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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 15 June 2022

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

COP26

*The President of COP26 was asked—
Fossil Fuel Industry*

1. **John Mc Nally** (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the role of the fossil fuel industry in meeting the UK's COP26 climate commitments. [900521]

3. **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of the role of the fossil fuel industry in meeting the UK's COP26 climate commitments. [900523]

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): The Government are committed to a managed transition from fossil fuels to green energy as we work to deliver on our 2050 net zero commitment.

John Mc Nally: The UN Secretary-General has called investment in new fossil fuel production and power plants “moral and economic madness”. The European Parliament has objected to plans to include gas in the definition of sustainable energy. Surely the COP26 President must agree that the Westminster Government are making a mockery of their presidency at COP. Not only have they increased support for fossil fuels, but their renewables policy is disguising billions in subsidies for biomass. How does he square the Government's plans with the UK's COP26 commitment and with the views of his possible future boss?

Alok Sharma: I am very happy with my current boss, the Prime Minister. If the hon. Gentleman looks at the British energy security strategy, which was published a few weeks ago, it clearly sets out our commitment to a clean energy future. He knows that our stated aim is to decarbonise the electricity sector by 2035, and we stand by that.

Chris Stephens: The fossil fuel lobby at COP26, covering more than 100 fossil fuel companies, fielded a larger delegation than the combined delegations of the eight countries worst affected by climate change, and was the single largest delegation with more than 500 delegates. Does the COP26 President not agree that although investment in renewables by fossil fuel companies is a key part of tackling climate change, it would not be appropriate for that situation to be repeated at COP27? The fossil fuel industry should not be given the loudest voice in climate discussions.

Alok Sharma: The presidency in any one year is not responsible for who attends a particular COP; we are responsible for the presidency platform. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that at COP26, all participating corporates were required to have signed up to the UN's Race to Zero campaign and were committing to reach net zero by 2050 on science-based targets. There were no fossil fuel companies participating on UK presidency platforms in Glasgow.

Sir Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I encourage my right hon. Friend to continue to get the balance right between marching towards a green future and using whatever fuels we need to use in the meantime to keep the lights on in our hospitals, schools, homes and offices. He has done a great job so far. Will he continue to get that balance right?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have always talked about a managed transition to a clean energy future. It is not about flicking a switch off overnight; I think everybody understands that. As a Government, of course, we have to make sure that we keep the lights on and keep the factories and businesses running.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Does the COP26 President recognise that fossil fuels remain critical in the transition to net zero 2050 and in the production of blue hydrogen, plastics and power through carbon capture, utilisation and storage projects such as Net Zero Teesside?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes the same point that this is about a managed transition. We want to ensure that we decarbonise the electricity system by 2035. Hon. Members will know that the energy security strategy is all about transitioning to a clean energy future with a big push on renewables, nuclear and hydrogen.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow COP26 President.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It has been reported that the COP26 President is in the running to become the executive secretary of climate at the UN. I wish him well, because he would do an excellent job in that post. Part of the reason he won respect at COP26 was for his commitment to phase out fossil fuel subsidies, yet here at home the Chancellor has created a massive loophole in the windfall tax to give away at least £4 billion of public money in new incentives for new oil and gas projects. Can the COP26 President tell us whether he was consulted on that plan? How much does he estimate that it will drive up emissions? Is it not totally at odds with the agreement on fossil fuels that he worked so hard to secure in Glasgow?

Alok Sharma: The energy profits levy to which the right hon. Gentleman refers is a targeted short-term measure with an effective end date of December 2025. Any company looking to make future energy investments will have to factor in the risks of potentially ending up with stranded assets.

Edward Miliband: Maybe the COP26 President has one eye on the UN, because that did not sound like a wholehearted endorsement of the Chancellor's policy, and he is right to think that the Chancellor's policy does

not make any sense. The money will either go to oil and gas projects that would have happened anyway, or incentivise new projects that will make no difference to consumer bills, take years to come to fruition and drive a coach and horses through our climate commitments. What is more, this policy excludes investments in renewables, which are the quickest, cheapest and cleanest form of power. Does that not reveal the truth that on climate, he says one thing on the world stage and the rest of the Government do another here at home? Is it not totally understandable that he wants to jump off the sinking ship?

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman will not get rid of me that easily. He needs to look at what the Government have done over the past few years: we have built the second biggest offshore wind sector in the world, which is precisely the reason that we are not dependent on Russian hydrocarbons, as some countries are. We have had a big push on renewables. He talks about the energy profits levy, but he should please have a look—he will have done this anyway, but a detailed look—at the energy security strategy, which sets out a very clear direction to a clean energy future for the UK.

Glasgow Climate Pact: Business

2. **James Sunderland** (Bracknell) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of businesses in implementing the Glasgow climate pact. [900522]

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): COP26 was one of the first such summits where the corporate sector's presence and commitments were significant. Over 7,000 international businesses have now signed up to the UN Race to Zero campaign, which commits them to reaching net zero by 2050 at the latest. The private sector will of course be critical to helping deliver on the commitments in the Glasgow climate pact.

James Sunderland: My constituency of Bracknell is blessed with several businesses of 10 employers or fewer. How might they be helped and persuaded towards climate neutrality when key decisions may not be in their immediate economic interest?

Alok Sharma: In fact, there are many businesses, both large and small, that are committing to cut emissions, because they have understood that it is good for their bottom line and actually gives them a competitive advantage with clients and customers. I refer my hon. Friend to the UK business climate hub, which is championed by the Government and climate groups. Over 3,000 UK small and medium-sized enterprises have already signed up. I am sure that, if small businesses in Bracknell look at the website, they will understand the positive impact of making a climate commitment.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The COP26 President will be aware of concerns raised about aspects of biomass, so how does he intend to ensure that carbon emissions from this sector and businesses such as wood-burning power stations are reflected in the reformed UK emissions trading system? How does he think the COP commitment to protect the world's

forests aligns with existing UK Government policies for burning imported wood and the considerable UK Government subsidies given to this industry?

Alok Sharma: There are quite a lot of questions there in one. We have a very clear commitment, not only in our legal framework but in the net zero strategy, which sets out how we will decarbonise through different sectors of the economy. The hon. Member mentioned forests, and she will know that at COP26 over 140 countries representing more than 90% of forests made a commitment to reverse deforestation by 2030. I have just returned from Stockholm, where I and other UK Ministers held a meeting to discuss how we can push forward those commitments. They are not just written down; we are actually seeing progress.

Fossil Fuel Interest Groups

4. **Jon Trickett** (Hemsworth) (Lab): If he will make an assessment of the effect of fossil fuel interest groups on the outcomes of COP26. [900524]

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): I answered this question earlier, but I reiterate that, to participate on UK presidency platforms at COP26, all corporates were required to sign up to net zero commitments. Let me reconfirm that there were no fossil fuel companies participating on UK presidency platforms.

Jon Trickett: Look, the truth is that the whole process of transition is either stalled or in reverse. We know that there are powerful interest groups in Downing Street saying that climate change is of secondary importance. What is striking is that, when we look at ministerial diaries, we see that Ministers have met representatives of fossil fuel companies nine times more frequently than companies representing renewables. Is it not clear that this Government are in the pockets of the fossil fuel industries and have in effect been captured by those corporations, which explains the asymmetric way in which the Government are operating in relation to the transition?

Alok Sharma: This Government have not been captured by any interest. Once again, I point out to the hon. Member that, if he looks at the energy security strategy for the direction of travel, he will see that we are looking to quintuple the amount of both offshore wind and solar, and by 2050 we want a quarter of our electricity needs to come from nuclear. As far as I am concerned, if he looks at the detail of that, he will understand that we are focused on a clean energy future, and that is what we are delivering.

Adaptation

5. **Sally-Ann Hart** (Hastings and Rye) (Con): What progress he plans to make on adaptation in his COP26 presidency year. [900525]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Good progress is being made on adaptation, as was clear at COP26, and it is critical that we work on that. We will continue to do that through the global goal on adaptation, which has just had its first workshop, and by focusing on doubling adaptation finance to £40 billion. An example of what

we in the UK are doing to adapt to rising tides around the coast is our coastal accelerator programme, which we have just launched.

Sally-Ann Hart: The reality is that every country, including the UK, will need to adapt to the impacts of climate change, in which nature-based solutions can play a significant role. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to consider the opportunities and policy support needed to implement nature-based solutions across the UK, in ways that deliver for nature, climate and people?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. Nature-based solutions are critical, and about one third of the mitigation that we need to keep up with 2° of warming can be delivered through natural solutions. That is why the Government are focusing so many of their policies on that issue, whether through flood funding, the new environmental land management scheme, our Nature for Climate fund—that is £740 million and focuses specifically on trees—or peatland restoration. All those things will restore habitats, increase biodiversity and, critically, reduce carbon emissions and sequester carbon.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): We rightly talk about the adaptation finance gap, but as the Minister will know, according to Oxfam the economic costs of loss and damage could be up to £580 billion a year by 2030, yet rich countries are continuing to drag their feet. Will the Government work to ensure that Egypt succeeds where Glasgow failed, so that the £100 billion in climate finance is not just met but exceeded, and so that a new loss and damage finance facility is established at COP27?

Rebecca Pow: A major focus of COP26 was attracting climate finance, and £126 billion was attracted for the forest and agriculture sector to work on reducing degradation. We are of course focusing on the just energy transition, which is also important, and that remains a key focus, in particular doubling finance for adaptation to £40 billion by 2025.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister's answer about working with all sectors on delivering on COP26. Before the United Kingdom hosted COP26, the Secretary of State visited the Vatican to meet His Holiness Pope Francis, and to receive a document signed by all faith leaders about their commitments on climate change. The United Kingdom is hosting the international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, which I had the pleasure of signing off during my term in office. Will the Secretary of State and his Department work with the Foreign Office to ensure that the responsibility of faith leaders on climate change, and their work, is taken forward?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point, and I know the COP President will be happy to continue the work that is already under way.

Domestic Renewable Energy

6. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on accelerating domestic renewable energy production to reduce carbon emissions and help ensure delivery of COP26 commitments. [900526]

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): The Government recently published the British energy security strategy, which sets out plans to turbocharge our clean energy transition. As I said earlier, the aim is to quintuple our offshore wind and solar PV capacities by 2030, while also significantly expanding nuclear and hydrogen. We aim to decarbonise our electricity sector fully by 2035.

Christine Jardine: While I welcome the Minister's comments, all the evidence points to the fact that we need a drastic shift towards renewables if we are to meet our climate change commitment. What does he say about figures from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy that show a reduction in growth in renewable energy over the past few years, specifically in onshore wind? Will he commit to investing more in onshore wind, and to committing to hydrogen, so that all new housing developments are hydrogen capable when boilers are replaced and central heating systems are introduced?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Lady knows, a lot of work is going on with hydrogen, and we published our hydrogen strategy last year. We have announced plans to double our available capacity to 10 GW of hydrogen production by 2030. We already have 14 GW of onshore wind deployed to date, and we have made it clear that we will be consulting this year on developing local partnerships for a number of other supportive communities that wish to host new onshore wind infrastructure. That will, of course, be in return for benefits, including lower energy bills.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): With the international energy price so high, will my right hon. Friend help to cut the cost of living by either scrapping the green levies to help people pay their bills, or at least by introducing a downward green escalator, so that when the international energy price is high, the green levies reduce?

Alok Sharma: Taxation is obviously an issue for the Chancellor, but the Government are providing £37 billion-worth of support right now to help people with the cost of living, including energy bills. On green levies, I think they represent 8% of a dual fuel bill, a significant amount of which is going to vulnerable households through the warm home discount and other mechanisms. The reason energy prices are high right now and wholesale prices have risen by 300% to 400% is in large part due to what is happening with the illegal war in Ukraine.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield, Hallam) (Lab): We need a sprint on renewables, yet Ministers are barely breaking into a limp. In the latest round of contracts for difference, the Government implemented a cap of 12 GW on renewables, despite the industry reporting that 17.4 GW had been cleared for planning permission. That is 5.4 GW of shovel-ready, cheap, clean energy blocked. We are in an energy crisis. Why are the Government not firing on all cylinders to address it?

Alok Sharma: The Government are firing on all cylinders. If we had not been firing on all cylinders and got the second-biggest offshore wind sector in the world, we would now be reliant on Russian hydrocarbons, which we are not, unlike some other countries. The hon. Lady should welcome the progress that has been made and of course we want to do more.

Zero Emission Vehicles

7. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What progress he made at COP26 on supporting the transition to zero emission vehicles. [900528]

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): At COP26, the UK presidency launched the zero emission vehicles declaration. Over 140 parties, including Governments, vehicle manufacturers and businesses, committed to working together towards ensuring that all new car sales are zero emission by 2035 in leading car markets and by 2040 globally. We continue to gather signatories.

Mark Pawsey: The move from internal combustion to electric vehicles will only be successful with good access to infrastructure, but policy on parking at public charging stations rests with local authorities. Does the COP26 President agree that that should be restricted to electric vehicles, and will he join me in regretting that this is not currently the case in Warwickshire?

Alok Sharma: As my hon. Friend points out, parking policy enforcement is devolved to local authorities. He certainly makes an interesting point and I encourage him to raise it with the Department for Transport. Local authorities can, under a traffic regulation order under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, implement parking restrictions, for example dedicated electric vehicle bays.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On local government authorities, has consideration been given to a part-funded scheme allowing refuse vehicles coming near to end of life to be sourced as zero emission, with the cost offset to set the example for other businesses?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. Perhaps I can write to him or get a fellow Minister to do so on this issue.

Topical Questions

T1. [900537] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The COP26 President (Alok Sharma): Last month, I co-chaired a ministerial meeting with Egypt's COP27 President-designate, bringing together almost 50 Governments to discuss progress on the implementation of countries' COP26 commitments. We discussed the commitments to revisit 2030 emission reduction targets, finance, and work programmes on adaptation, loss and damage. While some progress has been made in turning commitments into action, countries need to significantly accelerate the pace of implementation on the road to COP27.

Mark Pawsey: On Friday, I joined the Rugby Green Christian group for a question time event to consider national and local responses to the challenges we face. Does the COP26 President agree that those discussions are essential to building local support for the measures the Government are taking?

Alok Sharma: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing in this area and he is absolutely right. We can all play a part in tackling climate change. It is vital that we do so to make not only the environmental case but the very positive economic case for climate action.

T2. [900538] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Six days ago, the Government approved an application to draw gas in Dunsfold in Surrey, although the council had refused the application twice. Does the Minister agree that this decision by the Government to draw gas from a new gasfield in Surrey flies in the face of the commitment the UK Government made during COP26?

Alok Sharma: I refer the hon. Lady to the British energy security strategy, which sets out the very clear direction of travel towards a clean energy future for the UK.

T5. [900541] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I agree that action is much more important than just straight-forward commitments, so will the COP26 President update the House on the progress made on climate action at the G7 climate, energy and environment meeting?

Alok Sharma: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend about the need for commitments and action. I can confirm that at the G7 Ministers reaffirmed the key climate commitments that were made at COP26 and we also agreed to phase out the use of domestic coal and end G7 international fossil fuel finance by the end of 2022.

T3. [900539] **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): As we have heard, the Government have recently given the green light for oil exploration in the Surrey Hills despite their own admission that it will degrade the quality of the setting of the Surrey Hills area of outstanding natural beauty. We have already seen the degradation of the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty in my constituency. Why are such new licences for oil and gas exploration still being issued and why do the Government continue to allow the destruction of our areas of outstanding natural beauty in the name of fossil fuel production?

Alok Sharma: Again, I make a wider point that we all need to consider. What is our future policy? Our future policy is all about clean energy. Again, I refer the hon. Lady to the energy security strategy, which sets that out very clearly.

T6. [900542] **Chris Clarkson** (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): The UK is in the unique position of being able to become a net exporter of energy again. What progress has my right hon. Friend made towards developing green hydrogen, in particular, for the UK to export to the energy market?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Of course, hydrogen is clearly part of our energy future. We set out our hydrogen strategy last year and, as he will know, in the energy security strategy we have doubled our ambition to 10 GW of low-carbon hydrogen production capacity by 2030. Internationally, we are working with partners through the COP26 breakthrough agenda to ensure that clean technologies such as hydrogen are affordable and accessible for all by 2030.

T4. [900540] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The war in Ukraine, the Freeport LNG explosion and Nord Stream 1 pipeline issues caused a spike in wholesale gas prices overnight at 30%, announced at £2 a therm. Scotland is uniquely placed to assist in the response to this international shortage, but it must be

done responsibly and support carbon capture underground storage to meet net zero targets. After a very recent and helpful discussion with the Energy Minister, will the COP26 President meet me to discuss the opportunities in my constituency?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman knows that the North Sea Transition Authority launched the UK's first ever carbon storage licensing round yesterday. I am very happy to meet him or to ensure that a Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy meets him.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend has just told the House that at the G20 meeting of environment and climate change Ministers, the agreement was reached to phase out global coal. Did he support that measure on behalf of Her Majesty's Government?

Alok Sharma: As my right hon. Friend said, the agreement we reached was for the G7 to phase out domestic coal. Of course, we want to see that happen in developing economies across the world and that is why we are working, as we did with South Africa, to ensure that funding is made available to a number of other countries that are major emitters to ensure that they are able to make that transition to clean energy.

T7. [900543] **Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** Yesterday, RWE announced a partnership with SGN to investigate the provision of hydrogen gas to a number of off-grid small towns in Scotland. They are also investigating the development of a 100 MW hydrogen production plant at Markinch in my constituency, building on the world-leading H100 project in Methil. Will the COP26 President join me in welcoming this confirmation that Scotland leads the world in genuinely renewable energy technologies?

Alok Sharma: I think we should all be welcoming the fact that the UK leads the world when it comes to clean energy transition.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): If all the forest pledges made at COP26 are delivered, we will have achieved 10% of the emissions reductions that we need to stay within 1.5°, so nature is critical to achieving net zero. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on his ambitions for biodiversity at the COP15 summit?

Alok Sharma: We are working very closely on the issue. We want to ensure that there is a new framework for biodiversity. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that COP26 had a big focus on reversing deforestation and supporting biodiversity; we are continuing to press forward on that issue.

Mr Speaker: Before we start Prime Minister's questions, I remind Members of the service at St Margaret's at 1 o'clock today to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the end of the Falklands war. I hope that as many hon. Members as possible will be able to attend.

I would also like to point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings on PMQs is available on parliamentlive.tv. [Interruption] Not that sign language!

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900544] **Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 June.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Mike Wood: Government support for households is greatly appreciated, but high energy costs are causing massive problems for businesses, particularly in energy-intensive manufacturing. Will the Prime Minister support the Repowering the Black Country initiative, which is backed by the local enterprise partnership and by Andy Street, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels? Will he meet me to look at how the Black Country can be a pilot project to decarbonise, reduce costs and protect the region's manufacturing jobs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion for Dudley and for the Black Country. In addition to the £1,200 for the 8 million most vulnerable households, we are providing £400 to help everybody with the cost of energy. We are supporting the Black Country with cost-efficient energy infrastructure, and the region has already received £1.5 million to develop a cluster plan for decarbonisation.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I pay tribute to all those who served in the Falklands? My uncle was among them, serving on HMS Antelope when it went down. Thankfully, he made it back, but too many serving in that war did not. We remember them all.

Britain is set for lower growth than every major economy except Russia. Why?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman: actually, according to the International Monetary Fund and the OECD, in addition to the fastest growth in the G7 last year, we are going to have the second fastest this year, and we will return to the top of the table. The reason that other countries are temporarily moving ahead is, of course, that we came out of the pandemic faster than they did, because we took the right decisions to come out of lockdown—which he opposed. That is why, right now, we have the highest number of people on payrolled employment on record.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister always likes to blame global forces, but global forces are just that: global—everybody faces them. Britain is not under crippling economic sanctions like Russia. No wonder he does not want to answer the question: why is the UK set for lower growth than every other major economy?

The Prime Minister: I think everybody can see that I have just answered the question. Once again, the right hon. Gentleman is guilty of what m'legal friends call "ignoratio elenchi": he has failed to listen to what I have

actually said. What would be useful, in supporting the UK economy right now, would be if the leader of the Labour party ended his sphinx-like silence about the RMT's strikes coming up in the course of the next couple of weeks. Will he now break with his shadow Transport Secretary and denounce Labour's rail strikes?

Mr Speaker: Just to remind the Prime Minister—he seems to have forgotten—it is Prime Minister's questions, not Opposition questions.

Keir Starmer: He is in government. He could do something to stop the strikes, but he has not lifted a finger. I do not want the strikes to go ahead, but he does. He wants the country to grind to a halt so that he can feed off the division.

As for his boasting about the economy, he thinks he can perform Jedi mind tricks on the country—"These aren't the droids you're looking for". "No rules were broken". "The economy is booming". The problem is, the Force just isn't with him any more. He thinks he is Obi-Wan Kenobi; the truth is, he is Jabba the Hutt. Last week he stood there and boasted that we would continue to grow the economy. This week it turns out that the economy shrank for the second month in a row. How does it help Britain to have an ostrich Prime Minister with his head in the sand?

The Prime Minister: There he goes again, Mr Speaker, running this country down. We have got the highest employment—the highest payroll employment—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Look, I want to hear the questions and the answers. Whether you like it or not, but I genuinely believe it, the public who watch Prime Minister's questions also want to hear both.

The Prime Minister: We have got lower unemployment than France, Germany, Italy or Canada. As I have said, we have the highest number of people in payroll jobs—620,000 more—since records began. The right hon. Gentleman might like to know that just in the first five months of this year, this country has attracted, I think, £16 billion of investment in its tech sector. He does not like these European comparisons; let us make them for him. That is three times as much as Germany, twice as much as France. He should be talking this country up, not running it down.¹

Keir Starmer: That's the ostrich. He is not just denying how bad things are; he is actively making things worse. His 15 tax rises are throttling growth and the Director of the CBI is so fed up that he is reduced to saying:

"Can we stop Operation Save Big Dog and...move to action stations on the economy?"

We know what the Prime Minister says about British business in private—I think that is pretty unparliamentary—but when did screwing business turn from a flippant comment into economic policy?

The Prime Minister: I just reminded the House of what is happening in tech week in this country—the massive investment that is coming in, helped, by the way, by the 130% super deduction for business investment that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has put in. Never forget, Mr Speaker, that under Labour, taxes go up on businesses and on people. We are not only putting

£1,200 more into people's pockets; the right hon. Gentleman talks about taxes, and we are having a tax cut worth £330 on average for everybody who pays national insurance. Labour has already made spending commitments, in this Parliament alone, worth £94 billion more than the Government's. That is £2,100 for every household in the country. No wonder no Labour Government have ever left office with unemployment lower than when they came in.

Keir Starmer: Fifteen tax rises, and we are saddled with the highest tax burden since rationing. He says the economy is booming when it is shrinking. He is game-playing so much, he thinks he is on "Love Island". Trouble is, Prime Minister, I am reliably informed that contestants that give the public the ick get booted out.

It is not just low growth. He has also lost control of inflation. He was warned about this last September, and what did he do? He dismissed it; he did not act; he sat on his hands. Now prices are through the roof and we are set to have the highest inflation in the G7. When will he accept that he got it badly wrong when he claimed that worries about inflation were "unfounded"?

The Prime Minister: We are helping people with the cost of living with £1,200, and on 14 July the money will be going into people's bank accounts. Why can we do that? Because we have the fiscal firepower to do it and because the economy is in robust shape, with record numbers of people in payroll employment. That is thanks to the steps that we took, that the right hon. and learned Gentleman continuously opposed. I will not say this interrogatively, Mr Speaker, but he has the chance now to clear this up. He can oppose Labour's rail strikes right now—*[Interruption.]* He can disagree; I will give him that opportunity. Let him disagree with the union barons who would add to people's costs in the coming weeks.

Keir Starmer: I do not want the strikes to go ahead. The Prime Minister does, so that he can feed on the division—*[Interruption.]* There may be a lot of noise now, but I have a long list of what his MPs really think of him. "Dragging everyone down." Who said that? Come on! Who was it who said that? "Authority is destroyed." Come on, hands up! Which of you was it? "Can't win back trust." Anybody owning up? You are very quiet now. Hands! Hands!

My personal favourite is this. It is a document circulated by his Back Benchers, in which they call him the "Conservative Corbyn". Prime Minister, I don't think that was intended as a compliment. Week after week, he stands there and spouts the same nonsense: the economy is booming, everything is going swimmingly, the people should be grateful. But while he is telling Britain that we have never had it so good, millions of working people and businesses know the reality. Britain's growth is going to be slower than our competitors, and our inflation higher. A Prime Minister who sounds totally deluded, totally failing on the economy, failing to tackle—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we need to get to the end of the question, but I will just remind hon. Members that I will hear the end of the question in silence. Any more noise in this corner of the Chamber, and there will be another early cup of tea if we are not careful.

1.*[Official Report, 6 July 2022, Vol. 717, c. 12MC.]*

Keir Starmer: A Prime Minister who sounds totally deluded, totally failing the economy, failing to tackle inflation, failing to back business, failing to help working people through the crisis, and his big idea is to go back to imperial measurements. He has '80s inflation and '70s stagnation; now he wants '60s weights to complete the set. When is he going to ditch the gimmicks and face up to the reality that, under him, Britain's economy is going backwards?

The Prime Minister rose—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us hear the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: A couple of quick points about Mr Corbyn—the right hon. Member for Islington North. First, the right hon. and learned Gentleman tried repeatedly to get him elected as Prime Minister. Secondly, speaking from experience, the right hon. Member for Islington North is relatively dynamic by comparison with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Dynamic and coherent—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. It might be helpful if the Prime Minister could speak to me. I am struggling to hear because of the noise on both sides, so please look towards the Chair; it will be easier for both of us.

The Prime Minister: What we are going to get on and do is continue to take the tough decisions to take this country forward—decisions that are on the side of the British people. The Opposition are blatantly on the side of the RMT union barons, when there are some ticket offices that barely sell one ticket per hour. We are on the side of the travelling public.

By the way, the right hon. and learned Gentleman has not mentioned this, but they are on the side of the people traffickers who would risk people's lives at sea, and we are on the side of people who come here safely and legally. They carp and snipe from the sidelines—that is what they have always done—and we take the big decisions to take this country forward. No matter how much welly the deputy Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), may ask him to apply, or how much welly he pretends to apply, that welly is always on the left foot.

Q3. [900546] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Many areas like mine have already had massive new housing development with no commensurate increase in general practice—

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Sorry—a point of order? The hon. Lady has been here long enough to know that points of order come at the end.

Andrew Selous: Many areas—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Have a conversation later!

Andrew Selous: Many areas like mine have already had massive new housing development with no commensurate increase in general practice capacity. At one of my surgeries, which has double the recommended number of patients per GP, the bowel cancer diagnosis of a 51-year-old father of four was missed and is now

terminal. Getting this right is a life and death issue, so will the Prime Minister make sure that parts of the country that have already had massive new housing growth get the commensurate increase in general practice capacity that is only right and fair?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course. We have 6,000 more doctors, 1,200 more GPs than this time last year and 11,800 more nurses, but we must make sure that areas with sensitive new development have the infrastructure and services, particularly medical services, that they need. The NHS has a statutory duty to take account of population growth. I know my hon. Friend has met my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary, and I will take this up personally to make sure we get a proper approach to this very important issue.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I join you and others, Mr Speaker, in remembering the Falklands conflict of 40 years ago and those like my colleague Keith Brown, the Scottish Justice Minister, who served there. In particular, our thoughts are with those who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Yesterday our First Minister started a national conversation on Scotland's right to choose an independent future. When we look at nations like Iceland, Ireland, Norway and Denmark, it is clear that our neighbours are outperforming the United Kingdom. They deliver greater income equality, lower poverty rates and higher productivity, social mobility and business investment—the list goes on and on. The evidence is overwhelming: Scotland is being held back by Westminster.

Prime Minister, all those countries can use their powers of independence to create wealthier, fairer and greener societies. Why not Scotland?

The Prime Minister: I do not doubt the right hon. Gentleman's talents as a conversationalist, but I think there are other subjects in the national conversation right now, including what we are doing to come through the aftershocks of covid with the strongest jobs-led recovery of any European economy. As I said, 620,000 more people across the whole UK are in payroll employment than before the pandemic began.

Another subject of national conversation is investment in our whole country. In Scotland and across the whole UK, as I mentioned, there is great investment in the tech sector, and the whole UK is standing strong together on the international stage and sticking up for the Ukrainians. Those are some of the things the country is also talking about.

Ian Blackford: Stronger together? Has the Prime Minister seen the pound? I think the financial markets have made their judgment on this Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister can afford to live in his own little world, his own little Britain, but people have to live with the reality of a failing Westminster system: a cost of living crisis that is worse in the UK than in any other G7 country; an inflation rate double that of France; the second worst economic growth forecast in the G20, behind only sanctioned Russia; and now the threat of a trade war with our European friends, triggered by a lawbreaking Prime Minister. That is not a vision for the future of Scotland.

Our nation is big enough, rich enough and smart enough. Is it not the case that Scotland simply cannot afford to remain trapped in the failing Westminster system? Stop the world, Scotland wants to get on.

The Prime Minister: I think the figures speak for themselves. The UK has record numbers of people in payroll employment. That is an astounding thing, when we consider where we were during the pandemic. That was because of the UK working well together, as the right hon. Gentleman will remember, on the vaccine roll-out and on the testing, on which Scotland and the rest of the country co-operated brilliantly.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about a trade war. What could be more foolish than a project that actually envisages trade barriers within parts of the United Kingdom? That is what we are trying to break down.

Q4. [900548] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I was honoured to share part of the jubilee celebrations with Cohort 4, an inspirational mentoring and support group that provides life-changing support to a wide range of women, such as those who have, tragically, been victims of domestic violence or sexual abuse, or who suffer from mental health difficulties. Sadly, as a result of the pandemic, the need for those services has only grown, so will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Beverley and her team for the incredible work that they do at Cohort 4? Will he also set out what more the Government can do to support these organisations so that they can continue to deliver this vital care to vulnerable men and women across all our constituencies?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and I want to extend my thanks also to Beverley and everybody in Cohort 4 for what they are doing. The extra support that we are giving includes £140 million of funding for victims' services and £47 million ring-fenced particularly for organisations such as Cohort 4. I say thank you to Cohort 4 and similar organisations for everything they do.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): May I join the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in paying tribute to our armed forces, and in sending our thanks and gratitude to the veterans of the Falklands war and their families?

Millions of families across our country are suffering because of the cost of living emergency. People in rural areas are especially hurting, bearing the brunt of record fuel price rises. The rural fuel duty relief scheme is supposed to help by taking money off the price of petrol, but some rural counties are not eligible, such as Cumbria, Shropshire and Devon—[*Interruption.*] The Conservative party does not want to hear ideas to help those people, and I think the people of Devon will take note because there are families and pensioners across rural counties who are missing out on this support. As petrol prices soar, will the Prime Minister accept our idea to help people in rural counties and expand rural fuel duty relief?

The Prime Minister: We cut fuel duty for everybody across the country by record sums. The right hon. Gentleman talks about pensioners; we are giving £850 more to every pensioner across the country. He talks about the cost of energy; everybody is going to get another £400 to help them with the costs of energy.

The blissful fact about the Liberal Democrats is that people do not actually know what their policies are. They are able to go around the country bamboozling the rural communities—not revealing that they are, in fact, in favour of massive new green taxes, which is what they want, and not revealing that they would like to go back, straightaway, into the common agricultural policy, with all the bureaucracy and all the costs that that entails. They do not say that on the doorstep.

Q6. [900550] **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): There are proposals for up to 10,000 housing units on flood-prone greenfield sites to the west of Ifield in my constituency that would also represent intolerable pressure on local services. May I have an assurance from the Prime Minister that as we update planning legislation, we will enshrine the “brownfield first” principle for new developments, and save our environments and our services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is completely right. We encourage the use of suitable brownfield land, and our policy is brownfield first, everywhere and always.

Q2. [900545] **Neale Hanvey** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): The Prime Minister will know from my recent correspondence that a Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath constituent, Ruth Zuccarello, is the sister of Jim Fitton, who is currently imprisoned in Iraq. He has been sentenced to 15 years for collecting some shards of pottery. The judge passing the sentence did not believe that Mr Fitton had any criminal intent. This has obvious and significant implications for Jim and his loved ones. Is the Prime Minister willing to meet me and other MPs who have constituents in Jim's family to discuss the case, so that we can work in concert to resolve some of the issues?

The Prime Minister: I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising Mr Fitton's case. I have a great deal of sympathy with him. I will make sure that the hon. Gentleman gets a meeting with the relevant Minister as soon as possible.

Q8. [900552] **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): One of my youngest constituents, little Nellie Oakshott, is two years old and has been diagnosed with metachromatic leukodystrophy. Her very brave parents, Megan and Tom, are supporting a campaign for MLD to be added to the newborn blood spot test. Had it been included in the test, Nellie's condition could have been treated. Now the family are squaring up to palliative care and planning to make every day count. Will the Prime Minister give his support to adding MLD to the heel-prick test, so that families can be spared the same heartbreak in future?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I know that everybody's thoughts will be with Nellie and her parents, Tom and Megan, at this very difficult time. The UK National Screening Committee has received a request to look again at the conditions for doing an MLD test, and that is being reviewed right now. I will make sure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting as soon as possible with the relevant Minister.

Q5. [900549] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): In just five days, rail passengers across the UK and in the north-east will face huge disruption—[*Interruption.*] But on the eve of the biggest rail dispute in a generation, it has emerged

that Ministers have not held any talks whatsoever since March. I ask the Prime Minister: has he met trade unions and employers in the rail industry to attempt to bring the dispute to an end—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I noticed that when one union baron was asked about this, he said, “I don’t negotiate with a Tory Government.” That is what he said, Mr Speaker. We all know how much money the Labour Front Benchers take from the RMT. We know why they are sitting on their hands during Labour’s rail strike. They should come out and condemn it.

Q10. [900554] **Tom Randall** (Gedling) (Con): Today is Pension Credit Awareness Day. Pension credit is currently underclaimed, with about a quarter of those who are entitled to it not claiming it. Will my right hon. Friend join me in encouraging people in Gedling and throughout the country to check their eligibility and make that claim, so that we can get more money into the pockets of pensioners?

The Prime Minister: That is a very worthwhile and important campaign that my hon. Friend supports. Too many pensioners fail to take up their entitlements under pension credit. It can be worth an additional £3,300 a year, and the more we can do to make pensioners aware of it, the better.

Q7. [900551] **Anna McMorris** (Cardiff North) (Lab): Mr Speaker,

“Why is it that the worst people often rise to the highest office and stay there?”

Not my words about the Prime Minister, but those of his newest appointment—his cost of living tsar. Families across Cardiff North who are crippled with sky-rocketing bills and are unable to afford even the most basic necessities all agree with him, saying, “This Prime Minister has to go.” If even the Prime Minister’s own tsar does not have faith in him, tell me why those who are struggling should.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has asked that question repeatedly. Let me remind her that this is a Government who get on and deliver on our promises to the people—in particular, on getting Brexit done. I read the other day that she wants to go back into the single market and the customs union. If going back into the EU is the real policy of the Labour party, why will the Leader of the Opposition not admit it?

Q11. [900555] **Edward Timpson** (Eddisbury) (Con): When our family adopted my two brothers in the 1980s, support for adopters, whether that be financial, therapeutic or professional, was minimal. By the time I became a family law barrister in the late 1990s, it really was not much better. Efforts since, particularly the adoption support fund from 2015 onwards, have improved the situation, but, as ever, there is much more that we can do. To that end, will my right hon. Friend look at making self-employed adopters eligible for statutory adoption pay so that they can also have a better and fairer start to family life?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a great champion of adopters and all those who help to give children a loving and stable home. He is quite right, we have so far focused on supporting employed parents, but local

authorities have the power to provide discretionary payments equivalent to maternity allowance for self-employed adopters as well.

Q9. [900553] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): We know that, at times of economic hardship, suicide rates are likely to rise too. We saw that after the 2008 crash. As well as doing more to support people through the cost of living crisis, will the Prime Minister commit to doing more to support excellent suicide prevention campaigns such as CALM—the Campaign Against Living Miserably—and also implement Labour’s pledge to let anyone in need of it to be able to access mental health counselling within a month and to end waiting lists?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is entirely right. We must focus ever more on mental health. That is why we are putting another £2.3 billion into supporting mental health, which includes suicide prevention and the many wonderful charities that help people with their conditions. All I can say is that it would be a good thing if, across the Floor of this House, we had support for the spending that we are putting in.

Q12. [900556] **Mr David Jones** (Clwyd West) (Con): The conflict in Ukraine and the consequent disruption of the supply chain in wheat have highlighted the need for the United Kingdom to become more self-sufficient in food. The Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, which has its Second Reading this afternoon, will help create the conditions to enable English farmers to produce more food of higher quality. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the drive to self-sufficiency requires a UK-wide effort? Will he urge the devolved Administrations to adopt the provisions of the Bill, so that farmers across Britain can produce the food that the country needs?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is completely right that, currently, the Bill only applies to England. But, in a loving and sharing way, we are going to work with the devolved Administrations so that the whole of the UK can enjoy the benefits.

Q14. [900558] **Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): Mental health support is vital for victims of sexual crimes. When a Rotherham survivor, who is here today, reported her childhood abuse to the police, they told her not to go for counselling as it could be used against her in court. Your Attorney General, Prime Minister, is challenging the rules to make it even easier for defence teams to access victims’ counselling notes, which has an immediate chilling effect. Survivors should not be forced to choose between their mental health and justice. Prime Minister, please stop this.

The Prime Minister: I am very interested to hear what the hon. Lady says, and I will look at the evidence that she has. These are very sensitive and difficult issues, particularly with regard to defence cases. But if she looks at what is happening on rape and serious sexual offences, where we have had similar problems, she will see that we are gradually starting to see an improvement in the prosecution rates. That is because Departments across Whitehall are working together to take account of victims’ needs. I agree that the progress is not everything that I would like, but we are seeing progress.

Q13. [900557] Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware that the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust has recently submitted a revised outline business case in support of its £312 million capital allocation made by the Department of Health and Social Care four years ago. Does he agree that, in order to make progress and complete the ambitious hospital building programme, the NHS decision-making processes need to be not only levelled up, but speeded up?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend certainly speaks for many in this House in wanting faster decisions on planning and the NHS, and that is what we are doing. We are pushing through, as he knows, 40 hospitals by the—[*Interruption.*] Forty hospitals we are building, and what that needs is the funding. I tactfully point out again that Members on the Opposition Benches are bellowing away, but they voted against the extra £39 billion that we are putting in.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent Mr Singh's identity has been stolen. His NHS records are being misused, but he has been advised that there is nothing the Health Secretary can do. Crimes are being committed in his name. The Home Secretary's Department assured him that that would not affect his immigration status, yet recently he and his wife and children were detained by UK Border Force while travelling for a family holiday. Can the Prime Minister explain who in his Government is responsible for this chaotic incompetence?

The Prime Minister: I would be only too happy to look at this. I am very sorry for the experience Mr Singh and his family have had. The hon. Lady asks who is responsible: I am responsible, and I take responsibility. I will look at the case and I will make sure that she gets a proper answer from the Home Office and the immigration department.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): My constituent Dominique Davies is the niece of Dom Phillips, the British journalist missing in Brazil alongside the indigenous expert Bruno Pereira. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Government make this case a diplomatic priority, and that they work to do everything they can to ensure that the Brazilian authorities put in the resources necessary to uncover the truth and find out what has happened to Dom and Bruno?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for representing the niece of Dom Phillips. Like everybody in this House, we are deeply concerned about what may have happened to him. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials are working closely now with the Brazilian authorities following his disappearance on 5 June. The Minister responsible has raised the issue of the search and rescue effort repeatedly with Brazil's Minister of Justice and Public Security; what we have told the Brazilians is that we stand ready to provide all the support that they may need.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you could advise me on how I can correct the record on the question from the right hon. Member for Kingston and

Surbiton (Ed Davey), who raised the matter of rural fuel duty relief and incorrectly advised that it was not available in Devon. In my North Devon constituency, which I on this side of the House clearly know quite well, fuel retailers in the EX35 postcode of Lynton have had access to the duty relief for some time. How might we address that situation?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. The Chair is not responsible for points made by right hon. and hon. Members, but she has put her concerns on the record, so I suggest we leave it at that.

Ed Davey: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Member for North Devon (Selaine Saxby) for raising that point and—not directly, I think—pointing out that vast parts of Devon do not have rural fuel duty relief.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I think this is becoming a continuation of Prime Minister's questions, so we will leave it at that.

Yasmin Qureshi: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, in Prime Minister's questions the Prime Minister said that the Leader of the Opposition was a supporter of people traffickers. I think that should be taken out of the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. Frankly, the level of noise during PMQs meant that it was not possible for the Chair to hear everything, but I understand that the Prime Minister did say, as she says, that the Opposition were on the side of people traffickers. That seems to me—and, I have to say, to the Speaker—to fall well short of the good temper and moderation that should characterise our debates. I say to the Prime Minister and to all Members here that we need to refer to each other in this place in more respectful terms, and I am sure that that spirit will be adopted in the statement to come.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Speaking as Chair of the International Trade Committee, it was to the dismay of the Committee that we found out that the Government were to trigger the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 process on the Australia-UK free trade agreement before the scrutiny was finished. This is in the light of assurances in a letter to the Speaker of the House, assurances from a Department for International Trade Minister at the Dispatch Box on the Floor of the House on 17 November 2021, and assurances to the Committee itself that scrutiny would be allowed to happen before CRAG was triggered. This has not happened. What is happening is that the UK is opening and rolling out the red carpet to Australian exporters to the UK while Australia is not ratifying. We in the Committee feel that there should be a vote, at the very least, to delay CRAG. Can you advise us, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how best we can achieve that end?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. It did not relate directly to PMQs, so it should actually have been taken later. However, Ministers should obviously stick to commitments that they have made, and I am sure that he will find a number of ways to further the points that he has made.

Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda

12.41 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the Government's world-leading migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda.

The British people have repeatedly voted for controlled immigration and the right to secure borders. This is a Government who act and hear that message clearly, and we are determined to deliver that. Last night we aimed to relocate the first people from our country who arrived here through dangerous and illegal means, including by small boat. Over the course of this week, many and various claims to prevent relocation have been brought forward. I welcomed the decisions of our domestic courts—the High Court, the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court—to uphold our right to send the flight. However, following a decision by an out-of-hours judge in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, minutes before our flight's departure, the final individuals remaining on the flight had their removal directions paused while their claims were considered.

I want to make something absolutely clear: the European Court of Human Rights did not rule that the policy or relocations were unlawful, but it prohibited the removal of three of those on last night's flight. Those prohibitions last for different time periods but are not an absolute bar on their transfer to Rwanda. Anyone who has been ordered to be released by the court will be tagged while we continue to progress their relocation. While this decision by the Strasbourg court to intervene was disappointing and surprising given the repeated and considered judgments to the contrary in our domestic courts, we remain committed to this policy. These repeated legal barriers are very similar to those that we experience with all other removal flights. We believe that we are fully compliant with our domestic and international obligations, and preparations for our future flights and the next flights have already begun. Our domestic courts were of the view that the flight could go ahead.

The case for our partnership with Rwanda bears repeating. We are a generous and welcoming country, as has been shown time and time again. Over 200,000 people have used safe and legal routes to come to the UK since 2015, and most recently Britons have opened their hearts and their homes to Afghan nationals and Ukrainian nationals. But our capacity to help those in need is severely compromised by those who come here illegally and, as we have discussed in this House many, many times, seek to jump the queue because they can afford to pay the people smugglers. It is illegal, and it is not necessary, because they are coming from other safe countries. It is not fair, either on those who play by the rules or on the British taxpayers who have to foot this bill. We cannot keep on spending nearly £5 million a day on accommodation, including hotels. We cannot accept this intolerable pressure on public services and local communities. It makes us less safe as a nation, because those who come here illegally do not have the regularised checks or even the regularised status and because evil people-smuggling gangs use the proceeds of their ill-gotten gains to fund other appalling crimes that undermine the security of our country. It is also

lethally dangerous for those who are smuggled. People have drowned at sea, suffocated in lorries and perished crossing territories.

The humane, decent and moral response to all this is simply not to stand by and let people drown or be sold into slavery or smuggled, but to stop it. With that, inaction is not an option—or at least, not a morally responsible one. This is, as I have said repeatedly, a complex, long-standing problem. The global asylum system is broken and between 80 million and 100 million people are now displaced, and others are on the move seeking better economic opportunities. An international problem requires international solutions.

The UK and Rwanda have shown the way forward by working together, and this partnership sends a clear message that illegal entry will not be tolerated, while offering a practical, humane way forward for those who arrive to the UK via illegal routes. It has saddened me to see Rwanda so terribly misrepresented and traduced in recent weeks. It is another example of how all too often, critics not only do not know what they are speaking about, but seek to vilify another country that has a good track record when it comes to refugees and stepping up to international responsibilities.

Rwanda is a safe and secure country with an outstanding track record of supporting refugees and asylum seekers. Indeed, we are proud that we are working together, proud that the UK is investing in Rwanda and helping that great country to thrive, and proud that those who are relocated to Rwanda will have an opportunity to thrive as well. They will be given generous support, including language skills, vocational training and help with starting their own businesses or finding employment, but I am afraid that the usual suspects, with the blessings of Opposition Members, have set out to thwart and even campaign against these efforts and, with that, the will of the British people.

