sidetracked by details such as environmental standards and workers' rights.

Devolution and the power it returns to our communities in Scotland are being further eaten away by this Government's so-called levelling-up agenda. In January, the House of Lords Constitution Committee's report on the plan said that the UK Government are simply ignoring devolution and the calls for greater transparency on funding decisions. The Scottish Government have no role in deciding how this funding is allocated, and so which projects might align with their priorities, in order to deliver maximum benefit. This runs completely counter to the principles of devolution. The fact it has been created by a Government of a political hue that we in Scotland have not supported since the 1950s, with priorities and values that we in Scotland do not embrace, illustrates again why the power to make all our own decisions is the way forward for our country.

What guarantees can the Minister give us that the Scottish Parliament will not be forced to amend retained EU law? The Scottish Government intend to stay as closely aligned to EU legislation as possible. What power do Scotland's Government, Scotland's Parliament and, ultimately, Scotland's people have if those decisions are stripped from their hands and made by Westminster?

Why are the UK Government now concerned about retained EU law not having received full democratic scrutiny when they are certainly not bothered about, say, international trade deals returning to this Chamber to be considered by hon. Members before they are signed? That is another question on which I fear we will get no reply from the Dispatch Box.

We were also told that lost EU funding will be replaced with equal, if not greater, funds. Those, I am afraid, are just more fibs from the cast members of Vote Leave. The Scottish Government calculated that £183 million a year is needed to replace the different EU funding streams that Scotland had previously received. This should mean that Scotland receives £549 million over the next three years, but we are getting only £212 million through the shared prosperity fund—a 60% cut in real terms that leaves us with real fears for the future of numerous community groups across my constituency of Edinburgh North and Leith, and across Scotland.

A particularly alarming admission that I must mention is the lack of any replacement for one of the most valued EU-funded schemes in Scotland, the LEADER programme, which supports more than 900 projects across rural Scotland, including 400 initiatives for young people and disadvantaged groups. The shared prosperity fund does not replace it, and nor can we see obvious opportunities to access similar support. When questioned in the Scottish Parliament on the rationale for levelling-up fund priority groups, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities said:

“The conclusion about whether funding has been distributed equitably will come at the end of the process.”

That is an extraordinary admission from a Minister. Surely allocations should be continuously reviewed, evaluated and then reported; I am pleased to hear that the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), who is no longer in her place, agrees on that. Shortfalls in this funding will likely mean the end of many

organisations and services that have provided vital services to communities for years or even decades, damaging even further the fabric of our society. In the midst of a cost of living crisis and the biggest fall in living standards in recent memory, the Government's flagship policy to rebalance power and resources swerves Scotland's elected Parliament and leaves our communities with many, many pounds less in funding than we had with the EU. How can this be justified in a country where every local authority, all 32 of them, rejected Brexit? All this is not to mention outstanding questions—which I will not go into in detail, although I could—about what appear to be politically motivated choices made on those funds.

The people of Scotland trust the Scottish Parliament to make these decisions. The Prime Minister and his wrecking crew of Brexiters seem to think that devolution was enacted merely at the whim of a previous Administration and that it can simply be reversed with a wave of their aristocratic hands. They have clearly forgotten, so I will remind them, that in the 1997 devolution referendum almost three quarters of voters backed the re-establishment of a Scottish Parliament. It was, as David Cameron acknowledged, the settled will of the people. In the years since, that support has mushroomed, with polling from 2019 showing that 93% of the Scottish public were in favour of the Parliament's existence. That demonstrates clearly the continuing support from communities in Scotland for power being returned to them, after more than 300 years of it being locked away from them down here.

Policies such as free prescriptions for everything from HRT to medicines for those with long-term conditions, and tuition-free university education, have broken from Conservative ideology at Westminster and meant real benefits for the people of Scotland. While Tory Government free-marketeers stubbornly refuse to meaningfully support people amid the cost of living crisis, the Scottish Government have used their limited powers to take measures such as increasing Scottish social security payments by 6% and doubling the Scottish child payment to £20 per child per week, with plans to increase it further by the end of the year. We have mitigated the impact of hated UK Government policies such as the bedroom tax and the benefits cap, at a cost to our Government of hundreds of millions of pounds per year.

Every day the UK Government fail to use their reserved powers to tackle the cost of living crisis, they show again, starkly, why independence is the only way for Scotland to build that fairer society we all want to see. It is no wonder that in last week's council election the fortunes of the SNP and the Conservatives were so contrasting. The Tories suffered their worst result since 1990, whereas the SNP won its 11th election in a row. Following consecutive emphatic election wins, as well as a clear majority in the Scottish Parliament for another independence referendum, the mandate for that second vote should be beyond dispute. Furthermore, a new report on last year's Holyrood election by the Scottish Election Study, carried out by six academics across the UK, concluded that it was “Independence Wot Won It” for the SNP Government. The study shows not only that the SNP holds broad support across a number of demographics, but it won more than half of the constituency ballot among voters born outside the UK, as well as a plurality of those born in England. Surely that is a testament to our outward-looking and progressive vision for Scotland's future.

[Deidre Brock]

Finally, it would be remiss to talk about empowering our communities without making some remarks on the Online Safety Bill, which, if amended, could play an important role in protecting and enhancing democracy at a national and local level. There is much in the Bill that the SNP can support, but it disappoints in its lack of a credible plan to tackle online misinformation and disinformation, which is doing so much to weaken our democracy. We think the Bill should include robust measures on misinformation and disinformation, and the UK Government should follow the example of countries such as Sweden, Finland and Latvia in building up national information resilience programmes.

The Government might point to self-regulation by online platforms via the ads transparency centre, but we have learned that tens of thousands of ads went missing from Facebook's ad archive in the final days of the 2019 general election. There are requirements for businesses, charities and public sector organisations to communicate honestly with the public about their online activities and products, but no such provision exists for political parties or campaign groups.

Neither the Advertising Standards Authority nor the Electoral Commission has the powers to enforce basic standards of honesty in electoral online advertising. Currently, a bad actor can run a huge volume of misleading online adverts and invest large amounts of money in breach of electoral law, and if that bad actor does not report it, or its activities are not uncovered and reported, there is no record of that advertising having been placed.

The various campaign groups that were established as unincorporated associations and sprang up like weeds just before the most recent Scottish elections used Facebook ads in particular to push political links, and in most cases it was not possible to establish who paid for the ads or the groups' political links. The Government must look into and close the loophole that allows donations under the spending limit or directly to political candidates.

In closing, I urge the Government to take the issues I have outlined much more seriously than they have been taking them. They should examine closely the dark side of political advertising and take some real action. Democracy is under threat like never before, and without democracy there is no real power for our communities.

3.51 pm

**Olivia Blake** (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate, because although the Government talk abstractly about levelling up the country and addressing the housing emergency, people in my constituency and throughout the country are paying the price of years of failed policy and Government inaction.

The proposed renter reform and social housing regulation Bills in the Queen's Speech are once-in-a-generation opportunities to build a new system in which everyone's right to safe and secure housing is protected, respected and guaranteed in law. It is vital that this opportunity is not squandered, and I will hold the Government's feet to the fire to ensure that it is not because, I am sorry to say, their record to date has hardly been inspiring. Throughout the pandemic, we saw Ministers' willingness to cast aside people in the rented sector. The covid crisis

only confirmed what we already knew: that rents are too high, that renters' rights are too precarious and that too often rented accommodation is unsafe or in poor condition.

Since I was elected in 2019, not a week has gone by in which I have not heard horror story after horror story from people in my Sheffield constituency about mould, damp, exposed asbestos, broken appliances, rats, vermin and many other issues. Tenants are afraid to speak out in case they face eviction or cannot re-sign their contract the following year. Renters are being gradually priced out of areas by landlords who are unchecked, unchallenged and feel no consequence for their actions.

One family I have been working with cannot put furniture against the walls because it causes cavities where black mould builds up. This is not happening in just a handful of properties: according to a report by Shelter, across Sheffield 28% of private rentals and 4% in the social rented sector contain category 1 hazards such as excess cold or risk of falls. To make matters worse, my constituents themselves are often unfairly blamed for the hazards. I constantly hear of people being told that the black mould in their properties is because of their own ventilation problems and that they need to open their windows more and bleach their walls. Often, these families have been sitting in the cold with their windows open all year round, constantly running dehumidifiers, at great cost. One family has even innovatively—albeit sadly—been using sticky-back plastic on their walls and replacing it every few months to remove the mould.

Given the rising energy costs, problems such as those I have described are all the more concerning. The impacts are far-reaching: I have seen numerous cases of new or worsening asthma in children, formally recorded by doctors as likely to be linked to their living in mouldy or damp housing conditions. Other families have reported repeat infections. We are returning to the 1800s. My constituents are not only paying the price with their physical health; every single person I speak to with housing issues is also experiencing poor mental health. Living in conditions unfit for human habitation is devaluing. It makes people feel as if they do not matter. The stress of having constantly to complain and chase up repairs comes at a cost for people because they are having to take multiple days off work to try to resolve the issues and to protect their families.

Our housing market is fundamentally broken. This is not a new emergency, but the covid-19 pandemic has made the situation more acute, exposing worsening cracks in the private rented sector and pushing more people into long-term crises of homelessness, debt and precarity.

In Sheffield, we saw a 46% rise in the number of private renters claiming housing benefits to help pay their rent between February 2020 and 2021. Nearly 3,000 households were made homeless, or threatened with homelessness, over the same period. The main issue, as we know, is that not enough affordable housing is being built. Shelter's recent report makes it clear that a key part of our solution must be to build more new, good quality social housing. Investing in social housing would deliver affordable homes in which local people can thrive, because genuinely affordable social rents allow people to save money and to build their lives.

Between 1946 and 1980, an average of 126,000 council homes were built every year. As of 2019, that figure was just 6,826. My city, once famed for the construction of great public housing works, including the streets-in-the-sky design of Park Hill, and the radical Gleadless Valley estate, now faces a year-on-year decline in social housing stock, largely as a result of Thatcher's right to buy. Between March 2015 and April 2020, 1,812 social homes were sold in Sheffield through right to buy, and only 229 were built.

The situation is not just about the affordability of rents, but about the quality of housing and the affordability of day-to-day bills. I am pleased to say that Sheffield Labour group has pledged to spend £350 million to improve the quality of council housing to upgrade all council homes to EPC band C, retrofitting homes to make them warmer, and greatly cutting energy bills and emissions.

Our council now plans to build 3,100 new council homes—to the highest energy efficiency standards—but unfortunately it is nigh on impossible for local authorities to build enough to maintain that rate let alone carry out the investment in maintenance that is so desperately needed to improve council stock.

As Shelter's "Levelling up with social housing" report states, in order to truly level up the city of Sheffield, it needs to be provided with the funding to ensure that it can build the good quality, genuinely affordable social homes that it needs. To date, however, the Government's ambitions for levelling up have stopped far short of the action that we need to see even to maintain our current stock of social housing, let alone provide genuinely affordable, warm, new-build homes.

It is time that Ministers stepped up to the challenge. My constituents are tired of poor quality housing. They are tired of high rents and of struggling from pay cheque to pay cheque to pay their rent and bills. We need a housing revolution, and I will be fighting to ensure that that is what these two Bills provide.

I wish to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) for his work as the Mayor of South Yorkshire. It is incredibly brave of people to put themselves forward for election, and I congratulate Oliver Coppard on becoming the new Mayor. I thank all candidates up and down the country who have taken the brave step to represent and build power in their community.

There is much that is missing in this Queen's Speech. I know that colleagues today have outlined very eloquently the issues that arise from not having the employment Bill. We have heard much today about taking away the ability of people in our communities to live independently and to be empowered to get the best out of their lives. It is incredibly telling that we see what I would call a Yorkshire mix of Bills—which is a bag of boiled sweets that are all different—because it is unclear what the Government's ideology is. It seems that each Department has a different flavour of right-wing ideology going on. That is very confusing for people up and down the country who are facing a cost of living crisis when their clear demands are to live well, live healthily, live in warm homes and have good quality, well-paid jobs.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans):** We come now to the last Back-Bench contribution, from Kirsten Oswald.

3.59 pm

**Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): People across the nations of the UK have had a difficult couple of years, and I fear that those difficulties—at least as the UK Government calculate it—provide the perfect cover for the Prime Minister's current chaos and his Government's failure to deliver on the promises set out in his party's manifesto. He did, however, deliver a severely undercooked Brexit, which Scotland did not vote for but which we are all now paying a high price for.

This week was the Prime Minister's opportunity to chart a way forward, if he intended to deliver on his promises. Instead, the Queen's Speech showed him for what the people of Scotland have long known him to be. Instead of measures of substance to help people in challenging times, we have a Queen's Speech of missed opportunities. We do not have anything that seriously addresses the themes of today's debate, fairness at work and power in communities.

Of course, if the UK Government had any interest in delivering fairness at work or properly thinking about the future of work, the long-promised employment Bill would have been among the Bills in the Queen's Speech—it was a Conservative manifesto pledge in 2019, after all—but, despite the numerous promises, yet again it is nowhere to be seen. That is a great shame, because for too many people the labour market in the UK is broken.

That was demonstrated during the pandemic, when millions of the self-employed and directors of small companies got no support because their place in the labour market did not fit the Treasury model. Some of the most vulnerable continued to work because statutory sick pay leaves people in poverty, and many just stopped receiving texts calling them to shifts and found themselves in limbo with nowhere to turn.

This was the UK Government's line in 2019:

"The Prime Minister was clear that he is determined to make the UK the best place in the world to work... Once Brexit is done, we will continue to lead the way and set a high standard, building on existing employment law with measures which protect those in low paid work."

To coin a phrase, what a load of baloney. It has proved, unsurprisingly, to be nonsense. Where are the measures to improve employment or fairness in the workplace? Where is the right to flexible working? They are all missing. Where is the stronger legal protection for pregnant employees, new parents or carers? Those things are missing too. Where is the single enforcement body to protect employee rights? It is missing.

The Queen's Speech should have featured reform of the chronically failing shared parental leave scheme. Recent figures show that just 2% of new mothers used the scheme to transfer some of their paid leave to the child's father. No one defends that scheme and no one pretends it works—it has been under evaluation by the UK Government since April 2018—but evidently addressing that undisputed failure does not merit legislation.

P&O Ferries sacking 800 workers without notice should have been a wake-up call for urgency in a wider reform of employment law. Instead, the Government have focused solely on the narrow issue of pay for seafarers, through the harbours (seafarers' remuneration) Bill. Those plans been called "feeble and likely unworkable" by Frances O'Grady of the TUC, and the Bill leaves unaddressed the wider issues of fire and rehire.

[Kirsten Oswald]

The Parliamentary calendar being what it is, any interventions in the labour market that are not started this year stand little chance of ever seeing the light of day. Without the protection of EU law, much of which this Government intend to strip away, UK workers face greater unfairness in the workplace, not less. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman): the Labour party must step up and support our calls to devolve employment law, rather than enabling this Tory Government, which Scotland did not vote for, to sell our workers short.

The people of Scotland did not vote for this future at all. We in the SNP are committed to making sure that they have the opportunity to choose a different future in an independent Scotland, where delivering fairness is not just an electoral soundbite. I challenge the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats to recognise the right of the people in Scotland to choose that better, independent future, instead of once again siding with the Tories in their race to the bottom.

The other strand of this debate is power in communities. I must have a different understanding from the UK Government of what “community” means. I see little sign of them adopting a community focus and approach, either in response to the cost of living crisis or in the proposals—or rather the missing proposals—in the Queen’s Speech. I see that the Prime Minister has adopted the simple tactic of denying the link between the actions, or inaction, of his Government and people’s very understandable anxiety about their bills. That will not wash. Voters can see for themselves that the UK Government are actively choosing courses of action that affect their lives in the most challenging of ways. This UK Government are choosing to load on tax rises, choosing to cut universal credit by over £1,000, and choosing not to uprate benefits by something closer to the current rate of inflation. Contrast that with the Scottish Government’s prompt action to uprate the limited number of benefits they control and to support families via the groundbreaking Scottish child payment. Contrast the UK Government’s approach, with their missing employment Bill, with the Scottish Government’s focus on fair work.

The UK Government are actively choosing to damage communities in other ways too. They are taking a wrecking ball to human rights and the dignity of the individual. Having closed off legal routes to reach the UK in an emergency, the UK Government moved on to their abhorrent Nationality and Borders Act 2022, criminalising those who use another route. Now they have adopted the inhumane policy of paying a third country to take those who make it to the UK off their hands. Not only is that policy morally wrong and a shocking waste of taxpayers’ money, but there are serious questions about the safety of people under those plans, including LGBT people. I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) about the contrasting approach to refugees between the Scottish and UK Governments. Like him, I very much welcome the election of Roza Salih. I think that the way forward will surely be one where more people are included in our democratic systems.

But that is not the approach that the UK Government are taking. Their decision to continue with their hostile environment instead of building an immigration system founded on community, on decency and on fairness is,

I fear, a sign of what is to come. The safeguards in the Human Rights Act are an essential feature of our democratic society and our commitment to the rule of law. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), they are also, whether the UK Government like it or not, at the heart of the devolution settlement, and changes must not be made without the consent of the Scottish Parliament. Looking at the report of the Independent Human Rights Act Review, it is difficult to disagree with this:

“Since its passage, the HRA has faced a steadily escalating series of attacks, designed not just to undermine the Act but, at times, the very concept of human rights. A genuine case can be made that the HRA has faced a series of attacks without precedent for a piece of legislation in modern British history.”

The Queen’s Speech was the next round in that series of attacks. It should really bring shame on the UK Government, but, having heard some of the remarks from Conservative Members today, it is clear that their approach to rights is to deny that they should exist.

The UK Government should also be ashamed by the way they have treated the issue of conversion therapy in the Queen’s Speech. There are no conversion practices that are acceptable, and provisions put in place must be trans-inclusive. We need to get a move on, too, given the serious harm that these practices cause. On 30 March, the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer), said in this House:

“Both the national LGBT survey of over 100,000 LGBT people and the in-depth Coventry report demonstrated that violent and harmful talking conversion practices continue to take place. That is why we need to act.”—[*Official Report*, 30 March 2022; Vol. 711, c. 796.]

But shamefully, within hours, it became clear that the UK Government would not use their proposed ban to protect trans people. In fact, it took a public outcry to get them to row back on what looked like a refusal coming down the line to protect anyone at all. Their excuse for their decision was the need to clear the legislative decks for the cost of living crisis and the Ukraine war. However, looking at the Queen’s Speech, it is now clear to all of us that no significant bodies of legislation are being brought forward on those issues, so that excuse does not wash. What is the fig leaf for that discriminatory decision?

It is a dark road that this Government are travelling down, in many ways, with scant regard for people struggling to manage because of the Tory cost of living crisis, a race to the bottom on rights, and a woeful disregard for workers. I repeat what my colleagues have said today: the people of Scotland deserve better and they have a right to reject this.

4.9 pm

**Lisa Nandy** (Wigan) (Lab): Out there in the country, a crisis is unfolding. We have the biggest fall in living standards since the 1950s, pensioners boarding buses to keep warm and food banks handing out cold boxes to families where both parents grind for a living that pays so little they cannot even heat the food handed out to them by charity, when it should be given as a right. We have had an uprising across the north of England and demands for more power in Scotland, in Wales, in the midlands and the south. We need to rewrite the script, ditch old orthodoxies and end the injustice of whole communities being written off and written out of the national story by Governments with far too little ambition.

In every corner of this country, people are crying out for change, and this Government's big idea is referendums on street names and an alfresco dining revolution. Is this it? Seriously, is this it? Can they not see how absurd it is to tour TV studios talking about a Medici-style renaissance of our towns, villages and cities when high streets are falling apart, when many town centres in every part of this country are now no-go areas for people who live there, and when homes, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) said, are cold and damp, and communities are broken apart by policies that force people to move into insecure housing miles away from friends and families? While they tour the country, reading out lists of leisure centres that have had a lick of paint funded by a small refund of our money that has been taken from us over a decade, on every measure—wages, homes, transport and life expectancy—the gap is growing and Britain is going backwards.

Are the Government not ashamed to stand there and say that they are getting the country firing on all cylinders, spreading prosperity and widening opportunity when Bloomberg this week showed that in nine out of 10 constituencies, the salary gap is widening, almost everywhere homes are unaffordable and public spending has fallen behind London in every single region of England in the two years since this Government were elected and took office with a promise to level us up? Are they not ashamed?

I thought it was pretty brave of this Government to enshrine the levelling-up missions in law, given that appalling record, but then I read the small print, and it turns out they are not even doing that. They are not even delivering the big flagship promise. Tucked away in this 325-page Bill, it states:

“The Minister...may revise the current statement of levelling-up missions so as to change the mission progress methodology and metrics or...target date”.

This is exactly what we have come to expect. They say they will build 300,000 houses a year, and then they do not. They promise Northern Powerhouse Rail 60 times in 60 press releases over seven years, and then they ditch it. They have given more money to fraudsters than they have to the whole of the north of England in the past year.

The bus subsidy, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra) said quite rightly, was quietly halved when no one was watching. The Government have closed Department for Work and Pensions offices across our regions. Remember that promise that when we left the European Union, we would take back control and the money that used to flow freely back to us through Brussels would be protected? That promise has been thrown in the bin.

The Cabinet is meeting in Stafford today. Frankly, I do not know how they have the nerve. Stafford is one of those places. Some £35 million has been lost from Stafford because of this Government's decision to hold on to money that belongs to us. A billion pounds has been taken from communities in England. I am starting to think that the Government are just incapable of keeping any simple promise. After all the talk and all the spin, the only people who seem to have taken back control are a small group of Ministers in Whitehall. Any Government worth having would have used this Queen's Speech to get money into people's pockets, scrapping business rates and bringing in a windfall tax on the big oil and gas producers to get money off people's energy bills.