It would be wrong to issue a running commentary on ongoing cases, but I would like to say this: this Government will not be deterred from doing the right thing, we will not be put off by the inevitable last-minute legal challenges, and nor will we allow mobs to block removals. We will not stand idly by and let organised crime gangs, who are despicable in their nature and their conduct—evil people—treat human beings as cargo. We will not accept that we have no right to control our borders. We will do everything necessary to keep this country safe, and we will continue our long and proud tradition of helping those in genuine need.

Many of us have met refugees, both abroad and on British soil, and listened to the stories that are frankly chilling and heartbreaking. It suits Opposition Members to pretend that those on this side of the House do not care, but as you referred to in the earlier point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker, on this side of the House such accusations are a grotesque slur. What is truly chilling is listening to opponents going on about how awful this policy is while offering no practical solutions while lives are being lost.

Helping to develop safe and legal routes to this country for those who really need them is at the heart of this Government's work. Having overseen efforts to bring to the UK thousands of people in absolute need, including from Hong Kong, Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine, I am the first to say that controlled immigration, including by refugees, is good and outstanding for our country, but we simply have to focus on supporting

[Priti Patel]

those who need it most, and not those who have picked the UK as a destination over a safe country such as France. It is no use pretending that those people are fleeing persecution when they are travelling from a safe country.

Our capacity to help is not infinite, and public support for the asylum system will be fatally undermined if we do not act. The critics of the migration and economic development partnership have no alternative proposal to deal with uncontrolled immigration. As on so many other issues, the Labour party and the SNP are on the wrong side of the argument. With their arguments, we would see public trust in the system only being corroded. That is irresponsible and utterly indifferent to those who we seek to help and support.

I have always said that I will look at all proposals to reduce illegal migration and illegal entry to our country, even those that Opposition Members might put forward, although we are still waiting for them. *[Interruption.]* Fundamentally, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) and others do not think there is a problem, which is why they do not have a solution. They still stand for open borders—pure and simple. Meanwhile, this Government want to get on with not just delivering what the British people want, but reforming our systems so that they are firm and fair for those who pay for them and those who need our help and support.

12.51 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): This is a shambles; it is shameful, and the Home Secretary has no one but herself to blame. This is not, and never has been, a serious policy, and she knew that when she chartered the plane. She knew that among the people she was planning to send to Rwanda on that plane were torture and trafficking victims, that she did not have a proper screening process in place and that some of them might be children. Can she confirm that the Home Office itself withdrew a whole series of those cases on Friday and yesterday because it knew that there was a problem with them, and that even without the European Court of Human Rights judgment, she was planning to send a plane with just seven people on board, because she had had to withdraw most of the cases at the last minute?

The Home Secretary knows that there is a lack of proper asylum capacity in Rwanda to make fair decisions and that as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says, Rwanda normally deals with only a few hundred cases a year and has only one eligibility officer who prepares the cases. There is also a lack of interpreters and legal advisers to ensure fair decisions. The Home Secretary promised that there would be extra payments to Rwanda for each person transferred, presumably to pay for the extra caseworkers and support, but she has refused to tell us how much. What is she hiding? Will she tell us now how much she promised Rwanda for each of the people she was planning to send yesterday, and how many Rwandan refugees she promised to take in return?

The Home Secretary knows that serious concerns have been raised about Rwandan restrictions on political freedom, the treatment of LGBT people, the fact that

12 refugees were shot by the authorities in 2018 for protesting against food cuts, and the fact that Afghan and Syrian asylum seekers have been returned by Rwanda. She knows that none of those concerns has been addressed.

The Home Secretary also knows that the policy will not work. We need action to tackle dangerous criminal gangs who are putting lives at risk, and she knows that her policies will not achieve that. That is not their objective. If it was, she would not have asked the National Crime Agency, whose job it is to target the criminal gangs, to draw up 20% staff cuts—that is potentially 1,000 people being cut from the organisation that works to tackle the gangs. Can she confirm whether she has asked the NCA to draw up plans for staff cuts?

If the Home Secretary was serious, she would be taking seriously the fact that the Israel-Rwanda deal ended up increasing criminal people trafficking and smuggling and that her plan risks making things worse. If she was serious, she would be working night and day to get a better joint plan with France to crack down on the gangs and to stop the boats being put into the water in the first place, but she is not, because her relationship with French Ministers has totally broken down.

If the Home Secretary was serious about tackling illegal economic migration or cutting the bills from people in hotels, she would speed up Home Office decision making so that refugees can get support and those who are not can be returned home. Instead, the number of decisions has totally collapsed from 28,000 to just 14,000 a year—fewer than Belgium and the Netherlands, never mind Germany and France. She is so badly failing to take those basic decisions that she is trying to pay a country thousands of miles away to take them for us instead. How shameful does that make us look around the world if our Home Office cannot take those basic decisions?

The Home Secretary knew about problem after problem with her policy. She knew that it was unworkable and unethical and that it will not stop the criminal gangs, but she still went ahead and spent half a million pounds chartering a plane that she never expected to fly, and she still wrote a £120 million cheque to Rwanda with a promise of more to come, because all she really cares about is picking fights and finding someone else to blame.

This is not a long-term plan; it is a short-term stunt. Everyone can see that it is not serious policy; it is shameless posturing and the Home Secretary knows it. It is not building consensus; it is just pursuing division. It is government by gimmick. It is not in the public interest; it is just in the Government's political interest, and along the way they are prepared to trash people's lives, our basic British values of fairness, decency and common sense, and the reputation of our nation.

Our country is better than this. We have a long tradition of hard work and stepping up to tackle problems—not offloading them—to tackle the criminal gangs who put lives at risk, and to do right by refugees. That is what the Home Secretary should be doing now, not this shambles that is putting our country to shame.

Priti Patel: I always look forward to these exchanges in the House, primarily because—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps hon. Members would like to listen.

As a point of education for the right hon. Lady, we are not the only country in the world to be adopting this approach. She may be aware that it is an approach that the EU has adopted through its transfer mechanism to Rwanda. Denmark is also in the process of looking at it.

The right hon. Lady raises a number of points that are factually incorrect. *[Interruption.]* I will come to the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East shortly. The purpose of the work that we are doing is to absolutely break the business model of the people smugglers. It is a shame that Opposition Members run down the National Crime Agency.

Hon. Members: You are running it down!

Priti Patel: Calm down a second. Actually the UK intelligence community are working together to tackle the people smugglers upstream, and we are investing in upstream programmes to tackle the people smugglers.

I have more to say on this subject, of course. Opposition Members keep speaking about asylum seekers who have travelled from Iran, Iraq and other countries, but of course, they have come from France—a safe country. They have not come from Iraq; they have come from France. In the same way, the right hon. Lady said that people have come from Syria; they have come from France and they have paid people smugglers.

Opposition Members do not claim that it is immoral to send people back to European countries for their claims to be considered there. Their logic seems to be that Rwanda is a wonderful country that is good enough to host international summits and world dignitaries, but not to relocate people there, as our global partnership does.

Opposition Members know that people are dying in the channel, but they simply do not have a single workable solution between them. They are choosing sides while the Government are committed to pioneering a way forward. They are clutching at straws when they speak about money, but of course we cannot put a price on lives being lost. We believe in saving lives and breaking the people smuggling model.

On the legal claims that I think the right hon. Lady was referring to—pre-action protocol and national referral mechanism claims—I do not remember her making those points with that synthetic hypothetical rage when she occupied my seat under a previous Labour Government. That Government brought in Acts and powers, including the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 and the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Act 2004, to remove people with no legal basis to be in this country. These are the same powers that we are using to remove individuals with no legal right to be in this country, and of course these are exactly the same powers that, only recently and again today, she was saying could be used if we had not left the EU.

Yet again, the right hon. Lady talks about the policy being unworkable and extortionate, but it cannot be both, because clearly, as we have said from the outset, this is a partnership based on working with Rwanda. If I may say so, there is nothing more inhumane than

turning a blind eye to those who are being smuggled not just across the channel but in lorries, and we have a global collective responsibility to work with international partners, on which the Labour party has clearly shut the door firmly.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Let me say from the outset that I know the shadow Secretary of State very well, and she is much, much better than some of the comments she came out with today.

I say to the Home Secretary that I was a child in school when people came to this country from Vietnam and from Hong Kong, as well as from Africa, but this is different. This Parliament is supreme, and our courts have said this is right. This is what the British people want us to do—control immigration in relation to those coming across in boats—so how is it right that this Court has overruled all our courts and this Parliament?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes some very important points. He speaks of the generosity of our country, and I stand by that. I think this Government's record speaks very strongly on supporting people from Afghanistan, Syria, Hong Kong, Ukraine, and the hundreds of thousands of people whom we have supported. He rightly speaks about our domestic courts in the same way as I did in my statement, and it is important to note that the courts have not challenged the legality of our policy.

In fact, I use this moment to pay tribute, which the Opposition parties will not do, to our officials in the Home Office, both in-country and here, for their work on developing the programme and on evidencing the legality of the policy, and how they have worked with Rwanda as a country on its capability and capacity to house people.

These arguments have been challenged in the courts and they have been well heard in the courts. If I may make one final point, our domestic courts have been transparent in their decision making and how they have communicated their verdicts from the High Court, the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal. What is concerning is the opaque nature of the conduct of last night's appeal by the European Court of Human Rights in the way that it informed the UK Government about one individual. It is now right that we spend time going back to that Court to get the grounds upon which it made its decision.

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

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): My party continues to deplore this unworkable, illegal and immoral policy. It does nothing to stop smugglers and it inflicts serious harm on victims, despite the Home Secretary's cloud cuckoo land description of it. We wholeheartedly welcome the cancellation of this flight, and we condemn the reckless approach that the Home Secretary has taken to taxpayers' money and, more importantly, to the rule of law.

May I take a moment to commend the lawyers involved for their incredible work in the face of some utterly inappropriate commentary from the top of Government? Will the Home Secretary tell her colleagues to heed the

[Stuart C. McDonald]

call from the Law Society and the Bar Council, and stop attacks on legal professionals who are simply doing their job?

It is not the lawyers who caused this flight to be cancelled nor any court; this flight was stopped because of the stench of yet more Government illegality. [Interruption.] It was. Even the most ardent supporters of this dreadful policy must recognise that there is, to put it mildly, massive dubiety over its lawfulness. The UNHCR, the guardian of the refugee convention, is clear that this is in breach of it. To seek to press ahead before the courts have concluded that issue either way was a reckless waste of taxpayers' money and shows again this Government's total disregard for the rule of law.

The Home Secretary should call this off now, and wait for that Court ruling. That is all we are asking for in the meantime. She should start answering the basic questions that we did not get answers to on Monday, such as about oversight, age assessments, and screening for torture survivors and trafficking victims. This is a dreadful mess.

Inevitably, this pitiful policy failure will now, wrongly, be blamed by the usual suspects on the European convention on human rights, so will the Home Secretary recognise what the Prime Minister previously said about the convention being a "great thing"? Will she recognise its importance for devolution, for the Good Friday agreement and for the trade and co-operation agreement, and call off the agitators in her party who want the UK to follow Russia and Belarus through the exit door and on to pariah state status?

Priti Patel: As ever—tone is important, if I may say so, in this debate—we respectfully disagree with the hon. Gentleman and his party wholeheartedly. As we have heard throughout the debates on this subject previously, but also on the Nationality and Borders Act, as it now is—thanks to the support we have had from Government Members to deal with smuggling and trafficking, and to change our laws—it is quite clear that the SNP would like to see an end to all removals and all deportations, irrespective of their basis, full stop. That is obviously its policy, and it would like open borders.

It is important to put it on the record that the European Court of Human Rights has not ruled that the policy or removals were unlawful, but it actually prohibited the removal of three of those on the flight last night. That was at the end—

Stuart C. McDonald: Wait for the ruling!

Priti Patel: And, if I may say so, we have asked for that ruling in writing, so we are waiting for that, but those prohibitions are different from the other claims that came up from lawyers—at the very last minute actually—yesterday.

It is also important to recognise that the first ruling provoked those solicitors involved to then go back to the courts to apply for more injunctions for the remaining people on the manifest. Therefore, before all Opposition parties start to condemn a policy that the courts have not ruled as unlawful, it is important that our approach is absolutely proportionate and measured.

Mrs Natalie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Last November, I stood on Dover seafront and mourned 27 people who had drowned in the English channel. Of those people, who had been travelling in these small boats—these unseaworthy vessels—seven were women, one was a teenager and one was a seven-year-old child. In addition, up to 166 are feared to have lost their lives or are missing across the channel: people who were safe already, in France. Overnight, many of my constituents have been in touch with me anguished at developments that have occurred to stop effective action to tackle the crossings. May I urge my right hon. Friend to continue to do everything possible to bring an end to these dangerous journeys, and ask her what representations she has received from the Labour party supporting action to bring these crossings to an end and save lives?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for the very thoughtful way in which she has made her points and asked her question. In particular, I want to pay tribute to her and to her constituents, because they are on the frontline. I have spent a great deal of time both in my hon. Friend's constituency and with her, and with the professionals in her constituency—not just in Border Force or on the frontline on the coast, but in her local authority—who do a great deal of work when it comes to housing, providing sanctuary and providing support. We should take this moment to pay tribute to them, because they are on the frontline day in and day out, it is fair to say. I also want to commend them for the way they work with Home Office officials and our operational teams.

My hon. Friend speaks very strongly and powerfully about the lives that have been lost, and I think the House should recognise that this is not just about those crossing the channel. It is about those crossing the Mediterranean, going through European countries and sometimes even those going through parts of Africa and the Sahel. The conditions are absolutely appalling. On that journey I have just spelt out—from north Africa and the Sahel, crossing the Mediterranean and going to EU member states—the EU member states are safe countries, and this is the model that we have to break.

It is a fact—we know this through intelligence work and the UK intelligence network—that a lot of those gangs are based in European member states. While I cannot speak in more detail about the wider work that has taken place, a lot of good, solid co-operation led by this Government has spurred action in EU member states to deal with the smuggling gangs, go after the smugglers, and ensure they are prosecuted.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Dame Diana Johnson.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The permanent secretary refused to sign off the Rwanda policy on the basis of a lack of evidence of value for money for the taxpayer. That is only the second time in 30 years that the most senior civil servant in the Home Office has had to be ordered by the Home Secretary to implement a policy.

In light of those concerns about wasting public money, will the Home Secretary confirm that on top of the payment of £120 million to Rwanda, the taxpayer will

also now be picking up the £0.5 million cost of the flight last night, and all subsequent charter planes, whether they take off or not? Will there be additional payments to Rwanda for people whom Rwanda is expecting, whether or not those people actually arrive?

Priti Patel: First, on our accounting officer advice, we should always put this in the context of asylum costs that are soaring across the United Kingdom—and have been for many years because of the number of people coming here illegally—and the costs and strain that that puts on the system, particularly during the pandemic. As Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—this issue has been discussed in the Committee many times, including when it was chaired by the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper)—the right hon. Lady will know about the impact of covid on asylum claims. She also asked about payments, but we do not speak about operational costs right now—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it is taxpayers' money. That is for a range of reasons, but primarily because of commercial sensitivities in terms of how we run our operations.

The House should recognise that when we have mob rule turning up to thwart our charter flights—some of them have ended up in courts—it is right that we keep our commercial operators, and the way they work with the Home Office, confidential. The right hon. Lady asked about payment mechanisms to Rwanda as part of the partnership deal, and we would be happy to drop her a line and share that information with her.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): People who are trafficked into this country, or duped or coerced, are exploited for sexual or labour purposes. People who are smuggled into this country willingly pay to be so, and come for economic purposes. The first group are victims and deserve the protection of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. The second group are not, and deserve no protection from that Act, which is being abused by people who are coming across in small boats. I hope the Home Secretary can sort this out.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue, for which he is a committed and passionate advocate, and for the way he has worked with us in the Home Office on many of these challenging issues. There is a difference between trafficking and smuggling, and he is aware of some of the issues that have been materially rising over a number of years, and that thwart the removal and deportations not just of people who come to our country illegally, but also of foreign national offenders. He is referring to the national referral mechanism, and many of the challenges that are now used—with intent, it is fair to say—by some of the specialist law firms in the claims being made.

I look forward to continuing to work with my hon. Friend, because it is clearly in our national interest to ensure that the right safeguards are in place for people who need our help and support. That is what the Modern Day Slavery Act is about, and we cannot allow people to exploit it for the wrong aims.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Why does the Home Secretary say, as she did in her statement, that “It is no use pretending that those people are fleeing persecution” when they are not? She will be aware that Home Office figures state that 98% of

those who make the channel crossing claim asylum, and that 64% of asylum applications are granted at first instance, rising to almost 80% after appeal. There are only three options here: either the Home Secretary in demonising those people is making an incorrect statement, or the Home Office figures are incorrect, or the Home Office is granting asylum applications to people who are not fleeing persecution. Which is it?

Priti Patel: If I may, there is a fourth option, which is that the right hon. Gentleman is wrong on all counts. The individuals coming over the channel are coming from a safe country, which is France. He will be aware, from debates we have had in the House about our Nationality and Borders Act 2022, about the changes being made to immigration courts and tribunals to stop the repeated claims that go through the courts, and to speed up processes and bring the scrutiny that is needed to stop claim after claim. We have just spoken about the exploitation of our system, which we have to stop. That is part of the measures and changes that this Government are determined to bring in, as well as long-term reform of our asylum system, which the right hon. Gentleman and his party, and Labour Members, voted against.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): In the absence of any practical, workable policies on this issue from the Opposition, I absolutely support the Home Secretary's policy on Rwanda, and on the establishment of reception centres in the UK, rather than asylum seekers being housed in hotels. Does she agree, however, that those reception centres must be in the right location, so that they do not present an unfair or undue burden on any one community, including the 600 people who live in Linton-on-Ouse and who are expecting an intake of up to 1,500 young single men right in the centre of that village? Does she agree that that policy should be reconsidered?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend. We have been discussing this issue for some time and working together on it, and it is incredibly important, particularly for his constituents. He has raised with great candour some of the challenges that he feels his constituents will face, and I have committed to working with him on that. There is no doubt that reception centres are the right way forward, so much so that, as the House will be interested to know, the European Commission has been paying up to €500 million, or even more, for EU member states to build reception centres. We must also have the right provisions and facilities within those reception centres, and that is exactly what we are working to achieve.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Last week I finally received a response to an immigration query that my office sent last August. I have an asylum seeker who has waited 18 months just for an interview, which he still has not had, and many constituents are desperately looking for passports that have failed to arrive. The Home Secretary is spending millions of pounds of taxpayers' money on a policy that is as unworkable as it is inhumane. Why does she not put the work in and fix the issues in her Department of process and resource, instead of hiding her incompetence behind desperate refugees?

Priti Patel: I will politely disagree with the hon. Lady, for a change. She asked about the asylum case—bear in mind that the Labour party supported being locked down throughout the pandemic for even longer than the Conservative party did—and she will know perfectly well that asylum decisions were not made during the pandemic, and that interviews were not granted because many of them were face to face. We have now reformed the system to put many more interviews online and things of that nature. That is the nature of the pandemic. We are building on that work, as she will know, and it is a shame that she voted against asylum reforms and the new plan for immigration.

The hon. Lady mentioned passports, and I sure she would welcome the resources in people and staff, the work that has taken place with the Passport Office, and the increase in demand. More blue passports will be issued this year, compared with previous years—*[Interruption.]* It is clear that Labour Members like to run down civil servants, and the hard work of people in the Home Office. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps they can stop the finger pointing. We work together as a team to deliver for the British people, and it is such a shame that Labour Members constantly vote against those changes and measures.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The European convention on human rights was started in the early 1950s, notably with the involvement of British lawyers, for very good reason, but does the Home Secretary agree with me that last night's decision by the European Court of Human Rights undermined the original purpose of the convention and that the Court stands the very real risk of losing the confidence of the British people as it seeks to undermine our domestic legal structures?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend makes a very strong and important point. I have touched on the fact that, from the High Court to the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal, our policy—we know that there will be more legal action—has not been found to be unlawful. There are very, very strong submissions based on the evidence: the work that has taken place in country—in Rwanda—on the efficacy not just of the policy but on the delivery of the policy in country. That is absolutely right. I think the public will be surprised, there is no doubt about that.

It is important to be cautious right now because of legal proceedings. I will just finally say clearly that we are in touch with the European Court of Human Rights, because we want to see its judgment and decision in writing, which we have not had yet. As I said earlier, it is concerning, when the British courts have been so public in terms of providing their summary and their positions, that last night's decision making was very opaque.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yesterday, 444 people made the dangerous crossing in small boats, which suggests that the deterrent effect of this policy is not getting through. That is the highest number in two months, since 681 crossed the day after the Home Secretary announced this policy. Does that not suggest that this is not the time for her to be cutting the National Crime Agency? Do we not need a bit of joined-up thinking on dealing with this situation and the illegal traffickers?

Priti Patel: This is also not the time to sit on our hands and do nothing. The Government are determined to address these issues and work with all our agencies—intelligence agencies, crime agencies and law enforcement agencies—to go after the people smugglers, which, quite frankly, seems to be a policy the Labour party does not support.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Notwithstanding the niceties of this particular judgment, we are going to have to grasp the nettle and extend the principle of taking back control to the convention, aren't we?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is trying to tempt me. He will know my own full-hearted views on taking back control, but also on the need for controlled migration, which is at the heart of the work the Government are bringing forward. With that, of course, we must build on our Brexit opportunities, which quite frankly, as we keep learning day in, day out, the Labour party wants to completely destroy: it wants to take us back into the EU.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Home Secretary has the gall to talk about a moral response to this situation. The moral response would be to provide safe and legal routes for those people who are exercising their legal right—their legal right—to seek asylum. The Government do not even have a basic monitoring and safety process in place for this ugly policy. The monitoring committee promised in their memorandum of understanding with Rwanda is still not going to be set up for several months. She is not even exercising the most basic care. Is that because she knows full well that, if she did, no decent committee or procedure would ever agree to trade refugees in this despicable way?

Priti Patel: I want to come back to the grotesque mis-characterisation of the country in question, Rwanda. It is a shame and a stain, actually.

Caroline Lucas: I haven't said anything about Rwanda.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady may like to read the country report, and the work that has been done in country and in terms of the monitoring committee. That work is actually taking place and we have had officials in country for weeks and weeks in the two months, not several months, since we made this announcement.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): May I commend my right hon. Friend for her determination to find solutions to the very real problem facing our shores, and for trying to break the model of people smugglers taking advantage of incredibly vulnerable people? Today, I have heard the same old story from Labour: no solutions, not standing up for Britain, and definitely not thinking about what my constituents want. Can she assure me and my constituents that she will continue in her determination to find the solutions to resolve these awful crimes that are happening on our coast?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. She is a Kent MP, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Mrs Elphicke), and I know exactly how strongly her constituents feel about this issue and

the impact on constituencies in Kent—I sometimes think Labour Members forget about that. She asks me about our determination. Our resolution is strong. We will continue with not just our work, but our commitment to break up the people-smuggling gangs.

Finally, it is a real shame, but it is worth leaving the House with this point right now. Over the weekend, we have seen mob rule—including, actually, Labour councillors in London engaging in mob rule—to stop people being removed from our country and to stop immigration enforcement action against those with no legal basis to be in our country. We are determined to do the right thing, despite the synthetic outrage we get from many Opposition Members and, quite frankly, some of the appalling protests we have seen involving political activism from the Labour party.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): As Home Secretary, the right hon. Lady has a responsibility to uphold the rule of law. She cannot only approve of courts when they make decisions in her favour. Will she take this opportunity to affirm her support for the whole of the justice system, including the European Court of Human Rights and our membership of the European convention? All we have heard from her today are smears and mudslinging directed at lawyers, courts and judges.

Priti Patel: I would like put the hon. Gentleman's comments into some context.

Andy Slaughter: Answer the question!

Priti Patel: I am speaking to the hon. Member directly through the Chair. He may want to calm down his synthetic outrage. I have not made a single slur about our judges or our courts. I have spoken about the processes of the courts and it is right that we do that.

Secondly, as you have heard me say already, Madam Deputy Speaker, there are legal processes taking place right now. It is absolutely right that we wait for the judgments to come forward, so that we work with the courts and our legal counsels in the right way, rather than, if I may say so, participating in the sort of faux and synthetic yelling match that is taking place in the Labour party.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): There is nothing more inhumane than evil people smugglers forcing people on to small boats and crossing the busiest sea lane in the world, placing them at risk. It is also inhumane to keep people waiting for months, months and months for a decision. I understand that only 130 individuals were issued with protective notices. May I urge my right hon. Friend to speed up the process and to issue thousands of these notices to put people on notice, and then get people over to Rwanda so that their cases can be resolved?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important point and I agree with him. It is not just about our processes but, as we are seeing now through legal challenges, it is about ensuring that we work in the right way to make sure that, from an end-to-end perspective, everything is joined up. That is, effectively, what we will be doing through the challenges that have come forward. It is important, just as a point of reflection, that my hon. Friend speaks about asylum cases. That is why we are reforming our asylum system. That is what the new plan

for immigration was about, supported by those on the Government Benches, supported by the British public, and constantly voted against by those on the Opposition Benches.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): It is fascinating that the Home Secretary talks endlessly about refugees travelling from France when it is such a safe country. The memorandum of understanding that the Home Secretary signed makes it clear that the UK will settle some of Rwanda's most vulnerable refugees and the Home Office has briefed that that could be up to 50 people. When will those refugees be arriving in Britain and, more importantly, on the basis of the Home Secretary's argument, why do they need to when Rwanda is such a safe country?

Priti Patel: I appreciate that the hon. Lady is speaking in very general terms, but there are specific cases that the Rwandan authorities have raised with us of people fleeing persecution in the region. As we have said, we are always a welcoming country and we look at those who need our help and support. Because of the political situation in the region—there is a difference there—the Rwandan Government have asked us to work with them on specific cases. We will do that, because it is the right thing to do.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for showing the courage to implement this policy. I know that she is awaiting the final adjudication from the European Court, but when that is through, finally, will she show the same courage in making sure that she starts a debate in the Cabinet about leaving the European convention on human rights? Maritime law is predicated on English law, many financial centres around the world use English law and many international disputes come to Britain to use British law. The fact that our Supreme Court decision has been thwarted in this way means that it is now time to consider leaving the European convention on human rights.

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend has made an important point about the standing of the UK's legal system in the world. It is one of the best in the world. If we look at common law, commercial law—you name it—many countries look to us and our legal systems and processes and the incredibly high standards that we have. That is absolutely right.

It would be wrong of me to comment any further, particularly in the context of this debate. It is right that I am in the process going back to the European Court of Human Rights and we will continue to work with the Court of Appeal, the Supreme Court and the High Court, because it is important that we understand their rulings and work with them in any way possible to deliver our policy.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): To hear the Home Secretary talk, one would think that the European Court of Human Rights was not part of this country's legal processes. The reason for that—it is a very good libertarian reason—is, as one of its founders said, that the European Court was set up so that “cases of the violations of the rights of our own body of 12 nations might be brought for judgement in the civilised world”.

[Stella Creasy]

Wise words about protecting citizens from overbearing Governments who seek to deny their most basic rights. Will she just abandon this expensive mess? We know, as she said, that there will be further legal action and further cost to the public purse here in the UK. Will she also stop the attacks on the lawyers who are just doing their jobs in holding her to the law? Or does she think that Churchill was wrong?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Lady to the comments that I have already made in the House. Specifically, I take issue with her saying that I am attacking lawyers, which is simply not what I have been doing this afternoon—*[Interruption.]* It is a deliberate misrepresentation, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I think that the hon. Lady might want to withdraw her comments.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): Just when you think this place cannot get any dafter, you turn up and listen to the rubbish that the Opposition are coming out with today. Is the Home Secretary aware of the sniggering, smugness and delight shown on the out-of-touch Opposition Benches about the cancelled Rwanda flight? Will she please advise me? I need some travel advice—I am going away this summer. Is France a safe country to go to?

Priti Patel: For the benefit of the British people, the public, I have in my hand just four pages with a list of Opposition Members making exactly that point with glee—basically wanting the policy to fail, condemning it and saying all sorts of things without coming up with alternative solutions.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about France as a safe country. This is a fundamental principle of working with our colleagues more broadly—*[Interruption.]* Those on the Opposition Front Bench have already had their chance to speak. These are safe countries and there are people who are effectively picking to come to the UK. That is something we have to stop by going after the people smugglers and breaking up their business model.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Instead of attacking lawyers who represent desperate and frightened people and attacking courts who give judgment on the European convention on human rights, why cannot the Home Secretary just say very clearly that her Government support the European convention on human rights as a protection of the rights of everybody among the signatory nations and that this Rwanda policy is not just a shame but an utter disgrace? It is a dereliction of duty and it is treating desperate people trying to find a place of safety in a difficult world like chattels that can be sent away somewhere else. Is the policy not just a disgusting example of what the Government are really about where human rights are concerned?

Priti Patel: With all due respect to the right hon. Gentleman, we disagree on many aspects of things. In fact, we have had previously had debates in the House where we have disagreed on various issues. He is absolutely consistent in his approach. I disagree with what he says about our policy and in light of the fact that we are currently going back to the courts to get their judgments, which is the right thing to do, I am not going to

comment any further on the European Court and its work. I am in the process of getting that judgment and that is the right thing to do.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): This country's record on human rights is world-leading and this Parliament has passed resolutions in law that say that we must remove people who have entered this country illegally. That has been upheld, as the Home Secretary has said, by our domestic courts, so it is deeply troubling that a supranational court seeks to delay the process. What discussions has she had with the Deputy Prime Minister about a renewed British Bill of Rights?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend has consistently made some excellent points about the removals policy. It is worth reminding the House that Acts of Parliament passed in 1999, 2002 and 2004 clearly enable the Government of the day to remove individuals with no basis to be in this country through removal flights, for example. By the way, those Acts were passed under a previous Labour Government, while Labour is now completely going against them.

My hon. Friend asks a very important question about discussions with the Deputy Prime Minister on the forthcoming Bill of Rights. I can confirm that those discussions are active and that work is taking place—and rightly so. We will continue to deliver, as this whole Government have been doing, on our manifesto commitments, as that is where this stems from. It is right that we do that. As part of delivering for the British people and delivering on Brexit, we will change our laws so that our Government and our laws are sovereign.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): How does cutting the National Crime Agency by 20% deter people smugglers?

Priti Patel: This is a new line of attack from the Opposition. I am not making cuts to the National Crime Agency—let me be clear about that. I am resourcing it. Labour might have forgotten that we have the Russia-Ukraine crisis under way right now. The work that we have brought forward with the National Crime Agency on the kleptocracy cell, the resources that have gone into enforcing sanctions and working with the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation is all the work of the National Crime Agency, where we have given it resource and empowered it to go after the people who do harm to our country. Yet again, the Labour party has not supported that.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): My constituents in Clwyd South and people across the UK are generous and welcoming to refugees, particularly those from Ukraine and elsewhere, but they have also voted consistently for controlled immigration and the right to secure borders. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have heard no practical solutions from the Labour party to combat the problems of illegal migration?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He knows how much I enjoy visiting his constituency—that part of Wales is beautiful, it really is. I know how strongly his constituents feel about the issue, and rightly

so, because they want to see change. That is what this Government are committed to, and clearly the Opposition are not.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Government Ministers, from the Prime Minister down, consistently signal their hostility to the European convention on human rights—this episode is a case in point—but the convention is fundamental to Welsh law, for example in the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. Does the Secretary of State accept that a move away from the convention would undermine Welsh lawmaking, which the overwhelming majority of Welsh people support?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Gentleman to comments that I have already made about the European Court's ruling.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Is this debate not extremely simple? On this side of the House, we believe in saving lives, stopping evil people smugglers and doing something about thousands of undocumented people landing on our shores week in, week out. On that side of the House, they back the ECHR ruling, they do not want to crack down on people smugglers, they support open borders and they have absolutely no plan to deal with this problem.

Priti Patel: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and the conviction with which he has just spoken.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): On the Home Secretary's watch, the number of people coming to our country through very dangerous routes has increased. She talks about trying to address the issues with people smugglers, but by closing off safe routes she is pushing people into the hands of people traffickers, making everybody's life more unsafe. When will she recognise the failure of her policy?

Priti Patel: I could refer the hon. Lady to my earlier statement, but it is always worth reminding colleagues in the House that for many years now there has been a global migration crisis. That is a fact, and every country around the world is speaking about it, not just in Europe, but over in America—even the American Administration are looking at similar policies. Tackling illegal migration requires new solutions. That is effectively what we are doing, because we know that existing approaches have not worked. It means that we work with all our counterparts, which is the right thing to do; it also means that change is needed. We know that people are dying, and that is what we want to stop.

Sir Gavin Williamson (South Staffordshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House as to whether, since the French elections, the French Government have had a more proactive approach to working with the UK Government to tackle the issue at source, at the channel?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. In fact, before the elections, a good deal of work was under way to take UK-French partnership and co-operation to a new level. That work is under way right now; just last Friday, our two teams came together to move it forward under the instruction of the French Government

and, obviously, my instruction as Home Secretary. It looks not just at improved co-operation, but at moving into territory in which the French Government had previously been slightly more hesitant to work with us on more co-operation. A great deal of work is under way—let me give my right hon. Friend that assurance.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Can the Home Secretary confirm that the Home Office itself withdrew people from the flight on Friday and yesterday because it accepted that they were victims of torture or trafficking? She has already been asked that question; she did not answer.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady will know that individuals are removed from the flight manifest when their representatives make claims. We have to remove them when their representatives make claims, because we then have to look into those claims and investigate them through the Court.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): We have seen the Opposition, charities in receipt of Government funding, a minority of my right hon. Friend's own civil servants and now European judges intervening to block the will of the British people. To borrow a slogan already used by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), when will we take back control?

Priti Patel: I think it fair to say that my hon. Friend is frustrated by the events that have taken place—understandably so, because so are the British people. That is why I will continue with our collective will and determination for this policy and for bringing in changes. We have just passed the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. There is work that we need to do, and we are going to get on with the job.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): For the sake of myth-busting, there is no requirement in international law for asylum seekers to claim asylum in the first country. Indeed, there are many legitimate reasons why people might choose to come to the UK.

I am grateful for the check and balance that we have from the European Court. The Home Secretary has avoided giving a clear commitment on the future of the European convention on human rights, so maybe I can ask the question in a different way. Over the past week, in relation to the protocol, Government Ministers have stressed their new-found undying commitment to all aspects of the Good Friday agreement. The convention is hardwired into that agreement. Does the Home Secretary therefore agree that it is untouchable?

Priti Patel: Because of the legal proceedings that are taking place and the fact that I am waiting for the Court judgment, which is the right thing to do, I am not going to pre-empt it with any remarks or comments about the European Court of Human Rights.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her statement. She has my full support to carry on with the determination that she has shown throughout. Does she share my fear that this is about saving lives and stopping the people smugglers, but the longer people keep it in the courts and go about

[Greg Smith]

legal acrobatics, the more serious is the risk of smugglers preying on more people and, potentially, more people sadly losing their lives?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that is why the Department has been working overnight to secure the judgment so that we can give responses. It is right that we do so: there is no point in dragging the processes out, because, quite frankly, people will continue to die and people will continue to be smuggled. That is why we will continue with our policy of removals and deportations to third countries and safe countries. That is the right thing to do, because we have to strain every sinew to break up these smuggling gangs.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Home Secretary claims that this policy will destroy the business model of the evil people traffickers. That sounds good, but when Israel adopted the identical policy, every single deported asylum seeker attempted to escape from Rwanda. Many did so successfully, straight into the arms of those same people smuggling rings. It fed the model rather than smashing it. When will the Home Secretary admit that that worked example of trialling the policy—a policy that has been slammed by royalty, clergy, the lot—shows that it is just immoral, expensive and unworkable?

Priti Patel: With all due respect to the hon. Lady, I disagree profoundly. This is not the same agreement as the country that she mentioned has in place with Rwanda; it is a migration and economic development partnership. We are investing in the people who will be removed to Rwanda; they will not only be housed and taken care of, but have the opportunity to rebuild their lives. That is fundamental to the Government of Rwanda and the resettlement policies that they already have successfully in place. The hon. Lady cannot compare this policy to any previous policy whatever. It is important that we continue with it so that we can not only demonstrate, in quarters, that it will work to break up the people smuggling model, but show that we can provide new opportunities in safe countries around the world.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): My constituents support this policy, this House supports this policy, and polling shows that the country supports this policy. Does last night's decision not mean that we must now fast-track our plans for a new British Bill of Rights and ensure that this democratically elected House is able to deliver on the will of the British people?

Priti Patel: The voice of Redcar speaks with great conviction and determination, as ever when he makes representations. He will have heard my comments with regard to the British Bill of Rights; that work is under way right now, and it will be for the Deputy Prime Minister to announce in due course.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent Azizullah is among the 80 families in my constituency who have relatives who are still stuck in Afghanistan. He has been in regular contact with me since Afghanistan fell; he sent me a message yesterday to say that the Taliban are abusing his brother, trying to find his father

and threatening their execution. If the Home Secretary were in my constituent's family's shoes, would she stay in Afghanistan and wait to be executed? Or does she advise them to try to get to safety in Glasgow any way they can, because there is no safe and legal route for Azizullah's family and the other 80 in my constituency?

Priti Patel: Of course, there has been a scheme specifically for people from Afghanistan to come over.

Alison Thewliss: Not in my constituency.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is very welcome to share details with the Refugees Minister.

Alison Thewliss: I have multiple times, and got no response.

Priti Patel: Then I am happy to get a response for her. If she would send me the details, I will absolutely pick that up.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): The interim judgment of the Strasbourg Court yesterday did not say that the Government's policy was unlawful or illegal, and any suggestion of that in this Chamber is at best incorrect and at worst misleading. Does my right hon. Friend find it surprising that she has been criticised for enacting a policy that is a democratic mandate given to our Government by millions of people throughout this country—many millions of them ex-Labour voters who will be aghast at the position that the Opposition outlined today?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right, because the British people absolutely voted for change. In constituencies such as his, and those of many other Members such as my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Jacob Young) and for Stoke-on-Trent North (Jonathan Gullis), the public wanted change. We are committed to delivering that change, and we will continue, undeterred, to deliver on the people's priorities.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): I pay tribute to the campaigners, the activists and the lawyers who stopped the flight last night. [Interruption.] Those on the Government Benches might heckle, but those people stopped this disgrace of a Government from trading for money people who fled war and persecution. That is a policy that should shame us, as the Bishop of Coventry, a proud city of sanctuary, and dozens of religious leaders have said.

Let us get a few things straight here: it is not about stopping people trafficking, it is about whipping up hate, dividing communities and distracting us from the failures of this Government. Because if the Home Secretary really wanted to help refugees, if she had a single ounce of compassion, she would bin this inhumane policy and instead create safer legal routes to help refugees live and breathe all their lives in Britain. Will she do that?

Priti Patel: I hope that the hon. Lady, when she calms down, will withdraw her personal slur against me.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I have full confidence in my right hon. Friend. This is going to be attritional, but we will win out in the end. There will be a short-term cost to the scheme, but the hope is that with deterrence,

over time that cost will fall. Does my right hon. Friend agree that actually the status quo will end up costing far more, because it is an escalating, potentially never-ending problem, which could potentially bring our public services to their knees through unprecedented demand?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He speaks about the costs of doing nothing, which is something that this Government will not do. It is right that we look at all avenues, all policy and changes to our laws, where necessary, to ensure not just that we do everything not just to deter people smugglers and break up those gangs but that people come to this country through our legal routes. Our points-based immigration system is an illustration of that.

This Government have also put in place safe and legal routes, which quite frankly the Labour party has never supported, and consequently campaign against through its mob rule—protests of the type that we saw at the weekend, which the hon. Member for Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) has been supporting.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Seeking asylum is a basic human right, and we should be protecting people fleeing war and persecution. I thank the many constituents in Vauxhall who show that compassion and have written to me about this deeply inhumane policy. I have flagged up with the Home Secretary the treatment of LGBT people seeking asylum, and I wrote to her on 21 April seeking assurances that the deal that she mentioned had a legal agreement on that. To date I have not received a reply. Can the Home Secretary now assure us that the deal that she has agreed does have those assurances to protect LGBT people?

Priti Patel: I apologise that the hon. Lady has not had a response, and after this statement I will go and find out what has happened to that. If I recall rightly, the hon. Lady raised this matter on the Floor of the House when we last had this debate, and we discussed human rights, including LGBT rights in Rwanda. If I remember rightly, I think I said back then that Rwanda's constitution outlaws discrimination. Rwanda does not criminalise or discriminate against sexual orientation in law, and importantly, our policy is cognisant of that and fully compliant with those laws and our own domestic laws.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that despite this despicable ruling from a foreign European Court of justice, we are committed to relocating illegal immigrants to Rwanda? When can we look forward to wheels down in Kigali for the first flight?

Priti Patel: I note my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for this Government's work and policy on removals and deportation. It is an important point because, as I have said a few times during this statement, we are working to receive the judgment from the European Court; it is right that we do that. It is right that we go through all the processes. But our policy is legal, and I can give my hon. Friend and his constituents every assurance that we will continue.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): A few minutes ago, the Home Secretary appeared to confirm that she considers Afghans to be in genuine need. There were reports of Afghans on the planned flight. Are those reports correct?

Priti Patel: I will restate, as I said in my statement, that the individuals who were due to be on that flight had travelled to this country illegally through safe countries where they could have claimed asylum.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): My right hon. Friend will understand and share the frustration of the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke after judges have meddled with our UK legal system and our UK Parliament, but they will not be shocked at the sneering and snarling from Labour Members, who like to look down upon the people of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke for backing Brexit and this Government for taking back control of our borders. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that a British Bill of Rights will indeed help clear the way to ensure that these flights can take off and this policy will flourish?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend spoke of the sneering from the Opposition—the Front Benchers, in fact; we can hear it—while one of the strongest-working MPs for Stoke-on-Trent spoke. His great constituents have one of their most vocal advocates in this House. He is absolutely right in his comments. We will continue our work.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I wonder whether the Home Secretary realises the extent to which her determination to pursue this immoral, expensive and already failing policy is damaging the firm and fair immigration system to which she says she is committed—to the extent that amongst one of the very many complaints and letters that I have received on immigration matters was one from someone who has sponsored a youngster, then in Ethiopia, for 18 years and has been refused a visa to bring him over for a visit this summer, on the grounds that the forms were not filled in correctly and there was a problem with the interview. The interview never took place, and the forms that were incorrectly filled in were filled in by the former Member for Edinburgh West, my predecessor as MP, who is well acquainted with the immigration system. So will the Home Secretary stop this obsession and deal with those issues?

Priti Patel: I have not seen the case that the hon. Lady mentions. She is welcome to bring that to me; I would be happy to look at it. As I have said throughout this statement, we will continue with our policy, and we will continue in our determination to break up the people smuggling gangs and work with our global partners to find solutions.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): We know that Ministers have form for breaking rules and wasting public funds, but will the Home Secretary stop hiding the figures and tell us how many millions of pounds of taxpayers' money her Government will squander before the outsourcing of asylum policy, so roundly condemned by our Church of state and our next Head of State, is eventually and inevitably proved unlawful?

Priti Patel: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the comments that I made earlier.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement.

BILLS PRESENTED

SOCIAL SECURITY (ADDITIONAL PAYMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Orders Nos. 50 and 57)

Secretary Thérèse Coffey, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng and David Rutley, presented a Bill to make provision about additional payments to recipients of means-tested benefits, tax credits and disability benefits.

Bill read the first time; to be read a second time tomorrow and to be printed (Bill 13) with explanatory notes (Bill 13-EN).

NEONATAL CARE (LEAVE AND PAY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stuart C McDonald, supported by David Linden, Luke Hall, Alex Davies-Jones, Steve Reed, Caroline Lucas, Ben Lake, Tim Farron, Ms Anum Qaisar, Gavin Newlands, Alison Thewliss and Amy Callaghan, presented a Bill to make provision about leave and pay for employees with responsibility for children receiving neonatal care.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 July, and to be printed (Bill 14).

PROTECTION FROM REDUNDANCY (PREGNANCY AND FAMILY LEAVE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dan Jarvis presented a Bill to make provision about protection from redundancy during or after pregnancy or after periods of maternity, adoption or shared parental leave.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 September, and to be printed (Bill 15).

EQUIPMENT THEFT (PREVENTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Greg Smith presented a Bill to make provision to prevent the theft and re-sale of equipment and tools used by tradespeople and agricultural and other businesses; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 16).

CO-OPERATIVES, MUTUALS AND FRIENDLY SOCIETIES BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Mark Hendrick presented a Bill to make provision about the types of share capital issued by co-operatives; to make provision about the taxation of mutual insurers and friendly societies which issue deferred shares; to permit the capital surplus of co-operatives, mutuals and friendly societies to be non-distributable; to amend the Friendly Societies Act 1992; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 17).

ELECTRICITY AND GAS TRANSMISSION (COMPENSATION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Liam Fox presented a Bill to establish an independent mechanism to determine claims for compensation in cases where land will be or has been subject to the acquisition of rights or land, through compulsion or by agreement, for the purposes of electricity and gas transmission; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November, and to be printed (Bill 18).

SUPPORTED HOUSING (REGULATORY OVERSIGHT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bob Blackman presented a Bill to make provision about the regulation of supported exempt accommodation; to make provision about local authority oversight of, and enforcement powers relating to, the provision of supported exempt accommodation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 November, and to be printed (Bill 19).

PROTECTION FROM SEX-BASED HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Greg Clark presented a Bill to make provision about causing intentional harassment, alarm or distress to a person in public where the behaviour is done because of that person's sex; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 20).