It is not just that the Government do not back us when companies are making record profits and we are struggling to heat our homes; it is that they are actively working against us. This is the only Government in any G7 economy to put up taxes on workers during a cost of living crisis. I gave up looking for this Government's moral compass a very long time ago, but the economic stupidity of that is breath-taking. Next year, we are forecast to have the slowest growth of any G7 country, which is why levelling up matters more, not less, at a time such as this. We should be turbocharging this programme and investing in our communities.

In the nine years leading up to the pandemic—in almost a decade of Tory rule—only two of the 38 OECD countries invested less than Britain, which is how we got high tax, low growth and a cost of living crisis. It turns out that if the Government slash solar, ban onshore wind and degrade gas storage, we get an energy bills crisis. It turns out that if an Education Secretary axes the scheme to build schools fit for the future, we end up with an £11-billion repair bill and one in six kids being in schools that are falling apart. Now the Government tell us that they want to raise school standards and enshrine them in law—give me a break!

The difference between us and the Conservatives is that we believe in our communities and we are prepared to back them. We would invest £28 billion a year, every year, for a decade to bring back the good jobs that underpin our local economies, so that kids from Barnsley to Aberdeen have choices: the chance to leave if they wish, and the chance to stay and contribute if they can. That way, geography is no longer destiny—do hon. Members remember that phrase?—and young people do not have to get out to get on.

This Bill is not a plan; it is a 325-page obituary of the Government's levelling-up programme. The press release promises real power, but I think we have learned by now not to trust the spin. The Secretary of State promised to throw open the doors to welcome refugees from Ukraine, but he did not, did he? Some 200,000 families came forward in Britain to provide a home to people fleeing Vladimir Putin, but only 26,000 have been able to make a home here. After years of delay and agony for leaseholders, the Secretary of State said that he would make developers pay, but he did not, did he? We got a meeting, then another press release, but for all that, the agony continues.

What does the promise to implement the

“biggest shift of power from Whitehall in modern times”

actually amount to? The right to a better home was published literally—I am not joking—while the Secretary of State was on TV abandoning his commitment to build them. What on earth is the point of a right to something that does not exist? There was an announcement to make it easier for councils to bring boarded-up properties back into use, which is an idea so good that when we called for it back in September, the Government said that it was a “rehashed and failed” policy first proposed by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—I did not realise that the Secretary of State took advice from him. They went on to say that it “goes to show Labour...have absolutely nothing new to offer our country”.

I am pleased to see that they have come round to our way of thinking.

[Lisa Nandy]

Seriously, how many times do the Government think they can do this? They make a flashy headline-grabbing offer, but then people read the small print. The “power” in question is a share of the infrastructure levy, but only if people set up a town or parish council; and more powers, but only if people have a Mayor and live in an area that the Chancellor has deemed “economically viable” and has not written off, as he has done large swathes of the country. Even then, only a privileged few friends of the Secretary of State seem to get any powers that they need. My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) was an outstanding Mayor, but let us imagine what he could have delivered for the people of South Yorkshire if he had had the powers that he clamoured for throughout his entire time in office.

As I went through the Bill, it turned out that the only thing that we get the right to decide for ourselves is what our Mayor is called—I am not joking. Three whole pages of the Bill are dedicated to giving us the right to pick a new name for our Mayors. A Medici-style renaissance it is not. In fact, it is just patronising nonsense or, as the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) said, a load of baloney.

In the Secretary of State’s quote accompanying the press release, he brags that he will allow “every part of England which wants a London-style mayor to have one.”

May I gently say again to Ministers that not everywhere in this country wants to be London? We are proud of London—we love London—but not everywhere wants to be the same.

**Tom Hunt:** On the topic of Labour Mayors, I wonder if the hon. Lady shares my concern that the Labour Mayor for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is currently under investigation for bullying a huge number of staff at that authority?

**Lisa Nandy:** If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would be very careful about trying to give the Opposition lessons on bullying, given the allegations that were found to have merit against the Home Secretary and many other Members on the Government Front Bench. As they say, if you wrestle with a pig, you get covered in—stuff. I would be careful, if I were him, about using this place to try to throw mud at us.

If only the Secretary of State had come to us and said that he could not do what had been proposed. If only he had just said to us, “Look, the Treasury has blocked it, No. 10 has ditched it, and the Cabinet Office has laughed at it.” If he had come to us and said, “Work with me, because together we might achieve this,” we would have been more sympathetic today. Instead, what we get is 325 pages marking the death of the Government’s levelling-up agenda. Well, if the Government will not do it, we will.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) said, we will proactively defend and support the people who power this country. We will not stand aside when workers are thrown on the scrapheap. It really does make nonsense of claims of levelling up when we have a shower of Ministers who did not lift a finger to help hundreds of P&O workers until the news about P&O was made public. Today, the GMB and Deliveroo have shown that the jobs of the future can be

jobs that people can raise a family on with dignity, security and respect. The hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who is here to listen to the winding-up speeches, has run an admirable campaign to protect the tips of hard-working staff from unscrupulous employers, but where is the employment Bill that has been promised 20 times? Seriously, where is it?

We will put money back in people’s pockets through a windfall tax, so they can spend on our high streets, and our town centres can thrive again. We will aggressively chase down the jobs of the future, not have an empty Procurement Bill. We will not be a Government who promise to bring renewable jobs to Britain and then award a contract to build windfarms in Fife to a yard in Indonesia; instead, we will have a real strategy to make, buy and sell more in Britain. We will close the gap that has seen only two regions of the UK prosper in 19 of the last 20 years, and 12 years of managed decline of our nations and regions under the Tories.

By investing in good jobs in transport, digital and skills, as well as in tidal, hydrogen, solar and wind, we will rebuild our coastal and industrial communities. These places were once the engine room of Britain. Within living memory, we powered the world, and we will again. Whether in shipbuilding in Glasgow, textiles in Preston and Burnley, mining in Wales and Wigan, or fishing in Grimsby, the people that make our great towns and cities are the people who drove Britain forward, and they deserve so much better than this. Those jobs may have gone, but what remains is a fierce determination to contribute again—not to the history books, but to our future.

We deserve a Government who share our ambition for our communities and for Britain. That is why Labour will do this with the best asset we have—our people. If I have learned anything in the last 12 years, it is that people who have a stake in the outcome and skin in the game try harder, work longer, think more creatively and do more because so much is at stake. This Bill should have been the moment to hand real powers that we know will work for us to our community, so that we are no longer forced to go begging, cap in hand, to Whitehall for loose change and small powers. Every community in this country has the right to make a contribution to the national effort, not just some. It was George Orwell, who is forever associated with my town through “The Road to Wigan Pier”, who said that this is a country that lies “beneath the surface”, and it is time for that country

“to take charge of its own destiny.”

It is time for this tired Government—out of energy, out of ideas—to get out of the way, so that we can build it.

4.23 pm

**The Minister for Levelling Up Communities (Kemi Badenoch):** It is my pleasure to close today’s debate on behalf of the Government and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I begin by thanking hon. Members on all sides of the House who have contributed to today’s long and lively debate, following Her Majesty’s Gracious Speech earlier this week. Before I say more on how we are delivering on our pledge to strengthen communities, rebalance our economy and level up parts of the country, I first want to address as many as possible of the points raised by hon. Members during the debate.



I will start with the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who asked: where is the money? I do not think he is in his place, but I would like to thank him for his substantive engagement with the issues—he engaged far more than anyone else on the Opposition Benches. I am pleased that he found some things to praise in the set of Bills that we are bringing forward, unlike his colleagues, although I saw he was claiming credit for the policies that he agreed with; I am not quite sure whether that is right.

The hon. Gentleman asked where the money is, and the point I want to make—I know quite a few people will be making this point throughout the debate on the Queen's Speech—is that levelling up means more than money. We have been providing funding, but it needs more than that; clearly, funding alone has not eliminated regional inequalities, so other types of action are required. I agreed with the point of the anecdote of the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) about west and east Germany and the trillions of pounds spent. It is not about just pouring money into areas; that alone will not deliver levelling up.

I disagree with the point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East that levelling up means taking from wealthy areas and giving to others; it is not a zero-sum game. I also found his idea of devolving every single decision down to the most local level interesting, but if we did take up that radical idea, as he described it, he would then complain about postcode lotteries. To answer his question on the new powers that combined authorities will have, the final package of powers will be bespoke, and will depend on the needs of and proposals from local areas. Mayors could therefore have increased powers over budgets, employment and skills, transport, health and social care, and policing, but the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill streamlines the process for a combined authority that proposes taking additional powers. The Bill will make devolving more powers to Mayors easier as long as they agree to take on greater responsibility. There will be a flexible choice, which is why the detail the hon. Gentleman was looking for will not be there; the detail will depend on the proposals from Mayors.

Many Members raised good points. My right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox) asked questions about inflationary shock, global commodity prices and monetary inflation that I am unable to answer; I am sure Treasury Ministers will. He also made a good point about the conflicting aims in trying to deliver housing; I hope he will take part in debates on those issues during Second Reading of the legislation.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) talked about the need to have effective monitoring of levelling up, and that will be found in the Bill. We have embedded that mission in it, recognising there is a need to help everyone everywhere because there are pockets of deprivation all over the country, not just in certain regions. I look forward to hearing her further contributions on that.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about the Secretary of State saying that we did not have a housing target any longer. That is not true; that is a straw man. He did not say that; he simply said that the housing target is not the only way we are measuring success. We are also looking at issues

such as beauty, infrastructure, the environment and neighbourhoods. That does not mean we no longer have a housing target.

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) complained that the Secretary of State was not here to—

**Mr Betts:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kemi Badenoch:** Yes, of course.

**Mr Betts:** I apologise for returning a little late; I have been speaking at a housing conference and had to rush back. On this question of a target, the Government have a target, as the Minister has just said. Can she confirm that it is to build 300,000 homes a year before the end of this Parliament?

**Kemi Badenoch:** I confirm that we have not changed anything about our targets, but we are looking—*[Interruption.]* I am agreeing with the hon. Gentleman. We are looking at other things beyond targets, not just a statistic or number.

My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) raised the issue of vaccines and vaccine damage payments. Again, I am unable to give an answer on that at the Dispatch Box, but the vaccines Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup), will have heard his comments, and I hope he will receive a response shortly. He made wider points about the economy that I think will be addressed in the debates around energy next week.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) made many points that I agreed with, including on employment, and I want to acknowledge what he said about the risk takers being the employers; we often forget that when talking about employment.

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) complained about the legislation in this Session and the last. The legislation we are bringing forward was in our manifesto. These measures were manifesto commitments, and we won an election on those commitments, so he should ask himself why he is at odds with the wishes of the electorate.

The hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) made a passionate speech, as usual; but as usual, I disagreed with most of it. The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) talked about ethnicity pay gap reporting. She and I have discussed this many times. A review of the success of gender pay gap reporting is coming, and it will be interesting for us to have a conversation on that.

**Mr Sheerman:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister mentioned me, but then was intervened on, perfectly legitimately, by a colleague. I think she was about to say that I had made a wonderful speech and was about to rehearse the key points, but she was unable to finish what she intended to say about me.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** As the hon. Gentleman knows perfectly well, that is not a point of order for the Chair. It is a point fishing for compliments, and he is not going to get one from the Chair; nor, I fear, from the Minister.

**Richard Drax:** Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I balance the equation? I tried to get in, having been mentioned, but I was not allowed, so I feel the same as the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). It is the same for both sides.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is not going to get any compliments either. Let us return to the subject of the debate.

**Kemi Badenoch:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think that the hon. Member for Huddersfield was begging for a shout-out, so I am happy to give him one. His points were wonderfully bonkers, and I disagreed with most of them.

**Marsha De Cordova:** The Minister rightly talks about gender pay gap and ethnicity pay gap reporting. Does she agree that it is also time to review disability pay gap reporting so that we can address the disability employment gap and, more importantly, get the impairment-specific data that will really highlight some of the flaws in relation to disabled people and employment?

**Kemi Badenoch:** The hon. Member raises a good point. The metrics that we would use for disability pay gap reporting would be quite significantly different. There are issues around ability that mean that disabled people are at a serious disadvantage compared with others, but I think that we are already exploring that; we certainly keep it under review. Of course, I am happy to take those conversations offline.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Olivia Blake) talked about social housing regulation and made some good points. When the Minister for homelessness and rough sleeping—the Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes)—takes that Bill through the House, he will be able to answer many points that I cannot at this point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) spoke movingly about loneliness. He has been a powerful advocate for fairness in the workplace, with his Tips Bill and his First Aid (Mental Health) ten-minute rule Bill evidence of that. I note the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Tom Randall), which I think will be addressed in the renters reform Bill. We can provide further details on that in due course.

I was amazed that the hon. Member for Enfield North (Feryal Clark) said that the levelling-up White Paper was thin—it was nearly 400 pages of policies and ideas. That is proof that Labour MPs do not bother to read anything. It is insane to pretend that the White Paper is thin. I encourage them to engage with the content.

The fact that the majority of the debate has consisted of Opposition Members asking, “Where is the employment Bill?” simply shows the paucity of their arguments. The Government have promised an employment Bill, but the vast majority of legislation to improve workers’ rights does not need to come in a package entitled “employment Bill”. I was in the Treasury when we implemented the furlough scheme, which is probably the greatest employment protection scheme ever devised in this country.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Kemi Badenoch:** No, I will not give way. The many Members who have risen should listen to the point that I am making rather than interrupt it. The fact is, the furlough scheme—the greatest employment protection scheme ever devised in this country—is an example of how the Government act innovatively, nimbly and quickly to deal with the serious issues of the day.

**Chris Stephens:** I thank the Minister for giving way, but she cannot have it both ways. She cannot give Opposition Members trouble by saying that all the Bills tabled are manifesto commitments when an employment Bill was in the 2015 Conservative party manifesto, the 2017 Conservative party manifesto and the 2019 Conservative party manifesto. When will the Government table an employment Bill? They promised it in January.

**Kemi Badenoch:** I am making the point that we do not need an employment Bill to deliver employment legislation.

**Andy McDonald** *rose*—

**Kemi Badenoch:** We are still committed to one, but the fact remains—*[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) may think that I did not notice that he was not here at the beginning of the Minister’s speech. He may not intervene, as he was not here at the beginning of her speech.

**Kemi Badenoch:** The fact remains that we have already made progress on legislating to strengthen workers’ rights. We have closed the loophole that saw agency workers employed on cheaper rates than permanent workers and we have quadrupled the maximum fine for employers who treat their workers badly. The fact is, we on the Government side measure how well we are doing not by the title of legislation but by the fact that we have delivered record high levels of employment.

Moving on to the points made by the hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), she criticises us for not doing enough on the cost of living. I remind the House that at the autumn Budget, when she and all her colleagues had an opportunity to reduce the cost of living, like the rest of them she voted against measures in the autumn Budget to reduce the universal credit taper rate, which effectively gave low-income families a £1,000 tax cut. So they failed to support those on the lowest incomes. We do not buy their argument that they are interested in the cost of living, because when the legislation comes forward they vote against it.

The hon. Lady also criticised the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, just as she did the levelling up White Paper. I remember her comments during the debate on that. They were all sneering and no substance from someone who, again, clearly had not taken the time, like the hon. Member for Enfield North, to read it. She is constantly playing catch-up, because her immediate priority is to criticise instead of engaging with the policy detail. That is why the five-point plan she wrote in January consisted of five recycled policies we are already carrying out and some sour finger-pointing. That is not an action plan.

The fact is that we have done quite a bit on the cost of living. We are supporting families with the cost of living through £22 billion of support in 2022-23 and delivering the biggest net cut to personal taxes in over a quarter of a century. Our plan for jobs, as I mentioned earlier, is bringing unemployment back below pre-pandemic levels. We are delivering a £9.1 billion energy rebate with the £150 council tax rebate. We are increasing the value of the warm home discount to £150 and expanding eligibility to cover nearly 3 million households.

**Barry Gardiner:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kemi Badenoch:** I am not giving way, because Opposition Members do not want me to list these things. We are protecting the vulnerable, including pensioners, with winter fuel payments of up to £300 and cold weather payments of £25 a week. We delivered a record cash increase in the national living wage, meaning a £1,000 salary boost for full-time workers. We raised the national insurance threshold from July, saving an average worker £330 a year. We cut fuel duty by 5p for 12 months. As I mentioned, we cut the universal credit taper rate.

**Kirsty Blackman:** Will the Minister give way?

**Kemi Badenoch:** No, I am not giving way because the selective amnesia of Opposition Members never ceases to amaze me. They refuse to acknowledge the policies that they know we have carried out and they agree with. They pretend money is not being spent when we have spent it—and not just spent, but spent in unprecedented amounts. So there is no use giving way, just for them to repeat the same arguments they have been making over and over during the course of the debate.

I will move on to the comments made by the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis). He talked about levelling-up funds and money for local government. He knows that, as the Minister with responsibility for local government, this is something I care about very passionately. I know he is no longer a Mayor, but I will be working with local government leaders across the country. We have boosted funding to councils by £3.7 billion this year, an increase of over 4.5% in real terms, which will ensure councils have the resources they need to deliver key services. The poorest areas will receive 14% more per household than the least deprived areas. On who got levelling up funding, the truth is that all of this is based on the quality of the bids. We cannot guarantee that we can fund every bid, when they are compared with what is being presented by others.

The other thing Opposition Members say is that we have done absolutely nothing for the last 12 years. Just to remind them, in the last three years alone we have tackled the greatest public health emergency in a generation, delivered a historic funding boost to the NHS, ended the cruel lottery of social care costs with our £36 billion health and social care plan, led the world in the fight against climate change with our COP26 presidency, and tackled crime, closing over 1,500 county lines. We have delivered for the whole of the United Kingdom, securing vaccines for all four nations and agreeing the largest funding settlements since devolution.

**Kirsty Blackman:** If the Conservative Government have done all those wonderful things, how come my constituents cannot afford to eat?

**Kemi Badenoch:** I am afraid the hon. Lady is being disingenuous with the way she is presenting the argument. She knows—*[Interruption.]* I will withdraw that remark, Madam Deputy Speaker. She knows that I do not know the specific circumstances of her constituents. What I can tell her is what the Government are doing. I would ask her, given that we have devolved so much policy to the Scottish Government: what are the Scottish Government doing to help her constituents?

I will go back to saying what we have been doing in this country. The fact is that we have delivered for the whole United Kingdom, securing vaccines for all four nations and agreeing the largest funding settlement since devolution. It is also ridiculous for us to be criticised by Labour Members for not devolving more. In 13 years of Labour government, there was no devolution except in London. We created so many devolution deals. We even provided jobs for three Labour MPs, Tracy Brabin, Andy Burnham and, until recently, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central—and they say that we are doing nothing on employment. I am afraid that many of the Opposition's claims are simply not credible. *[Interruption.]*

The Queen's Speech set out the Government's ambitious—*[Interruption.]*

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. The noise is getting a bit too much. I cannot hear the Minister—*[Interruption.]* Look, it is obvious that hon. Members disagree with the Minister. That is what they are here for; they do not have to make so much noise about it. We have to hear what the Minister has to say.

**Kemi Badenoch:** It is because they don't like it up 'em and they know that the points I am making are hitting home.

This Queen's Speech sets out the Government's ambitious legislative agenda to grow and strengthen our economy, ease the costs of living for hard-working families and level up opportunity in all parts of the country. It includes the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill, which will transform struggling towns and cities, supporting local leaders to take back control of regeneration, end the blight of empty shops on their high streets and deliver the quality homes that communities need. A renters reform Bill will deliver the biggest change to rental law in a generation, improving the lives of millions of renters by improving standards in the private and socially rented sector. A social housing regulation Bill will shift the balance towards tenants, strengthening their rights and creating a robust regulatory framework that drives up the standards of social housing everywhere.

I am very proud that my Department is contributing five Bills towards the Government's ambitious legislative agenda. It has been a pleasure to work with ministerial colleagues, Parliamentary Private Secretaries and officials on these policies, and not least with our Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, who manages to be both Conservative and radical at the same time.

The Bills set out in Her Majesty's Gracious Speech meet the demands of the moment. Our plan recognises the sacrifices that the British people have made over the past two years and allows us to return to our central mission of levelling up communities and creating a stronger, fairer and more united country.

*Ordered,* That the debate be now adjourned.—*(Miss Sarah Dines.)*

*Debate to be resumed on Monday 16 May.*

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would be grateful for advice from the Chair following the publication of the Humble Address regarding the appointment of Lord Lebedev. As you will know, on 29 March, the House approved the Humble Address compelling the Government to release to us critical information concerning the Prime Minister's involvement in the appointment of Lord Lebedev to the other place. The evidence provided has been so heavily redacted that it is utterly pointless.

In the written ministerial statement accompanying the publication of the Humble Address, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General suggested that it would be

“for the government to consider what documents are suitable for release.”

I am sure that the Chair would agree that this sets an extremely dangerous precedent. Can you confirm that what the Government say in the accompanying statement—that it is up to the Government whether they are transparent about information requested by the democratic will of Parliament—is incorrect?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the right hon. Lady for her point of order, which is a point of order for the Chair and which she makes very well. I recall the matters to which she refers, but I cannot give her an answer to her question now from the Chair, because if she is asserting—as I think she is—that the Government response as published today to the address of 29 March does not satisfy the terms of that address, she will wish to consider whether that actually amounts to a complaint of privilege. It is the practice of the House that a complaint of privilege must first be raised in writing with Mr Speaker, as is set out in “Erskine May” in paragraph 15.32.

I cannot deal with the matter now, but the right hon. Lady raises it quite properly. If, as I think she probably is asserting, it is a complaint of privilege, she ought to make such a complaint after careful consideration of the written ministerial statement and the return to the address of 29 March, which has just been published, and she should then write formally to Mr Speaker setting out her concerns. I am sure that she will do so, and it will be for Mr Speaker to determine whether or not the matter should be given precedence for debate in the House, being a matter of privilege.

## Safe Hands Funeral Plans

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

4.45 pm

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this important Adjournment debate. I know that my constituents and other hon. Members' constituents who have been affected will be grateful that the situation has been recognised with due seriousness.