EMPLOYMENT (ALLOCATION OF TIPS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dean Russell presented a Bill to ensure that tips, gratuities and service charges paid by customers are allocated to workers.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 July, and to be printed (Bill 21).

EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS (FLEXIBLE WORKING) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Yasmin Qureshi presented a Bill to make provision in relation to the right of employees and other workers to request variations to particular terms and conditions of employment, including working hours, times and locations.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 22).

CARER'S LEAVE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wendy Chamberlain presented a Bill to make provision about unpaid leave for employees with caring responsibilities.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 September, and to be printed (Bill 23).

OFFENDERS (DAY OF RELEASE FROM DETENTION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mark Jenkinson presented a Bill to make provision about the days on which offenders are released from detention; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 24).

TERMINAL ILLNESS (SUPPORT AND RIGHTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Alex Cunningham presented a Bill to require utility companies to provide financial support to customers with a terminal illness; to make provision about the employment rights of people with a terminal illness; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 November, and to be printed (Bill 25).

HUNTING TROPHIES (IMPORT PROHIBITION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Henry Smith presented a Bill to make provision prohibiting the import of hunting trophies into Great Britain.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 November, and to be printed (Bill 26).

CHILD SUPPORT (ENFORCEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Claire Coutinho presented a Bill to make provision about the enforcement of child support maintenance and other maintenance; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 27).

WORKER PROTECTION (AMENDMENT OF EQUALITY ACT 2010) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wera Hobhouse presented a Bill to make provision in relation to the duties of employers and the protection of workers under the Equality Act 2010.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 September, and to be printed (Bill 28).

ONLINE SALE OF GOODS (SAFETY) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Kate Osborne, on behalf of Ian Mearns, presented a Bill to provide for the Secretary of State to make regulations about the safety of goods sold online; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 January, and to be printed (Bill 29).

SHARK FINS BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Christina Rees presented a Bill to prohibit the import and export of shark fins and to make provision relating to the removal of fins from sharks.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 July, and to be printed (Bill 30).

DYSLEXIA SCREENING AND TEACHER TRAINING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Matt Hancock, supported by Robert Halfon, Dr Rupa Huq, Sir Iain Duncan Smith, Paul Bristow, Rosie Cooper, Tom Hunt, Henry Smith, Holly Mumby-Croft, Christian Wakeford, Brendan Clarke-Smith and Jim Shannon, presented a Bill to make provision for screening for dyslexia in primary schools; to make provision about teacher training relating to neurodivergent conditions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 31).

CHILD SUPPORT COLLECTION (DOMESTIC ABUSE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sally-Ann Hart presented a Bill to make provision enabling the making of arrangements for the collection of child support maintenance in cases involving domestic abuse.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 32).

POWERS OF ATTORNEY BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Stephen Metcalfe presented a Bill to make provision about lasting powers of attorney; to make provision about proof of instruments creating powers of attorney; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 33).

Business of the House (Today)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the motion in the name of Secretary Grant Shapps relating to Rail Strikes not later than three hours after the commencement of proceedings on that motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved; the business may be proceeded with, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Mark Spencer.*)

Rail Strikes

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I need to inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected amendment (a) in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. Under the terms of the business motion agreed today, the amendment will be moved formally at the end of the debate.

2.5 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the vital role of the railways in supporting people and businesses across the UK every day; condemns the decision of the rail unions to hold three days of strikes; believes those strikes will adversely affect students taking examinations, have an unacceptable effect on working people and a negative effect on the economy; and calls on the rail unions to reconsider their strike action and continue discussions with the industry.

The railway is one of the nation's greatest legacies. The industrial revolution was forged upon it, and for two centuries it has been the means by which we have connected north and south, east and west. It is a proud part of our history, but the truth is that the railways in this country have fallen behind the times. When I became Transport Secretary three years ago, it was clear that our railways were expensive, inefficient, fragmented, unaccountable and desperately in need of modernising and reform. There were delays to upgrades, collapsing franchises and busy lines operating at the very peak of, and sometimes beyond, their capacity, suffering overcrowding and delays. Some working practices had not changed for decades. As a result, we have a railway today that is struggling to keep pace with modern living, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. Our railways need a new direction.

Office workers are working from home more often and the railway has lost around a fifth of its passengers, and also a fifth of its income. The Government kept the railway running when most passengers stayed at home. We kept trains available for key workers and protected the brilliant railway workers who managed the track and ran the trains. So this Government have stepped in. We put our money where our mouth is and we committed £16 billion to support the railways through covid. That is taxpayers' money, and it is the equivalent of £600 for every household in this country. Put another way, it is the equivalent to £160,000 per rail worker in this country. As a result, the trains continued to operate, the industry survived and not a single railway worker had to be furloughed or lost their job—not one. We stepped up, but the honest truth is that this level of subsidy—which, let us not forget, is not the Government's money but the taxpayer's—simply cannot continue forever. If our railways are to thrive, things must change.

As I see it, there are four ways to bring about that change. First, we could continue to attempt to pump billions of pounds of taxpayers' money into the system in the same unsustainable way we have been doing for the last two years, but that would take money away from the NHS and schools. Secondly, we could ramp up fares, but that would price working people off our railways completely. Thirdly, we could cut services and lines, emulating those sweeping cuts made by Dr Beeching in the 1960s, making it harder for people to access our railways. I do not support any of those options, which leaves us with the fourth option: modernise the railways, making them more productive and getting the industry off taxpayer-funded life support.

Make no mistake, as a Government we profoundly believe in our railways, which is why we have reopened abandoned routes and electrified thousands of miles of lines—not just the 63 miles that Labour managed to electrify over 13 years. It is why we have got behind projects such as High Speed 2, the Elizabeth line and Northern Powerhouse Rail, and rolled out contactless to 900 more stations and digital signalling across the network. And it is why we are transforming the industry through Great British Railways, ending the fragmentation and putting passengers first, but we need the industry to help with that transformation.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The Secretary of State rightly says that billions were pumped into the railways during the covid pandemic. That money kept the system going, and a lot of people worked very hard to keep it going. The train operating companies were preserved and supported, and they did very well during that period, as did many others in the private sector. Why is he now punishing the people who kept the railway system working, and who do all the difficult jobs on the railways, with job losses, inadequate pay and a loss of morale? Should he not talk to their representative unions about the real situation on the railways and work with them to ensure we have an effective, efficient and secure rail system for the future?

Grant Shapps: I pay tribute to the workers on the railway who kept things running, with a lot of taxpayers' cash, during the pandemic. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about that, but he talks about inadequate pay. I remind him and the House that the median salary for a train driver is £59,000, compared with £31,000 for a nurse and £21,000 for a care worker. [HON. MEMBERS: "That's the train drivers!"] The median salary for the rail sector is £44,000, which is significantly above the median salary in the country. What is more, salaries in the rail sector went up much faster over the last 10 years than in the rest of the country—a 39% increase for train drivers, compared with 7% for police officers and 16% for nurses. It is a good package, and we need to get the railways functioning for everybody in this country.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that, coming out of the pandemic, the railways need to be modernised. Is it not extraordinary that, just as we are seeing confidence return, it will be destroyed by these strikes? Does he agree that this is exactly the wrong time, for both our economy and our railways, for these strikes to be happening?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. These discussions were under way when, suddenly, the union decided to ballot its members, incorrectly telling them that a strike would get them off the pay freeze. Nearly every part of the public sector experienced a pay freeze and, in any case, it is coming to an end. These pointless, counterproductive strikes should never have been called, and the Labour party should recognise that fact.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Precisely because of the potential disruption, and instead of calling today's debate, should the Secretary of State not be taking action to try to resolve these disputes? When did he last meet industry leaders and trade unions to try to get that resolution? Has he had a discussion about bringing in ACAS to resolve this dispute? If he has not, will he commit to doing so now?

Grant Shapps: I hear what the hon. Lady says. The Leader of the Opposition claims to care deeply about this issue, yet he is not with us today. [HON. MEMBERS: "Where is the Prime Minister?"] The Prime Minister has already said exactly where he is on this issue, but the Leader of the Opposition cannot find his way to the Front Bench when it really matters and when it comes to standing up for working people, Where is he?

The leader of the RMT, Mick Lynch, said only last month, "I do not negotiate with a Tory Government." He does not want to meet us. That is the reality of the situation.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): There have been 52 days of tube strikes since Sadiq Khan was elected Mayor of London, even though he was elected on a promise of zero strikes. He has also said:

"Strikes are ultimately a sign of failure."

Does the Secretary of State agree that Londoners deserve better? Does he agree that any Opposition Member who backs these strikes is punishing my constituents and my constituents' businesses? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. It will become impossible to hear what people are saying if this becomes a shouting match. Perhaps we could take the temperature down a little.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) is absolutely right. We provided £5 billion to Transport for London, and we have not seen the required level of savings. TfL is behind on providing those savings. There has to be a fair balance between taxpayers nationwide and what happens in London, but that has not stopped the RMT striking in London, which will stop Londoners getting to work. We are locked into an atmosphere in which, before the RMT even talks, negotiates or listens to an offer, it goes for a strike ballot.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Grant Shapps: I will make a little progress before taking further interventions.

We need the industry to help with this transformation. We cannot ignore working practices that are stuck 50 or even 100 years in the past. A modern railway needs to run seven days a week. Right now, too many operators are left short at the weekend, which leaves passengers

with substandard services. We cannot continue increasing pay on the railways far above the pay for nurses, teachers, police officers and care workers. We cannot continue with the absurd situation where workers can restart their 20-minute break if a manager dares to say "Good morning" at minute 19. That is insane. We have to change the system, as we cannot continue to fund such practices from the public purse.

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very profound speech—[Interruption.] The Opposition might not like it, but he is.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that the reason there is no chorus from the Opposition condemning these strikes is that the RMT is pouring hundreds of thousands of pounds, if not millions, into the Labour party? [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to be very careful not to descend into insults.

Grant Shapps: I think my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) is a former union member, possibly even a former RMT member. He worked on the railways, so he knows what he is talking about. Madam Deputy Speaker has asked us to stick to the facts, so let us do that.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the RMT has donated almost £250,000 to the Labour party and constituency Labour parties over the last 10 years. For the fullness of the record, it is also worth pointing out that the Electoral Commission registered more than £100 million of trade union donations to the Labour party and CLPs over the same 10-year period. Those are the facts of the matter.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): My understanding is that the RMT is not affiliated with the Labour party, and I say that as an SNP Member.

We have the strictest trade union laws in Europe, and the thresholds have been easily surpassed in this particular ballot. What discussions is the Secretary of State facilitating between the RMT and the employers to resolve this issue?

Grant Shapps: First, it will interest the House to know—this is in direct answer to the question—that the negotiations and talks are going on almost every day.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Without you!

Grant Shapps: This is Labour's level of understanding. There is a Network Rail company that runs the infrastructure—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. We need to hear the answer.

Grant Shapps: Network Rail runs the infrastructure and 14 train operating companies are the employers, and they are meeting on a daily basis. But that has not prevented the unions from striking. That has not stopped the leader of the RMT saying that he would refuse to meet us. So we cannot have this every way.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): As my right hon. Friend said, billions of pounds of taxpayers' money was put into the railway industry and it kept almost everybody in employment. In my constituency, many businesses survive by servicing the footfall through the stations. Because these businesses employed staff and they were people's own companies, they were not capable of getting the loans and grants that were in place, because they had to keep the company alive and keep the people they employed. So what does he think their reaction is to hearing about more public money spent on the railways, on top of the £16 billion, when they are struggling to get their businesses back on track? This strike will make it even worse for them.

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to point that out. Just as the railways and the country are recovering—after two years of being locked down, with many of our constituents having lost their jobs and businesses while coronavirus was going on, without the kind of £16 billion of protection that the railways have enjoyed—now is not the time to strike.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: I will make a little more progress and then I will take a couple more interventions.

That brings me to the motion. Instead of having proper negotiations with the train companies and Network Rail, the RMT and other railway unions have leapt straight for the lever marked “strikes and mass disruption”. Just as the industry is beginning to recover from the pandemic and people were starting to be able to travel once again, the last thing we need now is to alienate passengers who are returning to the network. The unions do not seem to recognise that many commuters who before covid had no option but to take the train now have the option not to travel at all. Say goodbye to them and we really will be in danger of losing the jobs of thousands of rail workers.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Grant Shapps: Again, I will make a little progress. Of course for others who have no option but to travel, the strikes will mean huge disruption. They will mean thousands of people not being able to get to work, some of whom might lose their jobs and be added to the list of those who did during covid. These strikes will mean families losing money; the economy being dented by tens of millions of pounds every day, as businesses lose customers; children unable to get to their exams; and patients unable to get to hospitals.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The question was raised as to whether the Secretary of State or the Government had met the RMT, and he basically said, “Let the negotiations go”. I cannot recall the exact phrase he used. Mick Lynch, the general secretary of the RMT, has written to him today, “I am writing to seek an urgent meeting with the Government, without any preconditions, to discuss the national rail disputes prior to the planned strike action next week, and I would be grateful if this could be arranged without delay.” Will he respond—*[Interruption.]* We are trying to resolve this matter. Will he respond immediately to Mick Lynch, positively, that he will meet the union now?

Grant Shapps: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know that it is probably on his record, but for the clarity of this debate let me note that he has £25,000 from the RMT. I say that merely in order to have this conversation with all that information being before the public. If this is a change of heart from Mick Lynch, I welcome it. As I said, just a month ago he said that he would not meet “a Tory Government”. Ministers have and do have meetings with him, but these negotiations are a matter between the employer and the union. The employer is meeting the union every single day, and that is the best way to get this resolved.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Before the previous intervention, my right hon. Friend was touching on the fact that many workers will not be able to get to work because of these strikes. Does he recognise that someone on the minimum wage will lose £160 over the course of these three days of strikes? Should that not be the cause for the Labour party to condemn the strikes today?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is inexplicable how those in the party who style themselves as the workers' party do not seem to care about the fact that anyone who is trying to get anywhere will lose pay. It is not just about them; it is about people trying to get to the 17 public examinations that will be disrupted. Kids doing A-levels and GCSEs will not be able to get to them. People will not be able to get to their hospital appointments. This is a reckless, unnecessary strike and it should be called off right now.

Dame Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the excellent speech he is making. He talked about the people who are going to be affected by this strike, and in my constituency that will be contract workers who cannot work at home and young people who are having to use the trains to get to college to take their A-levels. Is it not irresponsible of the unions to be timing strikes in the middle of A-level exams, when so many of our young people rely on trains to get to college?

Grant Shapps: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Thousands of children are taking those 17 public exams, including my daughter, whose transport to get to the exams will be complicated by this strike. It is surprising that there seems, from the noises from Members opposite, to be so little care and compassion about this issue. It is absolutely extraordinary. *[Interruption.]* This red herring that the unions have not had anybody to talk to is complete and utter nonsense. They are talking to the employers and they did not care about those discussions—they just called the strikes instead. That is what they did.

This is why the Government's motion calls on the House to condemn the unions for their unnecessary actions. It is why we demand that they get to the negotiating table and work in good faith with the train companies to find the solutions that secure the future of the industry. I hope that these common-sense principles will prevail today. I hope that everybody can agree with that, but I am not sure, given the performance so far, that we are going to see it.

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Given that the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, appears not to have publicly condemned these strikes, does my right hon.

Friend appreciate that Sadiq Khan might be encouraged to waive the ULEZ—ultra low emissions zone—and the congestion charge for motorists who are now having to come into London? Many of my constituents rely on the trains, and this is just another cost on hard-working families.

Grant Shapps: Every possible alleviation that can be made should be made. I have not seen that particular proposal, but obviously the Mayor will need to look at it. It is extraordinary that this whole House would not want to stand up for hard-working people everywhere and would not want to ensure that people are able to get to their work and job, and that their livelihoods are not damaged.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): Schoolchildren taking their GCSEs and A-levels have been mentioned. For the past two years, children have had to go through unprecedented times. They are in the process of going through exams that have been more stressful than those for any other generation, because of the pandemic. It is absolutely cruel that everybody in this House is not condemning the timing of these strikes and the strikes happening, because those poor children have gone through enough in the past two years and now they are having to suffer in the last weeks of their GCSEs.

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend has nailed it. It is completely unfair, it is totally the wrong timing. It should not be happening and the whole House would appreciate Labour Members saying more about it, but they cannot say more about it, because they are divided on the subject. The shadow Levelling Up Secretary says that Labour stands united with those who bring the chaos upon our communities. The shadow Health Secretary, supposedly a rising star, although he is not on the Front Bench today because he does not want to be associated with this, even goes so far as to say that if he was given a chance, he would join the strikes. The shadow Transport Secretary, styling herself today as the shadow Secretary of State for strikes, refuses to condemn the RMT's plan, which is going to cripple our railways.

What has happened to the Leader of the Opposition? He is not here. What is he saying about this? The Prime Minister has set out his position very clearly; I have not heard the Leader of the Opposition set out his position yet. I do not know whether anyone else has spotted him. He is not here today. Presumably, he has been standing up to his shadow Cabinet and defending the people whose lives will be disrupted by the strike. That is where one would expect him to be, but no. He has been playing a game of real-life Twister—his position hopelessly contorted, with one foot in the RMT camp and the other goodness knows where, stretching credibility. Perhaps it is a position that he thinks will appear boring to the shadow Cabinet. In fact, what he is doing is stretching the patience of the British public by not saying where he stands.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I have been trying persistently to get the Secretary of State's attention so that he would give way, but he wants to play politics throughout. He talks about wanting to protect hard-working people like those in London, so why will he not commit to meeting the Mayor of London to get a

proper sustainable funding plan for Transport for London so that people can use the transport network and get to work?

Grant Shapps: I am pleased that I have now taken the hon. Lady's intervention. This is a debate about the national strikes, rather than the future funding of TfL, but since she asks, we have already spent £5 billion supporting TfL. If we had done what the Mayor had asked me to do two years ago, which was to come up with a long-term settlement then, he would have been out of money a long time ago. He should be pleased we did not settle for that.

As I say, this debate is about the strikes that will take place next week. Labour Members should get behind the rest of the country and convince their union friends, who I know give them millions of pounds, that the strike is not in the interests of the British public. Although the Labour party is bankrolled by the unions, we want it to stand up to the union barons, rather than bringing the railways to their knees. The Labour leader might claim to be different, but if you scratch the surface, it is the same old Labour.

Today, the Labour party needs to join the Government and vote for the motion. It needs to put people above its party coffers. It needs to vote to condemn the unions for their irresponsible actions. It needs to stand with hard-working people everywhere, who just want to get on with their lives after two years of considerable disruption.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Thousands upon thousands of self-employed people throughout the country will not be able to earn a penny over the period of the strike. It will cripple the economy and the pockets of our constituents throughout the country. Will my right hon. Friend say how much the general secretary of the RMT will lose of his £124,000 in pay and benefits for crippling the economy of this country?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right to point that out. If I am honest, I am more worried about the rail card that the general secretary gets with his job than about his salary, because he will not be able to use it during the strike. I imagine that will be a problem for him.

Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con): Prior to coming here, I was a rail commuter. I stood on platform 14 of Manchester Piccadilly every day, Monday to Friday. That is why I am so frustrated that our Mayor has said absolutely nothing about the strikes and that a fellow Greater Manchester MP is enthusiastically backing them. Has my right hon. Friend consulted any of the Labour of MPs who have taken donations from the RMT about whether they will donate to their constituents on low incomes who will not be able to afford to get to work?

Grant Shapps: My rail commuting friend makes an excellent point. Every person in this country will want to know and understand how MPs have voted in this place tonight. It matters to them and their families, and it matters for their jobs.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not the reality that the person who most wants this strike to go ahead is the Prime Minister?

Grant Shapps: No.

The choice is clear: we can stick with the same old failed model, which makes the railways uncompetitive and jeopardises thousands of jobs as people abandon the rail network, perhaps forever, or we can come together to overhaul our railway industry, build a service that people want to use and give the railways a bright future. It is time for the unions to call off these absurd strikes. Strikes should be the last resort, not the first resort. If the unions will not stop, we as Members of Parliament, whose constituents rely on the railways for their work, to see their families, to get on and to use public services, must speak with one voice. People throughout the land will look to this House today to see how their Members of Parliament vote.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. It is unfortunate that he has misjudged the tone of this dispute. We are talking about—*[Interruption.]* Shh. We are talking about the livelihoods of public servants and about their job security. If he was serious about resolving this dispute, not only would he insist on coming to the table; he would be open to listening to what the unions have to say. Why won't he?

Grant Shapps: I would welcome guidance on a very serious point, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thought that Members had to point to the Register of Members' Financial Interests when they speak in this House. I believe that the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has received a £3,000 donation from the RMT. Today's vote is specifically about the RMT and its strike, so I would welcome any guidance on that matter.

I do not agree with the hon. Lady about the tone of all this. It is incredibly important that people are getting around the table and talking. Talks have been going on. Unfortunately, even though talks were going on, the unions sold a strike to their members on false pretences: on the basis that there would be no pay rise, when in fact there was always going to be a pay rise because the public pay freeze had come to an end.

I think that now is the time for this House to come together to show that we support hard-working commuters, key workers, the public and the pupils we have spoken about who are taking their A-levels and GCSEs, each of whom will be unable to go about their business. Or will Labour Members vote with their union baron friends, as we were just hearing, in favour of these reckless, unnecessary, self-defeating, premature strikes? Tonight, the voting record of each and every one of us will be on display. The record will show that those on the Government Benches stood united in favour of the people we represent. The question is, where do that lot stand? I commend the motion to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, I need to say that there is likely to be a time limit for Back Benchers. It will start at five minutes, but it may well be taken down further.

2.38 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): No one in the country wants these strikes to go ahead. As we have heard, they would be a disaster for workers, passengers,

the economy and the rail industry. The good news is that at this stage, they are not inevitable and the dispute can still be resolved. The bad news is that it requires Ministers to step up and show leadership to get the employers and the unions around the table to address the real issues on pay and cuts to safety and maintenance staff that are behind the dispute. Rather than demonstrating any responsibility, the only action the Government have taken so far is to send a petition to the official Opposition. The entire country is about to be ground to a halt, and instead of intervening to try to prevent it, the Government are more concerned with a data capture exercise.

Today, on the eve of the biggest rail dispute in a generation taking place on the Secretary of State's watch, it is right to say, is it not, that neither he nor his Ministers have held any talks with the unions and the industry to try to settle this dispute?

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making extremely good points—*[Interruption.]* Thank you. Does she agree that it is utterly absurd that the Government of this country are petitioning the Opposition Benches to try to resolve these strikes when they would do better getting round the table to resolve the issues themselves?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To Members who are just shouting out while the hon. Lady is trying to make an intervention, I say, please control yourselves. I couldn't quite hear the hon. Lady because of the noise.

Paula Barker: Shall I repeat it?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Why don't you?

Paula Barker: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is utterly absurd that the governing party of the United Kingdom is so incapable of running this country that it has resorted to petitioning Her Majesty's Opposition to resolve this dispute? Would not its time be better spent doing its job and trying to get round the table to resolve this dispute?

Louise Haigh: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I am afraid that it is pathetic that the Government have chosen to petition the Official Opposition when in fact the Transport Secretary has not held a single meeting with either the unions or the industry for over two months to prevent this action from going ahead.

Jacob Young: Why will the hon. Lady not condemn the strikes?

Louise Haigh: What difference does the hon. Gentleman think it would make if I condemned the strike? The only person who has it within their power to resolve this dispute is sitting opposite me now. The clue is in the name. My title—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just stop shouting. I want to hear what the shadow Secretary of State has to say.

Louise Haigh: My title, Madam Deputy Speaker, is the shadow Transport Secretary. If the Transport Secretary would like to put his hands up, admit failure and step

aside, I would be happy to take control. The fact is that the train operating companies have not been given their negotiating mandate by their Department for Transport, so they cannot even negotiate directly with the trade unions now. The Secretary of State has responsibility and he is completely failing to show it.

Anna McMorris (Cardiff North) (Lab): In Labour-run Wales, train staff are not on strike. That is because, in Wales, we work in social partnership instead of creating and fabricating misinformation and not engaging with England.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is right. Where we have leaders in charge who are showing responsibility and stepping in and negotiating with the unions and employers, we have resolved disputes. This Transport Secretary has no time to resolve the biggest dispute in modern history. What has he found time to do instead? Looking back at his Tik Tok over the past couple of months, I can see that he had plenty of time for videos, for sit-on lawnmowers, for Spaghetti Junction, and for impersonating Jeremy Clarkson. He spent a collective total of three-and-a-half hours on the media covering the back of his weakened, discredited, law-breaking Prime Minister. He has also found time to grandstand over this pathetic motion in front of the House today, but he has spent not one single second in talks to resolve these disputes. Frankly, it is unbelievable.

But whether it is the chaos at the airports, with security queues snaking out the door, and thousands of families missing out on their hard-earned holidays, or the looming rail strike, set to be the biggest since 1989—when, coincidentally, the Tories were also in Government—the response from the Transport Secretary is the same: to cast around for someone else, anyone else, to blame. It is nothing short of a dereliction of duty and an insults to the hundreds of thousands of passengers who depend on this being resolved.

The truth may actually be even worse than our usual missing-in-action Transport Secretary. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that Ministers would prefer to provoke this dispute and play political games rather than resolve it.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the missing-in-action Transport Secretary. A couple of Conservative Members raised the issue of schoolchildren taking their GCSEs and A-levels, and that is a concern to everybody. Ministers will not be forgiven for failing to prepare for this strike. *[Interruption.]* I tried to ask the Secretary of State this question. What contingency plans has he made and has he called Cobra? What we want to see now is not more Tik Tok from the Secretary of State, but more common sense, more planning and more contingency.

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Was it not telling that there was not a single mention of one constructive step that the Transport Secretary has attempted to take to bring this strike to a resolution? When is he planning on meeting with the industry and the unions before the first day of planned strike action? What safety assessment has he made of the cuts to Network Rail jobs in order to reassure workers and passengers that their safety will not be compromised?

Has Cobra met to plan contingencies for the impact on the movement of freight, on schoolchildren missing their exams and on the wider economy? Finally, and most importantly, will he immediately call in ACAS to bring an urgent end to the dispute? That is why we have tabled our amendment to the Government's motion in front of us today. It is to urge them to convene talks with the industry and the unions and take concrete steps to resolve these strikes.

Labour has been clear, and I will be clear again: we do not want these strikes to take place. If we were in government, we would be around the table in talks to resolve this. Members do not have to take my word for it: in Labour-run Wales, a strike by train staff has been avoided. Employers, unions and the Government have come together to manage change and avoid the disruptive action that this Government are about to oversee.

Chris Loder: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I say to the hon. Lady, with the greatest respect—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Sit down! No! The hon. Gentleman does not address the shadow Secretary of State. Thank you.

Louise Haigh: That is what any responsible Government would be doing right now.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It seems that we have a Tory Secretary of State for strikes—a Secretary of State giving the green light to strikes. There is an offer on the table from the General Secretary of the RMT. The shadow Secretary of State has clearly referred to ACAS. Does she agree that this is about talk, talk and about negotiation? This is about all those parties—the employers and the trade unions—meeting together. Should the Secretary of State not be taking up that offer from the RMT Union?

Louise Haigh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Secretary of State could call in ACAS this afternoon in order to take this dispute forward, but, instead, despite repeated promises made to the public, this Government have slashed 19,000 rail services, hiked up rail fares, and presided over near-record delays. The insane system that they have created means that private operators, handed millions of pounds for failing services, will be protected throughout the strike. Those operators have no incentive to settle this dispute. They will carry on collecting their fee and the taxpayer will foot the bill. That is the reality of the Conservative mismanagement of our railways.

Finally, let me say this loud and clear: the tens of thousands of workers who keep our railways running are not the enemy. In 2020, the Secretary of State called them “true heroes”. They kept our country served and stocked during the pandemic. They are cleaners, technicians and apprentices—the very same people to whom the Prime Minister promised a “high-wage economy” before presiding over the biggest fall in wages in a decade. Just six weeks ago, the Transport Secretary and his colleagues confected outrage about the illegal decision to replace 800 P&O workers with agency staff. He even called on the public to boycott P&O, but in reality he is acting directly from P&O's playbook. The only difference is that he wants to make it legal.

[Louise Haigh]

Today, the Government have shown their true colours: they want to gut the rights of British workers. How do they think scandals such as P&O can be avoided or even properly punished if they are going to take the axe to the limited protections that workers currently enjoy? Labour will always fight for fair pay and a decent wage for working people. However, rather than do their job, desperate Tory Ministers are spoiling for a fight to distract from their chaotic, discredited and aimless Government.

Chris Clarkson: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I hope this is a serious point of order and not just an attempt to disrupt the debate. I want to be absolutely clear that it is very discourteous to the House to keep interrupting with points of order when colleagues will have the chance to contribute separately. I look forward to this being a proper point of order.

Chris Clarkson: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a proper point of order, because we value a proper debate in this House. Is it a proper debate if the hon. Member at the Opposition Dispatch Box refuses to take interventions from this side?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Honestly, the hon. Gentleman should know very well, because he will have seen it on both sides of the House, that it is up to an individual right hon. or hon. Member whether they take interventions. He knows that very well. Quite honestly, that was a bit spurious. Let us have just a bit of courtesy to each other in this debate—[*Interruption.*] Don't question me. I call Louise Haigh.

Louise Haigh: The public will not forgive the Government next week, when children are missing their school exams, patients are missing their health appointments in the face of the biggest backlog in NHS history and low-paid workers cannot get to work, if the Government have not lifted a finger to resolve any of it. What the public need right now is a firefighter; instead they have a bunch of arsonists. If the Secretary of State is remotely interested in doing his job, he will accept our amendment, drop the toxic political point-scoring, and get round the table to prevent these strikes.

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

2.52 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Whenever I rise to speak, I always take the energy out of the room, which in this instance may be no bad thing if we are to get ourselves a settlement here.

These strikes are such a huge shame to this industry. We have a situation where diesel is rising to £2 per litre, we have challenges at the airport and we are going into the summer months looking at the leisure market. This should be the time when we can grow our rail market back to the levels it was pre pandemic. Let us remember that rail services used to pay for themselves—indeed,

back in 2018 they paid £200 million to the Exchequer—but we have seen that situation reversed to a £16 billion taxpayer subsidy.

In my years both on the Select Committee and chairing it, I have always tried to engage positively with the trade union movement. I certainly did when it came to airlines' cutting staff; I remember being on the picket line with hon. Members from Brighton with Unite staff. Indeed, the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said that someone had asked, "Which one of you is the Tory?", which one would not normally expect with him.

I have always spoken out where I have felt that the workforce have been treated badly, but I must say that rail workers have always enjoyed positive pay. I fished out a release from the RMT back in 2019 where it congratulated itself on an inflation-busting pay rise for its members. Rail workers earn 70% extra on a median basis compared with the typical UK worker. This is a well-paid workforce, and I will always continue to ensure that they are supported and well paid, but they must bear in mind that we need reform on the railway if we are to make it better and safer for passenger and worker.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Chair of the Select Committee has talked about engaging with the trade unions, which I know he has done positively. Does he agree that his Government should get around the table, facilitate those negotiations and talks and take some responsibility?

Huw Merriman: I will always support engagement positively. The trouble is that in order to do that, we need industrial action to come off the table, since it is only next week. Of course unions will not do that, because that is their leverage, but it is foolish for a negotiator on one side to allow those talks to commence without any certainty that there will be some give on the other side. I used to work as a negotiator, so I understand how these things operate: there has to be give and take from both sides. It is not good enough to write a letter saying, "We will talk immediately," without reducing demands or saying, "The strikes will be postponed so that we can have those talks." I do not believe that letter says that, but that is what is required.

It was right during the pandemic that we threw everything at ensuring the railways operated. It was right then, but if it was right then to get essential key workers to their places and people to their hospital appointments, then it is absolutely right now, given that we have given £16 billion of taxpayers' money—not our money, but taxpayers' money—into supporting the rail system.

I want to talk about safety, because that is bound to come up. When we ask for reform, which of course will produce savings, we are also talking about innovation and technology that will make the railways safer. I will give an example: there is no need for railway workers to be walking on the tracks to undertake certain jobs when technology—drones and cameras under the bottom of train carriages—can do those jobs instead.

I have a report in this folder from the Rail Accident Investigation Branch looking at a tragedy in Surbiton, telling Network Rail that it needs to get more of its workforce off the tracks and make more use of technology and innovation. This is not just about safety, efficiency,

cost-cutting or manpower-cutting, particularly when we are delivering HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail and Crossrail has just been delivered. There are jobs in the rail industry, but they must be modernised to make them safer for all.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): I come from a maintenance background and I know how maintenance works. When you get rid of engineers, you cannot replace them. You cannot decide one day that you have got rid of 500 too many maintenance staff or engineers; they are specialist workers who need training over the years. Once they have gone, so has the knowledge.

Drones and technology can replace people to some extent, but not to the extent being proposed. How do you suggest that the jobs that will be affected will not put at risk the safety of the people using the trains and lead to future crashes that would cost the lives of transport people?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Interventions do need to be short and not directly addressing the hon. Member.

Huw Merriman: Following your lead, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will just give one example: cracks to rail. Technology now allows a sensor camera underneath a train to click 70,000 images per minute. That replaces an individual's eyes or teams of men tracking. I would maintain that that not only makes it more likely that the cracks will be spotted, but means it is not necessary to put people on the asset, which is dangerous to them and means closures that we do not need when the train is operating.

This is not rocket science related specifically to the rail industry. Every single industry innovates, moves forward and develops. This Chamber may seem a funny place to stand and say that working practices are rooted in the past, when this very place is all about that, but the way we speak and operate here does not necessarily impact the lives or enhance the passenger services that I believe we could do in rail, if the industry as a whole, working with the workforce, developed and innovated in the manner I advocate.

I come back to the point about collaboratively working together. It is essential. I saw to my cost, as an MP in the region that includes Southern Railway, damaging strikes that went on for far too long. Passengers could not get to work; it had a huge impact on the economic community and on the workforce. The crazy thing about that strike, which was about who opened the doors, the guard or the driver, was that it ended up being settled with a pay rise for drivers. Ironically, that was on the ASLEF side; the RMT side, which started this, did not get that pay rise. The ASLEF drivers got a pay rise of 25% over three years.

I would say to those on the Front Bench: "Of course take leadership, make that noise, but you have to ensure that you see this through." There is nothing worse than starting this action, causing industrial relations to decline, and then finding out that we withdraw; it would be better not to do it at all.

Lilian Greenwood *rose—*

Huw Merriman: I will give way one more time because the hon. Lady is my predecessor on the Select Committee.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman knows that I have a great deal of respect for the work that he does, but what conclusion does he draw from the fact that there are no rail strikes going ahead next week in Wales, where there has been an active, responsible Government seeking to bring people together and resolve issues? Is it not precisely the point that active government can get the two sides together and attempt to resolve the issues?

Huw Merriman: I certainly take that point, but just I heard from another member of our Committee that Network Rail is still striking in Wales, and when it is about Network Rail members of the RMT, that tends to shut the railway down. In my example of when the RMT was striking in the Southern region, that did not shut the system down because that only happened when ASLEF drivers were involved. We will both check the record on that, no doubt, but that is how I am informed.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) *rose—*

Huw Merriman: I will take one last intervention and that is it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I should perhaps explain that if two interventions are taken there is extra time, but after that there is not, so I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has run out of time.

Jacob Young: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I took your advice to the previous Member who raised a point of order not to do it in the thrust of the debate, which is I waited until this moment, but I thought it right to put it on the record that I was not aware that the shadow Secretary of State declared in her remarks that she had received over £30,000 in donations from the unions. Given that Members' entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests are under particular scrutiny at this time, it is right that in a debate about unions and strikes, all Members are clear about their entries in the register.

Louise Haigh: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have never received a penny from the RMT.

Jacob Young: This is about unions and strikes, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the hon. Lady has received £30,000 from the unions since 2015. That is a matter of fact according to the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Madam Deputy Speaker: This is rather descending into how I hoped a debate on a very serious issue might not be governed. The hon. Gentleman has said one thing and the shadow Secretary of State has said another, but I reiterate that the responsibility for registration lies with individual Members and not the Chair, and I think we need to adopt that practice, frankly. If there are any complaints to be made, they should be submitted to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. That is the appropriate course of action. Perhaps we should now move on with the debate and address the issues in front of us in some detail, as I am sure the SNP spokesman, Gavin Newlands, will do.

3.3 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the rather febrile atmosphere on the Conservative Benches rather gives the lie to the Conservative approach to workers' rights in this place.

I congratulate the Secretary of State on his motion, because after his part-nationalisation of railways during the pandemic and his—on the face of it, at least—very un-Conservative response to the actions of P&O, his ideological re-education has been a roaring success in the form of this utterly regressive motion before us today. Let us face it, no Tory Cabinet Minister has ever seen their stock drop through a bit of good old-fashioned union bashing, and that is exactly what this motion is. *[Interruption.]* I am happy to give way to the Secretary of State if he wants. His motion talks about the “effect on the economy” that next week’s proposed action will have. I find that incredible when his Government have set the British economy ablaze in the name of “taking back control”. Is that control only to be taken back when it has a wee Union Jack on it as opposed to a union banner?

Some Conservative Members and their comrades in Holyrood moved at lightning speed recently in their attempt to blame the Scottish Government for the issues experienced with the newly nationalised ScotRail regarding rest day working, but they have gone a little more quiet after ScotRail management and ASLEF worked through the issues and came to a negotiated outcome that the union leadership have today recommended to their members.

Chris Loder *rose—*

Gavin Newlands: I had a feeling that my colleague on the Transport Committee would intervene at this point.

Chris Loder: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, though, that the SNP Scottish Government have absolutely failed in managing the situation in Scotland? Only a week ago, the SNP said that it would not buckle to the unions, but it has done. It has given a 5% pay rise, plus profit share, with no improvements at all, and the strike coming from the RMT will still affect Scotland in the coming days. So does he agree that perhaps the SNP Scottish Government are not quite as brilliant as he makes out?

Gavin Newlands: It will come as no surprise to anyone that I completely disagree. We are unlikely to have strikes in Scotland, other than the Network Rail issues, which are entirely reserved to this place. I am not entirely sure why the hon. Gentleman does not want people to get a fair wage in this day and age when inflation, partly caused by his own Government, might run at near 10% by the end of this year. I think that 5% is a good deal for the workers and a good deal for ScotRail.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): What I am discerning from this debate is that where you have Tories you get strikes. That is the lesson from Scotland and Wales. It is always instructive to find out from the Tories about market forces. Market forces apply only when it comes to bankers; workers should just suck up the cost of living crisis and not use their

force in the market to get themselves a decent wage. If this was about bankers' bonuses, there would be no problems for Conservative Members whatsoever. They should be doing something about the inequality that is driving this. We saw yesterday from the SNP's prospectus for independence that the UK has the greatest inequality of any of the north-western European countries. That lies at the doorstep of the Tory Government, and Transport Ministers and other Ministers do nothing about it.

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more. I knew my hon. Friend would manage to shoehorn yesterday's statements on independence into this debate on rail strikes, and I wholeheartedly agree.

I was talking about the difference in approach between the Tories in Scotland on the ScotRail issue as compared with the current issue. The Scottish Conservatives' Twitter account said that the SNP Government

“must sort this mess out and address the travel misery facing commuters.”

Graham Simpson called for the Scottish Government to get involved and get round the table. Graham Simpson is a Scottish Conservative transport spokesperson in Holyrood. When he was on “Good Morning Scotland” on 20 May, he was asked seven times how he would resolve the rail dispute and he could not answer on any of those seven occasions. That is the difference in approach we get from the Conservatives in Scotland and the Scottish Conservatives in this place. It would be nice to think that the same energy and vim would be directed towards the Secretary of State and his Ministers for their role in the UK-wide dispute next week, but I somehow think that their social media output will instead absolve the Government of any blame, after throwing the kitchen sink at a Scottish Government only weeks after nationalisation.

Perhaps there is something to be said for real public control of our railways, because under the DFT's fragmented and privatised system, next week will be catastrophic for our rail network. It would be churlish to point out, but I will anyway, that for years the Scottish Government have called for Network Rail to be devolved to Holyrood and come under the auspices of the Scottish Parliament so as to operate a fully integrated railway bringing together track and services. Indeed, former Rail Minister Tom Harris, now an HS2 Ltd board member, advised the Williams review that Network Rail should be devolved when he was a member of the expert challenge panel, but, as per, the Scottish Government, and the rail sector in Scotland, were ignored. Perhaps if that were the case, and given the likely resolution of the ScotRail dispute, we would have services operating next week in Scotland instead of an almost complete cessation of any rail operations across the country for a week.

At least ScotRail tried to give some certainty to passengers, despite the disruption to services, by publishing an emergency timetable outlining which services were running. As of today, we are promised an emergency timetable on Friday for the disruption starting next Tuesday, and that simply is not enough time for people to plan whatever trips they might have to take. This industrial action has been known about for weeks, yet passengers are waiting until days beforehand to find out what skeleton services will be in place. Whatever other lessons are learned by the DFT from this dispute, a key

one will have to be that early information is crucial in allowing potential passengers to make informed decisions about how, where and when they can travel and what alternative arrangements they might need to make.

I was stunned to see the Secretary of State appear to call for an overtime ban for striking rail workers. The entire railway can only function on overtime. One thing that the ScotRail rest day and overtime issue has highlighted is the antiquated rostering system we have in rail systems across the UK. ScotRail has been working to phase that out. That job has been hindered by the pandemic and the impact it has had on driver training—130 new drivers would be in place on the network right now if covid had not hit. Training and recruitment is back on track, with those drivers now scheduled to finish training and be deployed over the next 18 months.

That will go hand in hand with the agreement that ASLEF is now recommending to its members, which will bring Sundays into the working week and put a truly seven-day railway in place over the coming years. That agreement also includes, as highlighted by my colleague on the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder), revenue sharing for all ScotRail staff when revenue targets are met. That kind of initiative—giving workers a stake, not just in their job roles but across the service—should be considered across the industry and taken to the negotiating table by the Secretary of State.

Elsewhere in Parliament today, there is a debate on fire and rehire secured by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). I was keen to take part in that debate, but my Front-Bench duties have brought me here. One of the key points in the speech I would have made there is equally valid here: modern and progressive industrial relations must involve dialogue and collective working between management and the workforce. It is clear that the Secretary of State appears to have been doing everything possible to run far away from the very thought of even appearing progressive or modern. He suggested that striking rail workers should be banned from getting overtime, despite the reliance of the network on overtime and rest day working—a situation we are working on in Scotland.

The Secretary of State wrote a column for *The Sun* about “rapacious union barons”

and the RMT executive holding

“a gun to the industry’s head”,

while

“ministers are determined to ensure strikers cannot milk the system”.

He used veiled threats to bring in unqualified, untrained staff to bust strikes, which simply poured even more fuel on a fire of his own Department’s making. That might go down well around the Cabinet table or at the next meeting of the 1922 committee—at least when it is not trying to change the rules for the next leadership election—but that is not the way to show actual leadership, and it certainly is not the way to negotiate with workers who are at the end of their tether with a Department that has used rail to grab headlines when it suits, but quietly dumps the negative stories when it suits, too, whether that is HS2 to Leeds and Bradford, the Golborne link or the truncated Great Western electrification.

Passengers and rail workers all want to see a better railway that delivers efficiency, punctuality, value and convenience. The Government’s attempt to drive a wedge

between those groups and their ambitions are as predictable as they are regressive. They are the behaviours of the past and of those with their heads in the sand. Ministers must meet transport workers and trade unions to resolve this dispute before mass disruption affects us all, and in doing so commit to no redundancies, as the Scottish Government have.

This motion—in fact, this whole approach—is all part of the Tory culture war to cripple unions, undermine strikes, ban disruptive protests and end pickets with temporary agency staff, and it highlights yet again why the Tories are unfit to govern. Rail has a bright future. In Scotland, after decades of underinvestment and gradual decline, electrification and decarbonisation have been a core part of the Government agenda for every party that has been the Administration, whether Labour, Liberal or SNP. Sadly, we have not had a Conservative Government in Scotland yet.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Not sadly at all.

Gavin Newlands: It was ironic. Electrification and decarbonisation are a key part of the drive towards a net zero society and a more balanced and sustainable economy, but that modernisation has to be accompanied by a modern, mature industrial relations strategy. That maturity and modernity was demonstrated by ScotRail and the trade unions in Scotland this month in coming to an agreement that benefits staff and the network, and the contrast with the utterances of the Secretary of State and his team could not be clearer.

The Secretary of State is a dinosaur stuck in the dark ages of industrial relations, retreating to his ideological instincts instead of looking elsewhere to see how to manage a railway and work collectively with staff and unions to plot a path for the future. It is not too late for him and this Government to see sense and join the rest of us in the 21st century, to learn lessons from elsewhere on these isles and in Europe, and to take heed of the voices in the industry, unions and management who want a grown-up discussion about where the industry goes. This motion is not grown-up. If the Secretary of State is serious about a new start for railways, he should seek permission to withdraw it immediately.

3.15 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I want to bring the debate back to passengers and rail users, because my constituents do not just face the strikes next week; they have faced months of industrial action by the RMT affecting the TransPennine network.

We have seen weekend services completely and utterly disrupted. We have seen regular cancellations of weekday services because of the issues around rest day working and working to rule on that issue. We have the conductor dispute, which means that there is essentially no reliable Sunday service. As someone who has worked for 20 years to improve services at Lockerbie station and to encourage people to get on the railways, I can say that these issues undermine confidence in the railways. Lockerbie station is the hub for the rural south of Scotland. There are, particularly for journeys to Edinburgh—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

David Mundell: No, I will not, because the hon. Gentleman would be well advised to learn about the south of Scotland and services that connect Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom.

We have faced the undermining of confidence in rail travel, but we have also seen—this has not been touched on enough in this debate—disruption to individuals. Constituents of mine travel to hospital appointments on these services. They sometimes have to travel 40 miles to get to the station, only to find that the train has been cancelled at the last minute and they cannot get to a cancer appointment in Edinburgh. They cannot carry out the normal activities that people would want in terms of shopping and leisure, and they cannot carry out their work, and it is totally and utterly unacceptable, and it has gone on for months. The strike and the industrial action have not brought the issue to a resolution; they have simply affected adversely all those people who want to use rail services, and it is not acceptable.

I am not saying that TransPennine and others are not without blame in this. One of my constituents' complaints, which I have raised with the Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), is that through something like Traveline, people can actually buy a ticket for a train that has been cancelled, and that cannot be right. It cannot benefit anyone to undermine confidence in rail services. I have worked hard to ensure that my constituents have a full and comprehensive timetable that allows travel not only from Edinburgh and Glasgow, but importantly into the rest of the United Kingdom, and that is being completely and utterly disrupted and undermined.

I travelled to London by train last Monday, because something important was happening in Parliament, only to find that two cancelled trains had to be combined with the Avanti service that was coming to London. The guard threatened to cancel that train too, because there were too many people on it for health and safety. Passengers who wanted to get on the service at Penrith were refused. That is not the way that our rail services should be operating, and it is not the way that the unions, which should clearly want our rail services to not just continue but expand and grow, should support those services.

To conclude, the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) did not mention it, but ScotRail does not run all rail services in Scotland; there are other services that connect Scotland to the rest of the United Kingdom. Let us not have such a blinkered approach from the Scottish Government that merely focuses on rail services within Scotland. People in Scotland want to travel across the whole United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As hon. Members can see, there is a lot of interest in this debate. The winding-up speeches will start no later than 4.45 pm, with 10 minutes each for the Front-Bench spokespeople. John McDonnell is next for five minutes, but to get as many people in as we can, we will then drop the time limit to three minutes.

3.20 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Let me clarify one point if I may. There has been reference to RMT donations to individual Members and the

declaration of interests. I thought the declaration of interests was annual, but I make it absolutely clear that the RMT contributed to my constituency party during the general election, which I declared properly and of which I am proud. RMT members were the first to move at the TUC that the Labour party should be established; that union is part of our movement. I am proud to be supported by it and I am proud to be part of the RMT parliamentary group. That gives me a relationship with workers in the railway estate in my constituency, which enables me to speak with some authority—I try, anyway—on rail matters. Let me put that to rest: I am proud of the support that it gives to my constituency party.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: If it is on that, no, because there are more important points to be honest.

We need to return the debate to what the dispute is about. I refer to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). The union has three demands in the negotiations so I will make three points. The first demand is for no compulsory redundancies—compulsory is the key word. There has never been a time when the RMT has not negotiated job losses, but there has always been a principle that they should not be compulsory. I remember that Bob Crow never lost a dispute, and neither has Mick Lynch, because they are sensible about the nature of the disputes that they get into.

Chris Loder: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Let me press on.

The union's second demand is to get some form of inflation proofing of members' incomes, and who can blame it when inflation is rising by anything between 7% and 11%? That is what ordinary working people want.

Mark Jenkinson (Workington) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Let me press on.

Let us also be clear about wages in the industry, which are linked. The median wage is £31,000. Drivers are largely represented by ASLEF, so the vast bulk of people who we are talking about are station staff, cleaners and others whose wages range between £20,000 and £30,000. We are not talking about people on very high wages, so inflation proofing is important to them at the moment.

The third demand is where we have some problems—I understand that. It is that when there are changes in jobs and conditions of work, they should be subject to negotiation and—this is the difficult bit—agreement. We know that this dispute will be settled at some stage, so the issue is how bloody it will get. What we all have to do, as I say on the RMT parliamentary group as well, is to facilitate an exchange that enables a resolution.

That is why today's letter is important. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle is right to say, "Well, it was unconditional", but it is unconditional from the Government as well. At the moment, it is important to just get everyone through the door. The Government have not put conditions on and neither has the union.

The union has not asked for conditions from the Government, and nor should the Government ask for conditions from it. Often, in organising a ballot about industrial action, time limits are in place. At this time, when we are faced with the disruption that is there, an act of good faith such as sitting in the same room is important—it might not work.

Huw Merriman: I am in danger of agreeing with the right hon. Gentleman, who makes a very good point. It may well be, in return for giving way a little in saying, “Okay, we’ll sit down with you and then not strike”, that the RMT needs to hear that there will not be a need for compulsory redundancies, because the way the workforce works, voluntary redundancies should probably be taken up anyway and then that could be the natural progression.

John McDonnell: The hon. Gentleman knows what these negotiations are like. My background is the National Union of Mineworkers, then the TUC and so on—I have been a trade unionist for the last 50 years—and in every sort of negotiation, the key issue is just getting through that door. Once we get through that door and are face to face starting those negotiations off, anything can happen. We have all been there, and we can have a bloody great row, but at least we are talking. That is all the RMT is asking for.

Let me just say that Members need to know the atmosphere at the moment. I have been talking at various union conferences—I was at Unison yesterday and all the rest—and there is a concern that we are going back to the 1980s, and I saw what happened in the 1980s. My hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery), who is here, was an active miner at the time, and I was a member of the NUM head office. What happened then was that there was a Government will to somehow take on the trade union movement, and we got described as the “enemy within”.

If anyone thinks it is to their advantage politically to start taking the RMT on as the enemy within in this situation, they are sorely mistaken, because it is not just about the RMT. At every union conference I have been to, there is a real anxiety. There is an anxiety about protection of their members against this cost of living crisis, and I have to say that there is an anxiety about protecting themselves against some of the threats that have come from the Government—minimal services, bans on overtime and all the rest—which is inflammatory when we are trying to get a negotiated settlement.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: I do not have time, to be honest, or do I get a second extra minute? *[Interruption.]* I will give way.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is it not ironic, or does he not think it is ironic that, with a Prime Minister who talks about a higher-wage economy, the minute people start—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Can the hon. Gentleman face the front, please?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am trying to do that and face the right hon. Gentleman, which is not easy, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Surely it is ironic that, with a Prime Minister who talks about a higher-wage economy, the first time people come along just wanting to maintain wages—not let wages go lower—his Government are opposing it, with the right hon. Gentleman having to make a very reasonable case in this House pointing out why trade union members have to do what they are doing.

John McDonnell: Perhaps I pointed in the wrong direction, but I meant no disrespect to the hon. Member.

I have talked at several trade union conferences and I have been consulting trade unions in my own constituency, and the big fear at the moment is that their members are facing a potential avalanche of costs coming at them, and they have had their wages largely frozen for 12 years, with some having in effect had a wage cut. They do not see any light at the end of the tunnel, and they see a Government now threatening intimidatory legislation to undermine trade union rights further, so then we ask the question: what do they do? All they can do—this is all that is left to them—is to withdraw their labour, and that is what we are seeing.

This is not just in the RMT. Unite has 100 disputes taking place at the moment. The general secretary of Unison has for the first time—I have never heard this before—said to Unison members, “Go back to your branches and prepare for action.” The PCS is in dispute as well. If we look at what is happening, it is because we have working-class people frightened for their futures and deeply insecure about their futures. They are faced with a Government who, to be frank, on this particular issue will not even open the door for a meeting. That is why the atmosphere has been so fouled at the moment. I just think that Conservative Members should know that this is not the time for braying speeches; it is a time for consideration and an element of responsibility to be introduced into this debate.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. There is now a three-minute limit.

3.28 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): To go back to close to the final comments of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), she said she was looking for a firefighter—well, here he is. I was a member of the Fire Brigades Union when it was thrown out of the Labour party because we were too militant, so I have been around this circuit many times.

I found the speech of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) quite frightening, because we can reverse that argument about the trade unions going back and getting ready for a fight. That is turning round to the British public and saying, “You voted Tory, so we’re going to punish you.” That feeling is as strong in my constituency now and in other parts of the country as it has ever been. This dispute does not need to take place, because it is too early to call this sort of strike. It is really early—we are right at the front. Why now? Why call a strike at such an early position? *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an

[Sir Mike Penning]

Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) has been chuntering away from a sedentary position for about the last two hours. Shut up! We are fed up with it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Let us be much more conciliatory—[*Interruption.*] That is my job, not that of the right hon. Gentleman. Let us be conciliatory and use moderate language throughout this debate. It doesn't need any more heat.

Sir Mike Penning: What I am trying to get across is that there is anger here, on both sides, and my constituents will not be able to go to work, because people are on strike who did not have to go to work during the lockdown when the unions were getting their money. What is going on here is that we are being punished. My constituents are being punished by the Labour party, which will not come out against this strike.

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose*—

Sir Mike Penning: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He has been chuntering away for the past two hours, and that's enough for anybody. Labour Members could contribute to this. They could turn around and say, "This is the wrong time; this is not the right time". Instead, because they are so petrified of their paymasters, they have to condone it.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab) *rose*—

Sir Mike Penning: I will give way to the hon. Lady. She is a good friend of mine.

Ms Brown: I know, and I am very fond of the right hon. Gentleman. His constituency is not completely dissimilar to mine. We both know that we have additional people using food banks, and that those people are in work. There is a huge amount of fear—reasonable fear—within our communities about people not being able to afford to put food on the table and pay their rent. Does he agree that the Government have a responsibility to get round the table, protect livelihoods, and show some respect and concern for those who are suffering from the cost of living crisis?

Sir Mike Penning: That is why it was so appalling for a trade union leader to turn around and say that he will never deal with a Tory Government. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) could come up with a letter on the day of this debate, when there is almost nobody on the Opposition Benches, even though the unions pay for them, almost completely—[*Interruption.*] I said the Benches; I did not direct that at the hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown). What can my constituents say when figures come out that a train driver earns 50-odd-thousand pounds a year? On my council estates people dream of that sort of money every day of the week. [*Interruption.*] Yes, they do get paid less than me, but people can put their name on the ballot paper and have a go as well, which is why I beat a Labour MP for my seat. Those sedentary comments from the Back Benches are not useful.

We do not need to have strikes or the cancellation of train services for my commuters all the time. Southern rail, which we spoke about earlier, caused chaos in my constituency. Week in, week out I listened to the local

radio, and trains were cancelled because they did not have the staff. The jobs are there. What is going on? Let's stop the strike now, and then discussions can take place. This is not a nationalised railway; these are employers and that is a completely different situation. We are not in the days of the miners' strikes; we are not in the days when the Government ran the mines. Railways today are different, and I passionately believe that they are going to try to punish my constituents, and particularly those in the northern seats, because the British public dared to vote Tory—dared to vote Tory!—and the union barons hate it and so does the Labour party.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Let us try an experiment and see whether we can get through the next three minutes without any shouting on either side. I call Sarah Green.

3.33 pm

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. After the challenges of the pandemic, the rail industry is just starting to bounce back, and with working from home now a much more accepted working practice, we might have to accept that passenger numbers may not return to pre-pandemic levels. Numbers are trending upwards, as people are returning to work in person or looking to get away for a family holiday, but that recovery risks being a fragile one if the strikes go ahead as planned. Too many passengers have been plagued by delays, cancellations and general disruption to their journeys over the past year. First that was down to the pandemic, then the "pingdemic", and they are now facing the biggest wave of industrial action in over 30 years.

In my constituency of Chesham and Amersham, more than 6,000 people rely on rail to get to work every day. Those passengers, and others like them who commute into London from the outermost stops on the underground, are facing a double whammy of overground and underground disruption, with strikes in London on 21 June.

The right to strike is fundamental, but that does not mean it is right to strike next week. The RMT should realise that wreaking havoc with the UK's transport system at a time like this will not make people more sympathetic to their cause. Indeed, I spoke with a transport user group in my constituency this morning and it made that point to me quite emphatically. What we need is for the Government and the unions to get back around the table, as has been mentioned previously, to resolve this dispute before it starts to impact on passengers. And by passengers, I mean patients, students, workers and, as the hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) mentioned, self-employed people who will not get any lost earnings back. Those are the people the strike will hurt: the people who rely on the railways.

This is not a problem the unions alone can solve. It is all very well for the Government to condemn the decision to strike, but that does not address the key problem. The Secretary of State's effort to solve the problem, suggesting that agency staff will be able to fill such gaps in the future, will not cut it. I also wonder just how the Government would find 50,000 agency workers, when the UK has a record number of vacancies and not enough workers to fill them. The Government cannot

allow people to lose jobs because they cannot make it into the office. They cannot allow the NHS to be disrupted as doctors and nurses are unable to reach hospitals.

It is time for the Government to come to the table and work with the unions to avoid disruption. They need to thrash out a way forward that is fair for workers, fair for the taxpayer and fair for passengers.

3.36 pm

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): I declare an interest of sorts: I am the son of a trade union rep. I am very proud of the work he did in standing up for the people he worked with to secure them better conditions and safety in the workplace. He always said to me that if trade unions did not exist, we would have to invent them. They play a very important role in our society, and I am certainly not someone who comes to this place as a natural union basher. I will say this, though: I think the RMT has got this strike badly wrong in both timing and tactics.

On timing, it will have a huge impact on a huge number of people across the country, particularly as it falls in the middle of exams and after the horrendous two years young people have had. This will make things even worse. It will have an impact on businesses not just in terms of the huge number of lost hours of work, but for those reliant on footfall from passengers, including Twig at Glossop station where I get my Monday morning coffee every week and Edwards Wine Bar in Hadfield where I often enjoy a drink on my way back from meetings. It will also have a huge impact on workers who cannot get to work, including doctors and nurses. And let us not forget the self-employed, who will not be able to earn money because they cannot work due to the strikes.

The strike is also bad in terms of tactics. It is a self-defeating tactic by the RMT. We are at a very critical moment for public transport and the rail sector. It has had a very difficult two years due to covid, with plummeting passenger numbers and record levels of subsidy just to try to keep the service above water. We are now in a position where we face the need to modernise and deal with the drop in revenue. The strike will only harm that work towards modernisation and sustainability. In the long run, I fear that that will have a huge impact on the industry and the workers the RMT professes to represent.

Sir Greg Knight: As a number of train operating companies are urging the public not to seek to travel at all by rail during the week of the strikes, is there not an overwhelming case for requiring road congestion charging and similar schemes to be suspended until the rail network is back to normal?

Robert Largan: I sincerely hope that that is a proposal the Government and Mayors look at very closely in their areas.

We are currently dealing with very reduced rail services as a result of staff shortages. The three lines I represent are currently running on very reduced timetables, which are causing massive amounts of problems. The problems we see with this industrial dispute will only make that worse. We have seen this go on for months. There has been a large number of cancelled trains, particularly on the Glossop line. We have seen a lot of work to rule and

disputes over rosters, which in fact led to a High Court injunction from Northern to ASLEF only a couple of weeks ago. We are already seeing some problems due to industrial disputes and they desperately need resolving.

I really think the RMT has got its tactics and timing very badly wrong. I hope it can reconsider. I sincerely hope we are able to avoid what I believe would be very damaging and self-defeating strikes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I remind hon. Members that everybody taking part in the debate is expected to be here for the wind-ups and should stay for substantial amounts of the debate and at least for the next two speakers after they have spoken.

3.39 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): As a proud trade unionist, I start by paying tribute to all rail staff in Liverpool, West Derby and across the country. I stand in absolute solidarity with them and am fully behind their demands for improved conditions, terms and pay and to safeguard the safety of the public. To be absolutely clear, the industrial action that will take place next week is the result of the political choices made by this Government, who are calling the shots. They are a Government who have shown every day they have been in power, throughout the pandemic and in this cost of living crisis, their complete disdain for rail workers and their disregard for their pay and conditions, job security, safety and welfare. It is shameful.

We can see where this Government's loyalties lie from the way that they were so quick to bail out the private operators who continue to make vast profits while on the other hand bringing this despicable motion to Parliament to attack key workers who are demanding fair pay and conditions. The strikes are absolutely a last resort and the RMT has been talking to employers and Ministers for almost two years to find a resolution. A key part of the dispute is that employers will not withdraw the threat of thousands of compulsory redundancies pushing many rail workers into poverty in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis in living memory. For passengers, that will also mean increased risks to safety and critical infrastructure with fewer staff on the trains, including the removal of guards and catering staff, cuts to cleaning and the closure of all ticket offices. That is not modernisation; it is a managed decline of our railways. The public should also be aware of the consequences of the proposed cuts that are being fought by the RMT: that our railways would be less safe. How can that be acceptable in the world's fifth richest country?

It would be interesting to know how many Members across the Benches have been on strike to ensure their families' wellbeing and future. How many realise what it entails to go out on strike as an absolute last resort? I was on strike for six months, locked out of my factory, to save jobs in the printing industry. It is a time of stress and worry about the future and what it may hold for your family. The absolute hypocrisy of a Prime Minister and Government who trumpet soundbites about an economy built on highly paid and highly skilled jobs while bringing motions to this place that go against protecting the jobs he desires.

Tahir Ali: Members vote to go on strike as an absolute last resort. It happens when everything else has failed. In the strike action planned for Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, I will show my solidarity by joining trade union members wholeheartedly. Would Government Members do the same and show solidarity with the working class?

Ian Byrne: I agree with my hon. Friend. Why did we not see the same urgency in calling out British Gas for using fire and rehire? Where was the anger and the motion calling out P&O for its disgraceful sacking of its entire loyal workforce by Zoom? There has been a total absence of leadership, a total absence of standing up to those rogue companies and a complete absence of any legislation in the Queen's Speech to protect workers.

Trade unions are a force for good, unlike the Conservative party, which is responsible for the worst living standards in living memory and continues to let millions of people shiver and starve in their own homes because of the political choices it makes.

Mark Jenkinson: I am a former trade unionist and I have probably been out on strike more than most people on either side of this House. I recognise the fundamental right to withdraw labour, but does he not also recognise, as I did, the moral duty not to interrupt others going about their daily business and earning fair day's pay?

Ian Byrne: I have listened to the hon. Gentleman and I am glad that he was not a trade union rep who I worked with.

I know what side I stand on. I know and I believe that the trade unions will act in the best interest of people in this country, unlike the people we have heard for the past two hours denigrate trade union members and trade unions.

3.44 pm

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): I express my strong support for the motion, which "condemns the decision of the rail unions to hold three days of strikes" that will cause significant and needless disruption for many of my constituents. I commend my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his sensible and reasonable speech.

I am very disappointed with Labour Front Benchers, who are stuck in the past. They always support the unions against the general public; they have no interest in thinking about the suffering that constituents will face if there are strikes next week. The actions next week will harm our economy at this vital time, cost businesses millions of pounds and disrupt vital NHS services and GCSE and A-level exams. If the strikes go ahead, the disruption will be unforgivable. The electorate in my constituency and others will never forget those who did not care and who showed a lack of concern.

There will also be a loss of earnings for the workers and rail companies involved with the walkout, much-reduced spending by those who travel by rail, a knock-on effect on tourism spending, and the potential to significantly intensify the disruption of existing supply chains. Greater London is now recovering financially, economically and socially from the covid pandemic, but the strikes will set back our recovery in our capital city. The Centre for Economics and Business Research estimates that on the

first day of the strikes alone, when the mass walkout is set to have the greatest impact, about a quarter of a million people will be unable to work. It predicts that the cost to the economy will be £100 million, with London suffering about 60% of the economic hit.

I understand that on the Southeastern network alone, most stations and routes will be closed, with services severely restricted and a maximum of 20% of trains running. That will cause huge damage to the economy and the travelling public. My Southeastern service is not the best normally: the Secretary of State well knows that it is unsatisfactory, with cancellations, delays and poor information.

Reform of the railways is essential to make them fit for the future. "Modernisation" must be the key word. The Government have provided great support to our railways, keeping trains running for key workers and ensuring that nobody at the train operating companies or Network Rail was furloughed. That was a real investment and achievement by the Government to help the people who work in the industry, which is so vital. It is therefore so disappointing to see the situation that we are in today.

It is still not too late to call off the strike, so I urge the unions to sit down with the industry, take on board the misery that their actions will cause, and act responsibly—maybe helped by Opposition Front Benchers. My constituents deserve nothing less than a service next week.

3.47 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): We come to this situation in very challenging times, with the cost of living biting hard for working people. There are vast numbers of rail workers in York, as the Minister will know, and they are really struggling at the moment. I have been talking to them about the challenges that they have been facing. They obviously want to see the dispute resolved as soon as possible, because they are the ones who are really struggling, with threats not only to their job security, but to their livelihood, as house prices, food prices and energy prices escalate. These are members of the public as well.

The reality is that when we get into a situation of industrial dispute, we need not hyperbole, but humility. We need to come into the industrial space with fresh thinking, ready to listen and engage. I have heard a lot of shouting today, but not a lot of listening. When the general secretary of the RMT is willing to enter that space, take the first move and meet the Government and employers, it is the responsibility of the employers and the Government to come into the space, listen and engage.

In industrial relations, people have to change the direction of their talks to reach a result. If the Government take a step forward, we can see the pathway to resolution. The traditional approach that the Government take to industrial relations is so deeply damaging, so I ask the Minister to really consider the actions that she could take to make such a difference in this dispute.

Many things that the Secretary of State put out were not included in the statement. I could think of a fifth, a sixth and a seventh thing that could be on the table: the long-term stability needed across the rail industry; long-term planning around industrial relations and workforce, in order to get smoothing so as not to have to go down the

road of redundancy, let alone compulsory redundancy. There are so many issues. The Government are concerned about the fall in patronage, yet they have not put forward a patronage plan to increase rail travel across the board, which is absolutely essential with the climate crisis that we are facing.

Resolution can be found for this dispute, to provide the long-term security needed across our rail sector. If we are to truly build back better—something that the Government seem to have forgotten—they need to think about how they build strong industrial relations for the future. I trust the Minister is listening, and will act after today's debate.

3.50 pm

Chris Loder (West Dorset) (Con): It is absolutely right that the Government have brought this motion to the House of Commons today. I heard the cries of Labour in yesterday's business statement not to bring the motion to the House, suggesting that we should just get parties around the table, but how is that remotely possible when the RMT's strike ballot date—the date of the declaration of the intention to strike—was 24 May, two days before the pay negotiations even started on 26 May? It confirms a rampant appetite for industrial action that tells us everything we need to know about the RMT—a union so addicted to striking that it was determined to do so before the pay talks even began. We know it is an addiction, because only a few months ago it was even striking against itself, with a picket line outside RMT HQ in north London.

Before being elected to this place, I worked for the railway for 20 years. I left school and worked my way up through the ranks on the stations and on the trains. I was an RMT member as well. But if anyone in the House needs convincing that they should support the Government's motion today, against the RMT's series of strikes, let me tell the House about something called RMT Broad Left—the hard left faction of the RMT union.

In order for the present RMT general secretary to be elected, he did a deal with the hard left of his union that in return for their backing, two communists were given leading jobs in the union, including the presidency. And they were not just any communists; they are on record as being anti-Ukrainian, pro-Russian separatists. They protested outside the Ukrainian embassy in London in 2015, following Moscow's invasion of Crimea, while wearing the black and orange ribbon, a symbol of Russian military valour. I could go on.

This is very, very serious. This country faces being brought to a standstill by Putin apologists—Russian-sympathising, militant communists who are bankrolling the Labour party to the extent that they have bought its silence. We cannot allow that to happen. There is a deeply sinister element to these strikes, and it is this Conservative Government, and this Secretary of State, who are on the side of the taxpayer, the passenger and the staff, because we want to see staff on the railways have a pay rise, but we also need to ensure that we make the railway fit for purpose.

3.53 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I first draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I received support from the RMT union at the

2019 general election. Anybody reading the right-wing press all the weekend would have thought that that was something to be ashamed of. Well, I want to tell everyone in the House clearly that I am not ashamed; I am extremely proud of it. If I asked every hon. Member sitting here where they got their support from, we might find that there were some very difficult questions to answer. I am proud that I have got support from people in the RMT—the train drivers, ordinary people, the taxpayers.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con) *rose*—

Ian Lavery: I will not give way.

The right hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Sir David Evennett), who is no longer in his seat, suggested that the members of the RMT and the unions were against the general public. The RMT—the members of the RMT, the members of the trade union movement—are part of the general public. They are workers of this nation, and in this case, we are talking about key workers. I am proud to represent the unions. I am proud to have been a trade union member all of my life. And just for the record, I want to avoid any dispute next week—but if there are disputes next week, I will be standing shoulder to shoulder with representatives of the RMT.

Chris Loder: I concur with the hon. Gentleman that we should try to avoid these strikes, but could he help us to understand why the declaration of the intention to strike was made two days before the pay talks even started? That does not show spirit on the part of the RMT to avoid strike action.

Ian Lavery: I heard what the hon. Member was saying before, but these negotiations have been going on for two years. This is not just about train drivers; basically, it is about the cleaners, the people who work in the ticket offices—as he probably did—the people who work on the tracks, the people who look after people in the trains and the conductors. It is about the track and about health and safety; it is about everything connected with the rail networks. We need these people. These were the key workers. We need these people to support a strong, healthy and safe railway. We need to be careful what we ask for. There have been negotiations for two years now, and that is the frustration.

A letter was sent to the Secretary of State this morning, asking for discussions. He dismissed it, and at the Dispatch Box today he basically laughed when he was asked if he would be trying to facilitate arrangements to avoid the strikes. He laughed! Why does he not accept that the best way to address the situation is to get everybody around a table, lock the door and get it resolved? We are talking about health and safety, about compulsory redundancies and about inflation-proof pay rises. These are basic human rights, to be perfectly honest.

I just want to say: do not believe anybody who is criticising the RMT—do not believe for one second that they will not come for you. Do not think that they will not come for your job, your pensions, your income and your future. As Pastor Martin Niemöller said,

“First they came for the Socialists,

And I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists,

[*Ian Lavery*]

And I did not speak out because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews,

And I did not speak out because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for”—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

3.57 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): I represent a commuter-belt area and many of my workers need the trains to go to work. On the strike days they will get no service at all and on the days in between they are going to get a Sunday service. If the trains are not running, at best those people will work from home. They might be forced to use a car, but we all know the price of fuel at the moment. At worst, they cannot work at all. Worst of all—as has been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Langan) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), both of whom have trade union backgrounds—the unions have jumped the gun. This is way too soon to cause this kind of damage to the economy and to the lives of individual people, and it will be millions of low-paid workers, and exam students, who will pay the price.

I believe in the power of unions. I think it is right that workers should be able to organise, have a collective voice and increase their bargaining power, but where unions are disrupting services that are already losing money hand over fist, demanding pay rises that are undeliverable and resisting modernisation, they are only doing their own workers harm. Any one of my constituents who uses the train will tell you that the railways are struggling to keep pace with demand and the needs of passengers, post-pandemic. Passenger numbers are down a fifth and train revenues are at about 60%. That is causing havoc with train services.

The taxpayer has stepped in. To give some sense of perspective, the Office of Rail and Road put the total industry income at £20.7 billion in 2020-21, of which £16 billion came from the taxpayer and just £2.5 billion came from passenger income. That is clearly not sustainable. The RMT argues that wages should go up by an inflation-proof 11%, but what private sector industry could withstand that logic when revenues are down 60%? Which member of the public—the public are not getting an 11% pay rise, by the way—should pay higher taxes for this increase?

I understand that workers are worried about inflation, but our cost of living package, which independent organisations such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies and Martin Lewis of MoneySavingExpert have said is very generous, will apply to rail workers, too. People on means-tested benefits will receive £1,200 of support this year to help with the cost of living.

I also understand that workers are worried about job losses. If people stop using ticket offices, however, how is it possible to keep increasing pay over time for a service that is being used less and less? Surely it is best to match workers with jobs and services that are in demand so they have a sustainable path to higher wages.

Chris Loder: Five members of Network Rail staff died on the tracks last year, with three of them being directly hit by trains. Does my hon. Friend agree it is

right that the Government and Network Rail look to find ways to reduce that risk, including through industry reform? That would also help with some of the issues she has articulated.

Claire Coutinho: I wholeheartedly believe that workers and unions have the right to try to ensure safety. The RMT has been around for a long time and, particularly when the railways were very dangerous during its early decades, it did a huge amount of work to push for safety, which is a good thing. The problem is that the RMT is now leading its members down the garden path. It is driving down the use of trains, which will reduce train revenues and therefore mean less money in the industry for the wages it is trying to achieve.

Opposition Members have not been very clear about their position, but I hope they will clarify in their speeches whether they agree that the unions should delay these strikes and allow time for negotiations, that these strikes are not fair on ordinary commuters in low-paid jobs who will not be paid for work they cannot get to, that an 11% pay rise, funded by taxpayers, is not fair when those taxpayers will not get an 11% pay rise, and that the system needs to be modernised if the RMT wants ongoing pay increases, as these vast Government subsidies are not sustainable.

4.2 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Nothing excites Conservative Members more than the chance to give the trade unions a good kicking. Some of their speeches have been chilling in their anti-trade union bile. Why do they not get as passionate about the number of food banks in this country as they do about bashing the trade unions and bashing working people who are trying to defend their pay, their jobs, their terms, their conditions and, of course, public safety? As a trade union lawyer for 10 years before being elected to Parliament, I know something that many Conservative Members do not seem to know: working people go on strike as a last resort, not a first resort.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I have been on strike a few times myself. Does he think that any Opposition Member who has received a donation from the RMT should put that money in a pot to help people who suffer during next week's rail strike? Does he also think that other MPs who have stolen money from the mineworkers—165 grand in the case of the hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery)—should pay it back?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. Please withdraw that remark about stealing money.

Lee Anderson: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You have to.

Lee Anderson: No, he stole it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: No, you have to. I implore you to withdraw the remark. Please, Lee, withdraw the remark and sit down.

Lee Anderson: I withdraw the remark.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Ian Lavery: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. You have been in the Chair three times when the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) has made allegations. He withdraws his ridiculous remark and consistently comes back to say it again. As Deputy Speaker, you are not protecting the likes of myself. I need your protection.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Do not make allegations against the Chair, ever. You saw how I treated Mr Anderson. You just leave it with me—I don't need lectures on how to do my job.

Ian Lavery: I will leave it there.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much.

Richard Burgon: The only time we seem to hear Conservative MPs worrying about the future of our children, our public services, nurses, doctors and other workers seems to be when they are condemning a potential strike. Isn't it funny that they do not seem to have this concern for working people at any other point?

Today, I was looking at an interesting letter, dated 27 May 2020, from the Secretary of State for Transport to the RMT. There was a handwritten flourish at the end of the letter in the handwriting of the Secretary of State, and it said:

"Thank you for your continued engagement with Chris Heaton-Harris and me as we try to bring services back together. Your members have been true heroes!"

Those are the words of the Secretary of State for Transport, written in his own hand, to the RMT.

James Daly: Many self-employed people have been heroes throughout the pandemic. They have gone out every day to provide services. As a result of this strike, they will not be able to go to work, earn money and eat. So what does the hon. Gentleman say to those people, who will not be able to earn money to put food on the table for their families as a result of the actions of the RMT?

Richard Burgon: What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that the Transport Secretary should reply positively to the letter from the RMT today, which is in the public domain and which asks for a meeting with him and the Chancellor, without preconditions, to try to sort this out. The RMT does not want this strike to have to go ahead.

The truth is that the Conservatives are living their Thatcherite revivalist fantasies; anybody would think we were back to the age of the "enemy within". Let me tell them this: train drivers, cleaners and people who work on our railways are not the enemy within. They are true heroes. They are the people who keep our society running and who bring our communities together. They deserve to be treated with respect. The Secretary of State put in his own hand that they are true heroes, and I agree. If they are true heroes, why move this politically contemptuous motion today? This is from the same repugnant right-wing box as that sick Rwanda policy. It is all about kicking migrants, kicking workers and seeking to cling on to power. This motion, just like that vile Rwanda policy, is red meat for rabid Tory right-wing Back Benchers. That is why the Conservatives

have got so excited and so red-faced on those Back Benches today, shouting about unions and treating them as the enemy within.

Politics is about which side you are on. I am proud to be a supporter of the trade union movement and to be supported by it. The people who should be ashamed are those whose politics are framed not by mass movements of the working class but by the billionaires and those at the very top, who have done very well in this crisis. So I say: meet the RMT, agree to no compulsory redundancies, agree that all rail workers should receive a fair pay rise that takes into account the rising cost of living, and agree that working conditions and jobs are subject to renegotiation and agreement with the RMT. Let us also stop lecturing rail workers on modernisation. They want to modernise, but we are not in the best place to lecture them about that, in this Ruritanian palace of powdered wigs, buckled shoes and swords. It makes us look out of touch. I will tell you this: the railway workers earn their pay; not every MP does.

4.9 pm

Suzanne Webb (Stourbridge) (Con): I recognise the vital role that railways play in driving the midlands engine and condemn the disruptive strikes planned for next week. Excuse the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the question is: who is the Fat Controller? Is it Labour or the unions? I am deeply concerned about what Labour's motives are for not coming out and publicly condemning the strike and about the unions' motives for having this strike now. They appear to thrive on the disruption the strikes will cause. It is as though they wish to destabilise the country for their own gain. The contempt they hold for the public concerns me greatly.

Chris Loder: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is only the Secretary of State tabling this motion today that has forced the RMT to write to him to ask for a meeting in the first place?

Suzanne Webb: I completely and utterly agree. This is the first time we have had sight of that.

What will the strikes do? They are a gut punch for people and businesses. Industrial action will not just torpedo our economy; it will wreak havoc with people's plans and livelihoods: pupils unable to take their exams, festival-goers and sports fans unable to see their favourite acts and teams, and a grieving family in my constituency who have campaigned tirelessly for justice for their son now unable to travel down to London next week to meet the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Corby (Tom Pursglove), to discuss how he can better support victims' families. It is an indulgent strike with a human cost.

What is Labour's position on these strikes? Well, they cannot make up their minds. As has been said, the shadow Health Secretary said he would vote to go on strike if he were an RMT member, the Leader of the Opposition has his head buried in the sand, and his deputy dodged a question in a BBC interview on whether she supported the strikes, saying that she had a train to catch. Next week, there will be no such trains for Labour Members to use to run away from the simple question: are they for or against the strikes? The British people deserve an answer.

[Suzanne Webb]

Others have spoken of the donations to the Labour party by the RMT. Labour Members say they are on the side of the workers and preach solidarity, but solidarity with whom? Not with workers; not with businesses. The only people Labour Members are in solidarity with are their union puppet masters. It seems like the RMT and Labour are at platform 9¾ when it comes to the strike and its impacts, yet back in the real world it is working people, businesses and pupils who will bear the brunt. While global cost of living pressures continue to bite, this strike is deeply damaging. We cannot have a railway system that is a steam locomotive in an electric age. Times are changing and the rail system needs to change too. I call on Labour and the unions to side with working people and stop this strike.

4.12 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): Before I begin, I would like to declare a couple of interests: I am a member of the RMT parliamentary group and I serve on the Select Committee on Transport. In fact, I am a member of numerous trade union groups that I am very proud of—the National Union of Journalists, the Public and Commercial Services Union, the bakers' union, the justice union—and I have the great honour of chairing the Unite parliamentary group. When I first started work—when I had a proper job—I worked on the railways at a time when they were part of British Rail. It was not the RMT in those days; it was the National Union of Railwaymen. That was my first paid employment.

I want to emphasise how important it is that we take the heat out of this situation and think about how we can move forward and get a negotiated settlement. It is absolutely clear that the unions are doing this as a last resort. After two years of talks and discussions, they want to find a resolution to the problems their members face. This issue is not simply about the pay scales for train drivers, although I would say that that is a group of workers we rely on every day—they keep us safe, they are highly skilled and they should be properly rewarded. It is about people who clean the trains, the signalmen and the people who maintain the track. Those are all vital jobs that keep our railways running.

The talks have revealed that the employers—the privately owned train operators and train companies—have an agenda that is being driven by the Government. That will be disastrous for rail workers and passengers alike.

It has become clear that the Government, and the Treasury in particular, are calling the shots and directing employers. They are, in fact, underwriting the costs of the strike. The Transport Secretary referred to modernisation and safety-critical infrastructure, but what we are looking at here are: fewer staff on trains, including the removal of guards and catering staff; cuts to cleaning; and the closure of nearly all ticket offices. That is absolutely no good at all for anybody with disabilities or for individuals who are vulnerable.

Chris Stephens *rose*—

Grahame Morris: I will give way to my good and honourable friend.

Chris Stephens: Surely the fact that the industrial action ballot has overcome the threshold that the Conservative party put in legislation tells us the depth of feeling among RMT members on these issues.

Grahame Morris: The feeling is very strong. I believe the margin was 71%, which is well above the Government's threshold. Indeed, the treatment of the RMT Union and its members seems to be part of a wider agenda to weaken employment rights. I was one of many Members, including my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and my hon. and right hon. Friends around me today, who were pressing the case for the Government to act on fire and rehire.

I was in the joint hearing of the Transport and the Business, Enterprise and Industrial Strategy Committees when we were taking testimony from the bad bosses of P&O Ferries who were boasting about their lack of consultation and their intention to drive down terms and conditions. We expect rather more from our own Government when it comes to the way in which the railway is being run. It is a huge and important national asset.

I want to put on record, so that there is no doubt, my solidarity with the RMT Union and with all the trade unions. Basic rights that govern pay and conditions at work were hard fought for and they were won through collective action; they were not handed out freely.

Let us not forget some of those appalling accidents at Ladbroke Grove, at Paddington and so on. One of the proposals that has been put forward is for 3,000 redundancies among people who maintain the tracks—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. I call James Daly.

4.16 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) is no longer in her place, but I would like to associate myself with every single word of what she said in her brilliant speech. It was a lesson in reality given the financial situation that faces us at this time.

We were asked by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) whether we had ever been out on strike. My answer is no, because I had the temerity to be self-employed. If I went out on strike, I would not have been able to eat. So when I am asked why I stand here and make this speech and whose side I am on, I have to say that I am on the side of the self-employed worker. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) talked about a person with disabilities who cannot get treatment, or the older person who cannot get to their cancer treatment, because public transport is cut off to them.

Grahame Morris: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Daly: No, I will not give way.

I am on the side of the pupil who is taking their exams and who has gone through an appalling period during the pandemic. For all of these people who will suffer in what will almost certainly be six days of action, the Labour party—certainly those we have heard from today—could not care less. My constituents can suffer at the altar of the Labour party, which is not able to stand up to its friends in the trade union movement.

I have not heard one Opposition Member say the very simple words, “Do not go on strike.” If people go on strike, they will destroy people’s livelihoods, destroy people’s jobs and put even more financial pressure on the rail companies that are struggling with a drop in income at this moment in time.

I had a meeting with representatives from the North-West Partnership regarding the west coast main line. The gentleman I spoke to said that the level of business travellers using trains is at 20% of pre-pandemic levels. Why would anybody look at this course of action and say, “No, I am going to rely on travelling by train when I need to go to work, when I need to go to an important meeting, when I need to go somewhere.” I know the Labour party does not like to hear this, but I had the temerity to try to create wealth, to employ people, to pay my taxes and to create a better situation. What we have here is a train system that has gone through a very difficult period. It has seen a drop in income, a drop in revenue.

We must approach this situation with reality. We must also approach it with compassion for everyone, and the compassionate way to deal with this matter is for the RMT to make an immediate statement saying, “We are calling off this strike”—not suddenly to produce on a mobile phone on the day of this debate a letter that none of us has seen regarding a meeting; utterly, utterly counterproductive. It is not in the interests of our constituents, and on the Government side of the Chamber we will stand up for those who are hard-working, who need to get their health treatment or their education, who have done nothing wrong, but who will be punished by the Labour party and the RMT.

4.19 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): This House has just discussed the Government’s disgusting Rwanda deportation policy. On Monday I attended a demonstration against that policy, coming directly from a debate in Parliament on the Government’s similarly disgraceful refusal to ban trans conversion therapy. That debate, the debate on the Rwanda deportations and this afternoon’s motion on the rail strike are connected: they are all about this Tory Government’s attempt to divide our communities and distract from their failure to serve the British people.

That is clear with the Rwanda policy, which has nothing to do with tackling people-smuggling and everything to do with whipping up hate, demonising marginalised groups and pitting people who were born here against people who seek asylum here. That is what the refusal to ban trans conversion therapy—letting abusive practices against trans people go unpunished in order to pit cis women against trans women—is about: division and distraction.

That is also what the demonisation of railway workers and the RMT Union is all about: threatening anti-democratic and anti-worker legislation; vilifying workers who are standing up for jobs, pay and conditions; and pitting those railway workers against other workers. It is all an attempt to distract and divide, at a time when this Government are overseeing a cost of living emergency and a growing poverty crisis across the country.

Railway workers are clear: this strike is a last resort, no matter what Conservative Members say. The union and the workers have been calling for the dispute to be

resolved for two years, but Ministers have refused to do so. Ministers have refused to get employers to withdraw the threat of compulsory redundancies against thousands of railway workers or to end the pay freeze for workers, which is really a pay cut, worth thousands of pounds per worker, when inflation rises to 10% and beyond. This dispute is not about modernising the railways or whatever else people say; it is about attacking workers, declining standards and worsening services for passengers.

These workers—we should applaud them for it—are standing up for their jobs and pay, but are being scapegoated by a Tory Government who would rather distract and divide.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend must be aware of the anger that many people who work in the rail industry feel—those who clean and repair the carriages, those who repair the track and those who provide the catering that many Members of this House enjoy—at being told basically to take a pay cut and face compulsory redundancies at a time when billions has been poured into the train operating companies, which have done very nicely out of their cosy arrangement with this Government.

Zarah Sultana: I absolutely agree. These tactics from the Government are to stop us talking about the fact that private rail companies take more than £500 million out of the railway system every year in private profits. It is the richest in the country who are truly raking it in, from the Chancellor, who is one of the wealthiest people in the country, to the record number of UK billionaires, one third of whom donate to the Conservative Party—*[Interruption.]* Tory Members can make all the sounds they like, but the facts are the facts.

That is all while working people are experiencing the biggest squeeze on living standards since the 1950s. Tory Members want us to believe that railway workers are the problem. They want us to blame refugees, not Tory cuts, for the crisis in public services and why they are at breaking point. They want us to think trans women are a threat to cis women. This House should be clear: the problem is not railway workers, it is not refugees and it is not trans women. The problem is this Tory Government and the billionaires who back them.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Right. We have just over 20 minutes and there are 11 people standing to speak. If there is discipline, they will all get in; no discipline, and some people will not get in.

4.23 pm

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): That was interesting, but my constituents are not really interested in the greatest hits of the left bank on the Opposition Back Bench. They are not interested in the enemy within or talk of the 1970s and 1980s. They do not care much.

These strikes are a totally unnecessary indulgence on the part of the RMT; its actions will have very limited impact on its members, but will have a huge impact on my constituents. They will miss work, hospital appointments and precious time with their family and grandchildren, and it will add very unwelcome stress, as many hon. Members have said, to young people at exam time. Let us not kid ourselves: the strikes will affect all of us next week. Rail services will not be back to normal, my rail

[*Steve Brine*]

company told me, until the week commencing 27 June—Monday week. It is worse than that: the RMT has a six-month mandate from this ballot. Will my constituents travel next week? Some will. Those who have to be in London who are just one hour from Winchester into Waterloo will probably drive, adding to the congestion, and with the eye-watering petrol costs at the moment. I agree with the several calls we have heard about suspending the congestion charge during this unnecessary strike.

That is not to say that there are no services from my constituency into London next week—there are. South Western Railway, which serves my constituency, will have just over 2,000 colleagues—guards, depot workers, drivers and so on—who will be swept up in the strike next week. The company briefed us this morning. I too have a good relationship with my local rail workers and my local rail company; the difference is that they do not pay me to have that relationship. The company has worked extremely hard to run a service next week. It is trying to match the key worker flows with the capacity. It has trained up managers with supply at the front to give my constituents a basic service between Southampton and Waterloo, albeit that the first train will not be until 7.30 am and the last train leaves at 5 pm, and my constituents in Micheldever and Shawford will be cut out entirely. I am also concerned about the concessions at railway stations, which, as many have said, have had a horrible time over the past few years.

So where to now? If the RMT wants to talk, then call off the strike. Let us take the heat out, because strikes will only up the heat. It is a dereliction of duty for the RMT to say that it does not talk to Tory Governments. It is a disgrace if that is what is being said. We have, “Do not travel next week”, messages going out to my constituents. Let us stop the strikes now, not on Sunday at the last minute, which will not avert travel disruption next week. This motion is very easy to support, because it supports my constituents.

4.26 pm

Sally-Ann Hart (Hastings and Rye) (Con): Railways have always been an integral part of our country's economic and social fabric contributing immeasurably to national prosperity, progress and development.

The support delivered throughout the pandemic totalled £16 billion of emergency funding to ensure that the railways were kept running, but none the less there has undoubtedly been a significant drop in railway usage, which will perhaps not return fully to pre-pandemic levels as we once expected. Strikes caused by the RMT will not encourage the use of trains at a time when increasing passenger numbers is vital. The funding thankfully ensured that none of the 100,000 staff directly employed by the railways were put on furlough, as were many millions of people in other industries around the country. It is unfortunately not sustainable to continue that level of Government subsidy indefinitely, especially given the current financial difficulties and pressures faced by many people, families and businesses across the country, including in my constituency of beautiful Hastings and Rye.