On the first day of the Easter recess, my constituent Patrick Hughes called my office following the collapse of Safe Hands Funeral Plans, which had gone into administration the week before. Quite understandably, he was extremely anxious about what would happen next. Some years ago, Mr Hughes had bought a policy or plan with Safe Hands at an initial cost of about £6,300. It was a significant investment, but it was worth it: he was paying for peace of mind that his family would not have to worry about finding the money for a funeral when the time came.

Funerals do not come cheap, but we all want to be able to give our loved ones the best send-off we can. A key attraction for Mr Hughes and for so many like him was the security that they were being offered. “Nothing can go wrong,” they were assured. “This is a smart investment: your plan is guaranteed and your family will be grateful that they won't have to worry about it at their time of grieving.”

To date, Mr Hughes has been contacted exactly once since the business went into administration: with the initial letter informing him of the collapse. Like the many thousands of policyholders in the same boat, Mr Hughes tried to make contact with Safe Hands or its administrators to get some answers about what would happen next. His letters went unanswered. The phone lines would not connect, or the phone would just ring out. Panic began to set in.

Customers were told that the company was “uncertain that the funeral plans will be able to be fulfilled” and that they should consider their plans “terminated with immediate effect”.

People were realising that it was becoming very likely that their life savings had been lost. Safe Hands was not regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Anecdotally, I understand that it was regarded in the wider funeral industry as a cowboy—a reputation that did not reach its customers in time for them to reconsider their investments.

The thing is that such plans, if provided by reputable companies and regulated properly, could be immensely beneficial. They really could give some peace of mind. That is why, along with the sector and colleagues, I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's plans to bring funeral planning services under the remit of the Financial Conduct Authority this July. The plans, which include assessments of providers, fund protection measures, stricter advertising rules and bans on cold calling, will hopefully protect future customers from falling victim to the scams of unscrupulous companies such as Safe Hands. I appreciate the letter that the FCA sent me in advance of this debate, setting out how the regulatory reforms will work; I look forward to taking up its offer of a meeting to discuss them in more detail.

**Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend my hon. Friend for securing this debate. As an example of the kind of advertising that the company has been doing, it promised that customers' money would be kept by an entirely separate and independent company. Is she aware that the trustees set up a company called SHFT Properties Ltd and that every single person who has ever been a director of that company was also a director of Safe Hands Plans Ltd? Does she share my frustration that directors of companies that repeatedly tell such blatant lies to con their customers are allowed to carry on as directors of other companies to this very day despite the chaos left behind in the wreckage, as has happened with Safe Hands Funeral Plans?

**Margaret Ferrier:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—and I shall have more specific thanks to give him a little later in my speech. I completely agree with the points that he has made. I know that the Government intend to introduce legislation relating to economic crime and impropriety during the current Session, and I hope the Minister can confirm that it is something they are seriously considering.

I was particularly happy to note the FCA's clear focus on consumer protections, and I fully agree with their approach in wishing to ensure that customers pay a fair price, that the plan meets their needs, that the money is looked after responsibly, and that they have all the information they need in order to make an informed decision. Unfortunately, however, that announcement is just too little, too late for many of Safe Hands' customers.

Let me provide some context by explaining the way in which Safe Hands worked. Customers' money was put into a trust and then reinvested. These funds are supposed to protect customer investments, and, indeed, that is how the plan was sold to my constituent Mr Hughes. The trust should have been overseen by independent trustees whose job is to make sure that funds are not misappropriated, and are ring-fenced from the funeral provider's business assets. When Safe Hands suddenly left the market after withdrawing its application to be an approved seller under the upcoming FCA rules, administrators found a significant shortfall between the value of this trust and the cost of the funeral plans that it would need to finance.

Apparently, what the administrators found was that the trust's assets had been wildly overvalued. What was even more concerning was that most of the assets were actually owned by third parties, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). Reports indicate that over £60 million of the trust's reported £64 million valued assets were high-risk investments based offshore. If that is true, we are talking about fraudulent misappropriation of the trust's assets. I will refrain from speculating on who might have benefited from all of this, which can only be described as a scam.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): The hon. Lady has made an important point. The constituents of many of our colleagues will be affected by this I have been contacted by a Mrs Hall of Knaresborough, who has been caught up in it. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is critical for funds that are supposedly secure to be managed in an effective way, and that there should be regulatory consumer protections

to ensure that those who are looking for certainty at what will be a very difficult time for their families can have that certainty?

**Margaret Ferrier:** As the hon. Gentleman says, many constituents of Members have been affected, throughout the UK. It is very important for people to have that certainty, because uncertainty is an extra worry for them.

It is likely that a number of similar smaller funeral plan providers will soon exit the market before regulatory measures become effective. They may be unwilling, or even unable, to meet the requirements for regulatory approval, and that has the potential to leave customers of those companies in the same position as the customers who went with Safe Hands, with no plans and no guarantees about retrieving the money that they have put in. I know that the FCA is also looking at this issue pre-emptively, with the aim of minimising risk to people who have already invested in plans with such firms. Hopefully the work that it is already undertaking will mitigate any potential further harm to vulnerable consumers, but for customers of prepaid funeral plan companies that will shortly be exiting the market, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

**Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing a debate that affects so many of our constituents. As she has said, there were plans in the offing for the FCA to have a role with companies such as Safe Hands. Does she share my concern that more was not done to warn people, given that this had already been flagged up? It seems to me that not enough was done in that interim period, and, as she has said, we could see even more people affected by other companies acting in a similar way.

**Margaret Ferrier:** I entirely agree. As I said earlier, it was a case of too little, too late. More people need to be aware of these plans and what they may mean. I look forward to the FCA's introducing that regulation at the end of July, which is not too far in the future.

For customers of Safe Hands, there is the potential for some support in the form of Dignity plc, one of the UK's largest providers of plans. Dignity has put a plan to the administrators which would allow them to step up and cover some of the shortfall left by Safe Hands, providing immediate support where it is needed most urgently, and planning to work with other customers and their families in the longer term to find solutions that will not leave customers with nothing in place. Dignity believes that, because of its business model as a plan provider with a wide network of funeral directors, it is uniquely placed to offer that support. It has already fulfilled in full the funeral plans of all Safe Hands customers in the four weeks following the collapse of the firm.

Dignity is also already preparing for the regulation requirements that will come into effect, but even as of last night, at my last check, the information offered by the administrators through the frequently asked questions page on the Safe Hands website was insufficiently clear or reassuring. They make numerous references to Dignity's offerings, but reiterate that customers should consider their plans cancelled with no guarantees around how much money customers will see returned, if any at all. There is a lot of "options being explored", and "updates will be provided", but a disappointing lack of commitment.

[Margaret Ferrier]

My constituent, Mr Hughes, really only has one immediate plea, and that is for some clarity and some willingness to proactively engage with customers. Maybe it is impossible for administrators to provide reassurances in the true sense of the word—maybe the financial realities of the situation just will not allow for that—but how difficult can it really be to ensure that the victims of this unfortunate situation are kept abreast of updates and to let them know periodically how the work is developing and that they are not being overlooked or forgotten? Mr Hughes has explained that there is so much information, so much speculating and so many customers shouting in the hope of being heard that he struggles to cut through the noise. What he needs is reliable, clear information to enable him to understand what has happened, why it has happened, and what might happen next, not only for him but for his family and his children. He worries about the worst happening while all this remains unresolved, and about the additional distress that this uncertainty will cause.

When people decide to invest in a prepaid funeral plan, it is often on the back of an event in their life that has made them come to terms with their own mortality. Maybe they are just reaching old age, maybe they have had a worrying medical diagnosis or maybe they have recently lost a loved one. That means that they are emotionally vulnerable and that they need to be sure that their investment is protected, particularly when the majority of those that choose a prepaid plan are doing so because their estate might not leave much more for their children or family than the cost of a funeral, and perhaps not even cover that.

We are in a cost of living crisis. At a time when people are struggling with the stress of paying their energy bills, putting food on the table or meeting their general living costs, it is unthinkable that, resulting from the collapse of Safe Hands, some of those people will face the added stress of trying to finance the funeral of someone they care about—a funeral that, as far as they were concerned, was already paid for, either partially or, in many cases, in full. I understand that any business needs to turn a profit. That is the nature of the game, but in this emotionally charged market based on one of the few guarantees we have in life—death—sensitivity is required. To prey on that customer base is absolutely disgusting.

While Safe Hands certainly does not represent the standards of the industry as a whole, we know that, intentionally or not, other firms have put their customers' money and funeral plans at risk by not seeking approval ahead of the regulations. For reasons I hope Dignity understands, I am cautious about enthusiastically throwing my support behind any company in the currently unregulated pre-paid sector at the moment, but I would like to thank Dignity for proactively reaching out and sharing some information with me ahead of this debate. I would also like to thank the all-party parliamentary group for funerals and bereavement and its chair, the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). I know that it continues to engage with the Treasury on this matter to try to ensure that dignity is maintained. I also want to thank the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant), who organised

the cross-party letter to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy last month. This provided a co-ordinated display of the feelings held by constituents.

I hope the Minister will be in a position to provide the assurances that Safe Hands and its administrators have been unable to provide, and I urge him and his colleagues in the Treasury and across Whitehall to find a way to ensure that these people who have lost hard-earned money do not miss out on a dignified goodbye when that time sadly comes, for the sake of Mr Hughes and the 46,000 others like him, their families and friends and the people who love them most in the world.

5 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I apologise to the Minister, who will not have anticipated my bobbing up for two minutes.

I commend the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing the debate. Like her, I have been contacted by numerous constituents who had Safe Hands policies and are in deep distress. Some of them have relatives who are very near death and are unsure what will happen to them. I welcome Dignity's proactive approach, but I remain deeply concerned that many more firms in a similar situation will withdraw from the market before FCA regulation takes full effect. I am not yet clear that Dignity has the capacity to cope with that level of demand, or that the industry as a whole has the willpower to address this issue.

This reminds me, to some extent, of the Farepak scandal about 10 years ago, although those sums were relatively small compared with the sums invested in funeral plans. I represent one of the most deprived communities in the United Kingdom, and the cost of a funeral can be one of the largest unexpected bills faced by families in my constituency. Many of them will have invested in these plans, not just for the emotional security but for the financial security, too. The risk is that, as an alternative, they will have to resort to the very dangerous lending practices of loan sharks and doorstep lenders.

I urge the Minister to explain what more he can do, and to accelerate the no-interest loan pilot, on which I know he is working. The perfect vehicle for dealing with these large, unexpected costs is to allow the state to provide an interim solution to give people more financial stability. These costs are a genuine worry for dozens, if not hundreds, of people in my constituency, and I join the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West in looking forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

5.2 pm

**The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):** I thank the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) for securing this important and timely debate on an incredibly emotive subject. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions, including the hon. Members for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) and for Llanelli (Nia Griffith). I will specifically address the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys

(Paul Maynard), and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) for raising his constituent's case.