On the serious question of rail strikes, fairness or the lack thereof must be an essential consideration. Having already subsidised the industry through the pandemic

to the sum of £16 billion, is it fair that taxpayers will now have their lives and livelihoods hit by these strikes? Strikes will disrupt British businesses, including the small and medium-sized enterprises that form the country's economic background, and cost them a significant amount. For those that rely on tourism, as many do in my beautiful constituency, the impact will be all the greater, particularly on more disadvantaged people on low incomes—the very people Opposition Members profess to support. We know otherwise, because Opposition Members continue to encourage the RMT to play political games while the British public struggle.

We have already felt the impact of rail strikes on tourism industry businesses in 2017, with huge drops in visitor numbers as a direct result of those strikes. Reforming our railways now is key to making them fit for the future. Only through proper thought and consideration can fairness for both the taxpayer and those who work in the industry be achieved. The Government have my full support for their motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): There are eight Members standing to speak and we have 15 minutes. Do the sums, if you want to be friendly to colleagues.

4.29 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden) (Con): The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) spoke about chilling speeches from Government Members, and I have to say that I have found the speeches from those on the Opposition Benches incredibly chilling. I must be grateful to them, because every time they mention their support for this strike, they remind my constituents what could have been, had they the authority and were they in power.

When hard-working families are facing challenges with the cost of living, and when we are still recovering from the effects of the pandemic, the upcoming strikes will wreak havoc on my constituents. Thousands of my constituents commute to work by train. As a proportion, it is almost double the regional average due to our great connectivity to London, Birmingham, Warwick, Coventry and the surrounding areas. That is not to mention the knock-on effects to the rest of the public transport network and the road network.

Due to the strike action by the RMT, Chiltern Railways has announced that it will be forced to run a significantly reduced timetable, as will Avanti West Coast, London Northwestern and West Midlands trains, all of which run through my constituency. As has already been said, that means patients missing hospital appointments in Birmingham, family days out in London postponed because of the pandemic being put on hold once again and children, who had a hard time through the pandemic, sitting their GCSE and A-level exams with the added stress of getting to school on time. Hard-working families and hard-working people are being held to ransom by the unions and the Labour party.

What does the Opposition have to say to my constituents? The shadow Health Secretary said:

“if I were a member of the RMT...I would be voting to go on strike”.

The shadow Levelling Up Secretary said that she would be standing up with the striking railway workers who will bring our network to a standstill.

Why do the Opposition find it so hard to back hard-working British people and British families? No matter how hard they try and reinvent themselves, they have had more than £100 million in trade union donations over the past decade, and they remain beholden to the trade union barons holding our railways to ransom. That is on top of the news that a shadow Justice Minister said that a Labour Government would take us back into the EU. It is the same old cynical, opportunistic Labour party that backs unions and undermines the British people.

4.31 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): First, like many of my colleagues and even more members of the public, I am deeply disappointed by how quickly this situation has arisen. The RMT has admitted that it is striking before it even knows the final plans for pay and conditions. How can anyone engage in constructive discussions with an organisation that has decided that pre-emptive strikes are the way to do it?

The timing of the strikes is particularly inappropriate, given the ongoing pressures on the UK's economic recovery as a whole, particularly in the rail and travel industries, and gives no consideration to the fact that many in supply chain businesses had to rely on furlough at best and so did not get full wages for the year.

The RMT says there is never a good time for strikes, but it is its choice. Some times are clearly worse than others. Choosing to strike when students are sitting their A-levels and GCSEs is a particularly bad choice. When the first festivals are being held since the summer of 2019, it is incredibly inconsiderate to say the least. It is an attack on our young people trying to get on, and on so many of the population wanting to finally enjoy some respite from covid.

It is also disappointing that Labour cannot decide whether it supports the strikes. If it supports working people as it claims, how can it have difficulty deciding whether it supports the many in the population or the few in the RMT who are spoiling for an early fight? The strikes will also have an impact on levelling up. I have spent much of my time and energy since becoming an MP advocating for more investment in the rail sector, especially in the north, including Ferryhill station, the Leamside line and other such places.

I sincerely hope that the rail unions will reconsider their actions and that the Labour party will encourage them to do so. They will clearly impact the weakest in society most. It is so disappointing, but not surprising, that those on the Labour Benches are doing nothing to discourage their paymasters from these excessive and premature actions, which will frustrate levelling up, frustrate climate change improvements, frustrate students and frustrate people recovering from life after covid. Do they really want to be responsible for that?

4.33 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): This strike is a great threat to the ordinary working people who depend on rail services for work and especially to those now undertaking exams. The reason that this action is so unjustified and reckless is that we have already seen the rail sector on life support following the huge challenges faced during the pandemic. Services

have become increasingly dependent on taxpayer subsidies, and that trend started before covid. Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, the National Audit Office identified that the amount of Government funding for operating and maintaining the rail network doubled.

Now more than ever, it is important that we get people back using the railways so that services remain sustainable. At a time when rail operators are trying to encourage and convince people back on to the trains, we see the country being held to ransom by the unions and the Labour party. These reckless actions will harm ordinary families already struggling with the cost of living.

Wage levels in the sector are already far higher than in most others. The average rail worker now earns £44,000 a year, compared with an average salary of just over £27,000 in Stoke-on-Trent South. Many working practices in the sector are also stuck in the dark ages. The driver rulebook has changed little since the 1960s.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jack Brereton: No, I will not.

If anything is to come from the unions' outrageous actions, I hope that they will influence the Government to finally overhaul those archaic working practices. Unfortunately, I feel that the culture in parts of the rail industry works against the necessary reforms and improvements, particularly in Network Rail, as we have experienced in Stoke-on-Trent in trying to deliver our transforming cities fund to improve local rail services.

The Government are focused on reinvesting in our railways, particularly on making them more accessible to communities across the country. For Stoke-on-Trent, which lost much of its local connectivity under the Beeching axe, improving local rail services through schemes such as the restoring your railway programme and the TCF is absolutely vital for levelling up, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) said.

Locally in north Staffordshire, I hope that the Government support our levelling-up bids for reopening Meir station and the Stoke-Leek line, which we are working on as part of the restoring your railway programme. But these reckless actions by the trade unions and the Labour party undermine all that and threaten to undermine the levelling up of this country and the investment that we are putting into the railways.

4.36 pm

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): As has been said, there is only one question that each and every Member of this House needs to ask themselves today: "Whose side am I on?" On the Conservative Benches, we are on the side of the British public and our constituents—workers trying to get to their jobs, the businesses that rely on them to be there, students travelling to sit their GCSE exams, and veterans wanting to mark Armed Forces Day. Over the pandemic, our constituents supported our railways with £600 from every family in the UK, because public money is not Government money; it is our constituents' money.

It is now time for the rail unions to support our constituents by accepting that working patterns and demand for rail travel have changed. Our constituents

[*Ruth Edwards*]

cannot continue to subsidise the status quo when passenger numbers are down by three quarters and 94% of commuters are not going back to commuting five days a week. The way we all work and the jobs we do are changing at a faster and faster pace. No sector is immune. We need to be honest with workers. We do not hide from modernising the railways because it is difficult; we are making huge investments in massive infrastructure projects, overhauling ticketing, putting more staff on platforms, and reopening closed routes.

Conservative Members of Parliament will vote to support our constituents today, but what will Labour Members do? Will they side with their constituents or with their union barons? I accept that it is hard for them to bite the hand that feeds them. The RMT donated nearly £250,000 to the Labour party in the last decade, so why would Labour Members vote to condemn rail strikes when they are on the union gravy train? Today, they have a chance to prove where their loyalties lie. Whose side are they on?

4.38 pm

Julie Marson (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): I had intended to go through each element of the motion, but I do not have time, so I will focus on the second element, which is that we condemn

“the decision of the rail unions to hold three days of strikes”.

Precisely as my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (*Ruth Edwards*) said, I know whose side I am on.

David Linden: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Julie Marson: Absolutely not.

I am on the side of my hard-working constituents—employed and self-employed—going about their ordinary business on a day-to-day basis who want to go to work next week, who want to see friends and family next week, who want to go shopping next week, and who may want to go to urgent and important GP and hospital appointments next week. I am on their side, and when I speak to the residents of my commuting towns of Bishop's Stortford, Sawbridgeworth, Hertford, Ware and St Margarets, which serves Stanstead Abbots, I say, “I am on your side.” I do not want to see these strikes because I think they are profoundly unfair.

I do not believe that the unions are working in the best interests of the heroes who have been supporting our rail network and our rail industry over the last two years. I have written to my rail networks to thank them and their staff for everything they did during the pandemic. I would categorise this even more strongly: I support those workers, as well as all the other workers in my constituency, because they are hard-working people. They are not being served well by the union, and I would use that old adage of saying they are lions. They are lions, but they are led by donkeys.

4.40 pm

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Peterborough is a rail city, and it has been since the 1850s, when the Great Northern line opened going up to York. We have literally thousands of commuters who have moved to Peterborough because of our excellent housing and because of quality of life issues, who commute to London each and every day.

I do feel qualified to be able to talk about this issue. My father was a trade unionist for many years—he was the chair of Peterborough Unite—and like my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (*Steve Brine*), I have an excellent relationship with railway staff in my constituency. They want reform in many ways, because the argument for reform is unarguable. Seven-day working practices are the norm elsewhere, and ticket office reform is obviously urgently needed. These are decent, hard-working people who want to serve the public. They are keen for reform, and they want a resolution to this dispute. They are not interested in communism or ideology; they just want to work. But the RMT—the union bosses themselves—do not want that, and neither does the Labour party.

I just want to refer to the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (*James Daly*). He claimed to be on the side of those who are self-employed, on the side of those young people who want to sit their exams, on the side of those who want to go to hospital to access cancer treatments, and on the side of ordinary, everyday, hard-working people. I echo those sentiments entirely, because it is they whose side I am on—the hard-working people of Peterborough, be they people who need to get to work or the railway workers themselves. I am not on the side of these railway RMT bosses who put ideology before the interests of their members and ideology before the interests of the public, and the people who they pay for—and they are the Labour party MPs. This could be resolved tomorrow if the Labour party, the Labour leadership and Labour MPs appealed to RMT bosses to stop this strike. Will they do it?

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con) *rose*—

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I apologise to Mr Baynes, and I call Mr Butler. We will take the clock off for you, but please resume your seat at 4.45 pm.

4.43 pm

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary on grasping the nettle not just of recognising the needs of a modern-day railway, but of acting to secure a sustainable, efficient modern-day railway. It was right that public money supported the railways during the pandemic, but it is surely also right that public money is now focused where it is most needed, not least in the NHS and education. Unlike the Opposition parties, the Conservatives recognise that there is not a bottomless pit of money—taxpayers' money, I would add—and the answer to every question is not spend, spend, spend without thinking how we would manage costs or how we would improve productivity.

It was abundantly clear during the speech of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (*Louise Haigh*), that the Labour party has absolutely no answers, because she simply refused to take questions from this side of the House. I know that her Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Slough (*Mr Dhesi*), is about to speak, and I would ask him two very simple questions, so that my constituents are absolutely clear about the attitude of Labour Members. First, will they condemn the strikes—yes or no? A one-word answer should not be too difficult.

The shadow Secretary of State said that if Labour was in power, which I have to say is a thought that sends shivers down my spine, Labour would sit around the table with the unions. In that case, would Labour give in to all the unions' demands, and if not, which ones would it reject? Just so we are absolutely clear, that is what she said she wanted to do. What would her stance be? My constituents want to know because the workers who need trains to get to their jobs next week, the pensioners who need to get to their hospital appointments next week and the schoolchildren who need to get to class next week cannot do so because of these totally unnecessary strikes. Will Labour condemn them?

Mr Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much. I call the shadow Minister.

4.44 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up the debate on behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, and I thank all those who have contributed to what I can definitely say has been a lively debate.

There is no doubt that our railways, and the committed workforce who run them, are of huge importance to our country, and we can all agree that the tireless efforts of our rail community in keeping the country running throughout the pandemic and beyond should be commended. That is precisely why the significance of the proposed strikes cannot be underplayed. But they can be avoided. It is good that we are debating this issue, and Conservative Members should take heed of the Labour party amendment to the motion.

The rail industry has arguably seen more turbulent times throughout the pandemic than most industries. Service and revenues stopped, funding structures changed, and the franchise system was ditched. No one is arguing for things to return to the way they were before, but instead we should build effective and collaborative change for passengers and the industry. Our rail network faces issues such as pay, job losses as a result of cuts, safety and maintenance, but instead the Government seem busy playing politics—mud slinging, and trying to start Twitter wars. They are spoiling for a fight. That is precisely what this debate is about, and precisely what the intended strikes are about, rather than doing what is in the best interests of the British people. But we can see through all that.

Blaming the Labour party for strike action that has been driven from Tory policies and mismanagement just will not fly. Perhaps Conservative Members need reminding who is in government, and who have been in government for the past 12-plus years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said, if they put just half that energy into getting around a table with the unions to negotiate, we could have avoided the situation in which we find ourselves today.

Chris Loder: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the RMT has refused to come to speak to the Government? The only reason why the Secretary of State has received a letter from the general secretary of the RMT is that this very debate has been called in the House of Commons.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but the true fact of the matter is that the Secretary of State has not even tried. He has been missing in action. The unions,

including the RMT, have been asking for negotiations. Indeed, there have been discussions over the past couple of years, but the unions have been highlighting that many of their members have not received a pay increase for the past couple of years. As I said, they have not met since March. The Secretary of State needs to show leadership and hold an urgent meeting between Ministers, employers and the union. Sadly this behaviour is indicative of wider incompetence when it comes to managing our transport network.

Claire Coutinho: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the unions called a strike before they saw the finalised deals of a pay plan?

Mr Dhesi: As I highlighted, they have been in negotiations for the past couple of years. I am talking about wider incompetence, so let us take Transport for London and the Government's failures in securing a long-term funding deal. That has left Transport for London in limbo, leaving it no choice but to make cuts to services in the face of a lack of Government support. Ministers are playing political games, where the only losers are the hard-working British people.

Why are the Government choosing to cut when they should be choosing to invest? Instead of delivering on a rolling programme of electrification, they are scrapping huge parts of HS2. I see the Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), laughing from a sedentary position, but the Government scrapped the eastern leg of HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail to boot. Why are they choosing managed decline, when they should be choosing growth? Why are they cutting services, when they should be cutting fares, as many of our European neighbours are doing?

We could have a rail network with affordable, reliable services where more people want to travel by rail, helping us to address the climate emergency. Instead, the Government are focused on punishing rail passengers, punishing key workers on our railways, and presiding over the managed decline of our railways with £1 billion-worth of cuts imposed from the top. A decade-plus of Tory government has driven our transport systems into the ground, and the pandemic has catalysed that process to crisis point.

The Labour party will always stand to defend the rights of working people, the British people, who currently face a blistering cost of living crisis in the wake of a global pandemic. Workers are looking to the Government for answers, but the Government simply do not have a plan: no employment Bill, which has been promised for the last three years; and no progress on fire and rehire.

I have just been in a debate in Westminster Hall, which I managed to secure, on fire and rehire. Not one single Conservative Back Bencher managed to attend that debate. They simply do not—[*Interruption.*] They say they were here. Many other Members from the Labour party, the SNP and the Democratic Unionist party attended, but not a single Conservative Member from the Government Benches was there to support their Minister, because they do not believe in workers' rights. They do not believe in supporting the British people who are going through this cost of living crisis.

Now, the Transport Secretary seems intent on jeopardising the right to strike at all. If his Department wants to move forward, I suggest that what it should be

[Mr Dhesi]

doing is negotiating, ending the strikes next week, and giving our transport system the attention it rightly deserves.

4.52 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Let me start by thanking right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to this very important debate, although I note the rather empty Opposition Benches and I contrast that with those on the Government side.

Given that we are just six days away from the biggest rail strikes in decades—strikes which will disrupt examinations, Armed Forces Day, NHS operations and huge cultural moments like the Glastonbury festival—it is perhaps not surprising that so many Members have been here to contribute today. I share the disappointment expressed by Members on the Government Benches that the RMT has called this industrial action. Strikes should be the last resort, not the first, and I truly believe that the RMT is thoughtlessly jumping the gun by striking when talks with the industry have only just begun.

Many people watching our proceedings today will be worried about next week. They will be worrying about how they will get to work, see their friends, or access vital public services. We have heard many examples of that from the Government Benches today. While we urge the trade unions to talk to us to find a solution, we are also planning for the worst.

Clive Efford: Will the Minister give way?

Wendy Morton: I want to make some progress first.

I assure the House that, together with industry, we are looking at how to keep vital freight, medicine and fuel running. We should be in no doubt, however, that if the strikes go ahead, they will cause huge disruption. That is precisely why the Government have tabled this motion today. We believe that it is important that we stand as one House—[*Interruption.*] I give way to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder).

Chris Loder: I thank my hon. Friend, the excellent Rail Minister, for giving way. Does she agree, given that in 2018 the shadow Secretary of State stood on a platform and supported the RMT's strikes for Northern Rail, that we will never see the Labour Front Bench condemn these strikes?

Wendy Morton: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, but this evening the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and her colleagues have the opportunity to stand with Members on this side of the House and support the motion. We believe that it is important we stand as one House and condemn the unions for their reckless and irresponsible decision to grind our network to a halt next week.

I really do hope that the Opposition will finally put aside their funding interests to vote with us today. I do not think that our constituents will accept being told that their lives and jobs are being disrupted because Labour has sided with a militant group of union leaders

who belong in the 1970s—leaders such as Mick Lynch, who admitted that this strike action would make the cost of living situation worse for people and who refused to rule out working towards a general strike; and leaders such as RMT deputy boss Eddie Dempsey, who admitted that the unions were striking before even knowing the final plans for pay and conditions.

Just yesterday, we saw more rail unions moving toward strike action, this time cynically timing their walkout to coincide with the Commonwealth games. That will not just impact on the sport but will put at risk the legacy the games are looking to create in the west midlands. If Opposition Members deplore those actions as much as I do, they must vote to condemn the unions.

As a result of the pandemic, our railways are facing an existential crisis. Many people can now choose to work from home or just to travel into the office a few days a week. Passenger journeys in recent months are still a fifth lower than in the equivalent period in 2019 and it is no exaggeration to say that the industry is now facing the biggest challenge in its 200-year history. The Government have earmarked more than £16 billion of funding for passenger services since the start of the pandemic to keep the railways running and to protect jobs. That is the equivalent of nearly £600 per household. That just cannot continue, so our railways need to change.

The Government are doing our bit. We are simplifying the railways under the Great British Railways brand and ending franchising. We are investing in large infrastructures such as HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. We are overhauling ticketing and offering passengers discounts and promotions such as the hugely popular Great British rail sale. We are addressing historic issues in the railways through the Williams-Shapps plan for rail, delivering more punctual and reliable services and tackling franchising. The time to act on this is now and we need railway employees to work alongside us in order to deliver a network fit for the 21st century—

Louise Haigh: Then talk to them!

Wendy Morton: There is one thing on which I want to be really clear, because I can hear the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley chuntering from the Front Bench. Let me be absolutely clear that when we talk about industry talks, the Government are not the employer here. That is a fundamental thing that Opposition Members need to remember. We cannot intervene between the rail companies and the unions. Industry is offering daily talks to the unions and we absolutely encourage the unions to stay at the negotiating table and call off these strikes.

The unions must talk to the employers. Getting stuck in endless disputes will not solve anything, nor will it bring back the passengers the railway so badly needs—quite the opposite. The only solution is for everyone who takes pride in the railway to come together and agree a new way forward. Outdated working practices must end. It is time for the railways to modernise.

If we get this right, we can create a future in which our railways thrive, passenger numbers grow and Britain's economy rockets as we better connect up our towns, cities, communities and people. The prize is huge—Labour Members might not agree or like me saying this—but the consequences of these strikes will be severe: passengers may disappear for good, businesses will be damaged

and lives will be disrupted. It is time for the Labour party to get off the fence and stop defending the union bosses who fund their political activities. The Opposition might not like this, but it is time for us to put working people first. I commend the motion to the House.

Amendment proposed: to leave out from “House” to end and add

“does not want the national rail strikes to go ahead; and therefore urgently calls upon the Government, operators, network rail and the union to get around the table and resolve the issues on pay and cuts to safety staff to avert industrial action.”—(*Mr Dhesi.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 174, Noes 286.

Division No. 14]

[5.1 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Ferrier, Margaret
Ali, Tahir	Flynn, Stephen
Amesbury, Mike	Foxcroft, Vicky
Anderson, Fleur	Foy, Mary Kelly
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Gardiner, Barry
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Gibson, Patricia
Barker, Paula	Gill, Preet Kaur
Beckett, rh Margaret	Grant, Peter
Benn, rh Hilary	Green, Kate
Black, Mhairi	Greenwood, Lilian
Blackman, Kirsty	Griffith, Dame Nia
Blake, Olivia	Gwynne, Andrew
Bonnar, Steven	Haigh, Louise
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Hamilton, Fabian
Brennan, Kevin	Hanvey, Neale
Brown, Alan	Harris, Carolyn
Brown, Ms Lyn	Hayes, Helen
Burton, Richard	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Byrne, Ian	Hendry, Drew
Byrne, rh Liam	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Cadbury, Ruth	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Hollern, Kate
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hopkins, Rachel
Champion, Sarah	Hosie, rh Stewart
Chapman, Douglas	Howarth, rh Sir George
Cooper, rh Yvette	Huq, Dr Rupa
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hussain, Imran
Cowan, Ronnie	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Coyle, Neil	Johnson, Kim
Crawley, Angela	Jones, Darren
Creasy, Stella	Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Cruddas, Jon	Jones, Ruth
Cryer, John	Kane, Mike
Cummins, Judith	Keeley, Barbara
Cunningham, Alex	Kendall, Liz (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>
David, Wayne	<i>by Mr Pat McFadden</i>)
Davies, Geraint	Kinnock, Stephen
Davies-Jones, Alex	Kyle, Peter
Day, Martyn	Lake, Ben
De Cordova, Marsha	Lavery, Ian
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Law, Chris
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Leadbeater, Kim
Dodds, Anneliese	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Doughty, Stephen	Linden, David
Dowd, Peter	Lloyd, Tony
Duffield, Rosie	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Eastwood, Colum	Lucas, Caroline
Efford, Clive	MacNeil, Angus Brendan
Elliott, Julie	Madders, Justin
Elmore, Chris	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Eshalomi, Florence	Mahmood, Shabana
Evans, Chris	Maskell, Rachael
Fellows, Marion	Matheson, Christian

Mc Nally, John	Shah, Naz
McCarthy, Kerry	Sharma, Mr Virendra
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm	Sheerman, Mr Barry
McDonald, Stuart C.	Sheppard, Tommy
McDonnell, rh John	Slaughter, Andy
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Smith, Alyn
McGinn, Conor	Smith, Cat
McGovern, Alison	Smith, Jeff
McKinnell, Catherine	Sobel, Alex
McMorrin, Anna	Starmer, rh Keir
Miliband, rh Edward	Stephens, Chris
Monaghan, Carol	Stevens, Jo
Morden, Jessica	Streeting, Wes
Morris, Grahame	Stringer, Graham
Newlands, Gavin	Sultana, Zarah
Nichols, Charlotte	Tami, rh Mark
Norris, Alex	Thewliss, Alison
O'Hara, Brendan	Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Onwurah, Chi	Thompson, Owen
Osamor, Kate	Thomson, Richard
Osborne, Kate	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Oswald, Kirsten	Trickett, Jon
Peacock, Stephanie	Twigg, Derek
Pennycook, Matthew	Twist, Liz
Perkins, Mr Toby	Wakeford, Christian
Phillips, Jess	West, Catherine
Phillipson, Bridget	Whitley, Mick
Pollard, Luke	Whittome, Nadia
Qaisar, Ms Anum	Williams, Hywel
Rayner, rh Angela	Winter, Beth
Reeves, Ellie	Wishart, Pete
Reeves, Rachel	Yasin, Mohammad
Reynolds, Jonathan	Zeichner, Daniel
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell	
Rimmer, Ms Marie	
Rodda, Matt	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Colleen Fletcher and
Mary Glindon

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Brine, Steve
Afriyie, Adam	Bristow, Paul
Aiken, Nickie	Browne, Anthony
Aldous, Peter	Bruce, Fiona
Anderson, Lee	Buchan, Felicity
Andrew, rh Stuart	Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Ansell, Caroline	Burghart, Alex
Argar, Edward	Butler, Rob
Atherton, Sarah	Cairns, rh Alun
Atkins, Victoria	Carter, Andy
Badenoch, Kemi	Cartlidge, James
Bailey, Shaun	Cates, Miriam
Baillie, Siobhan	Caulfield, Maria
Baker, Duncan	Chalk, Alex
Baker, Mr Steve	Chishti, Rehman
Baldwin, Harriett	Chope, Sir Christopher
Baron, Mr John	Churchill, Jo
Baynes, Simon	Clark, rh Greg
Bell, Aaron	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Benton, Scott	Clarkson, Chris
Beresford, Sir Paul	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Bhatti, Saqib	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Blackman, Bob	Colburn, Elliot
Blunt, Crispin	Collins, Damian
Bone, Mr Peter	Costa, Alberto
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Courts, Robert
Bowie, Andrew	Coutinho, Claire
Bradley, Ben	Crabb, rh Stephen
Bradley, rh Karen	Crouch, Tracey
Brady, Sir Graham	Daly, James
Braverman, rh Suella	Davies, David T. C.
Brereton, Jack	Davies, Gareth
Bridgen, Andrew	Davies, Dr James

Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heappey, James
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David

Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew

Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Steve Double and
Scott Mann

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The House proceeded to a Division.

David Linden: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Standing Orders of the House state that a Member's vote should follow their voice. No doubt people will have noted that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) shouted "No." Would he be in breach of the Standing Orders if he did not vote no?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I do not know who shouted "Aye" and who shouted "No," but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that the vote should follow the voice.

The House having divided: Ayes 293, Noes 15.

Division No. 15]

[5.15 pm

AYES

Afolami, Bim	Badenoch, Kemi
Afriyie, Adam	Bailey, Shaun
Aiken, Nickie	Baillie, Siobhan
Aldous, Peter	Baker, Duncan
Anderson, Lee	Baker, Mr Steve
Andrew, rh Stuart	Baldwin, Harriett
Ansell, Caroline	Baron, Mr John
Argar, Edward	Baynes, Simon
Atherton, Sarah	Bell, Aaron
Atkins, Victoria	Benton, Scott

Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Ben
 Bradley, rh Karen
 Brady, Sir Graham
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Brereton, Jack
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Bristow, Paul
 Browne, Anthony
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buchan, Felicity
 Buckland, rh Sir Robert
 Burghart, Alex
 Butler, Rob
 Cairns, rh Alun
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Carter, Andy
 Cartledge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Cooper, Daisy
 Costa, Alberto
 Courts, Robert
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Davison, Dehenna
 Dinagen, Dame Caroline
 Dines, Miss Sarah
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Dowden, rh Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Eustice, rh George
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Farris, Laura

Farron, Tim
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gray, James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Kate
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Hart, rh Simon
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, rh Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Howell, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Jardine, Christine
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kearns, Alicia

Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Latham, Mrs Pauline
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Lewis, rh Dr Julian
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Lopez, Julia
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morgan, Helen
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mumby-Croft, Holly
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Opperman, Guy
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Pow, Rebecca
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom

Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, rh Alok
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trott, Laura
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Sir Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Scott Mann and
 Steve Double

NOES

Burton, Richard
 Byrne, Ian
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Gardiner, Barry
 Lavery, Ian
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Maskell, Rachael

McDonnell, rh John
Morris, Grahame
Sultana, Zarah
Trickett, Jon
Whitley, Mick

Whittome, Nadia
Winter, Beth

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Stephens and
Bell Ribeiro-Addy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the vital role of the railways in supporting people and businesses across the UK every day; condemns the decision of the rail unions to hold three days of strikes; believes those strikes will adversely affect students taking examinations, have an unacceptable effect on working people and a negative effect on the economy; and calls on the rail unions to reconsider their strike action and continue discussions with the industry.

Claire Coutinho: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think the whole House would agree about the importance of declaring our financial interests. Will you guide the House on whether Members should have declared that the RMT had funded them individually, their constituency party or their general election campaign in 2019 before speaking in the debate?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. It is not up to the Chair to determine whether Members should or should not declare any registrable interest. It is up to each individual Member to do so. Members should therefore reflect on what their circumstances are. Should anybody believe that another Member has not followed the guidelines, of course they always have open recourse to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards to make complaints.

Chris Stephens: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During the debate, a number of Government Members quoted other Members' entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Will you confirm that it was in order for hon. Members to declare those interests?

Mr Deputy Speaker: If I have understood the point of order correctly, it is about Members who have stood up and declared on both sides of the Chamber.

Chris Stephens *indicated assent.*

Mr Deputy Speaker: Then yes, those who have done so are absolutely in order.

Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill

Second Reading

5.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I beg to move, that the Bill be now read a Second time.

The UK is home to some of the world's best agricultural research facilities. For some 70 years, plant breeders have used chemical and radiation treatments to generate random mutations in genes, in the hope that these might provide traits that are useful for plant breeding. For decades we have had F1—filial 1—hybrid breeding techniques, which were designed to create far greater genetic consistency in plant varieties that are grown commercially.

Precision breeding techniques such as gene editing are really a natural evolution of conventional approaches to plant breeding. They are simply a modern way of creating more targeted and predictable changes to DNA within a species than would have been possible using induced mutagenesis or natural breeding. They result in nothing that could not occur through natural breeding processes. In that sense, precision breeding techniques are distinct from genetic modification, which can involve moving genes across species boundaries. It is the recognition of this difference that is the reason for this Bill today.

In 2018, the European Court of Justice ruled that all gene-edited organisms should be legally regulated as genetically modified organisms. That has hampered our ability to take advantage of precision breeding techniques and of the clear opportunity to help the environment and food producers.

The UK Government disagreed with that 2018 judgment from the perspective of science. Now that we are outside the European Union we are free to consider what a consistent, coherent and science-based policy looks like. What we really need to achieve as we address today's challenges is a fusion of the traditional principles of good farm husbandry with some of the best technology available to us in the 21st century.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Secretary of State keeps using this language about precision breeding, but he will know that that is neither a specific technology nor a scientific principle. It relies on the creation of a hypothetical class of GMOs that could have occurred naturally. He will know that there is opposition to that definition from everyone from the environmental non-governmental organisations right through to the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and to the Roslin Institute. Given that level of disagreement about the very principles of how he is framing this Bill, will he take it away and look at it again?

George Eustice: We have considered these matters in great depth. We ran a consultation. The overwhelming view of scientists are that these precision-breeding techniques, which do not achieve or do anything that could not be achieved through natural breeding processes, are not in fact GMOs. That is our view. That is why we are bringing this Bill forward today. As the hon. Lady knows, there will no doubt be a debate about these matters in both Houses as the Bill progresses.

Precision breeding techniques give us the ability to produce plant varieties with particular traits far more efficiently than was ever possible with conventional breeding. This opens up huge opportunities for our farmers and growers to produce nutritious food with a lower environmental impact.

Precision breeding techniques can improve crop resistance to diseases, reduce the need for pesticides, increase crop yields, improve resistance to climate change, promote drought resistance and reduce the need for fertilisers.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I do not believe that people need to fear this technology. This is not about creating Frankenstein's monster or introducing DNA from another species. From developing disease resistant crops to bird flu resistance in poultry to PRRS—porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome—resistance in pigs, there are significant benefits, including: for food security; for the environment; and importantly, for animal health and welfare. Ultimately, there are also significant benefits for public health, as we are reducing medicines and therefore tackling things such as antimicrobial resistance. Does the Secretary of State agree that, ultimately, this can be a win, win, win for food security, animals and people?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend, who knows a great deal about animal welfare issues in particular, raises some very important points. He will know that livestock breeders have long selected traits for polled cattle, for instance, so that they can avoid the need for mutations such as dehorning. It is also the case, as he says, that these new techniques offer the potential for us to breed poultry that is naturally resistant to avian flu, which is a major challenge, and some other issues that I will come on to.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): As the Secretary of State knows, I have long campaigned against the badger culls, so the idea that gene editing may improve disease resistance in livestock is something that I find really interesting and could be, as my hon. Friend put it, a win, win. However, the Secretary of State will also be very well aware that, with the Department's view that this could drive animals to faster growth and higher yields, there is significant concern from animal welfare charities that this would exacerbate the severe welfare problems that have arisen through selective breeding for increased productivity. Can he give some reassurances to those animal welfare charities that we are not seeking to produce more eggs, bigger eggs, or in any way harming breeding animals?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. There is already some work going on to breed natural resistance and to select, for instance, dairy cattle that have a higher level of resistance to bovine tuberculosis, and these techniques will allow that to be progressed far faster.

On my hon. Friend's wider point, we address that in the Bill, and I was going to come on to it. I have listened carefully to organisations such as Compassion in World Farming; that point was highlighted to me some years ago by its head of policy, Peter Stevenson. That is why we have put in some very specific safeguards to protect animal welfare, so that there can be an assessment before any authorisation is allowed. We do not want to

have a situation where there could be more lameness in poultry, for instance, or other animal welfare concerns. There will be a dedicated committee to assess that.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Has the Secretary of State considered the impact that this Bill might have on public trust? People might be suspicious of GE food products. For those who are worried, what reassurance can be provided that genome editing will only be used where there are no other less invasive alternatives available?

George Eustice: I think consumers want to see fewer pesticides in their food, and technologies such as this open the door for us to achieve that. As part of the notification process that I will come on to describe, we will ensure that there is transparency and that any seed that is marketed is listed in a transparent way. The Food Standards Agency will also conduct a very thorough and comprehensive assessment of any food safety issues. I think that will give people the reassurance they need.

Returning to some other examples of crops, UK Research and Innovation funded a study that has identified promising sources of genetic resistance to virus yellows in sugar beet, a group of viruses that can cause severe yield losses of up to 50% and are at the heart of the controversy around the use of neonicotinoids in sugar beet. Introducing resistance to virus yellows will reduce the need for pesticides, boost our food security and reduce costs to our sugar beet producers.

With food security high on the agenda, we also have the ability to develop wheat that is more resilient to climate change, helping successfully to grow a crop that 2.5 billion people are dependent on globally. Researchers at the John Innes Centre in Norwich have used gene editing techniques to identify a key gene in wheat that can be used to introduce traits such as heat resilience, while maintaining high yields.

These technologies also have potential to improve the health and welfare of animals, as some of my hon. Friends have mentioned. Research in farmed animals is already leading to the development of animals that have increased resistance to some devastating diseases. For instance, the Roslin Institute and Genus have developed gene-edited pigs with natural resistance to porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, a disease that causes mortality and major welfare issues in pig populations globally.

I turn now to the contents of the Bill. It will focus on four key areas. First, we will remove precision-bred plants and animals from the regulatory requirements applicable to the environmental release and marketing of genetically modified organisms. That will remove the necessity of adhering to the onerous regulations imposed by the European Union for plants and animals that could also have been produced through traditional breeding. The Bill does that in part 1.

Caroline Lucas: The Secretary of State will know that section 20 of the Environment Act 2021 requires him to be able to affirm that this Bill does not weaken any existing environmental protections. Given that he has more or less just said that it precisely does, because it will weaken the EU legislation that we were following and will erode the existing regulatory system, how can he then sign section 20 in good faith?

George Eustice: As I have set out, as a point of science, the scientific community and the UK Government rejected the legal conclusion of the European Court of Justice. It is important to point out that that was based on an interpretation of the clauses in EU regulations, rather than on any coherent assessment of the scientific evidence. We will assess the scientific evidence, and it is on that basis that we are bringing the Bill forward.

The hon. Lady asks whether I can be confident that this will not undermine the environment, and I can. Indeed, I am confident that it will lead to a reduction in the use of pesticides, which is a key objective that she will share with Conservative Members. It could also lead to a reduction in the use of synthetic fertilisers—currently the primary contributor to greenhouse gas emissions from the agricultural sector.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What restrictions are there around the world on the agricultural products of this technology? Does the Secretary of State think that in the very near future, when the European Union appreciates the benefits that this can bring to agriculture, it may well change its mind on it?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point. In fact, I was at the agrifood council when the European Court of Justice judgment came in 2018. Even countries that had some scepticism about genetically modified foods, such as Germany and France, were very concerned about that judgment. It is also the case, as he may well know, that the European Union itself is now consulting on a change to its own laws. The EU will be some years behind us, but it recognises that the ECJ judgment in 2018 was scientifically flawed. He asked what other countries around the world do. The vast majority of serious agricultural producers with the scientific expertise to assess these things treat gene editing and these precision breeding techniques as being distinct from genetically modified organisms.

Clause 1 of part 1 describes what a precision-bred organism is. Clause 2 establishes the scope of what is considered a plant and an animal for the purposes of the Bill. Part 2 introduces two simpler notification systems.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): On definitions, the Secretary of State may be aware that the British Veterinary Association has expressed some concern that perhaps the definitions have been broadened somewhat in the Bill—in particular, that organisms or techniques that would insert exogenous genetic material could be allowed under those definitions. Can he confirm whether that is indeed the case?

George Eustice: The Bill defines this quite tightly and lists what classes of animals are to be included. On some of these very specific technical issues, I am sure that hon. Members who have read clauses 1 and 2 will see that there are quite a lot of different processes, which we will all have to make sure that we learn a lot more about as the Bill progresses. I am sure that this will be discussed in great detail.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): There is no doubt that a lot of the Bill is potentially of huge advantage, particularly in terms of animal welfare. However, my

right hon. Friend will be aware that concerns have been expressed that people should at least have the right to know what they are buying. Does he have any comments to make about food labelling in this respect?

George Eustice: There will be transparency in the sense that any authorised product will be listed. No marketing authorisation will be granted for the sale of any food unless it has been properly assessed. However, it is not currently our intention to have some kind of labelling requirement specifically for food, because a loaf of bread might have some of these crops going into it and others produced through other techniques. We do not currently, for instance, require people to label that a crop has been produced using an F1 hybrid technique such as an open pollination. That is the comparison that I would draw my right hon. Friend's mind to.

Part 2 introduces two simpler notification systems—one for research and one for marketing purposes. Developers will have to submit information to DEFRA that will be published on a public register, and this will support consumer transparency. Clause 3 sets out the conditions under which a person may release a precision-bred organism in England. Clauses 4 and 5 set out the notification requirements for the release and marketing of a precision-bred organism. Clause 6 describes the application process for obtaining a precision-bred confirmation. This will ensure that each precision-bred organism is assessed on a case-by-case basis. Clause 7 sets out the requirement for there to be a report of the advisory committee, with further provisions in clauses 8 and 9 regarding the precision-bred confirmation and its revocation if necessary.

The Bill will not compromise animal welfare standards. As I said, it establishes a regulatory system to safeguard the welfare of precision-bred animals. This system is described in clauses 10 to 15. Clause 10 establishes that precision-bred animals will need to be authorised before they can be marketed. Clause 11 describes the application process. Clause 12 describes the involvement of an animal welfare advisory body. Clause 14 makes provision for regulations requiring information on the health and welfare of these animals once they have been placed on the market.

Finally, the Bill also makes provision to ensure that there will be no compromise whatever on food safety and that there will be a comprehensive assessment of the safety of any products placed on the market that result from precision-bred organisms.

Margaret Ferrier: Will the Secretary of State give way?

George Eustice: I will give way one more time, and then I will conclude.

Margaret Ferrier: I am keen to understand something. Although the territorial extent of the Bill's provisions is rather limited, what consultation did the UK Government have with their Scottish counterparts? Scotland remains opposed to GE food products being sold there, but legally cannot prohibit it.

George Eustice: This is a devolved matter, as the hon. Lady says. The Scottish Government have taken a particular position, which is broadly that if the European Union changed its law, Scotland would change its law at that

time, but not before, and it would appear that the Scottish Government do not want to move early on that. Of course, many of the leading international research institutes, such as the Roslin Institute and James Hutton, are world leaders in these technologies. They will probably be acutely disappointed if the Scottish Government do not take this opportunity to lead the world, rather than waiting and following the European Union.

Finally, part 3 of the Bill, in relation to an assessment of food safety, sets out the powers for the regulation of food and feed derived from precision-bred organisms and includes a new regulatory framework governing the placing on the market of these products, a public register and a monitoring and inspection regime.

In conclusion, it is more than 30 years since the current GMO legislation was passed. In that time, unnecessary and unscientific barriers imposed by the European Union have stalled the development of the agritech industry in the United Kingdom. Our legislation has not kept pace with our increased understanding of the safety and benefits of technologies such as gene editing. By removing these barriers, we will enable investment in these technologies, which have the potential to tackle some of the great challenges faced by the United Kingdom and the world today when it comes to producing food in an environmentally sustainable way. I therefore commend this Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the spokesperson for the Opposition, I note that we do not have very much time. It is likely I will have to put on a time limit of about four minutes. I simply issue that warning now so that people can take out six or seven pages of their prepared speeches.

5.48 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): This Bill comes in a week when food, how we produce it and what it does to us and how food production impacts our planet have been at the forefront of public debate. The Bill was an opportunity to tackle one of the great issues of our time, but instead of rising to that challenge, I am afraid that the Government have flunked it. There was a minimalist response on Monday, when failing to set out a proper food strategy for the future, and a minimalist response today on setting up the right structures to enable innovation to flourish. That is disappointing, but perhaps not surprising. These issues require a long-term view, and an understanding and appreciation of the wider public good. This Government are now reduced to slogans designed to get the Prime Minister to the end of next week. The country deserves better, and many on the Government Benches know that.

Let me set out the position on this side of the House on an issue of significance for the future. Let me start by thanking the many serious people from learned societies and institutions who have done the thinking and spent time briefing me and my team as we grapple with some very big issues. As an example, I wave the weighty report from the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, “Genome editing and farmed animal breeding”, which runs to many hundreds of pages. I can recommend it to Members—it is actually a very good read. Unlike this Bill, which takes the narrowest possible approach, it stood

back and asked the bigger questions about our food system, our treatment of animals, where traditional selective breeding has brought us, how we might approach novel foods, and the great changes that we may see in just a few years. The Royal Society criticises focusing narrowly on just one technology and argues for an outcomes-based approach.

There was a big opportunity, but a weak and disintegrating Government could not take it. I understand that, so I turn to the proposals that we have before us, which are a start. For reasons that I will explain, however, they risk having the opposite effect from those intended. Unless public and investor confidence is maintained, research will stall and opportunities will be squandered. Although we will support the Bill’s progress today, we want to see it significantly strengthened and we will propose an array of amendments in Committee, which I genuinely hope the Government will consider carefully.

The Opposition start from a clear principle: we are pro-science and pro-innovation. We want to find ways to maintain and improve the efficiency, safety and security of our food system while addressing the environmental and health damage that the modern food system has caused. That is the challenge that Henry Dimbleby set out in his national food plan, which the Government were unable to meet in their proposals this week.

With that challenge, there is an opportunity for the UK to create a world-leading regulatory framework that others will follow, but sadly this Bill is a rushed job—too thin on detail. With that lack of detail comes a risk, because the public need assurance that those new technologies are being used for the public good, not just for narrow commercial advantage. We have no doubt about the possible benefits. We understand the pressures that are put on farmers when we rightly say, as has been cited, that they cannot use neonicotinoids because of the harm they cause to pollinators. If gene editing can be used to safely ward off virus yellows in sugar beet, that is a definite good that we want to see proceed as quickly as possible.

Andrew Bridgen: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that the public good and commercial advantage are mutually exclusive?

Daniel Zeichner: Surely not, but they are not always the same thing, and that is the point.

We do not want a gene edit to modify an animal to allow it to tolerate more cramped conditions; we want a regulatory system that ensures that those technologies are used for the right purposes. We recognise that there will be people who are not convinced that it is right to intervene in these new ways, and who are not convinced that it is right for them or wider society, but we believe that if the system is regulated in the right way, most people can be reassured.

Let us not forget that Labour is the party of food safety. We established the Food Standards Agency, which will play a vital role in giving confidence to the public. Whatever it says and does, however, different approaches to food production must be respected with proper safeguards for organic production, for example, and for those who do not wish to go down these new routes. Their rights matter too.

[Daniel Zeichner]

We fully understand that laws designed almost 30 years ago for genetically modified products do not reflect advances in understanding and technology. We also see that many countries are recognising that gene editing should be treated differently. While we understand that, we must also recognise the importance of that distinction being drafted clearly and transparently, as has already been touched on.

The public will want to be assured that allowing the editing of genes in one organism does not also allow the introduction of genes from another organism. I hope that the Secretary of State can clearly confirm that today, because it is very important. Our reading of those complicated definitions, and the advice that we are being given, suggests that that subject is not entirely clear. I hope it can be explored in Committee.

We want our scientists to succeed and use their skills for good here in the UK. We know that over the years, traditional crop development and innovation has brought us all significant gains, but as we enter this new territory we need that strong regulatory framework to make sure that we get it right. As it stands, we are not convinced that the Bill provides that. It needs strengthening.

As it stands, far too much is being left to secondary legislation. We understand why that is always attractive to Government; it largely means, “Trust us.” As we all know, what is brought forward is unamendable and, almost without exception, it is always carried. It is a blank cheque, and on an issue that so relies on trust and public acceptance, that is not a good starting point.