I take this opportunity to remember our former colleague Sir David Amess. He was a friend to many of us here today, and he cared very much about helping people manage the financial impact of funerals. I thank hon. Members who have campaigned over the past few years in support of regulation. I recall conversations with Neil Gray, the former hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts, who first tabled a private Member's Bill to this effect in 2016.

Finally, I am grateful to hon. Members here today for the points they have raised. I think I will be able to address many of those points, and I will write to them on anything that I do not address.

As has been said, funerals are painful experiences, but they can also provide people with a degree of mental closure, because they help us to adjust to the reality of the loss of a loved one. We are all very much agreed that at such a moment mourners should be able to focus on their memories of their loved one and on their own emotions; no one should be consumed by money worries. Clearly, therefore, Safe Hands' entering administration, as the hon. Lady accurately set out, is very distressing for its customers and their families. Obviously, she mentions eloquently the case of Mr Hughes and what he has experienced in recent weeks. Our thoughts should be with those who have recently lost someone close to them and now find themselves affected by Safe Hands' failure. As has been mentioned, Dignity, one of the UK's largest funeral plan providers, has stepped in to provide funerals on behalf of Safe Hands' customers in the immediate period after the firm entered into administration. I echo the hon. Lady's words in expressing gratitude that it has stepped up to the mark and agreed to do that for a further six months. I regret the fact that her constituent does not have clarity on exactly where that leaves him, but of course Safe Hands will be entering the administration process and that will need to be concluded before wider issues can be looked at. I met people from Dignity yesterday, along with my Treasury officials, and they reiterated their commitment for the next six months. It has been very welcome to see a funeral plan provider taking that responsibility for protecting the sector's customers and upholding the industry's reputation.

I had the privilege of meeting my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), and members of the all-party group and of the industry a few weeks ago to discuss what was happening with this difficult case. Although the Financial Conduct Authority does not yet regulate funeral plan providers, it is supporting the industry and administrators as they look to find a longer-term solution for Safe Hands' customers. I am very hopeful that customers will not need to wait too much longer before they see further progress on this longer-term approach. However, I strongly believe that what has happened to Safe Hands is clear evidence of the pressing need for a better-regulated funeral plan market that will provide customers with the stability they need at such a difficult time and will allow us, as Members of Parliament with constituents who have been affected by Safe Hands' demise, the reassurance and confidence that we can see them not worry in future.

Although the sector provides a valuable service, there is still some distance to travel when it comes to ensuring that all funeral plan customers are shielded from harm. Indeed, major reports and work carried out by the Treasury and the FCA revealed examples of consumer detriment in the sector. As a result, last year, we legislated to bring providers and intermediaries within the regulatory remit of the FCA. That change means that from 29 July funeral plan providers will be subject to robust and enforceable standards for the first time. These standards will benefit consumers in a number of ways, for instance, by giving them clarity about what is covered by their plans, and ending high-pressure and misleading sales tactics. In addition, for the first time funeral plan customers will be able to access a redress scheme, which will be provided by the Financial Ombudsman Service. Ultimately, we believe a well-regulated market will promote effective competition and drive better long-term consumer outcomes. I recognise that this industry does have an important role to play; the demise of Safe Hands will be dealt with through the administration process and there may well then be further examination of what happened, but my determination is that we will get this regulation right and provide security to the industry. The vast majority of firms in the industry are doing the right thing at the moment and I am clear that once they have adjusted to that new regime, we will have confidence going forward.

The Government recognise that the new regulation presents a major change for providers, which is why we introduced an 18-month transition period before the new rules came into effect. That has given businesses time to take the right steps to familiarise themselves with the new requirements and prepare to adopt them.

We of course recognise that it is paramount that we minimise any disruption to customers as a result of the changes, which is why the FCA has said that providers that decide not to or cannot obtain authorisation should transfer their plans to a provider that will operate under the new rules. Alternatively, businesses should wind down in an orderly way before the regulation comes into force.

On that note, Members may be aware that last month the Government made a supplementary statutory instrument that will make it easier for funeral plan providers that seek to exit the market to transfer their existing funeral plan to a regulated funeral plan provider. I discussed that change with Dignity yesterday, and it welcomed it. It should ease the process for the relatively small number of people who find themselves subject to a plan the provider of which will not go into regulation: they will be able to port their plan to one of the bigger industry providers.

When we bring a sector into regulation for the first time, there is clearly a possibility that some providers will be unable to meet the authorisation threshold. In addition, the process may reveal that some businesses are unable to deliver on promises they have made to their customers.

**Peter Grant:** The Minister is understandably focusing on the new regulatory regime—I think he is aware of some of my concerns about the adequacy of the FCA as currently set up—but there should have been other regulation. Who should have been regulating the activities of the trust? Who should have prevented it from engaging in wildly speculative, insecure investments, directly against the promises that were made? Safe Hands Plans Ltd's

*[Peter Grant]*

first two years of accounts contained demonstrably and obviously false statements, which were never picked up on by Companies House. Who should have been regulating that? Does the Minister accept that regardless of the changes to the regulation of funeral plan companies, there appear to have been serious regulatory failures elsewhere, again?

**John Glen:** The hon. Gentleman makes his points somewhat speculatively, but expresses some valid specific concerns about the journey that Safe Hands went on. Other investigations cannot take place until the administration process is concluded. The driver for the regulations that we are to introduce was the fear among Members from all parties a few years ago. The important thing is to give reassurance going forward. There will be a day of reckoning for the directors of Safe Hands, who will have to account for what happened, but the administration process must happen first. I cannot say any more on that, but the hon. Gentleman's relevant points are noted.

I must stress that an inability to meet the new standards of regulation—because of issues with conduct, business models or trust arrangements—does not mean that the regulation is at fault; rather, by bringing the sector into regulation, we expose unsustainable practices that, left unchecked, could ultimately worsen and impact more consumers. As the famous adage says, sunlight is the best disinfectant. In this instance, by regulating we will turn the spotlight on businesses that operate with unworkable models, and will prevent consumer harm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) asked about the low-interest loan scheme that we have been piloting with South

Manchester Credit Union. I hope to visit Manchester in the week after next. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a wider agenda in terms of affordable credit, and I am still very much committed to developing that instrument and making it widely available, alongside making other interventions in respect of credit unions that we can talk about when the financial services and markets Bill comes to the House shortly.

It is right that the Government act to protect consumers, many of whom will be elderly or vulnerable, with a robust, proportionate regulatory framework. In addition, a well-regulated market will promote effective competition and drive better long-term outcomes for consumers. As I have said, Safe Hands customers can be assured that they will be covered for at least another six months. I encourage other providers and market participants to take further action, as Dignity has done, to protect consumers of firms that will not become authorised.

I assure the House that the Government and the Financial Conduct Authority continue to work closely with each other and with the sector—I have mentioned those two meetings that I have personally held, and meetings that my officials have held, with industry representatives—to ensure that that shift to regulation is as smooth as possible. I take account of the several valid points raised this afternoon. We all have a moral obligation to ensure that funeral plan customers and their loved ones receive the certainty that they need and deserve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.15 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Written Statements

Thursday 12 May 2022

## BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

### Sizewell C Nuclear Power Station

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully):**

This statement concerns an application for development consent made under the Planning Act 2008 by NNB Generation Company (SZC) Ltd for the construction and operation of a nuclear power station near Leiston in Suffolk.

Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, the Secretary of State must make a decision on an application within three months of the receipt of the examining authority's report unless exercising the power under section 107(3) of the Act to set a new deadline. Where a new deadline is set, the Secretary of State must make a statement to Parliament to announce it. The current statutory deadline for the decision on the Sizewell C nuclear power station application is 25 May 2022.

I have decided to set a new deadline of no later than 8 July 2022 for deciding this application. This is to ensure there is sufficient time to fully consider further information provided by the applicant and interested parties in response to the Secretary of State's post-examination consultation.

The decision to set the new deadline for this application is without prejudice to the decision on whether to grant or refuse development consent.

[HCWS17]

### Warm Home Discount

**The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands):** My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Corporate Responsibility (Lord Callanan) has today made the following statement:

Upgrading our homes to be more energy efficient is the best long-term solution for reducing our energy costs and keeping ourselves warm in winter. However, this takes time, which is why the warm home discount remains a key policy for tackling fuel poverty now. For 11 years, the warm home discount has provided vital help with energy bills to households on the lowest incomes. Last summer, the Government consulted on the future of the warm home discount scheme in England and Wales, and today, the Government have laid the regulations for extending, expanding, and reforming the scheme to 2026.

From this winter, the Government are expanding the warm home discount scheme. The annual spending envelopes will increase from around £350 million to £475 million (in 2020 prices), and the value of the household rebates will rise from £140 to £150. As a result, around 2.8 million households in England and Wales will receive a rebate every year, 750,000 more compared to the previous scheme. We are also lowering the energy supplier participation thresholds from 150,000 domestic customer accounts to 50,000 in 2022-23 and 1,000 in 2023-24, meaning that almost all customers will be with a participating supplier and thereby reducing the barriers for people switching energy suppliers.

Under the scheme, around 1 million low-income pensioners will continue to receive their rebates automatically through the core group 1 element of the scheme. It is right that we protect this low-income vulnerable group susceptible to the effects of living in a cold home.

From this winter, the Government are replacing the former application-based broader group element, under which low-income and vulnerable households had to apply to their energy supplier every year. Broader group rebates have often been awarded on a first-come, first-served basis or by lottery, as there have been more eligible households than there were rebates available.

Instead, around 1.9 million households will receive rebates under a new core group 2. These households will be those on the lowest incomes and with high-energy costs, determined by using data on property characteristics. Through data-matching between Government Departments and energy suppliers, the vast majority of these households will be identified automatically and receive their rebate without having to take any action. These reforms will improve the fuel poverty targeting of the scheme, ensuring more of the rebates go to households in, or at risk of, fuel poverty.

Lastly, the Government recognise the value of industry initiatives, taking the form of additional financial and energy-related support measures, that energy suppliers and industry partners provide to fuel poor households. It will therefore become mandatory for all energy suppliers participating in the scheme to provide or fund industry initiatives.

The Government are consulting on a warm home discount scheme in Scotland for the period until 2026 and shall lay separate regulations, subject to the outcome of that consultation.

This expansion of the warm home discount scheme forms part of the wider support to help households with rising energy bills. The Government have announced £9.1 billion of support through the energy bills rebate in 2022-23. This includes: a £200 discount on energy bills this autumn for domestic electricity customers in Great Britain; a £150 non-repayable council tax rebate for households in England in council tax bands A to D; and a £144 million discretionary fund to support households not eligible for the council tax rebate. Meanwhile, the devolved Administrations will receive around £565 million corresponding funding through the Barnett formula.

More information on the warm home discount scheme will be made available over the summer on [gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme](http://gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme).

[HCWS18]

## CABINET OFFICE

### House of Lords Appointments

**The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis):** On behalf of Her Majesty's Government, I am laying today before Parliament a set of documents (HC 204) in response to the Humble Address motion of the House of Commons passed on 29 March 2022, in respect of the appointment of Lord Lebedev to the House of Lords.

#### *The Humble Address procedure*

A Humble Address to Her Majesty is a request of Parliament to make its desires and opinions known to the Crown. The Government occasionally makes use of the Humble Address to deposit materials before both Houses, but when the House seeks to use the procedure to call for papers, it is for the Government to consider what documents are suitable for release.

The Humble Address of 29 March, seeking documents related to the nomination of an individual to the House of Lords—on which the Prime Minister advises the Sovereign to exercise the power conferred in the Life Peerages Act 1958—needs to be considered in the context of the Government’s responsibility to consider any adverse effect of releasing materials, including on the processes relating to the awarding of honours and dignities by the Crown.

*Access to information and the public interest*

The Government are and remain committed to openness and transparency to ensure that Parliament is able to scrutinise and hold the Executive to account. However, it is also the case that when considering requests for information from Parliament, the Government have a responsibility to consider whether it is in the public interest to place information into the public domain.

This is a position set out in the Government’s response to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee’s (PACAC) Fifteenth Report, “Status of Resolutions of the House of Commons”, in March 2019 (HC 1587).

The Government noted:

“One of Parliament’s key roles is to scrutinise the actions of the Government. In order to do this effectively, it is important that Parliament is able to access information from the Government. In providing information to Parliament, as set out in the ministerial code, ‘Ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament’, ‘refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with the relevant statutes and the Freedom of Information Act.’ This principle was endorsed by Parliament in the resolutions on ministerial accountability, passed by both Houses in 1997. [Footnote: The motion passed by both Houses stated “ministers should be as open as possible with Parliament, refusing to provide information only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with relevant statute, and the Government’s ‘Code Of Practice On Access To Government Information’. The code of practice was superseded by the Freedom of Information Act].

The consideration of whether it will be in the public interest to place information into the public domain always involves a careful balancing exercise, weighing up the need for transparency and openness against other important and long standing, and often competing, principles and legislation, such as the Data Protection Act. Ultimately, Ministers have a duty not to release information where it is not in the public interest to do so. The use of the motion for return procedure to call for papers gives rise to a potential tension with that duty.

The Government has been put in a very difficult position by some of the recent motions for return. The Government has in responding sought to balance competing pressures of providing information to Parliament and protecting the public interest. It has been possible to find this balance where Ministers have been able to agree with Select Committee chairs the appropriate information to disclose and how. However, the Government would suggest that motions of returns which seek sensitive information to be made available in a way that makes that information public are not in the public interest and a threat to good governance.”

The March 2022 motion recognised the need for non-disclosure on grounds of national security. However, as the Government made clear during the debate in resolving not to oppose the motion, this does not override or restrict the Government’s need to also consider the wider public interest.

In passing the Freedom of Information Act 2000, Parliament and the then Labour Government both recognised that from time to time, the principle of transparency is secondary to a competing public interest

in favour of non-disclosure of certain information. In the March 2019 response to PACAC, the Government noted that “the Government is under an obligation to balance...[the] competing interests” of transparency and other public duties but will “seek to find a way to balance these tensions and provide as much information as possible to the House”.

It is in this context that, in responses to other Humble Addresses in this Parliament—on Westferry planning consent and Randox contracts—the Government have duly applied Freedom of Information principles when assessing what documentation is appropriate to release into the public domain. This approach to Parliamentary scrutiny also reflects the long-standing approach of successive Administrations as set out in the Osmotherly Rules, paragraphs 39-40.

It also reflects the ministerial code provisions—noted above—that Ministers should refuse to provide information “only when disclosure would not be in the public interest, which should be decided in accordance with the relevant statutes and the Freedom of Information Act 2000”.

As laid out in today’s House of Commons paper, the disclosure of these documents reflects the need to protect national security, and to maintain integrity in the system for the awarding of honours and dignities by the Crown, the vetting of nominees for probity and the data protection rights of individuals.

A Humble Address to Her Majesty is a message from Parliament to make its desires and opinions known to the Crown and is related to the exercise of Her Majesty’s Royal Prerogative. This link to the Royal Prerogative supports the need for Her Majesty’s Government in responding to such an Address to consider any adverse effect in relation to the exercise of other powers by Her Majesty, such as the awarding of honours and dignities by the Crown.

*The Intelligence and Security Committee*

In the Government response to the Procedure Committee’s Ninth Report of Session 2017-19, “The House’s power to call for papers: procedure and practice”, HC 190, the Government noted:

“The Government recognise that where it is in the public interest to provide sensitive information to Parliament, sharing information with select committees is a well-established and effective mechanism for parliamentarians to review such information and ensure that information is disclosed in an appropriate way, or restricted if in the public interest.

Where the House resolves that information should be shared publicly with the House as a whole, it removes the possibility that arrangements can be made to share information confidentially with the relevant select committee. The Government maintains that the existing mechanisms that enable the sharing of information with select committees is a more appropriate way for sensitive information to be shared with Parliament”.

In that light, I can confirm that the Government have provided a response to the Intelligence and Security Committee, following a separate request from them for information relating to any national security matters arising. This has been provided in accordance with the Committee’s statutory remit, as set out in the Justice and Security Act 2013 and the accompanying memorandum of understanding.

Whilst separate to the formal Humble Address response, I believe this sharing of information illustrates the Government are acting in good faith in responding to

Parliament's request for information. It also reflects a request made by the Shadow Home Secretary to the Prime Minister.

#### *Vetting by the House of Lords Appointments Commission*

Since 2002, crossbench and party political life peerage nominations to the House of Lords have been vetted by the independent House of Lords Appointments Commission. The commission seeks advice from Government Departments and agencies where appropriate and these vetting procedures and the advice to the Prime Minister are confidential.

I can assure Parliament that proper consideration would be given to any information which indicated national security concern arising from a prospective appointment before a decision was made.

Were the Prime Minister to recommend a peerage against the commission's formal advice on propriety, the commission has previously undertaken to write publicly to the relevant Parliamentary Select Committee. This has happened in one case before in December 2020. The Chair of the Commission, Lord Bew, has noted in evidence to PACAC last month that that was not the case in this appointment. He has also noted that no pressure was exerted on the commission on this matter. The conclusion of the commission's deliberations are clear.

The process by which an individual is nominated to the House of Lords is an established one. It is essential that the confidentiality of these arrangements is maintained as it is this that ensures the vetting procedures are suitably robust and command confidence, whilst also protecting the private and personal data of those individuals who have entered into the vetting process. The routine disclosure of such confidential information would undermine the commission's and Crown's ability to consider the probity of those nominated for a peerage and have long-term and damaging consequences for the peerage appointments system, and to individuals.

Such confidentiality also applies to recommendations for political peerages made by Opposition parties. Honourable Members should be conscious that requests for information on the internal correspondence of the commission could also be applied to such Opposition recommendations, including those which are rejected or withdrawn. I do not believe it would be in the public interest for such internal correspondence to be used in the future for political point scoring.

The House of Lords has a valuable role to play as a scrutinising and revising the Chamber. The preservation of these established arrangements is necessary to ensure that those nominated to the Lords are subject to a vetting process which is both fair and sufficiently robust to ensure high ethical standards are applied to holders of public office. Constitutionally, it is for the Prime Minister to recommend appointments to the Sovereign.

#### *Good standing of Lord Lebedev*

Lord Lebedev is a man of good standing. His public and personal works are reflected in the citation deposited in the House today as part of the Humble Address. No complaint has been made about his personal conduct. He has been vocal in his criticism of the Putin regime. Indeed, it was the Leader of the Opposition who personally congratulated him on his appointment as a peer.

#### *Conclusion*

Her Majesty's Government and the Prime Minister have been resolute in resisting Russian Government aggression and interference. These are matters of great importance and in lockstep with our allies, we are introducing the most severe economic sanctions that Russia has ever faced, and provided significant military support via the Ministry of Defence. We have also strengthened our domestic legislation to target those living and operating in the United Kingdom who support, enable, or facilitate Putin's regime.

We are working to cripple Putin's war machine and, as set out in the Queen's Speech, we will be bringing forward legislation that will provide intelligence agencies and the police with new powers to tackle any hostile state activity, including from Russia. This Government will be resolute in defending our democracy and our allies.

[HCWS22]

## TREASURY

### Contingent Liability Notification

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rishi Sunak):** The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England ("the Bank") decided at its meeting ending on 3 February 2022 to reduce the stocks of UK Government bonds and sterling non-financial investment-grade corporate bonds held in the asset purchase facility (APF) by ceasing to reinvest maturing securities. The MPC also agreed that the Bank of England should initiate a programme of corporate bond sales to be completed no earlier than towards the end of 2023 that should unwind fully the stock of corporate bond purchases.

In response to this decision, the Governor and I jointly agreed that, as the size of APF holdings reduces, the authorised maximum size for asset purchases should be adjusted to reflect the size of the portfolio every six months.

Since 3 February 2022, the total stock of purchased assets of the APF has fallen from £895 billion to £866.6 billion. Following this, and in line with the approach agreed with the Governor in February 2022, the authorised maximum total size of asset purchases within the APF has been reduced from £895 billion to £866.6 billion.

The risk control framework previously agreed with the Bank will remain in place, and HM Treasury will continue to monitor risks to public funds from the APF through regular risk oversight meetings and enhanced information sharing with the Bank.

There will continue to be an opportunity for HM Treasury to provide views to the MPC on the design of the schemes within the APF, as they affect the Government's broader economic objectives and may pose risks to the Exchequer.

The Government will continue to indemnify the Bank, the APF and its directors from any losses arising out of, or in connection with, the facility. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS21]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid):** Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS) affects the lives of children and adults across the country. It can be an incredibly disabling condition with fluctuating symptoms, making it difficult to take part in everyday activities, enjoy a family or social life, access services and engage in work or education, especially for the estimated 25% of people who have severe or very severe symptoms. Whilst there are currently no known cures or treatments for the condition, people with ME/CFS can be supported to manage their symptoms and maximise their quality of life.

Today, on World ME Day, I have two announcements to make to show that the Government are committed to better care and support for people living with ME/CFS and their families.

Firstly, I am pleased to welcome today the publication of the top 10 (plus) research priorities for ME/CFS, published by Action for ME and agreed by the James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnership on ME. This partnership included people with lived experience and clinicians working together to reach a consensus. I want to thank Action for ME and everyone who took part in this important work, recognising that for many this would have taken considerable effort.

To support these research priorities, I will co-chair a roundtable with my Department's chief scientific adviser, Professor Lucy Chappell, to bring together experts on ME/CFS, including people with lived experience, to discuss what needs to happen next. The chief scientific adviser has asked the UK clinical research collaboration to convene a subgroup on ME/CFS to work with funders, researchers, charities, and people with ME/CFS to drive high-quality applications for research into ME/CFS and support the research community to build capacity and capability in this field. We are committed to funding research into this important area. Funding for high-quality research into ME is available through existing commitments of HM Government to research and development. The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) will work with the research community to respond to the priorities as set out in the Priority Setting Partnership, alongside other funding partners.

Secondly, I am announcing the Government intention to develop a cross-Government delivery plan on ME/CFS for England, aligning with other devolved nations as appropriate. In particular, we are engaging with the Scottish Government to explore areas of potential shared interest and learning, especially in terms of research into ME/CFS.