We need more detail in the Bill, not least because this Bill covers both plants and animals, which makes this legislation much more complicated and difficult. In the notices accompanying the Bill, the Government have said they will only introduce new measures for animals after those for plants and after extensive consultation on the right regulatory framework for animals had been established. So far as we can see, there is nothing in this Bill to make that happen. Frankly, it is the wrong way around: sort out the preferred regulatory framework first, then put it into law.

As we have already heard, animal welfare organisations are rightly concerned. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals says in its brief that it is “incredibly concerned”. Compassion in World Farming has joined 20 other animal welfare organisations, including the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, in raising similarly strong concerns. Their points are powerful, and Labour will require much stronger tests on animal welfare impacts.

As I suggested earlier, to get this legislation right the Government must provide a proper mechanism to balance the risks and manage trade-offs. Just saying that there is no risk is not that mechanism. In this country, we have always been pretty good at regulation. The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority is a highly regarded model for dealing with some of these very complicated issues, and a model the Government would do well to consider.

The case for having a strong regulatory framework is not just a matter of giving confidence to the public; that public confidence in turn gives scientists and businesses the confidence to invest here in the UK and sets the

example for others to follow. That will be important as many of our trading partners go down the same route. How much better to have something worth copying, giving us first-mover advantage, but also settling some of those tricky trade issues if we end up with different rules.

As part of that framework, we need to recognise that the modern consumer wants and expects good information. Research carried out by the Food Standards Agency and others has clearly found that, while consumers support genetically edited foods having a different regulatory system from that for genetically modified foods, they want clear labelling and effective regulation of gene-edited products. Just telling them that they need not worry because there is no difference just does not cut it in the modern world.

Clear labelling is the way to help deal with another potentially difficult issue, which is the legitimately held views of different Administrations within the United Kingdom. I think it is fair to say—I suspect we will be hearing this in a minute—that the devolved Administrations are not happy with the way this has been handled so far, and I suggest that the Government should tread carefully. Clear labelling is a sensible way forward.

In conclusion, we are in no doubt that gene editing could bring real gains in improving environmental sustainability and reducing food insecurity. The world faces huge global challenges, and although much can be done by reforming global food systems, science and technology used for public good can be a huge boon. We need a regulatory framework that prioritises that. At the moment, as ever with this Government, the approach is to leave it to the market, and that risks repeating the mistakes of the past.

These are big and important issues. They will be explored in much greater depth in Committee and the evidence sessions, and the Opposition look forward to working with the Government to improve the legislation and create the strong regulatory framework that is needed, but currently lacking.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. We have to start with an immediate time limit of four minutes.

5.58 pm

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): I am speaking today in full support of the Bill, precision breeding and our outstanding scientists, who are looking to this House to unlock barriers to solving many of the most important problems facing us on earth. I want to see this Bill unleash their capability and energy on those problems, and I hope to be supporting the Bill throughout the whole of its passage.

Let me explain why I stand up with this bouncy enthusiasm. To take the House back to the 1990s, when I was young and thin, I was honoured to be at the Nottingham University life sciences department doing a biology degree. If the House will bear with me, I have a little practical knowledge of DNA editing techniques, as my undergraduate paper was using transgenic *Caenorhabditis elegans* as a biological monitor for freshwater sediment toxicity.

Dr Hudson: Hear, hear!

Katherine Fletcher: Quite. That is a mouthful, but the key here is “transgenic”. We were putting a gene from *Escherichia coli*—*E. coli*—into an itty-bitty nematode worm, an animal, and making a cross-species *C. elegans*. Those little guys were effectively harnessing natural stress repair mechanisms to produce something that we could measure easily.

I was a scientist; I was fascinated by that, but it did not always sit brilliantly with me, and the mechanisms that were used to produce that transgenic environment were at best embryonic and new. It was effectively taking DNA material in vectors such as plasmid, and pebbledashing a target DNA area. We did not know where it was going to land, and we had a lot of wastage where bits of DNA were going in the wrong place. That is not what the Bill is about, and I look forward to going into that in more detail.

Dr Hudson: We have heard concerns that people feel that an exogenous species of DNA would be coming in. Does my hon. Friend agree that this technology is not about that? This is not about an external species coming in, and perhaps the Bill could be tightened up by clarifying that, which would appease some of people’s potential fears.

Katherine Fletcher: Yes. If the Bill contained a way of opening up the transgenic debate, be that in plants or animals, it would not enjoy my support.

While I have put on a lot of weight since the mid-1990s, science has also massively moved on. In response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), this is a bit like comparing a 1997 diesel car with modern zero-emissions vehicles. Yes, they both have wheels, go along in a straight line and are called cars, but the two things are completely different. The British public were right to be cautious at the time, but let us explain why this is different. We now know the genome sequences of other target species and plants, and we have exact tools that are effectively like clever genetic snippers that will go along a genome and only cut in the exact place. There is confidence and science behind that point. We then insert something that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Dr Hudson) highlighted, comes from the same species. If we have wheat that does not taste nice but is good at growing in dry conditions, why can we not give it that dry condition gene, so that it tastes nice and is nutritious and can help feed the third world? There are scientists chomping at the bit to have a go at that—I really cannot wait.

As part of my undergraduate degree I went to Rothamsted and saw the scale that has to be put in place for traditional breeding techniques—think fields and fields and fields. Variant 1 has been crossed with variant 2 in a modern way, but it then needs to be tested, because in traditional breeding techniques we basically take the whole genome, throw it up in the air and ask nature to pick one variant out of two. That means we are looking at multiple generations to try to keep the tasty wheat, as well as the dry, coarse wheat. This is a fantastic opportunity to use fewer resources while doing that research, and to use fewer resources from the environment.

Let me highlight some of the extremely exciting opportunities that I have pulled out of the literature: disease-resistant wheat that needs less pesticide, as

mentioned by the Secretary of State; tomatoes with a little extra vitamin D; wheat with reduced asparagine to ensure that people are not exposed to carcinogens, especially if, like me, they cannot cook properly and always burn everything; or chickpeas with high protein levels that help those who are making an environmental choice by being vegan or vegetarian. The possibilities for health, climate, environment, farming and our planet are as endless as the natural variation within species that had Darwin so fascinated. We must do this, and I totally support the Bill.

6.3 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The regulation of genetically modified foods is a devolved issue. It is important to emphasise that at the start because, as in a growing number of policy areas, the UK Government pay only lip service at best to the powers exercised in the Scottish Parliament, while at the same time running roughshod over devolution with their post-Brexit deregulatory agenda.

Although the intended scope of the Bill may be England only, it is explicit that it will have significant impacts on devolved areas. The devolved Administrations were, however, only informed of this just one day before the Bill was introduced, in a letter from the Environment Secretary encouraging them to adopt the Bill’s principles. A UK-wide approach can, of course, sometimes be desirable, but this invite creates an illusion of collaboration and choice when in fact DEFRA is acting unilaterally once again. Frankly, it smacks of contempt for our democratically elected Government.

If the Scottish Parliament refused to allow gene-edited crops to be planted in Scotland, we would still be prevented from stopping GMO products from being sold in our shops under the devolution-violating United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020. This is exactly the kind of scenario the SNP warned against when the Tories forced that legislation through this place. I understand that DEFRA officials have now suggested that the Department discuss the UK Government’s plans to diverge from the common UK-wide GM regulatory regimes. Well, thanks very much, I am sure, but any discussions of that nature should have taken place prior to the introduction of the Bill so that potential policy divergence could be properly considered. The fact that they have not is deeply regrettable and unacceptable.

The SNP is committed to ensuring that Scotland operates to the highest environmental standards, and that we protect and enhance the strength of Scottish agriculture and food production. If we end up with unwanted gene-edited products in Scotland, diverging standards with the EU could cause further damage to our sales, risking damage to Scotland’s reputation for high-quality food and drink.

Katherine Fletcher: The way the hon. Lady is talking about gene editing implies that one can tell the difference. It brings in variant genes from the same species. It is literally scientifically impossible to identify a gene-edited product if it is done properly.

Deidre Brock: I accept the hon. Lady’s experience in this area, but there are many scientists who would differ from that opinion.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: I am going to make progress.

As previously, where the EU offers new scientific advice and moves to change legislative frameworks, the Scottish Government consider the implications for Scotland and seek to stay closely aligned with that approach where practicable. Holyrood passed the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Continuity) (Scotland) Act 2021 before Brexit, committing the Scottish Government to alignment with EU standards and regulations. In keeping with that, we are closely monitoring the EU, including its public consultation which I believe is continuing at the moment, as it reviews its policy on certain new genomic techniques.

Andrew Bridgen: Does the hon. Lady not appreciate that farmers are also businesspeople and that a farmer will not grow something that the consumer does not want to buy? Does she insult the intelligence of Scottish farmers by suggesting that they will grow crops nobody wants to buy?

Deidre Brock: This is about the devolved responsibilities of the Scottish Government and our intention to stay aligned with EU regulations, as we have committed to in the 2021 continuity Act. We are in constant discussions with farmers and will continue to be.

Surely it would be practical for the UK Government to follow the approach of monitoring the EU and its ongoing public consultation as it reviews this policy, ensuring alignment and avoiding divergence that could further threaten trade with our largest trading partner. As the European Commission's formal policy announcement is expected in the first half of 2023, the wait would not greatly undermine the UK's competitive edge but would ensure minimal trade disruption. The UK economy suffered a 4% reduction in GDP, according to the Office for Budget Responsibility, thanks to a hard Tory Brexit. The last thing Scotland needs is further disruption to EU trade.

It is worth noting, too, that the EU's 2021 study into gene editing and new genetic technologies highlighted that research into animals and micro-organisms is "still limited or lacking", especially when it comes to safety. The SNP would advise the UK Government to return to the precautionary principle in the deployment of such new technologies, especially those developing produce for human consumption.

There is no doubt that these issues are complex and emotive, with a variety of views across science, industry and other stakeholders. The SNP does not oppose further research in this area and it acknowledges the work of the James Hutton Institute, the Roslin Institute and other Scottish scientists and researchers. The more empirical data available in this area, the better we can understand exactly the effects in crops and animals, and in genetically modified organisms. However, the SNP will always listen to the concerns of the public and producers and take them into consideration in agricultural matters or in scientific development. Indeed, DEFRA's own consultation last year found that 88% of individuals and 64% of businesses supported continuing to regulate such organisms as GMOs. The strength and range of opposition to the use of gene editing should give us pause to reflect.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a lot of points about how this is, of course, a devolved area, but does she therefore disagree with the president of NFU Scotland, Martin Kennedy, when he says that precision breeding techniques such as gene editing, led by scientific expertise available in Scotland, have considerable potential to deliver benefits for food, nutrition, agriculture, biodiversity and climate change?

Deidre Brock: I thought I had made myself fairly clear. We are waiting for the EU review of this technology to take place, then we will weigh it up carefully and decide whether to continue down that route ourselves. The trouble with farmers and the NFUS at the moment is that they are so desperate to find something in place of the trade they have lost as a result of Brexit that they have seized on this. I think that the precautionary principle should always apply with new technologies of this sort.

Sir Robert Goodwill *rose*—

Deidre Brock: I will keep going for a bit.

Let me give the view of some of the organisations that have listed their concerns. The view of the umbrella group of individuals and organisations, GM Freeze, is that the proposed new approach would take away scrutiny and transparency, and as these are patented technologies, it is concerned that big business will be handed greater leverage and control over what we eat. The Soil Association warns that in the absence of a proper governance framework, gene editing is likely to be driven by industry interests. The question has to be asked: without rigorous democratic forms of governance in this area, how can we stop monopolies forming and companies acting in the service of profit rather than the public interest? I hope very much that we will hear that question answered as the Bill progresses and, as the Minister is nodding, perhaps even this afternoon.

Deregulating GE products also loosens the strict controls that allow modified plants and animals to be traced with ease, making the impact on the general animal and plant population harder to track and assess. There are also fears that deregulated gene editing risks displacing high-welfare agro-ecological farming systems such as organic farming. If there is no tracing or labelling, the future of organic and other non-GM farming is threatened. Citizens deserve to know how their food has been produced; that goes to the very heart of food sovereignty.

Sir Robert Goodwill: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. Is she aware that the last generation of new varieties were often produced using induced mutation, gamma radiation or chemicals such as colchicine, which was equivalent to smashing up DNA with a sledgehammer rather than this keyhole surgery? Varieties such as Golden Promise, which can be grown organically in Scotland and go into the majority of Scotch whisky, have been produced in that way and she has not raised any concerns about them.

Deidre Brock: As I say, we are prepared to consider the technology as things progress but we are waiting on the EU, because the EU has the strictest standards in the world—[*Interruption.*] The EU has some of the

strictest standards in the world, and if it is content after it has examined this process and had its consultation, that is certainly something we are prepared to consider.

Ministers insist that no changes should be made to the regulation of animals under the GMO regime until a regulatory system is developed to safeguard animal welfare. However, as has been mentioned, a coalition of 21 of the UK's leading animal protection organisations has called those safeguards

“poorly defined and largely inadequate”.

Among multiple other concerns, the group cites increased risk of regarding animals as things that can just be modified for human convenience. That, of course, contradicts the central premise of the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022.

DEFRA cites the potential for gene editing to address concerns over food security. I held a debate recently on the subject and talked about the need to prioritise sustainable domestic food production and build long-term resilience into our farming system. There is a danger, as the Soil Association points out, that gene editing is used as a sticking plaster for industrial farming systems, targeting symptoms and not root causes. The Secretary of State mentioned porcine reproductive and respiratory syndrome, which, as I understand it, is caused largely by poor living conditions. Why not try to address that rather than using the new technology as, as the Soil Association points out, a sticking plaster? The UK Government appear to be rushing to adopt untested technologies to distract from the real issues in our food system, such as poor soils, lack of crop diversity, intensive industrial farming and falling domestic production.

I will come to a close shortly, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I think you are looking at me sternly. It might be easier to take the Government at their word if they were not abandoning other plans that would have a positive impact on food security and inequality. The food strategy for England, which was published on Monday, has been remarkably watered down by rejecting many of the recommendations in the food system review and dropping the commitment to introduce a food Bill.

In Scotland, the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill, which is making progress, will produce plans that will be scrutinised according to various metrics, including social and economic wellbeing, health and the environment. A draft plan has been published on ending the need for food banks. The Scottish Government's new vision for agriculture outlines how we aim to support farming and food production in Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture.

If the UK Government are serious in their intention that the Bill will affect the market in England only, they must amend it to ensure that products covered by it are not included in the mutual recognition and non-discrimination provisions of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, and that the devolved Parliaments can reject those products outright if they are not content. The Scottish Government think that the principle of devolution should be respected by the UK Government. The Scottish Parliament should be asked for its consent before actions are taken hastily that could undermine our trade with Europe and compromise the safety of our food.

This is our food system. We must surely ensure that every possible safeguard is in place before we adopt this Bill.

6.16 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): As someone who has a farming business, I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I warmly welcome the Bill. I commend the Government for pressing ahead on a matter that is vital for national and global food security, protecting the environment, supporting the developing world and advancing UK science and prosperity at a time of economic uncertainty.

In the limited time that I have, I want to firmly refute the misconceptions that have been spread, in and outside the Chamber, about how gene editing is allegedly bad for animals and animal welfare. It is right that we proceed with careful additional safeguards for animal precision breeding, as the Bill proposes, but precision breeding can provide animal welfare benefits so huge that to my mind it is actually unethical not to allow it. Stopping diseases such as PRRS in pigs, bird flu, swine flu and mastitis is obviously a huge advance for animal welfare, not a threat to it. Put simply, regulation should follow the science. It should be based on the evidence, not on superstition or political agendas.

I reiterate that gene editing is wholly distinct from genetic modification, so it is totally wrong for it to be aggressively restricted in the same way. Genetic modification is the introduction of new material from one species into another; gene editing is the adjustment of DNA within one species. It simply speeds up, and makes more precise, genetic changes that occur naturally through conventional breeding methods. Food from gene-edited plants is therefore indistinguishable from food produced through conventional methods. Gene editing speeds up natural changes that can otherwise take up to 15 years. Do hon. Members seriously want to wait 15 years to protect animals from horrific diseases, to aid farmers in sub-Saharan Africa or to start producing more affordable healthy food in the UK? I think not. That is why we have to support the Bill.

The Whips will not be surprised to hear that I have some concerns about part 3, which risks undermining the legislation aimed at ensuring that innovation and investment, through regulation, reflects the scientific evidence; that is what we must base it on. There is already disquiet that the Food Standards Agency has been gold-plating the innovation-killing precautionary approach inherited from the EU. On top of that, on current drafting, the ministerial powers on food and feed safety risk assessments and traceability in part 3 risk adding additional safety assessments and other hurdles, thereby piling investment-destroying costs on to the breeding process, which could ultimately deter scientists and businesses from innovating. We must be careful about that.

In essence, however, this is a great piece of legislation and must be supported. I look forward to following its passage through this place.

6.20 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I believe that this is a flawed Bill—it is not strategic, it is not clear and it does not do what it says on the tin. Ministers breezily assert that it will deliver access to wonderful new markets, while failing to acknowledge that it actually risks hindering access to our closest significant market,

[Caroline Lucas]

the EU, as we create a divergent regime for regulating genome-edited products. As we have heard, consequences for trade with Northern Ireland are being ignored. With the Scottish and Welsh Governments currently taking a different approach from that of England, the Bill is a recipe for consumer confusion and significant operational difficulties for retailers across the UK.

These big questions are critical, but in the short time that I have, I shall spell out how the Bill falls down on some core principles that render it flawed and not fit for purpose. Those principles are scientific coherence and clarity, properly defined criteria—or the lack of them—and transparency.

On coherence and clarity, in its title and text the Bill uses the phrase “precision breeding”, yet that is neither a specific technology nor a scientific discipline. It is a marketing term: a vague colloquialism for a number of recently developed genetic engineering technologies, which do not form a coherent group of methods, and do not justify being called “precise”—not when the scientific literature contains reports of genetic technologies such as genome editing creating unexpected and unwanted mutations, genetic errors, altered proteins, and extensive deletions and complex rearrangements of DNA in plants. [Interruption.] I will not give way yet.

The Government give a nod to that uncertainty with their caveat that genetic editing of animals will not take place until animal protection can be safeguarded. Engineering the DNA of animals raises major animal welfare and ethical concerns. A wealth of problems are set out by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics report on gene-edited farm animals. As I understand it, there is nothing to prevent biotech-created disease resistance being used as a sticking-plaster for the intensive factory farming practices that are the underlying cause of disease emergence in the first place. That is why, given the current drafting, animals should be removed from the Bill’s scope, full stop.

Katherine Fletcher: Nature makes mistakes; that is how evolution comes about. So the mistakes that are reported in the literature are actually further evidence that such technologies effectively replicate a natural process. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Caroline Lucas: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. As has been said, she clearly has expertise, but I am looking at the scientific evidence that has been put before me, and it is being suggested that the mistakes that can be made in this area, especially when it comes to nature, appear very different from those that are seen in nature.

I move on to the principle of properly defined criteria. Using a term that lacks any proper definition looks like an attempt to obscure the full scope of the proposed deregulation. The terms “precision breeding” and gene editing help promote a particular narrative—that the process is just a simple “cut” or “tweak”. The Government are also at pains to stress that any changes might have occurred “naturally” and do not involve the insertion of transgenes—so-called “foreign” DNA.

I have read that this is to some extent smoke and mirrors. The Bill seeks to deregulate all manner of genetic manipulations, and genome editing can sometimes

involve the insertion of foreign DNA. As I understand it, the argument is that in such cases the inserted DNA gets removed before the product goes to market. That may well be the intention; but by using poorly defined criteria in the title and wording of the Bill, the Government are asking us to pass bad legislation.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Is it the case that, if the EU were to allow this technology to go ahead, the hon. Lady would, like the SNP, embrace it?

Caroline Lucas: I am not making a blanket statement in that way. I am saying that if a whole load more safeguards were built into the Bill and if it were not based on a set of definitions that are being criticised by the scientific community, I would have rather more confidence in it than I do right now.

As we have heard, several learned organisations have challenged the Government’s creation of this hypothetical class of GMOs that could have “occurred naturally” or could have been created using traditional breeding. The Institute of Food Science & Technology has called the approach “overly simplistic”, and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics was

“not convinced that this is either the most proper or most popular framing”.

The Roslin Institute found it “exceptionally challenging”, while the Royal Society of Biology said:

“No clarity can be achieved using this principle—we would not recommend using it as the basis for regulation.”

In response to last year’s public consultation, there was a clear view that this is a fundamentally flawed and unscientific basis for regulation.

Turning to transparency, there are no provisions in the Bill for the labelling of genetically engineered or so-called precision-bred food, despite this being what a majority of the public want, as the Government consultation made clear. In that consultation, 85% wanted genetic technologies used in farming to continue to be regulated in the same way as other GMOs. There are significant concerns over the commercial drivers of genome editing in farmed animals, for example. This makes labelling really important, not least if Ministers want citizen and market trust, and buy-in to any new regulatory regime. The public register idea is welcome, but it needs to be accessible as well as comprehensive, and it should include all genetic engineering events and organisms used in UK agriculture. Reduced data collection is worrying. Data that is not collected cannot be analysed. Ministers are simply assuming that risks are non-existent or vanishingly slight, but there is nothing scientific about such wishful thinking.

In conclusion, we need a national conversation. Regulation and innovation need not be at odds, but products of agricultural genetic engineering, including newer techniques, should be subject to a robust and transparent regulatory and governance framework. This must include a strong traceability and labelling scheme that protects the interests of organic farms and allows consumers to make a choice in the supermarket. This legislation lets down consumers, farmers, the environment and animals. Rushing ahead with a badly conceived and designed Bill because the Government are simply desperate to claim some kind of success on post-Brexit deregulation is unacceptable, and I urge them to bring back something better.

6.27 pm

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I want to speak in support of the Bill. Anyone who comes to the rural idyll of South Cambridgeshire and sees the fields of golden wheat, yellow rapeseed and barley swaying in the wind, or indeed goes and sees the cattle herds in the south-west of England or the sheep in the north, might think that that was agricultural produce as nature gave it to man—and woman, no doubt—but that is not the case. Since agriculture was invented 10,000 years ago, people have consistently bred the plants and animals they have been given, and those plants and animals have changed incredibly over the last 10,000 years. For example, there is very little in common visually between a chicken and the south Asian jungle fowl that it came from. All of that breeding was done by the natural mutation that happens randomly in nature, and most of those mutations are mistakes and do not get used.

We now have the technology to speed that up. We have radiation breeding, which various colleagues have talked about, where we speed up the mutation and do not just rely on the random happenstance of nature. We now have precision breeding, and gene editing in particular. We have the technology to do that, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher) went into detail about how it works. This technology has huge advantages, but we cannot use it because it is banned by the EU and we inherited that legislation. This Bill is clearly designed to allow us to do it.

This is a huge issue in my constituency. It is not just that I have a lot of farmers; I also have a lot of plant breeders who are chomping at the bit to use this technology, and a lot of genetic companies. South Cambridgeshire is the genetics capital of Europe, and there is huge interest in this there. There are lots of advantages to it that many of my colleagues have mentioned. There is a win for food security as it will enable us to have greater crop yields. There is also a win for the environment because we can use fewer pesticides and fertilisers and there will be less demand on water resources, which is a big thing in South Cambridgeshire.

The technology also benefits humans, as colleagues have mentioned. For example, the Japanese tomatoes that are on sale at the moment will reduce blood pressure, there are US soya beans with less saturated fat, and there are less carcinogenic amino acids in wheat. All of those are benefits. It can bring benefits to animals, too, by ensuring chickens are immune to avian flu and pigs are immune to swine flu, but we need to make sure that this is not used in any way to reduce animal welfare standards—I strongly support the Secretary of State's assurance that we will not compromise on animal welfare standards as a result of this Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) mentioned the industry's concern that part 3 of the Bill means the Food Standards Agency will require a full risk assessment for food and feed, as if it is a genetically modified organism with genetics from two different species, rather than the traditional breeding approval process. This adds time, cost and uncertainty. The developers and breeders will not know if their crop will be improved at the end, so the measure will damage investment in the sector.

Such decisions should be based on science and evidence. The Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment, Health Canada, and the European Food Safety Authority agree that there is no difference between the risk profiles of traditionally bred strains and precision-bred strains, and therefore there should be no difference in the approval process. They are, in essence, exactly the same. It is impossible to tell the difference between them.

The irony is that, by gold-plating in this way, we risk ending up with a more restrictive regime than the EU's regime. This is meant to be a Brexit opportunity, but it could end up with the EU taking the lead. A few amendments may be needed but, with that caveat, I strongly commend the Bill to the House.

6.31 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): We have heard today of the potential benefits and of how gene editing could have a role to play in reducing our reliance on fertilisers and pesticides and in creating food that is resistant to drought or food that is more nutritious. We have heard about vitamin D in tomatoes, and there has been a long-running conversation about vitamin A being added to golden rice, although it has yet to live up to its billing.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) that the Bill is very thin on the regulatory framework. Perhaps the Government ought to have put those measures in place before steaming ahead with developing these products. His points on labelling were well made, too. The concerns about cross-contamination and support for organic food producers and consumers are valid.

The Soil Association has raised concerns about the commercialisation of crops and tells us that just four companies control more than 60% of the global seed supply. I do not have time to go into detail on those concerns, but they need to be flagged up in Committee. I went to talk to farmers in El Salvador after the Central America free trade agreement, and they want to support organic farms and natural seeds but were told they cannot because, under the free trade agreement, alternatives from Monsanto and others have to be allowed into the market. I would be very concerned if such a situation were allowed to develop here at the expense of people who want to go down the organic route.

The most problematic part of the Bill concerns the gene editing of animals. I accept there are some positives, such as helping to reduce our reliance on antibiotics, but there are other ways to do that. Other countries have been much better than us in restricting the routine overuse of antibiotics.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said the Bill is trying to tackle the symptoms, not the causes. If not for the ever-growing intensification and industrialisation of farming, where animals are crammed together in unsanitary conditions, we would not need to rely on the routine use of antibiotics, as too many farmers do.

We have had an interesting debate on whether we could use technology to suppress the birth of male chicks. At the moment, 29 million male chicks are killed by the poultry industry each year, and 7 billion are killed globally. They are fed into maceration machines—mincing machines—because they do not lay eggs but, again,

[Kerry McCarthy]

other countries such as Germany, France and Sweden are already doing things to stop chick shredding without resorting to gene editing.

I am concerned by what the Secretary of State said in response to the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) about yields. He did not refute her concern about the Government saying the Bill will enable the development of

“precision-bred plants and animals which will bolster food production” and “drive economic growth.”

Existing livestock farming methods have already led to the creation of animals that are radically different from their original natural forms. We see turkeys and chickens that are bred to be so heavy that they cannot support their own weight on their legs; the milk yields of cows have more than doubled in the past 40 years, to about 22 litres per day in the UK—that is not natural; and we know that cows, as well as suffering from mastitis, now become infertile extremely quickly from intensive milking. Their life cycle has been reduced from 20 years in the wild to about three or four when raised in intensive farming conditions. Again, the causes, rather than the symptoms, ought to be tackled by the Government as well.

6.35 pm

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to support this legislation, which is part of the Brexit dividend that gives us the freedom to regulate to support innovation. Unlike the stifling, overly complex EU regime, we have the exciting opportunity to take a proportionate, science-based approach to precision breeding. This is a welcome part of the Government's focus on science and technology to drive economic growth. My county of Norfolk, and specifically the Norwich Research Park, is well placed to help realise these benefits, as it is home to not only world leading research institutes, but gene editing companies. Of course, it also plays a crucial role in our food production.

It is important to be clear what this Bill is about and what it is not about. Precision breeding is about enabling DNA to be edited much more efficiently and precisely than current breeding techniques to produce beneficial traits. Crucially, these traits can occur through traditional breeding and natural processes. Indeed under clause 1 that is a requirement in order to be classified as a “precision bred organism.” As my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy) said, this does not involve adding DNA from a different organism, so this is not about genetically modified organisms. Of course, people will want reassurance about the safety of these techniques. The expert independent Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment has stated that precision bred organisms

“posed no greater risk than their traditionally bred or naturally arising counterparts.”

By adopting a more agile regulatory approach, the time taken to comply with existing GMO regulation for getting precision bred crops to market will be cut from an estimated 10 years to just one. That is a huge win to accelerate innovation, and secure productivity and efficiency gains in crop production.

The real world benefits are significant, as we see if we just think about the disease-resistant crops that reduce the need for pesticides and fertilisers. In my constituency, the yields of sugar beet have been wiped out considerably in recent years, as the Secretary of State said. The UK Research and Innovation-funded study has identified sources of genetic resistance that would reduce the need for neonicotinoids—for pesticides—thus helping to protect the environment, increase food production and reduce costs to farmers. There is also the potential for crops to withstand changing climates, and there are also health and nutritional benefits. Colleagues have referred to the pioneering work that the John Innes Centre is doing to produce precision bred, high vitamin D tomatoes. In addition, tomato leaves are usually only waste material, but by editing the genes, those leaves could be used to make vitamin D supplements, thus reducing waste.

The disproportionate approach by the EU led to advanced breeding being moved outside the EU, and now we can take a lead in catalysing food science and innovation, and attracting inward investment. We can do so on the basis that precision bred organisms that have occurred naturally, or through conventional methods, should not face unnecessary layers of regulation. That was the original rationale of the Bill. As others have said, there are real concerns among crop and plant breeders that the power to introduce sweeping new regulations under part 3 of the Bill could see the introduction of additional new hurdles that are not scientifically justified—new requirements that do not apply to conventionally bred crop varieties. That would be a major disincentive to bringing these new techniques in. It is essential that we do not remove the EU bureaucratic rules only to allow the FSA to reimpose requirements that are not proportionate or necessary. Otherwise, what is the point in diverging from the EU approach?

In conclusion, I look for an assurance from the Minister that this opportunity to boost our agritech sector will be based firmly on a proportionate approach, and that during the passage of the Bill commitments will be made and included in the legislation to ensure a light-touch, low-cost and pro-innovation approach.

6.39 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): In broad terms, I support the idea of encouraging a science-based approach to technologies such as genetic editing for precision breeding. In general terms, I accept that such methods will be helpful in the fight against climate change and excessive antibiotic use, among other things, and that they have the potential to reduce the need for pesticides in farming. I welcome that the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment and the European Food Safety Authority have advised that no more risk is attached to precision-bred foods than to those from traditional breeding methods.

I would like clarification on some other implications of the Bill. First and foremost, I am concerned that it is a slight distraction from the current crisis facing British farmers. Contrary to the Prime Minister's assertions this morning, Liberal Democrats are broadly supportive of the concept of the environmental land management scheme and the sustainable farming incentive, and we welcome a replacement for the basic farm payment. However, the farmers we meet, such as those I met on Friday, tell us that the reduction in the farm payment

this year, when the replacement scheme is not yet in place, is causing genuine hardship. They would like to get on board with the new schemes, but the up-front costs make it unlikely that they will bother. A deregulated environment for precision breeding will not help them, because they might not be in business to benefit from it. We need to back farmers with a smooth transition between subsidy schemes to make sure we still have farmers who can benefit from the changes the Government propose.

The Bill is a bit light on detail on the new regulatory requirements for these crops and animals. Will the Minister clarify how the Government will identify any unforeseen environmental consequences once these products are released into the environment? It would be useful to understand how unintended downsides will be dealt with if they happen.

As many Members have suggested, there are concerns about animal welfare. While editing the genes of a pig, for example, to make it resistant to the worst types of disease is welcome, that must not be a shortcut to allowing pigs to be reared in less hygienic and more crowded conditions. Not only must their welfare continue to be protected; it must be continuously improved.

Given the amount of rhetoric over the past couple of years from Government Front Benchers about a bonfire of regulations, how can consumers be reassured that the Bill is not a back-door route to reducing animal welfare and environmental standards, in which our farmers have led the world? It certainly makes no provision for food labelling, that would allow consumers to decide whether or not they prefer a precision-bred product. Those concerns are a direct consequence of the fact that it is not at all clear how the precautionary principle outlined in the Environment Act 2021 and the Government's environmental principles policy statement of 12 May will be applied in this area. At points, the two seem to be directly at odds with each other. I ask for clarity from DEFRA on that point.

We are proud of the progress our farmers have made and the high standards they have achieved. We do not want all that effort to be wasted now through a back-door watering down of standards. I am worried about the impact that any reduction in confidence in British food and agricultural products would have on the export of our excellent food products to the EU, which we know takes a more cautious approach to gene-editing technologies.

I would like a complete overhaul of food labelling so that consumers know exactly what they are buying. Then, if there is a Union Jack on the package, they can be confident that the animal has been reared on a British farm by a British farmer, or that the carrot has been pulled from a British field, and that they have not just been butchered or peeled here. If the animal or carrot has been bred through a gene-editing process, that should be clearly marked on the package, so that the consumer can make the choice. It is vital to empower consumers with as much information as possible, so that they can make informed choices and have trust in the quality of the food they buy.

In conclusion, I support the Bill, but with qualifications. We need to build trust and confidence in our food chain. Transparency in labelling, appropriate regulation to provide readiness for unforeseen circumstances, and maintaining and improving animal welfare standards would help deliver that. I urge the Government to

consider those points in Committee. As I said, the priority at the moment must be the viability of our family farms in the short term. They need short-term support—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I call David Duguid.

6.43 pm

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It has been said, but it bears repetition, that gene editing is different from genetic modification, because it does not result in the introduction of DNA from other species. Gene editing creates new varieties similar to those that could be produced more slowly by traditional natural breeding processes. Without this legislation, that process would continue to be regulated in the same way as genetically modified organisms.

The Bill will introduce simpler regulatory measures to enable these products to be authorised and brought to market more easily, but not without the appropriate controls. The devil, as they say, is in the detail, and however the legislation is progressed and scrutinised in Parliament, and whatever final form it takes, we can be assured that it will be more fit for purpose for our country than the EU regulations it replaces.

I am, of course, aware that the legislation will apply only in England, but I welcome the UK Government's invitation to the devolved Administrations, particularly the Scottish Government, to take part in this process on a UK-wide basis. Although disappointed that the Scottish Government have so far declined to accept that invitation, favouring rather to remain aligned with the EU, I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm that that door remains open for them to take part. I am hopeful that, ultimately, they may welcome the opportunity to participate in that programme.

Andrew Bridgen: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is clear that the Scottish National party would like to move at the more pedestrian pace of the European Union, some two years behind us on the introduction of this technology?

David Duguid: I may be tempted to agree with that, but, in my experience as a Scotland Office Minister, I think that it is much more productive to work with Scottish Government Ministers behind the scenes; outside the sometimes febrile mode of this Chamber, we can work together on these things. Again, I encourage the Scottish Government and my SNP colleagues in this House to come to the table and work on that basis.

From talking to farmers and food producers in my own constituency, as well as to the National Farmers Union of Scotland, I know that gene editing technology in food production is not only desirable, but one of many crucial tools that can be made available to all British farmers. I quoted the president of NFU Scotland, Martin Kennedy, earlier. He did go on to say that the NFU of Scotland

“is disappointed that the Scottish Government has chosen not to partake in the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill in favour of a European ruling on gene editing.”

In my regular ongoing discussions with NFU Scotland over the years, one of its major concerns—not its only concern, to be fair—is maintaining the integrity of the

[David Duguid]

UK internal market, which is something that I very much hope will not be impacted by any divergence in legislation across Great Britain.

Gene editing, as has been said, can improve crop yields by allowing scientists to modify crops to be more resilient to the changing climate and produce more nutrient-rich produce. I therefore believe that such a Bill will advance the UK's crop resilience and agricultural economy for years to come.

I am glad to see that the UK, including the Roslin Institute and the James Hutton Institute in Scotland, are leading gene editing technology across Europe, promoting agricultural development in an environmentally sustainable way, and prompting, we hope, an increase in investment in United Kingdom businesses. I therefore believe that this Bill will help to energise the UK's agriculture and food production industry.

I welcome this Government's commitment to establish a proportionate regulatory system for precision-bred animals, which will allow the UK to retain its high animal welfare standards while increasing livestock resistance to health issues, such as respiratory syndrome in pigs, improving their welfare and quality of life. I do not think that it is an either/or proposition. We can be improving living conditions for animals and using this technology.

In conclusion, this Bill is a valuable piece of legislation that should benefit our food production industry right across the UK, and I look forward to seeing its progress through Parliament. I again express my hope that, at this early stage of the Bill, the Scottish Government and SNP colleagues in this place—with their customary challenge and scrutiny, of course—decide to take part in this process for the good of farmers and food producers in Scotland as well as across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman.

6.47 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to wind up for the Opposition this interesting debate on gene editing. I must say that the level of input has been high quality, with important points made across the House.

I trust that the Minister was listening carefully to the words of advice and guidance given to her by hon. Members across the House, but in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), who has led on this topic for the Opposition for several years.

Labour is pro-science and pro-innovation. We want to find ways to maintain and improve the efficiency, security and safety of our food system while addressing the environmental and health damage that the modern food system has caused. We also recognise, as has been said, that laws designed 30 years ago for genetically modified products need to be updated and that most countries are recognising that gene editing needs to be treated differently.

We are more than willing to work with the Government to achieve real gains in improving environmental sustainability and reducing food insecurity. We want the

Government to prioritise innovations that would provide public benefit and prosperity. We want our scientists to succeed and use their skills for good here in the UK, and we know that crop development and innovation has brought us all huge gains. But that requires a strong regulatory framework to get it right, and this Bill does not provide that. It needs substantial amendment. We need a strong regulatory framework that will give scientists and businesses the confidence to invest here in the UK, while giving confidence and knowledge to consumers so they can make informed decisions—a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) made eloquently.

We welcome the research and innovation currently under way, but to get this legislation right, the Government must have a strong plan to balance the risks and manage trade-offs. Of course we cannot afford to let risks paralyse our course of action, but we do need a system that manages those risks and provides security and transparency for businesses and consumers alike.

The Bill provides for the deregulation of genetic editing of vertebrate animals and includes a provision to establish a welfare advisory body. That advisory body must report to the Secretary of State to inform them whether the originator of a genetically edited organism under consideration has identified any adverse impacts on animal welfare and made an appropriate risk assessment for their proposals.

However, the Bill as it stands does not specify which adverse impacts on animals would be grounds for a GEO application's being denied, nor does it lay out what evidence the advisory body will consider with regards to animal welfare. Several non-governmental organisations and civil society groups have criticised that element of the Bill.

The Government's Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022 made provisions for an Animal Sentience Committee to scrutinise and consider the impact of legislation on animal welfare, but the committee has not yet been fully established. Can the Minister explain in her wind up why she is pressing ahead with this legislation before the Animal Sentience Committee has had time to consider it?

Research has overwhelmingly found that consumers support genetically edited foods having a different regulatory system from that for genetically modified foods, but they want clear labelling and effective regulation of gene-edited products so they can choose the products that suit their lifestyle. Surely that is not an unreasonable ask.

Here we have a much-needed Bill, given the need for agri-innovation and scientific development, and of course the Opposition welcome the concept. But why oh why is this legislation being rushed in? We need strong and robust regulation of this important and developing field. We need clear scientific evidence and strong protections to safeguard animal welfare. We need clear and transparent labelling to protect and inform consumers. Yet again we see truth in the saying "Legislate in haste, repent at leisure", and I urge the Government to consider our concerns and those of stakeholders and consumers and be open to constructive criticism in Committee. If they are prepared to do that, we will not push for a vote on Second Reading.

6.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Jo Churchill): I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble (Katherine Fletcher), for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), for South Cambridgeshire (Anthony Browne), for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid). I also thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and the Opposition for the constructive way they have leaned into this debate today. I would immediately say, “Yes, we need to work together on this.” I think the majority of those in this House see the huge opportunity we have here.

“The emergence of genome editing is a significant moment, as it represents a possible step change in introducing a new generation of potentially transformative biotechnologies into the food and farming system.”

Those are not my words; they are from the Nuffield report.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): I welcome this Bill, which will hugely enhance our future food security. May I draw the Minister’s attention to pioneering new genetic editing techniques being developed at the University of Nottingham’s Sutton Bonington campus, and invite her to join me on a visit there to see that groundbreaking research in action?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I believe my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble is an alumna of that august institution, as indeed am I, so I would be delighted to visit it. That intervention raises a key point that, because of the limited time, I will address in a general sense.

We do have some of the finest institutions, and many of them are lodged in Scotland. The James Hutton Institute and the Roslin Institute are beyond good in this space. They need to be supported. They do not need to wait for others to follow. Our door is open. We want to get this right. We want to work with the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Professor Colin Campbell of the James Hutton Institute has said that it is right. Professor Helen Sang from the Roslin Institute has given evidence to say that this is what we need. She is working on ensuring that we can beat avian flu, which attacks both animals kept inside barns and those kept outside.

We have the opportunity to improve animal welfare here, and I would like to address that point full on. Animal welfare is currently of a high standard in this country, and it is not true to say that this Bill will affect it. Our animals are protected by comprehensive and robust animal health welfare legislation, including the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2007, passed by Labour. These provisions help to reinforce the fact that the welfare of animals is a key priority, and it is simply not true to say that the Bill will lead to a diminution in those standards.

The Bill allows us to take the opportunities that have been presented to us through leaving the European Union. It is important to celebrate our country’s strengths at Rothamsted, James Hutton, John Innes and Roslin, all of which I have visited, and I hope to go to Aberystwyth

soon. It is important that we move on this as a country. By encouraging greater research and development in the use of precision-breeding technologies, we are supporting that drive. Innovation is key to enhancing the sustainability and resilience of our agricultural systems by harnessing the benefits of precision breeding to eradicate disease, as we have discussed.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer addressed the issue of section 3. The Bill provides the Food Standards Agency with an opportunity to build from scratch a tailor-made framework that is proportionate for the UK. This will allow swifter progress for businesses wishing to market precision-bred organisms while still ensuring the safety of our food.

I could not agree more that safety, transparency, proportionality, traceability and customer confidence is what we are building here. The EU is currently reviewing its systems and has acknowledged that its current system is not fit for purpose. I would indeed be happy to share that documentation, which is publicly available, with the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith. It is important that we move ahead in this area, and our scientists, farmers and researchers all want us to do it. It is simply not true to say that this will allow multinationals and conglomerates to drive forward in this space. Actually, in the countries that have already driven PBOs into their system, we see democratisation, with a greater proportion of precision breeding patents being held by smaller and local businesses.

In response to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is no longer in her place, I agree that food security is a top priority. We have taken account of the Nuffield report and public concerns, and we are constantly in dialogue with our stakeholders. On Monday, we met animal welfare stakeholders to talk about the declaration and how they can feed into that. I agree that consumers need clear labelling, but the FSA will authorise products for sale only if they present no risk to health and do not mislead customers.

As this technology brings no safety risk, labelling will not be required to indicate the methods used in breeding. It is unnecessary because, as has been repeatedly pointed out, it is the same as traditional breeding. The countries that are already in this space—Canada, Japan, the United States, Brazil and Argentina—do not do that. A public register will be available on gov.uk to ensure further traceability.

There is a great deal more that I could go into on the particular things that were brought up, but I want to finish by saying that this is a huge area of advantage. We need to go forward as a country making sure that we take our scientists with us, enhance our research and breeding practices, and enable consumer confidence. Ultimately the key aim of the Bill is to ensure that precision-bred plants, animals, food and feed products are regulated proportionately to their risk so that we can fully embrace the benefits and advantages of scientific progress that has been made over the past 30 years. The Bill is good news, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

**GENETIC TECHNOLOGY (PRECISION
BREEDING) BILL: PROGRAMME
(PRECISION BREEDING) BILL**

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 12 July 2022.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Amanda Solloway.)

Question agreed to.

**GENETIC TECHNOLOGY (PRECISION
BREEDING) BILL: MONEY**

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State or the Food Standards Agency; and

(b) sums payable out of money so provided under any other Act.—(Amanda Solloway.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 6 and 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Motor Vehicles (International Circulation) (Amendment) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 11 May, be approved.

HOVERCRAFT

That the draft Hovercraft (Application of Enactments) and Merchant Shipping (Prevention of Pollution) (Law of the Sea Convention) Amendment Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 12 May, be approved.—(Amanda Solloway.)

Question agreed to.

INDEPENDENT EXPERT PANEL

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 150(D)),

That this House:—

(1) takes note of the report of the Independent Expert Panel, The Conduct of Mr Patrick Grady MP, HC 368 and the recommendation for sanction of a suspension of two sitting days; and

(2) accordingly suspends Patrick Grady from the service of the House for a period of two sitting days, namely Monday 20 June and Tuesday 21 June.—(Mark Spencer.)

Question agreed to.

Government Policy on Syria

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

7.1 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I begin my contribution this evening by, through you, thanking Mr Speaker for allowing me the time for this debate. It is more than poignant to rise in this House this evening, the night before the sixth anniversary of the murder of Jo Cox MP. Having requested a debate on Syria, which I did for a little while, it must have been fated that a slot would be available this week, given Jo's incredible contribution to raising the alarm in this House and beyond about the terrible events occurring in Syria. She warned that if we did not stand for our principles in the face of those who would trash the rights of civilians in wartime, it would change our world, and not for the better, and she was right.

To compound the distress, the last time I led a debate on Syria in Westminster Hall, it was chaired expertly by Sir David Amess. Words simply cannot express how much we all miss them both and how indebted we are to their families for the great contribution and sacrifice Sir David and Jo both made. We think of their families tonight and wish them strength and love.

The argument I wish to make to the Minister this evening is that by turning away from conflicts such as that in Syria, we allow the world to be a more dangerous place. It should be obvious to everyone in this House that the situation that Syrian civilians have faced over the past decade—with human rights utterly obliterated at the hands of the Syrian regime, aided by Russia—is now echoed in the brutality that the Ukrainians have seen at the hands of the Russians.

The Minister's fellow Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), said:

“Russia's actions in Ukraine will be familiar to millions of Syrians who have suffered at the hands of the Assad regime, with Moscow's backing. In both countries, Russia has been responsible for violations of international humanitarian and international human rights law.”

A person could be forgiven for wondering whether those words mean anything any more. When Bashar al-Assad's regime, shielded by Russia, is responsible for chemical weapons use, arbitrary detention, torture and indiscriminate attacks on civilians, what do those words really mean? When Ukrainians see cities destroyed and siege tactics used yet again to starve people into submission, what do those words mean?

Our country has been central to the crafting of international humanitarian and human rights laws. The rights of non-combatants in the face of aggression are meant to mean something, as are the right to be treated in a hospital without bombs falling on the very doctors trying to help and the rights of refugees. Demonstrating that our words—whether articulated through the UN declaration of human rights, or the promises rightly made in the sustainable development goals by a Conservative Government and supported in every corner of this House—are not empty, but full of meaning for starving Syrians or starving people anywhere shows

that we care for others in this world, but also that we are always prepared to stand up for our beliefs in the face of aggression.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate; I spoke to her earlier. I understand that 9.3 million Syrians have become food insecure since 2020 and more than 80% of Syrians are living below the poverty line. Does she agree that we have a duty of care to do more to help those victims of war and terror? Our Government have met their obligations in the past, and hopefully they will do so even more in future.

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman pre-empts what I am about to say and makes the point well. It would be good if the Minister could update the House on the diplomatic approach that we will take. If we in this House turn away from our principles, we lose sight not just of the Syrian people, but of ourselves. We honour our history, our culture and our interests by standing up for our values and their implementation. As I mentioned, the then Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, the right hon. Member for Braintree, said:

“The best thing for the UK to do is to ensure that the violence stops”.—[*Official Report*, 24 February 2020; Vol. 672, c. 28.]

As I said, it would be helpful if the Minister could use this opportunity to update the House on the current strategy.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She will probably be aware that there has been a resurgence of Daesh activity in northern and eastern Syria. In relation to the point that she has just made, does that not also underline the need for the United Kingdom and its allies to pay close attention to what is happening today in Syria?

Alison McGovern: The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right. Where we take away our focus and shift our eyes, we leave a vacuum. Whether it is Daesh or any other form of terrorism around the world, if we are not involved in the world—not that we can do everything, but if we are not doing all we can to prevent the rise of terrorism—in the end, the House will have to pay attention to it. It is far better to have a plan and a strategy for dealing with it.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, we know that many millions of people—in fact, most of the Syrian population; I think it is even worse than he said—are facing acute food insecurity. The number is 51% higher than in 2019. Record numbers of people need humanitarian assistance, and food prices have risen by more than 800%. That is mainly attributed to ongoing fuel shortages, increasing global food prices, inflation, and, of course, the Ukraine crisis. Against that backdrop, the World Food Programme has been forced to reduce food rations in all areas of Syria due to funding constraints. We face the perfect storm. If the Minister can, will she touch on the steps that the UK Government are taking, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, to ensure the renewal of resolution 2585 before it expires shortly on 10 July 2022 and ensure that the crucial crossing point at Bab al-Hawa remains open for the delivery of humanitarian assistance?

[Alison McGovern]

As well as there being a huge number of internally displaced people, many of whom are suffering in the most dreadful humanitarian conditions, the Syrian refugee population is now the largest in the world at 6.8 million. I appreciate that some of this is the Home Office's responsibility, but will the Minister update the House on international discussions about support for that population and on the UK's view of the future for Syrian refugees in the world?

It is ludicrous to expect the burden of supporting that number of people to continually fall on just a few countries. In response to a public outcry, the Conservative Government previously created a specific scheme to help to support Syrian refugees, but that is over now and in the past. We need to learn the lessons of the Homes for Ukraine scheme and our response in that case, so I would be grateful if the Minister could indicate the direction that we might be taking.

Speaking personally, I am inspired by the Syrians I meet in the United Kingdom. I think of the Syrians who work in the NHS in Merseyside as doctors. My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Kim Leadbeater) also mentioned to me Razan Alsous, a Syrian refugee she knows who has created a great business with Yorkshire squeaky cheese, and a fellow Syrian restaurateur, Khaled Deakin, who is creating a mobile restaurant in Exeter. Refugees bring their contribution, and they make our country strong, not weak.

I want to finish by asking the Minister about Syrian civil society here in the UK, because the route to peace and democracy in Syria will be very long. While at times it will seem that the British Government can do very little to bring about change in Syria, we do now have so many British Syrians and Syrian civilians here in the UK who will be an indispensable asset in building the first steps on the long path towards a different future for Syria. Could the Minister say what work the Foreign Office is currently undertaking to engage with Syrians in the UK and British Syrians? There are many issues where the perspective of our fellow community members in the UK who have a deep connection to Syria may well be of huge benefit and insight. I am sure the Minister will herself have learned a great deal from speaking with them and understanding their priorities, not least in working towards justice and putting down a path for prosecution for the horrific crimes committed against civilians in Syria.

Finally, I want to say something about this House, because we are often reactive when it comes to such crises. When an emergency happens in the case of Syria or of Ukraine, we all want our say, and that is only right in a democracy, but these crises and conflicts have a sustained impact on the world around us, be it in Syria or any other conflict that has seen such abysmal treatment of our fellow human beings. We in this House must have the persistence and seriousness of purpose to give effect to our values and to defend our interests, and the moral discipline to see things through to the end. News cycles can move on; we must not.

Jo described Syria as "our generation's test", but when you fail a test, you learn your lesson, and we must do that not just for the Syrians, who deserve better from us all, but for every victim of every conflict wherever they may be, so that we may see them not as a victim of some foreign war, but very much as the business of this House.

7.12 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): Can I say how grateful I am to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) for securing this very timely debate? I pay tribute to her for her work as chair of the all-party parliamentary friends of Syria group, and for her passion for Syria, as evidenced in her speech.

I also want to pay tribute to the legacy of Jo Cox and her commitment to the people of Syria, noting, as the hon. Member mentioned, that it is the anniversary of her horrific murder tomorrow and the fact that Sir David Amess chaired the last debate on this subject. As she said, they are both sorely missed by this House.

Bashar al-Assad and his allies, including Russia, have inflicted terrible suffering on Syrians for over 11 years now. Children born in Syria in the last decade have been subjected to terrible violence, hunger and deprivation. The UK Government continue to call for an end to this suffering through full implementation of United Nations Security Council resolution 2254, a nationwide ceasefire and progress towards an inclusive, representative political process.

Much of what we have seen play out in Syria, such as the crushing of dissent, attacks on civilian targets and a brutal conflict that has displaced millions, is now being replayed in Ukraine. Peace is a necessity for Syria, its people and us all.

Syria's conflict has killed more than half a million people, displaced 60% of the population, and collapsed the Syrian economy. Under Assad's regime people have faced arbitrary detention, brutal torture and indiscriminate attacks. There is clear evidence that Assad has used chemical weapons against his own people on at least eight occasions, and has the capability to conduct further attacks. Russia continues to shield Assad from accountability for his crimes, through disinformation and false narratives. Along with Iran, Russia has provided significant military support to the Syrian regime. The conflict has also created space for Daesh and other extreme groups to operate in, which continues to pose one of the most significant global terrorist threats, including to UK citizens.

The UK has responded to the situation in Syria by delivering our largest ever commitment to a single humanitarian crisis to date. We have committed a total of £3.8 billion since 2012, including up to £150 million pledged this year. Even so, aid is struggling to keep pace with the growing need in the region as the conflict continues. Today more than 14 million people are in need of assistance. Access issues and politicisation are complicating delivery, putting those in need at further risk. As the hon. Lady said, in July the UN Security Council will hold a crucial vote to renew the UN's mandate to deliver aid cross-border into Syria. Russian cruelty in the past three years has blocked that in the Security Council, and reduced UN access to a single border crossing. I visited Turkey last week to see first hand the importance of that issue, and to raise awareness. We are calling on all Security Council members to renew resolution 2585 and to provide cross-border aid at next month's vote. We thank our allies and partners for their continued support.

The UK also supports efforts to maintain the current ceasefire in north-west Syria, including Turkey's efforts to protect civilians. We will continue to support Syria's neighbours, so that they can meet the needs of Syrians seeking refuge. As they are so often, women and girls are the worst affected by the conflict. They also face horrific gender-based violence, including sexual violence. Support for women and girls is at the heart of UK foreign and development policy, through three innovation pilots that seek to prevent violence by targeting the widespread inequality that denies women ownership of land and access to economic resources and opportunities. We continue to push for a more robust global response to gender-based violence. The conflict is also denying Syria's children their basic human right to education, impacting a whole generation of young people. Since 2018, the UK-funded Syria education programme has reached more than half a million children, supporting 85% of children in lower primary school to be enrolled in schools in the north-west.

Just as we are consistent with aid, so will we continue to hold Assad's regime and its backers to account, including by sanctioning those close to him, and through our support for international law. There can be no impunity for violations of international, humanitarian and human rights law. Since 2012 the Government have contributed more than £40 million to gather evidence and help victims of human rights abuses and violations, including through the UN. We welcome the release of any detainees, but the regime has denied independent verification of its recent amnesty on prisoners, and there are still 130,000 who remain unaccounted for.

Our position on the regime's abhorrent use of chemical weapons during this conflict is well known. The UK has full confidence in the Organisation for the Prohibition

of Chemical Weapons and its investigations, which have attributed multiple attacks to the Assad regime. We will continue to push Assad to comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention.

On the point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) about Daesh, threats from terrorist and extremist groups rooted in Syria remain. The UK is a leading member of the global coalition against Daesh. We remain committed to ensuring it cannot resurge in the region, working with the coalition and our regional allies.

I also want to pick up on the hon. Lady's comment about civil society. We recognise the contribution of Syrians in the UK. The Government support and work closely with Syrian civilian society, especially in terms of upholding human rights.

In conclusion, the UK is committed to supporting the people of Syria. They have not been forgotten. We are clear that the UN-led political process, led by special envoy Pederson, is the only pathway to bring the peace that Syrians need and deserve. The Assad regime craves legitimacy, but continues to bring suffering and oppression to its people, and to stall the political process as it pursues self-preservation over genuine political reform. Until the regime participates in that process in good faith, we will not engage with Assad and will discourage others from doing so. Meanwhile, the UK will continue to deliver lifesaving and life-sustaining humanitarian assistance to protect women and girls, and to hold the regime and its backers to account.

Question put and agreed to.

7.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 June 2022

[DAME MARIA MILLER *in the Chair*]

Council of Europe

9.30 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Given that it is a hot day, if anyone wants to remove their jacket they should feel free to do so.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

I am the leader of the British delegation to the Council of Europe, which I declare as an interest, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria.

It pains me to start on a slightly sour note, but we are having the debate here in Westminster Hall because successive Leaders of the House have said no to us being allowed Government time for a debate in the main Chamber. I believe that the number of Members who have put in to speak, and the many more who have shown interest in the debate, is an expression of the greatest interest in the subject. It is a shame that we will be unable to hear the full richness of contributions from members of the delegation and others due to time constraints. That is no criticism of Westminster Hall as a setting for the debate, but it is a request to the Minister to provide us with assistance in trying to raise the visibility and importance of the Council of Europe.

More people now understand what the Council of Europe is and what it does. As a delegation, we work hard to make our contribution in the plenary sessions of the Parliamentary Assembly, the committee meetings that take place between plenary sessions and more generally. After each plenary session, we publish, for example, a summary of what we have discussed and the character of the meeting. I brief lobby journalists before we go to the Council. We issue press releases on key subjects, such as the position of Russia and the fate of the British individuals sentenced to death. We have held seminars—well attended—with, for example, Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian dissident now imprisoned, and with Ahmet Yildiz on Turkey. Finally, after each meeting, I raise questions on the subjects of the debate we have had. This has dramatically increased the profile of the Council of Europe among parliamentarians, and perhaps more generally among members of the public. However, I appreciate that there is still a lot more to do to ensure that people do not confuse us with the European Union, an organisation with about half the number of member countries as the Council of Europe.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Council of Europe represents 47 countries and that its mission is to empower and promote our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and given that we are seeing those values breached both by Vladimir Putin with his invasion of Ukraine and in China and elsewhere, does the hon. Gentleman agree

that this place should put paramount importance on those fundamental values and the Council of Europe, and on debate such as this?

John Howell: The Council of Europe is not responsible for China. It is responsible for what happens in Europe, and the three pillars of the Council of Europe—human rights, the rule of law and democracy—are crucial to its future. That is what we need to hold countries to.

The reason for making the remarks I made before taking an intervention is that the role of the Council of Europe has never been more important. For me, one of the proudest moments was when we expelled Russia from the Council. I am told that I was the first politician to ask for that to happen, in a letter to the Secretary-General, and I was pleased to see the support from the delegation for that action.

Thank heavens that the covid crisis has diminished substantially. The sort of diplomacy required simply cannot be carried out by Zoom or remotely. It is great for our effectiveness to be back in person, and I am pleased that newer members of the delegation can now see that what I said all along about understanding what the Council stood for being best achieved by their personal attendance was absolutely true. I am sure that other Members will want to comment on Russia during further consideration.

Theo Clarke (Stafford) (Con): I am proud to be part of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe and to sit on committees and give speeches to raise important topical issues such as the war in Ukraine. I thank my hon. Friend for recently arranging for us to meet the Ukrainian delegation in Strasbourg to demonstrate the UK's support. Does he agree with me on how essential it is that the UK continues to work in the Council of Europe? It is a vital part of our global Britain agenda and we must continue to lead on important international matters.

John Howell: I completely agree with that intervention. I will come on to say something about that at the end of my speech; it is crucial to what we are about.

The Russian expulsion has, however, left the Council with a deficit, which this time we are keen to see professionally filled. I appreciate the need for reform of the Council, and we look forward to participating in that. It is bizarre that meetings have taken place at a ministerial level in which there has been little contact with the delegation, which has tremendous experience of the Council and its work, but I am grateful that the UK Government have agreed to provide an additional £2.8 million this year to help the Council out of the hole left by Russia's expulsion. That gives us an opportunity to take advantage of the current situation to push the UK position forward in the full knowledge that we are participating fully in the future of the Council.

It is important to understand how the Council works. It works on the basis of putting forward conventions—international treaties—for countries to agree. Those set standards across a wider Europe in key areas. I will give the example of the Istanbul convention, which goes a long way to answering the question: what does the Council do for us? The Government have set 31 July as the date by which they expect to ratify the Istanbul convention on preventing and combating violence against

[John Howell]

women and domestic violence. Many of us regard it as a flagship convention of the Council of Europe and as the gold standard for the protection of women and girls in Europe. Dame Maria, you and I spoke at a debate on this subject that I organised in the covid period.

The Government signed the convention in 2012 and have been working since that date to strengthen UK laws to better protect women and girls—we like to change the law in this country before we finally ratify a treaty. The necessary Command Paper was laid in both Houses on 17 May. I hope that there will be no objections in the following 21 sitting days and that the convention will be ratified.

There are two reservations in the convention that the UK is allowed to make. The first concerns crimes in UK law that are not crimes in other territories, and the second relates to migrant victims. Members are free to ask Ministers questions about those caveats. That illustrates only too well how the Council works: a treaty that it is not compulsory to sign, where the arguments for or against are set out and fully debated, and where the successful signing of the treaty involves us as members of the delegation in pursuing the diplomacy involved through, for example, Westminster Hall debates; by encouraging meetings between Ministers and the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; and by our membership of the parliamentary network “Women Free from Violence”.

The Council is also active in the field of human rights, and never has there been a greater need to be on top of this issue internationally. I have already held a debate in the main Chamber on the future of the European Court of Human Rights because it does need reform. Non-governmental organisations have too much influence. Some of the judges could be more suitably qualified. Not only were Russia’s judges sent back for examination; the same has also happened with Iceland. But one of the biggest tests for the court is occurring in Turkey, where the Committee of Ministers—the second chamber of the Council—has begun infringement proceedings. The key question here is: are we to allow Turkey to infringe the court, or are we to take action? And what should that action consist of? Does it mean the expulsion of Turkey from the Council, or are there other routes to follow since we cannot do nothing? As one of the rapporteurs for the Council on Turkey, let me explain the situation in relation to Osman Kavala.

Kavala is a leading businessman and campaigner who has been sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment after a period of pre-trial detention. The Turkish authorities argue that the original court case has been complied with in relation to the European Court of Human Rights in that Kavala was released to be rearrested the following day. The court argues that its judgment applies to the whole of the evidence base for all charges brought against Kavala, which are lacking in any evidence. That is the source of the current impasse with the Turkish Government. Turkey faces many attempts at terrorism, for which I have great sympathy, but the question must be asked whether these anti-terrorism laws are too restrictive and contravene human rights. There are, of course, other examples besides the Kavala case.

That example illustrates the important work of the Council in monitoring countries to ensure they are complying with the three pillars of the Council: human

rights, the rule of law and democracy. That work and election monitoring are important functions. While I can see there is room for joint monitoring exercises with the Committee of Ministers, this is an important element of what the Council does. I would not like to see it given away to another organisation, and the Council not to have a role.

There is plenty of opportunity for the Council to work with other organisations, such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I have already had discussions with the head of the UK delegation to the OSCE, and we are looking at ways to work together more closely, but it would be wrong to see the OSCE having more experience of election monitoring or in monitoring more generally.

A key question remains about the future role of the Council of Europe. I welcome the UK Government’s support for Kosovo to join the Council, which the delegation also supports. Many discussions on this have already started, in which we can, should and do participate. The recent Turin ministerial meeting is one such example. I am grateful for the attendance of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary at that meeting. Another is the debate that took place at the standing committee in Dublin on the future discussions that will take place.

There is so much more that the Council could do in the area of the rule of law and in promoting democracy more widely across Europe. There are gaps in both those areas in many countries, and knowledge is needed to help them get the right answer. We stand ready to work in promoting that area. The delegation would value the chance to have more extensive discussions with the Foreign Office, and with other Ministers. We do have the experience of putting together programmes in this area.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the problems with the Council of Europe is that its work, importance and role are not fully understood, even by Members of this House, never mind the general public? I know he has worked hard on that. We need to have a much more active public relations initiative, explaining the value of the Council of Europe, its powers and the changes it can, and does, bring about among member states.

John Howell: I agree fully with right hon. Gentleman. I try my hardest to push that as leader of the delegation. It is essential to get across what the Council is about, how it can help, and the role it now plays in—I have to use this expression—a post-Brexit Britain. It plays a vital role in ensuring that we have good relations with parliamentarians in other parts of Europe.

I will conclude by saying that putting down written questions after each debate at the Council of Europe brings home how wide those debates are, and how they affect policy across Government. Debates that relate to the Foreign Office account for about 30%. The rest cover a range of Ministries, from the Department for Work and Pensions to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I ask those questions I put to them to show the range of debates that we conduct, partly to ensure there is a written answer on record for the issues that have been discussed, and so that we understand what Government are doing. That is welcome, at least by members of the delegation, but we would welcome the Minister’s help in ensuring that the

Government's position can be put across when rapporteurs visit the country on behalf of the Council and need to see a Minister. I know that that is a pain, but without it the result does not look good and can leave us in an embarrassing position.

I am extremely grateful not just for the work of all members of the delegation—we try to operate on a genuinely cross-party basis wherever possible, and the number of Members here for the debate illustrates that—but for our utterly brilliant secretariat led by Nick Wright, to whom we would all like to pay our thanks.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Don't forget Lord Foulkes.

John Howell: I will come to the other people. Finally, on behalf of the delegation, I would like to pay thanks to three people in Strasbourg: Alan Mitchell, the president of the committee for the prevention of torture; Tim Eicke, our judge at the Court, to whom we are grateful for getting to know us and for sharing with us his expertise and experience; and our permanent representative Sandy Moss, whose assistance and co-operation is second to none and has been particularly helpful for the delegation.

The Council of Europe is crucial for our relationship with wider Europe, particularly after Brexit. It sets out a method of co-operation that can alienate no one. It is a major part of our international diplomacy, and Russia's departure offers us an opportunity to make real change. I look forward to what the Minister has to say.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Before I call the next speaker, may I suggest an informal time limit of four minutes? The wind-ups will start at 10.28 am.

9.47 am

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) on obtaining the debate, and welcome on the consensual tone that he has established today and which he tries to create for the UK's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Of course, some issues will divide us, and we cannot shy away from them, because they are important. However, anyone taking a long-term perspective on the development of the European family of nations will see how dramatic a role the Council of Europe has played in enhancing the values of democracy and the rule of law.

There has been dramatic change in those countries that left fascist backgrounds such as Spain and Portugal—that was a long time ago—and, more recently, when the Warsaw pact broke up. Perhaps the failure of Russia to be brought into the family is regrettable, but that must be measured against the success seen in so many other countries. Russia's expulsion was necessary as it was such a flagrant offender against the basic values of the Council of Europe. We have a problem in knowing how to deal with those who are not prepared to accept the Council's rules and regime. The case of Osman Kavala and how we deal with Turkey—a persistent offender against judgments of the European Court of Human Rights; and the Council of Europe is all about human rights—is central to that.

Many aspects of the Council of Europe are tremendously important, including the Venice commission, which provides a legal framework in which nations can seek advice

about their own rule of law, and the Group of States against Corruption. Corruption is a major issue in many countries. I was in Bosnia last week, and nobody who visits that country will be amazed to know that corruption is one of the central issues that affects it and how young people in Bosnia view their country. It therefore matters enormously that the Council of Europe has a role in fighting corruption.

The committee for the prevention of torture is fundamental, and the capacity to have challenge and inspections here, as well as in those countries that we feel will be offenders, matters enormously, because we are all bound by the same rule of law. That is why I want to touch briefly on the Court, which this morning is controversial here in the United Kingdom.

I would say to Members of all parties that we cannot say to others, "Please abide by the rule of law and listen to the institutions to which we are subject," unless we are prepared to make that same judgment ourselves. That really does matter, because it is fundamental to how we as a nation behave and it is fundamental in our capacity to say to other nations, "These are the values that this country of ours wants to uphold." We were fundamental in establishing the European convention on human rights, and it is important that we recognise that.

As I understand it, the Rwanda judgment is an interim one. It simply says that there needs to be a delay before removal takes place. I welcome that, because I think it is an outrageous policy, but that is not the point. The point is this: do we respect the convention or not?

Mr Richard Bacon: I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's remarks on the Court, and he makes a good point about needing to obey the rules. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) referred to the fact that the Court needs reform. Does the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) accept that there are occasions when the Court sometimes strays into areas that perhaps it should not? An example is the question of whether prisoners should have a vote, which many people think is a political question that admits of two answers. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Court needs some reform?

Tony Lloyd: I will certainly concede that the Court needs reform. Frankly, the most outrageous thing about it is that it takes an unacceptably long time for people to obtain justice. We have to look at what that means. I am not sure that I agree with the hon. Member on the example he gave, because there are mixed feelings about that issue. In many countries, prisoners do vote. I have gone into prisons on election monitoring and observation to watch that process taking place. It is not such a preposterous view. If such an issue is arguable, we have to look at the Committee of Ministers and whether the European convention on human rights needs amending, rather than the role of the Court. The Court's role is to implement the convention, and it is the politicians who created the convention.

I am afraid I have exceeded my time, but I will finish my remarks by saying that we cannot have half a Council of Europe. If we believe in the role of the European convention on human rights and believe in the institutions, let us assent even when it pains us a little, because it pains other people an awful lot more and it is in our interest.

9.52 am

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Council of Europe was founded in 1949 by the treaty of London. It was founded to combat fascism, Nazism and communism, and played an extraordinarily positive role in doing precisely that. Perhaps its greatest hours of glory were during the break-up of the Soviet Union and the welcoming of new democratic states in eastern Europe. Whereas the EU is centralising, the Council of Europe is welcoming. With 46 member states, it has real power—for instance, on the European convention of human rights, about which I will say a few words in a moment.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) has said, we now have a new and very important role in the Council of Europe, given the appalling behaviour of the Russian Federation. I personally feel betrayed by what Russia has done. As a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Russia who has sought to understand, but not condone, Russian politics, I think there is absolutely no excuse for what Russia has done in invading Ukraine. Ukrainians have a right to self-determination, and I do not believe for a moment that Mr Putin believes that there is any threat to Russia by NATO; I think he is trying to establish the Russian empire. No doubt it is very sad for some Russians that the Russian empire is over, but it was presumably sad for some Turks when the Turkish empire was over, sad for some Brits when the British empire was over, sad for some French people when the French empire was over, and likewise for any other empire. We all have a right to self-determination.

The Council of Europe, under the guidance of people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, has acted with great vigour in this latest crisis, but that was not the case last time. After Russia took over Crimea, it was expelled for a time from the Parliamentary Assembly. Then, because people at the Council of Europe needed the money, it was allowed to dribble back in. That must never happen again. We must proclaim what is right, and not be deterred from doing what is right because we need its money. I am grateful to the Minister for ensuring that, with other western powers, we are filling the financial gap made by the Russian expulsion.

My point is that the Council of Europe has to concentrate on its core role, which is dealing with egregious human rights abuses in places such as Russia. Other countries such as Azerbaijan and Turkey also have some difficulties. The Council should not start nit-picking with demonstrably democratic western powers. We saw that in the row over prisoners' voting rights and we are seeing it even today—this is a hot topic—in the very late intervention of the European Court of Human Rights that resulted in the flight to Rwanda not being able to take off with any people. The European Court of Human Rights said that one Iraqi man faced

“a real risk of irreversible harm.”

What is the real risk of irreversible harm? The real risk—the immoral thing—is to allow people to go on crossing the channel and possibly drowning. The European Court of Human Rights, the Church of England and all the critics of the Government's policy on Rwanda have to ask themselves: what is their solution?

This may be a temporary intervention by the European Court of Human Rights. I hope that it is. However, it rather makes the point that the Council of Europe has a

core role in dealing with egregious human rights abuses, and that putting somebody on a safe flight, going to a safe hotel in a safe place, is not an egregious abuse of human rights.

9.57 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I am pleased that we are having this debate, and to be an alternate member of the Council of Europe. I have found the experience very interesting. As I said to the leader of the UK delegation, the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), in an intervention, the lack of information, understanding and publicity about the Council must be addressed.

The Council of Europe is a big body and it spends a great deal of money on staff, resources and all that—I am not complaining about that, but there has to be a much better understanding of what it does. Its foundation in 1949 was historic and dramatic, because it gave a European focus on human rights, and it supported the principle of the European convention on human rights and the European Court of Human Rights.

Some people, no doubt, will not be very pleased with the decision made last night, but personally I think it was absolutely the right decision. If any member state, including this one, goes outside the European convention on human rights and behaves in the way that the British Government wanted to, there are consequences. The Court has intervened to bring that about.

Personally, I support the decision, but others might not. However, we cannot complain about other countries not complying, such as Turkey or in the past Russia, if we do not stand up for exactly the same principle ourselves. The European Court of Human Rights is something that the whole of Europe apparently subscribes to and ought to continue to subscribe to.

The discussions in the Council of Europe on human rights issues are important, but more important in some ways is the engagement with, and delegations to, different member states to try to improve their human rights records, their prison conditions and prisoner rehabilitation regimes.

Russia was expelled from the Council of Europe. That has now happened. It is a huge step to expel a member state. Although I, like everyone in this Chamber, totally condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the war that is going on there, we have to ask ourselves a question: what message does it send to human rights campaigners and victims of human rights abuses in different parts of Russia if they no longer have access to the European Court of Human Rights? I know the issue of Turkey is writ large. Turkey is an abuser of human rights through its prison conditions, its treatment of Kurdish and Armenian minorities, and in a number of other ways. I am not in favour of the expulsion of Turkey from the Council of Europe. I want to see engagement—for us to work with and support the many brave journalists and human rights campaigners in Turkey, and try to bring about improvements in their society and their country.

The role of election observation is an important one. I was recently an election observer—not on behalf of the Council of Europe, but a different body—at the elections in Colombia. Having observed other elections in other places, I know the great importance, not necessarily of finding all the faults, but of simply being an unexpected

presence at the polling stations with a right to investigate and inspect what is going on. Therefore, to me, the Council of Europe is a very important body.

To conclude, we must ensure that there is a serious information campaign about the role of the Council of Europe and all its policy areas—environment, human rights, and many other social policy areas—so that people understand what it does. Obviously there was a funding issue with Russia’s removal, but that ought to spur us on to have a better information campaign and better reporting back. The least we could expect is to have a debate in the main Chamber of our Parliament, rather than here in Westminster Hall; I am not criticising Westminster Hall, but this ought to be a main Chamber debate.

10.1 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing this debate, and on his leadership of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

I follow on directly from the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who made the point in an intervention and has reiterated in his speech that people in this building do not understand the Council of Europe; he is absolutely right. Some months ago, I was in the Tea Room, explaining to colleagues that the Council of Europe covers lands stretching from Azerbaijan to the Atlantic, and from the Mediterranean to the Arctic circle. Even then, some people could not grasp the fact that it was not the European Union, but something much bigger and, I would argue, much more important. One of my colleagues present on that occasion—I will not name her, because I hate to embarrass the Home Secretary—said, “Why do we pay it so little attention?” I looked her straight in the eyes and said, “Because it’s got the word ‘Europe’ in it.” I am afraid that is a sad fact of life.

The Council of Europe has done, and continues to do, an enormous amount of work, particularly in relation to the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Following the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, we suspended the voting rights of the Russian delegation, who then walked out. The British delegation, which punches far and away above its weight in the Parliamentary Assembly, took a stand and resisted Russia’s readmission—with one dishonourable exception, who, I am ashamed to say, was a Member from the Government Benches. Every other Member of Parliament from every political party voted against Russia’s readmission in support of our colleagues in the Baltic states, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. However, others thought they knew better and let the Russians back in.

As such, a couple of years later, we found ourselves in a situation where the Russians had taken the wrong signal, believing that Europe would do nothing about Ukraine. It took the robust attack from my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley—sorry, my honourable Friend; he ought to be right honourable—to undo that damage and make sure that Russia was properly suspended again. Those are the powers that the British delegation to the Council of Europe can have and exercise.

There is some unfinished business. We rightly talk a lot about the Donbas at the moment, and we talk quite a lot about Crimea, but we have forgotten Cyprus.

There is a member state of the Council of Europe—Turkey—that, in 1974, invaded and occupied part of the territory of Cyprus, another member state. It is nearly 50 years since that happened, and the matter remains unresolved. There are still Turkish troops occupying soil of another sovereign state of the Council of Europe. That, in its own way, is just as wrong as what is happening in Ukraine.

I thank Chris Yvon, who was the permanent representative during my time as leader of the delegation. He provided massive support during our discussions about the Russian Federation, and contributed in an exemplary way to the work between an ambassador and Members of Parliament, advising and supporting us, and ensuring that we had the information we needed to do the job. I hope that the Foreign Office will recognise that. Finally, I would like to put on record my appreciation of the work done by the superb secretariat.

10.6 am

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I very much welcome this debate. I have been a member of the Council of Europe for many years, with a brief interlude. The bottom line is that the Council of Europe stands up for our fundamental values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, which we have seen under attack around the world and beyond the sphere of the Council of Europe; and obviously those values are under attack in Ukraine. I am proud to be the trade rapporteur of the Council of Europe, which involves instilling in trade agreements the values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law, plus sustainable development in compliance with the Paris agreement and subsequent COP agreements.

It is important that Britain shines the light of our values around the Council of Europe and beyond. We also need to look at and question what we are doing here in terms of the rule of law. An obvious example is the breach of the Northern Ireland protocol that breaches international law, and will undermine the Good Friday agreement and the Northern Ireland economy. We need to think about the right to peaceful protest and whether the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 is compliant with the conventions. Quite frankly, I find the prospect of police officers judging some annoyance, disturbance or discontinuity of business sufficient to stop a peaceful protest in a democratic country abhorrent, and it is the sort of thing that will play into the hands of Vladimir Putin.

We need to think about the issues around Rwanda. Israel refuses to send its refugees to Rwanda because they might face torture, death or rape. We need to think about the evidence, not, “Oh no, it is a court interfering”, as has been suggested. We also need to think about the independence of our own judiciary: how that should stand strong and not be attacked by the Government. In recent years the Supreme Court has been attacked by Ministers, who have been amplified in the press, on key decisions such as giving Parliament the right to vote on the EU deal and bringing democracy back after the prolonged Prorogation.

A recent report by the all-party parliamentary group on democracy and the constitution, which I chair, flags that issue and the fact that the Supreme Court has now reversed seven of the Government’s decisions in the last two years. We criticise the intimidation and chilling effect of an independent Court, but we should look at whether we are satisfying fundamental values.

[Geraint Davies]

I am very much a supporter of those fundamental values. I rejoice in the fact that we were founding members. After the war, Winston Churchill was instrumental in bringing about this bastion of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Around the world, whether in China—or elsewhere, those values are being broken down and alternative totalitarian or authoritarian systems are being championed. It is incumbent on us all to fight the fight, be a bastion for those values and not let them be undermined at home. I very much welcome the debate secured by the hon. Member for Henley; we must stand firm together for our fundamental values.

10.10 am

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I thank our wonderful representative, my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who has been a real champion for us newbies in the 2019 intake who have been lucky enough to serve on the Council of Europe. He has been a great help to me and everybody else speaking this morning.

The Council of Europe, of which I am honoured to be a member, has greatly contributed to the stability and progress of our continent for decades. I credit its longevity to its founding ideals, about which we have heard this morning, and to those who have been determined to build on them and keep them alive. All member states stand together under a common banner to protect democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and we should be proud of that.

In the 1940s, Winston Churchill was one of the main protagonists in a new regional organisation that became the Council of Europe. He recognised the need for co-operation in Europe, and well understood mankind's proclivity for violence and discrimination. It has been said that an institution is the lengthening shadow of a man or woman. Churchill understood that, and rightly recognised institutions as the hallmarks of democracy. He knew that, if we were to learn from and avoid repeating the mistakes and conflicts of the 20th century—how apt that is today—institutions such as the Council of Europe would be, and would continue to be, essential. I am sure that I speak for all hon. Members when I say how proud I am that this country has been there right from the very beginning. The UK was one of the founding signatories of the 1949 Council of Europe statute, and I sincerely hope that our commitment to this world-leading human rights organisation will continue to be as strong as it was over 70 years ago.

I am particularly proud that next Monday I will have my first ever meeting in the beautiful city of Strasbourg and that, although my French is rather appalling, I will be the first rapporteur from the 2019 intake. I have been working on the ethical, cultural and educational challenges of track and trace applications and technologies, and I am very proud of that. I have not been coerced into the position at all—I have taken it on board, and very much enjoyed it.

Given the challenges of that particular rapporteurship, the commitment and dedication to the Council's founding ideals that I have seen, and the principles of all those who have helped me, have been nothing but inspiring. The people from the Council of Europe who have

helped me have been absolutely wonderful. Although my own work will pale into insignificance compared with the immense achievements of many people at the Council, and certainly with those of some in the room, it has been a genuine pleasure to get to know the fantastic people on the Council of Europe.

In its lifetime the Council has had some quite outstanding achievements, which we ought to recognise. It abolished the death penalty in all of its member countries—not a single execution has taken place in any member state since 1997. Moreover, it proposed the first instrument criminalising the sexual abuse of children. It strengthened the prevention of torture, and to this day regularly makes unannounced visits to places of detention in member states to evaluate the treatment of detainees. The list goes on and on, and as I am running out of time, I shall sum up: the Council has been a constant in our nation's character throughout my lifetime, and I sincerely hope that it continues to be.

10.14 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), who is a good and dear friend. It is a real pleasure to be here to support him, and I thank him for his dedication to and enthusiasm for his role as leader of the UK delegation to the Council of Europe. This House should be grateful and thankful to him for his clear commitment, which we all appreciate.

I am pleased to be here to discuss how we can work together for the betterment of the UK as well as how the Council of Europe can benefit the likes of Northern Ireland. I know that the hon. Member has tried to do that. We should be representing the smaller states within the Council of Europe as well. There is no doubt that there is some fragility after Brexit.

The co-responsibility of the Council of Europe is to promote democracy and human rights. I am a great believer in human rights, which I have spoken about on many occasions, and in the rule of law on the continent of Europe. All too recently, we have seen the immediate expulsion of the Russian Federation and the suspension of relations with Belarus. Those were the right decisions. The hon. Gentleman led that, and we thank him for it. Ministers took the hard decision to expedite matters for the sake of protection, and there is no doubt that that has paid off in terms of unity. I am also a great believer in teamwork. There is no I in team—it is about how we all work together, and the Minister espouses that in abundance.

The UK is rewarded with many benefits for being a part of the Council of Europe. For example, we are able to push through world-class policies and legislation. The Council of Europe has also been instrumental in preventing and combatting domestic violence and violence against women. I am a great supporter of that legislation and that change in attitude. Those standards are groundbreaking—that is not my word, but that of others who have witnessed them. Domestic violence has been impacted globally. We must be proud of that, but we must still do more to widen goals and aspirations.

I understand that the Council of Europe has its questions about the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill. I know that that is not what this debate is about, but I mention it as an example. I must admit that I have questions about it, too. That is a

debate for another day, but it is great to see that the Council of Europe has an interest in Northern Ireland affairs. I hope that all views are taken into account, not simply those of one side. I know that the hon. Member for Henley, who is an honourable man, will take part in those views as well.

Portugal has made fantastic contributions in relation to trafficked victims among refugees. These real issues are faced by most Governments, and we have the platform to deal with and prevent them together. I do not see why the impacts of Brexit should be in any way detrimental to global prosperity. The UK played an instrumental part in establishing the Council of Europe in 1949, and the UK's influence within the Council makes it better able to protect the UK's goals in Europe. The hon. Member has protected those goals admirably. Despite global tensions, states sharing and working towards potential goals should be an inclusive process. We have the capacity to hold member states to account when necessary, as has happened with recent events, and to support those in need. The fundamental values of the Council are often forgotten, and it is important that we have a platform to work together.

I make a plea for the rights and democracy of young people. More than 5,000 youth leaders are trained each year in youth centres in Budapest and Strasbourg, and I encourage the Minister to consider creating something similar for the United Kingdom. We were a crucial part of the COE process. We should be facilitating and encouraging our young people to learn about democracy and human rights. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his work in Turkey, which is guilty of some of the worst human rights abuses and persecution of religious groups across the world.

We have real potential to deliver goals and aspirations if we are willing to work together and do what is right. Teamwork is important, as I mentioned. There are so many issues going on across the globe, and we are stronger when we tackle them together. I praise all the work done thus far, and I once again thank the hon. Member for Henley for ensuring the strength and unity of the UK of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and its place in the Council of Europe.

10.18 am

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on securing the debate, and commend him for his dedicated efforts in supporting the UK team.

It is important to outline what the Council of Europe is before discussing its work. As Members have already said, it is not particularly obvious to the broader public. Understandably, it is often confused with the European Council. I will give my opinions, as a new member, on what it does.

The Council of Europe was founded in the aftermath of world war two and is, first and foremost, a human rights organisation. The UK has been a member since its inception, and we have played an essential role in drafting its best-known document: the European convention on human rights. Since 1949, the Council has expanded from 10 to 46 members, and it now stretches from Iceland to Turkey, taking in states of all sizes. Its purpose is to promote and maintain liberal democratic values in member states. Human rights, democracy and the rule of law are the priorities of the Council of

Europe, which is why it seeks to hold members to account on those issues. Some of its recent reports have focused on human trafficking in Norway, corruption in Malta and prison overcrowding in Switzerland. Among the Council's achievements is the abolition of the death penalty in member states—as has already been stated—with the last execution having taken place over 25 years ago. That supports why the UK delegation has strongly denounced the recent death sentences handed down to Aiden Aslin, Shaun Pinner and Brahim Saadoun by Russian forces in Ukraine.

What I most admire about the Parliamentary Assembly of Council of Europe, and the Council of Europe as a whole, is that it provides a forum for European countries to work together to uphold our shared values while respecting the sovereignty of member states. Our membership of it is one of the best examples of the UK leaving the EU but not Europe. Although I have been to only one PACE session so far, it was one of the most consequential meetings, as it was when Russia was excluded from the Council of Europe.

In consultation with PACE, the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers suspended Russia the day after the invasion of Ukraine began. At the extraordinary session I attended on 15 March, PACE voted in favour of expelling Russia, as did the Council of Ministers the following day. In that session, I was privileged to hear in person from the female delegates of Ukraine, and to hear virtually from their male colleagues who had remained behind to fight the Russian invasion. To meet delegates who had brought their children from a war zone to the hemicycle—and who were going to return to that war zone the following day—was a strange and powerful experience.

Expelling Russia was undoubtedly the right action to take, as there is no aspect of the Russian Government's actions in Ukraine that supports the principles of human rights, democracy or rule of law. At the same time, it is worth noting that the expulsion means that Russian citizens can no longer take their Government to the European Court of Human Rights, a means previously used by dissidents such as Alexei Navalny to raise the profile of cases that would not be heard fairly in Russian domestic courts. Theoretically, it also allows Russia to restore the death penalty, so the decision does potentially have grave consequences for Russian citizens and those living in areas under Russian control. However, given Russia's ongoing aggression against Ukraine, it seems highly unlikely that the change will in reality make any difference to the actions of the Russian Government, as they appear to demonstrate contempt for other laws.

Since expelling Russia, PACE members have unanimously supported a resolution calling for an ad hoc international criminal tribunal to investigate and prosecute suspected Russian war crimes in Ukraine. I expect that the Council of Europe will continue to call attention to the human rights violations that are occurring in Ukraine. In that respect, its work is more important than ever.

The opportunity to be in a forum that is both cross-party and cross-Europe creates a powerful understanding of views, not least in the many side discussions that take place outside the main Chamber. The value of the Council is in that very opportunity. I also commend all of the UK support team for their help in facilitating that effort.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that we move to wind ups at 10.28 am.

10.22 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing this important debate. It is a reflection of its importance that when we look around the Chamber, we see that there is cross-party attendance by Members from both Houses, with Lords keeping an eye on proceedings from the Public Gallery.

As a new member of the delegation, similar to my hon. Friends the Members for Sedgefield (Paul Howell) and for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker), it has been a real eye-opener being part of the UK delegation and visiting Strasbourg. It is a crowning glory for global Britain that our voice in that arena is so important and well regarded. Part of today's debate needs to be to educate colleagues who are not sighted on the excellent work done in Strasbourg and Paris—and virtually. Reference has been made to various members of the delegation being rapporteurs, and it is important that those countries and topics are covered.

We have spoken about Russia being expelled from the Council of Europe. I think that was the right and proper decision. As a Conservative—and a low-tax Conservative at that—I want to focus on the money side of things. I had the opportunity to pose a question on behalf of my particular group to the secretary-general of the Council of Europe. The Russian delegation contributed about €33 million per year, so there is now a big shortfall. I thank the Minister and our Government for contributing to address that shortfall. It is right that we do our bit where appropriate, but all partners need to do so, too.

The Council of Europe remains important, as shown by Kosovo joining. It is one of the few international forums in which people can have quiet conversations about important issues by the water cooler, which reflects the value of physical meetings. As someone who tried to do virtual meetings initially—with all the difficulty that they entail for a new delegate—I think the physical side is important.

I will not speak about the ECHR—particularly because I am a parliamentary private secretary in the Home Office—but I am sure that we will discuss it in due course, given that we proposed our own human rights Bill in the Queen's Speech. Other Members have spoken about a lot of the policies, as well as the necessary difficulties of the Council of Europe. There does need to be an evolution at the Council of Europe, and part of the process will be to discuss not only the good things, but how we hope to see it change in future.

10.26 am

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to wind up for the SNP. It has been interesting to hear the various worldviews expressed across the Chamber. From the SNP perspective, I am glad to hear the cross-party support for the Council of Europe, and I very much associate myself with it.

I was a Member of the European Parliament for 16 years. I spent 192 weeks in Strasbourg over those years, so the Council of Europe is close to my heart, and I suffered a terrible thing in losing such a wonderful

environment and great colleagues at the Council. I was always struck by the genius of the twin-track mechanism whereby the Council of Europe focuses on the citizens and empowering their legal rights against their own Governments and states, and the EU is a more overtly political and trade union.

It will surprise nobody that it grieves me deeply that the UK has withdrawn from that co-operation in the European Union. I am not in the business of fighting old battles, but Scotland wants to be back in that co-operation; the SNP is an internationalist party, and we want co-operation and multilateralism in all its forms and in all forums. Scotland's best future is, from my party's perspective, as an independent state in the European Union. I will come back to that point.

That withdrawal, or retreat, from the international multilateral co-operation of the EU—which the UK has taken Scotland out of—is precisely what makes the co-operation with the framework of the Council of Europe all the more vital. I applaud the work of the delegation. It has had enthusiastic SNP support. My hon. Friends the Members for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) are enthusiastic members of the delegation. As long as the SNP is part of this House, that co-operation will continue. It suits our worldview to co-operate internationally and to be part of a multilateral enforcement of decency and human rights.

I have been glad to hear the support from across the House for the work of the Council. We need to bear in mind that it needs to be intellectually consistent, so that we work with and support the Council when it is difficult to do so, as well as when it suits us. I have been uneasy about some of the comment and debate, especially in today's papers. It is not just about the European Union; I see the same ingredients in the public discourse about the European Court of Justice, the European convention on human rights and the European Council.