This will build on the recommendations of the priority setting partnership, the recently updated guideline for ME/CFS from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and the comprehensive work of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Myalgic Encephalomyelitis to date.

At the heart of the delivery plan will be two core principles: firstly, that we do not know enough about ME/CFS, which must change if we are to improve experiences and outcomes; secondly, we must trust and listen to those with lived experience of ME/CFS.

Following this announcement, officials will work with stakeholders ahead of publishing the delivery plan later this year.

[HCWS23]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### National Security Bill

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel):** I am pleased to say that my Department has introduced a National Security Bill to the House of Commons. This Bill brings together a suite of new measures to further protect our national security, the safety of the public and our vital interests from the hostile activities of foreign states.

This activity is a growing concern, even though it often takes place away from the public eye. The harm, which includes espionage and sabotage, foreign interference in our political system, and even attempted assassinations, is significant. This foundational legislation will provide tools and powers for our fight against state threats for years to come. It will keep our country safe by delivering the biggest overhaul of UK state threats legislation for a generation. Its measures will make it even harder for those working on behalf of foreign states to undermine our national security, economy and democracy. And while the core of the Bill focuses on countering hostile activity from foreign states, it will also include measures to combat the enduring threat of terrorism through reforms to restrict the access of convicted terrorists to civil legal aid.

#### The National Security Bill:

Further protects our national security, the safety of the British public and safeguards our national interests from hostile activity from foreign states.

Addresses the new state threats our country faces including from espionage and interference, sabotage and disinformation.

Ensures our world class security and intelligence agencies and police have the modern tools, powers and protections they need to counter those who seek to do us harm.

Protects us and makes the UK even harder target for those would attack or interfere with our national security, our vital interests and our democracy.

The Home Office has developed the Bill in partnership with wider Government and our world-class law enforcement and intelligence agencies, building on the support expressed for work to improve our toolkit in the public consultation we ran last year. In detail, the core state threats measures in the legislation will:

For the first time, make it an offence to work covertly for a foreign intelligence service in the UK.

Create a modern set of offences to protect the UK against espionage and other harmful conduct, focusing on the obtaining and disclosure of protected information and trade secrets, and the assisting of foreign intelligence service offences referred to above. It repeals and replaces existing espionage laws which were primarily designed to counter the threat from German spies before and after the first world war.

Provide our law enforcement and intelligence agencies with new offences, tools and powers to detect, deter and disrupt threats from those acting on behalf of foreign states with a harmful purpose in the UK. For example, this includes seeking, by illegitimate means, to influence public figures or stealing our trade secrets.

Modernise the regime which governs access to, in and around the UK's sensitive sites that require higher levels of deterrence against unlawful access.

Modernise the existing search warrant power to enable the police to obtain evidence of state threats activities.

Create new offences to tackle state-backed sabotage and foreign interference, as well as a preparatory conduct offence that will allow disruptive action to be taken at an earlier stage (thereby reducing the harm done).

Require sentences for other offences where there is a state link (e.g. kidnap) to be aggravated (increased) to reflect the additional seriousness of the issue.

Introduce a new suite of state threat “prevention and investigation measures” to use as a tool of last resort to manage those who pose a threat but whom it has not been possible to prosecute.

Improve existing powers which grant police officers the ability to stop individuals at ports to ascertain their involvement in hostile activity by foreign states.

To further strengthen our defence against foreign influence, we will bring forward a foreign influence registration scheme requiring individuals to register certain arrangements with foreign Governments to deter and disrupt state threats activity in the UK. This scheme will be brought forward by Government amendment to the National Security Bill as soon as possible. The Government are considering the scheme’s requirements to ensure it is effective in dealing with the current threat and protects the interests of the UK.

The core of the Bill focuses on countering hostile activity from foreign states, and these proposals will apply UK-wide, as will measures to further enable the courts to freeze or limit civil damages being paid to convicted terrorists where these funds might support further acts of terrorism.

The Bill will also make minor reforms to the Serious Crime Act 2007 relating to the protections of those executing the functions of intelligence, law enforcement and defence when engaged in authorised information exchanges.

[HCWS24]

## INTERNATIONAL TRADE

### India Trade Negotiations: Update

**The Secretary of State for International Trade (Anne-Marie Trevelyan):** The third round of UK-India free trade agreement negotiations began on 25 April and concluded on 6 May. The official-level negotiations were conducted in a hybrid fashion, with some UK negotiators meeting counterparts in New Delhi, supported by the majority attending virtually from the UK.

During this third round, talks focused on draft treaty text. Technical discussions were held across 23 policy areas over 60 separate sessions, with draft treaty text advanced across the majority of chapters.

The negotiations were productive and reflected our shared ambition to secure a comprehensive deal to boost trade between our nations, currently worth £24.3 billion in 2021.

The fourth round of official-level negotiations is due to take place in June 2022.

We remain clear that any deal the Government strike must be in the best interests of the British people and the economy.

The Government will keep Parliament updated as these negotiations progress.

[HCWS16]

## TRANSPORT

### Ship Safety: Merchant Shipping (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) Regulations 2

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts):** I have today published as a draft the Merchant Shipping (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) Regulations 2022 and an accompanying draft explanatory memorandum. The draft regulations revoke and replace the Merchant Shipping (Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping) Regulations 2015 (S.I. 2015/782) to implement the seafarer training, certification and watchkeeping standards contained in the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers, 1978 (“the STCW convention”).

The draft regulations are being published for 28 days. Following the conclusion of this period, and once any observations on the draft regulations have been taken into account, they will be laid for approval by each House of Parliament. This procedure is required under paragraph 14 of schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 because these regulations revoke an instrument that was made, in part, under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972. Further details about why the changes are needed and the effect they will have on retained EU law are contained in the annex to the draft explanatory memorandum.

The draft regulations replace the existing legislation making provision for seafarer training and will implement the latest requirements for seafarers’ training in the STCW convention. This provision relates to new requirements for seafarers serving on ships subject to the “International Code of Safety for Ships Using Gases or Other Low-Flashpoint Fuels (IGF Code)” and passenger ships. Implementing these amendments to the STCW convention ensures that seafarers on these types of specialised ships can undertake the required additional training and be issued with the necessary certification to demonstrate the appropriate level of competency. This will allow United Kingdom seafarers to take up employment on these types of vessels.

The draft regulations contain additional provision to ensure wider compliance with seafarer training requirements. The definition of “seafarer” has been clarified to ensure that all persons engaged in the operation or navigation of a pleasure vessel to which the draft regulations apply (24 metres or over in length or 80 gross tonnes or over) are included within the definition. The provision and quality of training has been revised to enable the Secretary of State not only to approve a training provider, but also to suspend or cancel the approval; this is needed because the STCW convention places obligations on Governments to ensure that training providers deliver all training in accordance with the convention requirements. Amendments contained in the draft legislation also enable the Government to recoup the costs of carrying out the approval of training providers who deliver seafarer training.

The draft regulations aim to meet the objectives in the Government’s maritime 2050 strategy to modernise and grow the British maritime sector, including alternative

training provision for engineers on small vessels; this will support UK industry and boost employment opportunities for UK seafarers. Additionally, express provision to provide for seafarer training equivalent to that of the STCW convention will help relevant sectors of industry to avoid being unnecessarily burdened with cumbersome certification requirements, while modernising and updating UK training and certification.

The draft regulations also include an ambulatory reference provision to ensure that future amendments to the STCW convention referred to in the draft regulations will automatically become UK law when they enter into force internationally. As required by the regulations, a ministerial statement will be provided to both Houses of Parliament ahead of any amendment to the STCW convention referenced in the regulations, prior to it coming into force in UK law by way of the ambulatory reference provision.

The draft regulations and the accompanying draft explanatory memorandum can be found on gov.uk.

[HCWS20]

### **Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison):** I have today published the draft statutory instrument the Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2022 and accompanying explanatory memorandum.

These regulations amend the Motor Fuel (Composition and Content) Regulations 1999 to require the introduction of E10 petrol (petrol with up to 10% ethanol) at filling stations in Northern Ireland. Following the successful introduction of E10 in Great Britain in September 2021, this subsequent amendment will bring the ethanol content of standard grade petrol in Northern Ireland in

line with rest of the UK. The regulations also ensure the ongoing availability of E5 petrol (petrol with 5% or less ethanol) for those with vehicles and equipment unsuitable for use with E10.

At present, standard grade petrol in Northern Ireland contains up to 5% renewable ethanol (referred to as E5). Increasing the renewable ethanol content to up to 10% (E10) can reduce the carbon dioxide emissions from a petrol vehicle by the equivalent of around 2% per mile travelled. This, combined with increases to overall renewable fuel targets could cut overall transport CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by a further 750,000 tonnes a year, the equivalent of taking around 350,000 cars off the road. Transport is one of the biggest contributing sectors to carbon emissions in Northern Ireland, where 59% of new cars registered in 2019 were petrol powered—the reductions achieved through the introduction of E10 will help decarbonise the existing vehicle fleet and help meet climate change targets.

Introducing E10 will also help support UK farmers and domestic ethanol industry, reducing reliance on imported oil in accordance with the aims of the UK energy security strategy and the 10-point plan for a green industrial revolution. Producing ethanol also creates the valuable by-products of high-protein animal feed and stored CO<sub>2</sub>. These reduce reliance on imported products, in line with the Government's bioeconomy strategy.

The regulations are published in accordance with the procedure required by schedule 8 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and agreed with Parliament. The draft regulations will be available for review for 28 days before they are laid, and debates scheduled.

These regulations were subject to open consultation. The policy detail, Government response and impact assessment are available.

[HCWS19]

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 12 May 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL</b>		<b>INTERNATIONAL TRADE</b> .....	27WS
<b>STRATEGY</b> .....	19WS	India Trade Negotiations: Update.....	27WS
Sizewell C Nuclear Power Station.....	19WS	<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	28WS
Warm Home Discount.....	19WS	Motor Fuel (Composition and Content)	
<b>CABINET OFFICE</b> .....	20WS	(Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Regulations	
House of Lords Appointments.....	20WS	2022 .....	29WS
<b>HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE</b> .....	25WS	Ship Safety: Merchant Shipping (Standards of	
Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue		Training, Certification and Watchkeeping)	
Syndrome.....	25WS	Regulations 2 .....	28WS
<b>HOME DEPARTMENT</b> .....	26WS	<b>TREASURY</b> .....	24WS
National Security Bill.....	26WS	Contingent Liability Notification.....	24WS

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**not later than  
Thursday 19 May 2022**

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**CONTENTS**

**Thursday 12 May 2022**

**HM Passport Office Backlogs [Col. 263]**

*Answer to urgent question—(Tom Pursglove)*

**Hong Kong Arrests Under National Security Law [Col. 273]**

*Answer to urgent question—(James Cleverly)*

**Business of the House [Col. 279]**

*Questions—(Mark Spencer)*

**Debate on the Address [Col. 291]**

*Debate adjourned*

**Safe Hands Funeral Plans [Col. 378]**

*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Written Statements [Col. 19WS]**

**Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]**

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