I say to Conservative Members present—although I exclude most of them from this criticism—that some of their colleagues are quite specifically trying to undermine the work of the Council. Perhaps they are doing so from a position of ignorance, as we have heard, but it is also possible that they are doing so quite deliberately.

Sir Roger Gale: We are in the presence of a PPS from the Home Office and a Minister from the Foreign Office. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a knee-jerk, dog-whistle reaction to the Rwanda decision, and any attempt to attack the European convention on human rights and the European Court of Justice, would be a grave mistake?

Alyn Smith: I genuinely thank the right hon. Member for his intervention, and I could not agree with him more. One of the things that has struck me since I got to this House is that we are not all goodies and baddies, and there are a number of shades of grey within. I acknowledge the governing party on this issue. I very much agree with his point. Happily, it is on my page of notes, so we can all look forward to that.

That criticism of the framework is ahistoric. As we have heard, the Council of Europe came from a speech that Winston Churchill made in Zurich in 1946. It was formed by the London Statute, signed in this city in 1949. I am a proud member of the Scottish National

party; I have a different worldview from many on the Government Benches and many of the Members of this House, but I celebrate the work of the English and Scottish lawyers in drawing up this international framework of decency historically. To withdraw from that would be deeply ahistoric and an act of nihilism and vandalism, which I would deeply regret. The part that the UK has played in the growth and development of the Council of Europe is an example of global Britain that we can actually be proud of, because it has effected real change in the real world, on our European continent. To walk away from it would be an act of great harm, not only to the wider continent but to us at home.

I pay tribute to that proud history, but I also have to list a few of the things, as mentioned by some Members, that we see currently. When we talk about grievous international acts of criminality in Ukraine, the Donbas, or Cyprus or elsewhere, we need to be consistent at home. So loose chatter—in the Queen's Speech, no less—about a British Bill of rights, as if somehow the European convention on human rights does not work for us uniquely, is an absurdity. In fact, I would say that it is a deeply, deeply regrettable policy trend.

Loose talk of breaking international law—a solemn international commitment, only recently signed—over the Northern Ireland protocol, when there are dispute resolution mechanisms within the protocol itself, is setting the worst possible international example to those who would seek to do bad things internationally. How can we possibly look Mr Putin in the eye with any credibility when we are ourselves talking about breaching international law, as if it is a mere bagatelle? The odious reaction that we have seen to the European Court of Human Rights quite rightly stopping the odious policy of offshoring refugees to Rwanda is deeply dangerous. We are also seeing the limiting of rights to protest and indeed to vote at home; we can look forward to the Court's judgments on those issues, too.

There is also talk in some quarters—not by everyone, but in some quarters—about “unelected foreign judges”, as if our own judges were elected and as if “foreign” has anything negative to it. The whole framework of extraterritorial judicial scrutiny is the point—it was designed in this city. The point is to ensure the enforcement of decency and proper legal standards. The rule of law is an important thing to observe at home as well as abroad.

Geraint Davies: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, on the one hand, there are those who criticise the credentials of judges in the European Court of Human Rights, and yet we have had Lord Chancellors—such as the current Foreign Secretary, actually—who have not really got much legal expertise? What we really need is a Lord Chancellor here for a sustained period of time to protect the independent judiciary, rather than taking pot shots at it.

Alyn Smith: I am similarly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am really concerned about the public discourse in these islands. If we believe in the rule of law, that means that we also believe in it when it is difficult or inconvenient for the Government of the day. The Scottish Government have been before the European Court of Human Rights as well on the issue of prisoners slopping out. It has been difficult for us, too, but if we sign up to a set of rules and to extrajudicial scrutiny, we

need to allow that to run its course. Undermining the independence of the judiciary is a really, really dangerous place for us to go, so I urge everyone, from all points of the compass, to stop it.

John Howell: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that we are arranging a tour around the European Court of Human Rights for members of the delegation, hopefully in the next session, so that they can see for themselves how it works and talk to some of the judges there?

Alyn Smith: That is a very interesting and helpful point. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is inviting the Home Secretary along as well. Perhaps we can arrange that, because my concern is that most ignorance is wilful. We saw an awful lot of wilful ignorance in the European Union debate, and we are seeing some in the Council of Europe debate as well.

I believe, with every fibre of my being, that we are an internationalist nation in Scotland, but the UK is as well, and signing up to these international structures allows decency to be promoted on a wider canvas—the European continent. We have heard how wide a range of organisations is covered within the Council of Europe. We can and should be an enthusiastic part of that, not an example of how to undermine it.

This has been a good debate, and I have been glad to take part in it. However, the SNP will always be an internationalist, outward-looking party, and I would happily work with anybody across this House to those ends.

10.35 am

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Maria. I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing this debate at a critical time for democracy and the rule of law across our continent. I agree that it is a shame that this debated in the main Chamber; I hope that can happen in due course.

It is perhaps arguable that the work of the Council of Europe has never been as critical as it is today, whether that is on human rights, the rule of law and democracy, or, of course, in its crucial election-monitoring role or through the many other activities it undertakes. Not only do we face the pressing threat of Russia's illegal war against the people of Ukraine, but we see attempts to sow disharmony, undermine democracy and foment tensions elsewhere, whether in the western Balkans, Moldova, or the Caucasus—all, of course, within the geographic remit of the Council of Europe.

We have had some excellent speeches today. I echo the hon. Member for Henley in thanking our officials, the permanent representative, our judge, and all those who play a part in delegations, many of whom are represented today, including many of my hon. and right hon. colleagues on this side of the House.

I want to recognise the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) and the work he does, and his recognition of the Council of Europe's role for many member states in the huge, historic shift from the time of fascism and communism to where they have come to today. He spoke about Turkey and others—I will come on to those—and made a powerful statement about the importance of the ECHR and its judgments, and the role that we played in creating it, while also recognising the need for reform, for example in the length of time for judgments.

[Stephen Doughty]

The right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) made some powerful remarks about the importance of the Council of Europe and its geographic reach. He rightly referenced the expulsion of Russia—something I think we would all agree with. He also referenced other issues, such as Cyprus. I had the pleasure of visiting Cyprus recently and agree with many of his comments about the need to resolve that conflict and return to the plan for a bizonal and bicomunal federation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is also important in this context to have as much contact as possible, through the Council of Europe, with Russian human rights campaigners and activists, so that they feel that there are people who are interested in the difficult situation they find themselves in?

Stephen Doughty: I think that the right hon. Gentleman points out the importance of maintaining contacts with all those who are opposing Putin's regime. Indeed, I think that Vladimir Kara-Murza was mentioned. That is a case that we are all deeply concerned about. It is important that we maintain contact through many bodies, including the Council of Europe, with those who would stand up for democracy and human rights in Russia and against the actions of the Putin regime.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) for the work he does as a rapporteur. He made some very important points. I would reference his point on the attacks on the judiciary in the UK; I think that some of the comments we have seen are very damaging. He, like many others, raised the issue of the ECHR and Rwanda, which has obviously been a crucial point.

On that, I echo the comments of the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper): there is no point in the Government blaming anyone but themselves on this issue. Ministers have been pursuing a policy that they know is not workable and that will not tackle criminal gangs. Despite that, they paid Rwanda £120 million and hired a jet that now has not taken off, all because they wanted someone else to blame in a confected row. They ignored the warnings about the policy, including on the potential treatment of torture victims—which of course is a crucial issue for the Council of Europe. It has rightly been referenced in this debate, but I think the Government need to take a hard look at themselves to understand why they are in the position they find themselves in this morning.

The Council of Europe has done excellent work in many areas since its foundation. I mentioned the Committee for the Prevention of Torture, which makes unannounced visits to places of detention. The Committee of Social Rights also verifies that rights to housing, health, education and employment are being implemented. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochdale mentioned the anti-corruption work of GRECO, and the Council of Europe also works with other bodies, including the OSCE, the EU, the United Nations and other international bodies, which use Council of Europe reports in pursuing their own excellent work in these areas.

The ECHR itself—I would say this again as a salutary warning to those who make unwarranted attacks on the ECHR—has delivered more than 16,000 judgments.

Let us remember the wide range of those judgments, including on the right to life, the prohibition of torture, the prohibition of slavery and forced labour, the right to liberty and security, the right to a fair trial, the right to respect for private and family life, freedom of religion, freedom of expression, the prohibition of discrimination, and indeed the protection of property. Of course, one of the Court's most high-profile cases was its ruling that Russia was responsible for the murder of Alexander Litvinenko. That is the scope of the ECHR's work and it needs to be more fully understood. As has been mentioned, the abolition of capital punishment—something I have long campaigned for—has been a precondition for accession to the Council of Europe since 1985. Indeed, the Council of Europe has played a critical role in ensuring that we do not have the death penalty in member states.

The Istanbul convention has rightly been referenced, and I have a question for the Minister on that. We need to acknowledge that violence against women is a human rights violation and a form of discrimination. The Council of Europe has carried out work on the fight against discrimination for reasons of sexual orientation or gender identity. These are critical issues, particularly when we see backsliding by some members. This is a matter that I hope the Council will pay increased attention over the months and years to come.

I reiterate Labour's unshakeable commitment to maximising opportunities to work alongside allies and partners on issues of human rights, the rule of law and democracy through as many multilateral institutions as possible, and a critical institution is the Council of Europe. Today's world is too precarious and, frankly, dangerous to operate unilaterally, as unfortunately we have seen the Government do on too many occasions recently. I hope the Government and the Minister will reiterate our commitment to working through the Council of Europe on these issues, because we face some deep threats across our continent and the world, and the Council of Europe will be key to tackling them.

Beyond reiterating its solidarity with Ukraine and expressing an unwavering commitment to its sovereignty, the Council adopted an action plan for Ukraine, including measures to protect displaced people, to support legal professionals, to document human rights violations—which is critical when we see some of the horrific atrocities currently taking place in Ukraine—and to protect the rights of vulnerable groups, including children and the Roma. As the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) said, it is important that links with civil society in Russia and Belarus are strengthened. That grassroots work is critical in fighting back against the Putin war machine and the Kremlin's unrelenting disinformation campaign across Europe.

Geraint Davies: Would my hon. Friend accept that it is important to accept the credibility and importance of the statutory role of the Council of Europe's Court? If other countries fail to abide by these rules, that could collectively undermine the fundamental values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law that we are trying to push forward. The Government should think twice before putting stuff in the media about the Council of Europe and the convention when they are found in need by the Court.

Stephen Doughty: I agree with the principles of what my hon. Friend is saying, and that applies to judgments of other international courts, including the International Court Of Justice, which the Government have also been taken to task over on a number of issues. I mentioned Ukraine, which is crucial in our focus, but the situation in the western Balkans is also very serious at the moment—the Minister is nodding her head. The Council of Europe has been playing a critical role there in strengthening judicial processes and promoting peace and democracy.

The case of Turkey has been mentioned. The Committee of Ministers' decision to launch infringement proceedings against Ankara over the Osman Kavala case demonstrates its commitment to the Council's central values without fear or favour. The hon. Member for Henley rightly referenced wider concerns about Turkey and its infringement of civil and political rights.

John Howell: Will the hon. Member join us in supporting Kosovo's membership of the Council of Europe, which will be coming forward later in the year?

Stephen Doughty: I certainly would. I plan to visit Kosovo in the near future, and I am sure that that will be an issue on the agenda during my visit there and to the western Balkans. That is something I certainly support.

I want to end by asking the Minister a few questions. Can she give us some reassurances about the Government's wider commitments to the Council of Europe and the ECHR? The Prime Minister has refused to rule out leaving the ECHR. We have seen the many trailed proposals about a so-called Bill of rights, which could diminish the role of the ECHR and undermine its positions. There is a serious risk of undermining some crucial human rights that we all enjoy. Also, it is worth mentioning the crucial role that the ECHR played in the Good Friday agreement. I would like to see the Minister give some reassurance on that point.

Secondly, can the Minister explain the reasoning behind the Government's reservation of article 59 of the Istanbul convention, which protects migrant and refugee women from domestic abuse and violence? Finally, given the point I made about working together with allies, and given the scale of the challenges we face across Europe and the world, will she assure us that the Government will stop the unilateral approach that they seem to have drifted towards in recent weeks and months and, instead, work together?

10.45 am

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): It is an absolute pleasure to be serving under your chairmanship this morning, Dame Maria. My right hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), the Minister for Europe and North America, would have been delighted to take part in this debate, but he is currently travelling on ministerial duties. It is therefore my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government.

I start by saying how grateful I am to my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) for securing this debate. I echo the tributes paid by right hon. and hon. Members to his work on the Council of Europe as the leader of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly. My hon. Friend and the other members of the UK delegation play an important role in promoting the Council of Europe and its work throughout the UK.

I note that a number of Members across the House mentioned their wish to hold this debate in the main Chamber. I think that the Council of Europe's importance and the work done by the UK delegation is reflected in the sheer number of Members present.

While I am lavishing praise on my hon. Friend, I will also pick up on the points my hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) made about the support my hon. Friend the Member for Henley has provided to the newbies, a number of whom are present and have made contributions today. I note that my hon. Friend might be providing some French lessons, as well.

It has been an important debate, discussing the promotion of the work of the Council of Europe and the UK's role in that. I am grateful for the contributions from other right hon. and hon. Members, and I will hopefully pick up on many of the points they raised.

As hon. Members have mentioned, it was Winston Churchill who first publicly suggested the creation of a Council of Europe nearly 80 years ago. As Europe dusted itself off after world war two, the UK played a critical role in founding the Council, and we have been an active defender of its values—freedom, liberty and the rule of law in Europe—ever since.

Putin has brought war back to our continent on a scale not seen since Churchill's time, with devastating consequences for Ukraine and the wider world. Putin believes he can win through oppression, coercion and invasion, but Europe has been roused, not cowed, by his aggression, and the free world has united behind Ukraine in its fight for freedom and self-determination through sanctions, aid and military support.

The Council of Europe set the tone by suspending Russia within 36 hours of the invasion, and subsequently expelling them completely. As has been mentioned, the UK delegation was, naturally, at the forefront of calls for that expulsion. We commend the Council for that quick, decisive action, which helped to isolate Putin's regime on the international stage and sent a clear signal that his actions are not tolerated by the global community. The Council also has a role to play in supporting Ukraine, ensuring it has the financial and technical support to rebuild in the aftermath of Putin's war, including support from Council of Europe specialists.

As mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and others, the Foreign Secretary attended the Council's ministerial meeting in Turin, which underlined the need to consolidate standards on human rights, democracy and the rule of law for our future security. We must learn lessons from Ukraine and do more to protect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of states from those threatening to undermine them—for example, in the Balkans, in the eastern neighbourhood region, and in the Caucasus.

Let me turn to the budget because my hon. Friend the Member for Henley, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) mentioned it. The UK is committed to ensuring that the Council of Europe has the funding it needs to deliver. Russia's expulsion leaves a €34 million shortfall in funding. All member states, including the UK, have committed to covering the shortfall for this year. We will work with the secretary-general to understand

[Amanda Milling]

the longer-term impacts, but it is important that longer-term financing is considered alongside the Council of Europe's future strategic direction.

Members have mentioned the wider work of the Council. Beyond Ukraine, the Council continues to champion equality in other areas, and we agree with raising the profile and the importance of the organisation in that work. We will aim to increase engagement, ensuring that, wherever possible, PACE rapporteurs are able to get appropriate levels of access, and last month in this place, we started the process of ratifying its convention to prevent violence against women, better known as the Istanbul convention. I know how hard my hon. Friend the Member for Henley has pushed for that ratification, and I commend him for his efforts.

The UK can also do more with the Council of Europe to reduce violence and discrimination against LGBT people in some member states, and I shall look with interest to see what further progress there is on that matter. We also remain committed to improving the efficiency and the effectiveness of the European Court of Human Rights. We will work with—

Tony Lloyd: Will the Minister give way?

Amanda Milling: Briefly.

Tony Lloyd: Before she leaves the matter of the Istanbul convention, will she respond to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) about the decision to make a reservation with respect to migrant women? That is an important issue, and we would like some certainty about the Government's direction of travel, which is simply not yet there.

Amanda Milling: I am happy to follow up with more specifics, but the Home Secretary made a written ministerial statement to Parliament on 17 May, announcing the beginning of the process to ratify the convention on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which is more commonly known as the Istanbul convention. We expect the process to be completed and the UK to have ratified the convention by 31 July.

We support members in the western Balkans and the eastern neighbourhood to meet their obligations under the European convention on human rights. Several colleagues mentioned Turkey and, specifically, the case of Osman Kavala. We are concerned about the judgment against Osman Kavala on 25 April, and the failure to implement the European Court of Human Rights ruling to release him immediately, resulting in the commencement of infringement proceedings against Turkey. We continue to raise the case with the Turkish Government.

The promotion of freedom of religion or belief is another key area for the UK, and for the Council. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not in his place—[*Interruption.*] Oh, he has moved; he is in his place. So many people face horrific persecution and abuse because of what they believe. As colleagues will be aware, next month, we host the International Ministerial Conference on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and we welcome the Council of Europe's participation in helping draw attention to that pressing issue. We also

recognise the opportunity for the Council to work with other organisations, including the OSCE, and continue to encourage close co-operation.

I want to pick up the point about the Kosovo application. The UK supports Kosovo's international integration, including its membership of the Council of Europe. Application for membership of the Council is a signal of Kosovo's commitment to democracy, the rule of law and the protection of rights of all its citizens.

I will briefly touch on the ECHR ruling last night because a number of Members have mentioned it. As the Home Secretary stated, we are disappointed that legal challenge and last-minute claims have meant that last night's flight was unable to depart. We will not be deterred from doing the right thing in delivering our plan to control our nation's borders. Our legal team are reviewing every decision made about the flight, and preparation for the next flight begins now.

On the Council of Europe's future, Russia's expulsion is the start of a new era. The UK has been vocal on the organisation's future without Russia, asking it to pursue deeper economic, diplomatic, technological and security ties with allies around the globe. As part of that, we have highlighted the need for reform, as hon. Members mentioned, to ensure that it is as effective as possible. We stand ready to assist following the latest eminent persons review.

I end by reiterating the UK's recognition of the valuable work of the Council of Europe, about which we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber. The organisation has stood the test of time and is now entering a new era where its values face challenge. However, together, as a coalition of sovereign nations, we can advance the frontiers of freedom, stand up for open societies and unleash the power of our collective thirst for peace, just as Churchill imagined so long ago.

10.56 am

John Howell: It has already been stated that I try to run the delegation as a cross-party group, but it is important to bear in mind that it is also a cross-Houses group that includes Members of the House of Lords. I am grateful to Lord Foulkes for attending most of the debate. I thank everyone who has participated. It has been heartwarming to see such enthusiasm and agreement on the important things that the Council of Europe does. I hope that we can look forward to a much longer debate in the main Chamber.

Tony Lloyd: I associate the Opposition parties with the hon. Member's ambitions. He is assiduous in looking for ministerial responses, but the Minister did not answer my question, nor that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). Will he join me in asking for responses from Ministers?

John Howell: I would ask that question on a different occasion and in a different way, and I would hope to get a better answer than the hon. Member. On that note, I will end the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the work of the Council of Europe.

Sustainable Food Supply and Cultured Meat

11 am

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): I will call Sir Roger Gale to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as that is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered sustainable food supply and cultured meat.

Thank you, Dame Maria. I apologise for subjecting you to myself twice in one morning. I thank the Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for being here during an incredibly busy week for her. I know how hard she has been working, and I am deeply grateful for her presence. I would also like to thank the Good Food Institute, the Nature Friendly Farming Network, the Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation and Ivy Farm Technologies for opening my eyes and stimulating this debate.

It is a fact of parliamentary life that we go to a lot of receptions. Outside this place, people think they are a waste of time, but if we look and listen, we learn from them. The Ivy Farm presentation stimulated my interest in a subject that, frankly, I knew very little about until I was briefed. I am not starting from a conclusion; I am hoping to open an ongoing debate.

I will first place on record some quotes from the Government's food strategy, which was published this week. The primary objective is:

"A prosperous agri-food and seafood sector that ensures a secure food supply in an unpredictable world and contributes to the levelling-up agenda through good quality jobs around the country."

The second objective is:

"A sustainable nature positive, affordable food system that provides choice and access to high quality products that support healthier and home-grown diets for all."

The next point follows on from what we were talking about this morning and relates to Ukraine.

"The conflict in Ukraine has shown us that domestic food production is a vital contributor to national resilience and food security. Domestic food production can reduce the offshoring of food production to countries that do not meet our high environmental and animal welfare standards."

In the foreword to the document, the Secretary of State writes:

"Technological solutions are developing at pace. Our future farming policy will support innovative solutions to the environmental challenges we face."

The final quote leads directly into what I want to briefly discuss this morning.

"Innovation will be a key component to sustainably boost production and profitability across the supply chain. We have committed to spend over £270 million through our Farming Innovation Programme and are supporting £120 million investment in research across the food system in partnership with UK Research and Innovation, in addition to other funding packages."

That is the key and why I am standing here this morning. The potential, as I understand it, for cultivated meat is huge. Cultivated meat, scientifically, is meat

processed and produced from tissue. It is not, and never will be, a replacement for fillet steak, a pork chop or a leg of lamb. What it can do is augment and supplement meat production in a way that reduces carbon dioxide emissions and the number of animals required for slaughter, which is an objective that most of us would like to see followed through.

I was astonished to learn that 18% of CO₂ emissions—more than all CO₂ emissions from transport globally—are caused by animals. As I understand it, the cultivation of meat can obviate a significant portion of those CO₂ emissions, and I believe that to be a desirable objective.

I wish to comment on one by-product of this issue. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister launched a "grow for Britain" plan in Cornwall; I simply say to the Minister, and through her to Downing Street, that it is an admirable objective, but if we are to grow for Britain, we need the farmland to grow crops on, which means not sacrificing our prime agricultural land to development in the way that "Builder Boris" is seeking to do at the moment. It has got to stop.

Let me come back to the issue of cultivated meat, on which I can be brief. Ivy Farm briefed me to indicate that, frankly, research in this whole area is lamentably underfunded in the United Kingdom and is therefore slow. Singapore approved the consumption of cultivated meat in 2020. In 2021, the United States approved a major research programme into the development of cultivated meat. China has put cultivated meat on its development road map this year. Canada and Israel are investing heavily indeed in this area.

My plea to the Minister is quite simple. As I said, I do not start from a conclusion, and I do not know what contribution cultivated meat can make in totality to our demand, consumption and sustainability, but I believe the potential is very significant indeed. If that is so, it seems to me that if we in the United Kingdom are to get ahead of the game—sadly, we too often remain behind the curve—we have to examine carefully our investment in research and development, and make sure that our regulation does not get in the way of the introduction into the market of cultivated meat.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. I sense that he may be drawing his remarks to a conclusion and waiting for the Minister to respond. Before he does so, could he perhaps also comment on the importance of a proper public sector food procurement strategy that backs British-produced food, be that cultivated meat or meat and other agricultural products that are farmed in this country? That is something we have not seen to date, and there is every opportunity, now that we left the EU, for the Government to take this issue forward.

Sir Roger Gale: That is slightly wider than the scope of this debate, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to suggest that we need a co-ordinated initiative to ensure we deliver sustainable foods across the board. I know that the Minister will tell us we are largely sustainable and self-reliant with regard to meats and grains, and that there is a shortage in vegetables and fruit. I think we can go further. I know, because I happened to discuss this issue with the Minister only last night—I am sure she will answer my hon. Friend—that the

[Sir Roger Gale]

Government have an initiative that may not be entirely Conservative but is certainly valid. It does not try to direct farmers on what they should grow but seeks to ensure properly that the right needs are met in the right places and at the right time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. Ivy Farm had a reception here that I visited with some apprehension, to be fair, but I understood the issues and I understand what the right hon. Gentleman suggests and the necessity of it. He referred to the Nature Friendly Farming Network, which is going to have a reception today. One of my constituents, Stephen Alexander, will be there. He is involved with Dexter cattle, and he is showing great initiative to bring about a better product for use across the whole of Northern Ireland. As well as the Ivy Farm example that the right hon. Gentleman referred to, we should encourage the Nature Friendly Farming Network that Stephen Alexander is part of.

Sir Roger Gale: I believe nature-friendly farming is completely compatible with the other objectives—a point that was made to me by the network. They are not mutually exclusive. The Conservative Animal Welfare Foundation, to which I also referred, is not vegan or vegetarian but it is about animal welfare. The more we can do to utilise science and technology to improve animal welfare standards and minimise the number of animals we actually use, while maintaining our self-sufficiency, the better.

What I want from the Minister is simple. It is a commitment to endeavour to invest in research and development. As I said, I am not committed to this idea, but I do not believe we are talking about frankenfoods or putting livestock farmers out of business. I think the development of cultivated meat is completely compatible with the maintenance of a live animal sector. They should be complimentary to each other. I am not seeking to foist yet another job on the Minister, but if it is not too big an ask, it does seem to me that what we really need in this field is a designated champion to take this project forward and to put us in the vanguard of development, rather than the tail end of the train.

11.11 am

The Minister for Farming, Fisheries and Food (Victoria Prentis): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Maria. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on securing a debate on such an interesting issue. In the Government's food strategy, which we published on Monday, we acknowledged the opportunities for growth in the alternative protein sector. The sector covers a wide range of products and technologies—from cultured meat to the use of insect-derived protein in animal feed—that, as my right hon. Friend said, could be complementary to traditional animal systems.

Dr Poulter: On that point, protein from different sources has different qualities. Humans need protein that is as close as possible to the protein in our own bodies. That is why the points that my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) made about cultivated meat are particularly relevant if we are looking at developing the sector. Quorn and other

forms of protein do not necessarily have all the amino acids that humans need. Will my hon. Friend the Minister take that point back to the Department after the debate?

Victoria Prentis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I politely refer him to the Government's food strategy, published on Monday, which carefully makes the case for a healthy, sustainable and, above all, balanced diet that takes into account all the nutrients we need as the complex beings we are. Our food system is broad and complex, and the way we regulate it affects many different Government Departments. The way we talk about food is incredibly personal to the individual making food choices on a daily basis.

It is important that we as a Government do not stand here telling people what to eat but enable them to make healthy and sustainable choices. That is why it is important that we are having this debate today and looking at new forms of alternative protein that have not previously been available to us. The strategy identifies new opportunities to make the food system healthier, more sustainable, more resilient and more accessible to everybody throughout England.

I would like to give my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet the commitments about investment and regulation that he has asked for. On investment, the UK has been at the forefront of innovative protein development, and we will continue to financially support research and innovation in that area. Indeed, we are already doing so through our partnership with UK Research and Innovation, investing more than £130 million in research across the food system. We will continue to work with UKRI, industry and consumer groups to develop joint priority areas for funding, which will doubtless include alternative proteins.

On regulation, the Food Standards Agency is using the freedoms offered by Brexit to review our novel foods regulatory framework. Whenever anyone wants to put a new food on the market, they have to do so under the aegis of those regulations.

The food strategy commits the Government to developing dedicated guidance materials for those seeking approval for new protein products. A great deal of cross-Government work on alternative proteins is already taking place, with officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs collaborating with the Food Standards Agency. The Cabinet Office is taking a very close interest in this issue, and cross-Government meetings are taking place with the Department for International Trade and the Department of Health and Social Care. A group is starting to form that will take forward the regulatory basis for alternative protein development, if that becomes sensible.

It all sounds very exciting, although it is fair to say, as my right hon. Friend did, that not everyone agrees on the extent of the predicted benefits of the development of alternative proteins. However, it is clear that cultured meat presents a number of fascinating and promising opportunities for the future, and that this innovative technology may well present real economic growth potential. Though some market predictions are perhaps over-optimistic, there is clearly a willingness among private investors to invest in this exciting new industry.

There are significant challenges, specifically around scaling up the new technologies to make them commercially viable and taking steps to address any concerns about

consumer acceptance. Government officials from across Whitehall will continue to work together on this matter. I am not going to tell people what to eat, but I want our consumers to be presented with a wide range of clearly labelled options. Not starting from a conclusion is a very good attitude to take towards new forms of alternative protein.

I refer all Members to the Government's food strategy, which we published on Monday. It sets out exciting new policy ideas and a determination to support our farmers and producers to help us with our food security. It sets a goal of national production, and it also includes the new and quite brave idea of a land use strategy, which I think will address some of my right hon. Friend's concerns about where we build, where we grow, and where we let nature thrive without growing. The most important takeaway from the strategy is that the Government are committed to supporting farmers to produce the food we need for our national food security—an issue that has rightly gone to the very top of the political agenda.

There are also exciting points in the strategy about public procurement, including the fact that we now have a 50% goal for sourcing locally, and exciting announcements about innovation and technology, which will help to address the matters that were covered in the debate. It makes important points about sustainable farming—regenerative farming, which we will hear about in the nature-friendly farmers meeting that many of us will be attending—and makes it clear that farming, the environment and nature are not exclusive, but can and must go hand in hand. In helping our farmers to produce the food we all need, we have to make sure they do so in an environmentally sensitive way.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.

Fire and Rehire Tactics

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant document: e-petition 575544, Ban fire and rehire employment tactics*]

2.30 pm

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the use of fire and rehire tactics.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I am delighted to be able to bring this debate once again to Parliament, and to be able to combine it with a petition that has been signed by over 15,000 members of the public who, like me, feel passionately about this issue.

Ms McVey, I apologise if you are getting déjà vu, because just over a year ago I stood in this same room and spoke about this very matter. My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) brought an important debate to the House and Members, on a cross-party basis, spoke eloquently for the rights of their constituents in the face of the repugnant practice of fire and rehire. Sadly, the fact that we are here again today is indicative of how little progress has been made by the Government, who have been hiding behind reports and consultations. There has been little concrete action.

Hon. Members would be forgiven for thinking that the Government have been somewhat distracted over recent weeks, as they have been embroiled in another employment debate a little closer to home: Operation Save Big Dog. They have been trying desperately to save the job of a blundering, misleading and morally bankrupt Prime Minister. It is the same old story from the Government: repeated promises, with no action. This is despite the fact that we are approaching the fifth anniversary of the Taylor review.

Hon. Members may recall that, in January 2022, I secured and led a parliamentary debate on the Taylor review and modern working practices. Many of us pressed the Government to keep their promises and initiate reform, but we have had absolutely no joy whatever. We have seen fire and rehire practices condemned by countless Ministers, and the employment Bill has been promised a staggering 20 times over the past three years. The Bill being published has a lot in common with the Prime Minister resigning: both are events that should have happened months ago and that are clearly supported by a majority of the public and MPs, only to be needlessly delayed by Tory incompetence. As they stall, however, unscrupulous employers act.

No less than 10% of workers have faced fire and rehire in their jobs. Almost a quarter of employees say their working terms have been downgraded since the first lockdown, and 800 loyal P&O Ferries workers have been scandalously sacked. All the Government can say is that their planned statutory code will be announced “in due course”. Given how often they say that, I am beginning to think that “in due course” might be their next manifesto pledge and slogan: “Get it done in due course.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It was not just the issue of the workers being laid off. It was about those whom P&O picked up, who did not know about or understand the health and safety issues on the ferries. That was part of the problem as well, because P&O took away the people who knew what to do and replaced them with people who, with great respect, did not have the same ability.

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and that is why it is important that we have skilled workers who need be regarded for their loyalty to the job, and for their competence.

Call me cynical, but it seems that certain policies can be expedited over others, such as the Home Office having no difficulty in swiftly implementing the inhumane Rwanda policy or the Government pushing to break international law, or selling off the popular and successful Channel 4.

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend not think that part of the problem for the Government of the moment is that, if they try to expedite fire and rehire while we are trying to fire the current Prime Minister, they will unfortunately have to rehire him on worse terms and we will all suffer?

Mr Dhesi: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point and with a great deal of wit.

While the Government can do all the things that I have outlined, it seems that supporting workers' rights has been abandoned at the bottom of the pile. It is not a priority for this Government, who seem to value their own job security above that of the average working person.

What does the Prime Minister expect from our great British workforce? Under this Government, are workers just meant to put up and shut up about their inadequate pay, conditions and benefits, without having adequate legal protections? Thankfully, due to the excellent work of unions such as Unite, Unison, GMB, the Transport Salaried Staffs Association or TSSA, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers or RMT, ASLEF and others, there is some support and respite from fire and rehire for employees. However, without legislation, I fear that this practice will persist.

It is clear that we need to outlaw fire and rehire. We do not need some sort of consultation but to outlaw it and urgently introduce a Bill to strengthen workers' rights. Lip service will not stop fire and rehire; an effective ban will. However, Government plans on a statutory code fall woefully short and even then the Government are struggling to implement the bare minimum required. Current Government proposals would mean that the practice of fire and rehire remains legal, consultation procedures would not be improved and workers would continue to be dismissed for not agreeing to an inferior contract. Quite simply, all that that will achieve is to increase a company's financial calculation before it uses fire and rehire tactics regardless.

We already know that the Government plans do not work. P&O Ferries calculated that it was financially worthwhile foregoing consultations, despite knowing that they were necessary, before cutting almost 800 jobs and replacing those employees with agency workers. P&O's chief executive said:

"I would make this decision again, I'm afraid."

Unscrupulous employers are acting without consequence. Companies have examined our current legislation, deemed that it is not fit for purpose and then exploited it. Failing to turn the tide now will be a green light for other employers to behave in exactly the same way.

P&O Ferries did not act in a vacuum. Its decision came after immoral fire and rehire tactics were used persistently throughout the pandemic. British Airways and other such companies were called "a national disgrace" by the Transport Committee for their actions, which put thousands of jobs at risk and led to my inbox being flooded by messages from concerned Slough constituents who work at Heathrow airport. Employees who had worked for BA for decades were threatened with being cast off at the beginning of a global pandemic, which is unforgivable. It was only due to the excellent work of unions on behalf of the workers involved that deals were reached and jobs were saved, but it should not have had to come to that.

British Gas, which is owned by Centrica, threatened the livelihoods of 5,000 employees, using the threat of coronavirus as a smokescreen to act unethically against many of my Slough constituents, and I know that many other right hon. and hon. Members' constituents were also affected. Before an agreement was reached that brought the dispute to an end, there were 44 days of strike action and 500 workers were dismissed. Again, without the unions thousands more workers would have been left without a job and without representation.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman and I walked to this debate together from the main Chamber, where there is severe trade union bashing going on from the Government side. Is that not the reality of the current Government, namely that they are too busy bashing trade unions, not working with them?

Mr Dhesi: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. That issue is exactly what we discussed as we made our way from the main Chamber into Westminster Hall. The Government are trying to pick a fight with unions rather than dealing with issues or coming to the negotiating table. For example, the hugely disruptive rail strikes, which will have an enormous impact on many of us, could have been resolved by now if Rail Ministers actually done the job that they were supposed to do.

As I was saying, quite frankly the Prime Minister has job security that employees can only dream of. Put simply, fire and rehire is not a negotiating tactic but a direct threat to workers, it has no place in our modern Great Britain, and the Government should be ashamed that fire and rehire has been allowed to proliferate on their watch.

I hope that the Minister has some good news for the thousands of people who have been affected by this abhorrent tactic, and for the millions more who could be at risk from it. It is disappointing that not a single Conservative colleague—apart from the Minister—has come to speak for their constituents. We should be acting in cross-party solidarity to battle against fire and rehire on our constituents' behalf, and to press Ministers to finally introduce legislation.

We should have working standards that we are proud of and that celebrate our country's fantastic workforce, but the Government seem intent on a race to the bottom when it comes to workers' rights. Warm words will not do it any more; clear-cut legislation will.

Several hon. Members rose—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. As you all know, we will need to get to the Front-Bench speakers a little over half an hour before the end of the debate, at around 3.28 pm, but I will not put a limit on speeches as it does not seem that we need one.

2.40 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you very much indeed, Ms McVey; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing the debate and on opening it so well.

I have had quite a lot to do with the Minister recently. Although I have specific views on the lack of an employment Bill, I pay tribute to him for the constructive way in which he is working with me and my colleagues to ensure that we get neonatal leave and pay in statute—we have been pushing on that matter for a while. I thank my own trade union, Unite, for its helpful briefing in advance of the debate, and I will come back to a number of points on that.

I will not press this point too much given that you are in the Chair, Ms McVey—I know that you are quite an influential member of the Blue Collar Conservatives—but as the hon. Member for Slough was speaking, I was reflecting on the fact that workers' rights are something that Blue Collar Conservatives should think about. There is no doubt that the British political landscape has changed significantly on workers' rights. People on this side of the Chamber, and indeed people in Scotland, may not be happy about it, but there is no doubt that the Conservative-voting demographic has changed significantly, and it would be rather foolhardy of Conservative Members—particularly those who represent red wall seats—to overlook blue collar workers who have sadly been subjected to fire and rehire practices. I would not be so bold as to indicate, for the purposes of *Hansard*, whether the Chair is nodding.

It was interesting that during the Brexit referendum, people were regularly told that Brexit was about taking back control. I happen to believe that Brexit was a bad idea—I still believe that it was largely about deregulation and a bonfire of workers' rights—but I reserved a degree of judgment post-2016, and the jury is still out on whether the Government take workers' rights seriously.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the Government have promised time and again that an employment Bill would be introduced. It is quite telling that there is still no employment Bill three years into this Parliament, particularly when the world of work is changing. Ministers have to confront the reality: actions speak louder than words, so if Brexit was about taking back control and improving workers' rights, an employment Bill should be forthcoming.

In some respects, I actually feel quite sorry for British Airways. It quite rightly got a lot of flak for its deployment of fire and rehire tactics, but it was not the first company to use them. Asda was doing it long ago, and as we have seen with the likes of P&O, people—bosses, frankly—are pursuing something that is completely immoral but not currently illegal. Without an employment Bill that properly enshrines workers' rights post-Brexit, the likes of P&O, British Airways, Asda and so many other organisations will go down that path.

One reason why I am concerned that an employment Bill has not been introduced is because it is no secret that the current Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the right hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) authored—with the right hon. Members for Witham (Priti Patel) and for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab) and others—a book called “*Britannia Unchained*”. In essence, the book is about changing ways of work. Bear in mind that the authors are serving Ministers, one of whom heads up the Department that is responsible for workers' right. I would not normally promote this book, but let me share a key quote from it:

“The British are among the worst idlers in the world. We work among the lowest hours, we retire early and our productivity is poor. Whereas Indian children aspire to be doctors or businessmen, the British are more interested in football and pop music.”

I hope the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has changed his mind since he and his colleagues authored that book. The fact that in 2022, companies such as P&O, British Airways, Asda and many others can still get away with practices such as fire and rehire, suggests that the Government's doctrine has not changed from “*Britannia Unchained*”. Many of us, particularly in a Scottish context, think that leaving Conservatives in charge of workers' rights is akin to leaving a lion in charge of an abattoir.

2.45 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. Fire and rehire is wrong. I know it, everyone here knows it, workers know it, the Government know it, the Prime Minister knows it, and the Minister knows it, too.

Fire and rehire is unfair. It levels down; it is about deregulation and a continual rolling back of workers' rights and an attack on trade unions. There is not a constituency in the land in which this pernicious and cruel practice has not happened or is not on the verge of happening, with worse terms and conditions held over workers' heads as a constant threat, keeping them awake at night.

The vile way in which P&O workers were treated recently, handcuffed by private security and marched from their workplace, left me disgusted and angry. The route we are heading in with this Government and workers' rights means we need to take this seriously. Whether it be fire and rehire, zero-hours contracts or the constant insecurity of those in the workplace, the Government do not care about the plight of working people. If they did, they would have legislated against this damaging practice already and, at the very least, have produced the long-awaited and 20-times promised employment Bill.

If any of my former Conservative colleagues were here, they could correct me, but I hope they agree that the practice makes no sense from economic stance. If we do not stop this abhorrent practice, rogue bosses at firms affecting my constituents, such as British Gas, British Airways, Go North West buses and Asda, aiming to save a few quid with fire and rehire will leave us all to pay. If people end up on lower wages, they will have to claim more social security, such as universal credit. Instead of companies paying for redundancies, it ends with the taxpayer bailing out the companies.

[Christian Wakeford]

As much as the Government like to preach about work being the best way out of poverty, that cannot be when the majority of people claiming benefits are in work. There is only one winner with fire and rehire, and it is not the workers or their families. It is greedy bosses who continually ride roughshod over working people.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) for his campaign against this practice with his private Member's Bill last year, which I supported on many different platforms. That Bill was regrettably not taken up by the Government. On a wider note, I would also like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) for the great work he did on the green paper for a new deal for working people, which will go a huge way to forming a transforming Labour Government that will, once and for all, stop fire and rehire.

2.48 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), and indeed other Members who have spoken. I feel strongly about this issue, which I have spoken about before. There is nobody in Westminster Hall who does not have deep respect for the Minister, because he always tries to respond to our queries. This issue strikes at the core of employment, so I am keen to hear what he can say to reassure us on some of the things I will speak about.

This is a topical issue that causes many employees across the UK immense stress. There was widespread use of the fire and rehire tactic during the covid pandemic, as there was a need to alter working ways to adapt to the situation. Many employers have used the strategy to their success, but a majority see it as highly ineffective and unfair. In his significant contribution, the hon. Member for Slough mentioned P&O Ferries. When the P&O workers were fired, the agency staff that came in did not address health and safety issues. That is not to be disrespectful to the agency staff, but there are certain standards that must be met, and they were not met. The hon. Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) is absolutely right that it was despicable to come on to the ferry in Larne and lead people off, some of them in handcuffs. That really angered me. I could not believe that any company anywhere could resort to such tactics.

It got worse. Even after some staff were trained in health and safety issues, what happened in the Irish sea? The engines of the ferry from Larne to Stranraer went off, and it floated in the middle of one of the busiest sea lanes around Britain for more than two hours until the staff could get the engine restarted. That is another example of the potential safety impact of fire and rehire tactics.

I want to put on the record how strongly I feel for those who lost their jobs. The Minister knows all about this, because I brought it up in a question on the day that it happened, as the news broke that Thursday. He answered my question very helpfully and said that he was trying to address the issue, and I think he has shown a willingness to do so. It is important to note that this process is not unlawful, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said, but it does involve dismissals. Many employers have been taken to court for unfair

dismissal, and the technique has the potential to turn extremely nasty. If I was one of those workers, I would be pretty narked, to use an Ulster Scotsism.

A survey of workers by the TUC in November found that, since March 2020, 9% of workers had been told to reapply for their jobs on worse terms and conditions. Fire and rehire is becoming a common technique for both large and small businesses. The Government have said that it should not be used as a negotiation technique, but that it should not be made illegal. I follow others in asking the Minister whether he would be prepared to consider introducing legislation on fire and rehire, which has been used to the detriment of workers in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We need clarity and we need legislation that brings change.

Back home in Northern Ireland, this technique has been used by employers amidst the pandemic. Almost one in five 18 to 24-year olds—20% of that workforce—have said that their employer tried to rehire them on inferior terms during the pandemic. Black and ethnic minority workers are almost twice as likely as white workers to face fire and rehire policies. If such policies are detrimental to somebody because of their skin, their religion or whatever it may be, that is wrong, and I underline my request for the Government to introduce legislation to enforce that. As the unions have stated, one in four workers—25%—said that they had experienced a downgrading of employment terms and conditions as a result of fire and rehire.

We have seen the fire and rehire technique causing major problems, for instance in British Gas. Around 7,000 British Gas engineers staged 44 days of strike action after the company threatened to sack them if they did not sign up to detrimental changes to their terms and conditions. Why would they sign up to that? I do not understand how a company can just say to people, "Tell you what, we are just going to change all your terms and conditions, and you need to sign this or you are away." Perhaps I am old-fashioned and see right and wrong in very simplistic terms, but I see that as wrong. We need to protect the workers. I am not putting the Minister on the spot—forgive me for being fairly direct about this—but we need legislation that does so.

Christian Wakeford: I thank the hon. Gentleman—indeed, my hon. Friend in this instance—for giving way. Part of the problem is that at the moment the Government insist on stronger regulation and guidance, but that is clearly not the solution. That did not and would not help the workers at P&O, whose chief executive admitted that he knew he was breaking the law and said he would do so again. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that guidance is not the solution; it has to be legislation?

Jim Shannon: I thank my colleague the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree with that, sincerely in my heart. As I said earlier, the Government have said that fire and rehire should not be used as a negotiation technique, but that it should also not be made illegal. Well, that is a legislative change that the hon. Member for Bury South wants to see, as well as everyone who has spoken and everyone who will speak afterwards. I want to see that legislative change in place as soon possible.

It is essential that an environment is created whereby people enjoy their work. I am very privileged to do a job that I always wished to do, but never for one second did

I think that I, a wee boy from Ballywalter, would actually be here, so I am fortunate. People need to enjoy their work if they are to work hard and make a contribution to how their firm progresses. If staff are unsettled and unhappy in their work, for whatever reason, there is an onus on the employer to work harder to make them happy.

Moreover, employers rely on workers to fulfil goals and create successes, hence the need to prioritise their needs and not be dictated to. If someone wants their firm to be successful and do well, they need a happy workforce, and vice versa. I have six girls who work with me in my two offices, and I can say in all honesty that they seem fairly happy, so maybe this employer is treating them the right way. I understand how important it is to motivate staff and keep them happy.

David Linden: Although there are things that the hon. Gentleman and I disagree on politically, I had the great pleasure of visiting him in his constituency and meeting the staff in his constituency office. Would he reflect—as I hope will the Minister—that many of the staff who work for us would be appalled and would not stand for it if we turned around to them and said, “Do you know what? We are going to fire you from your job, but then you can come back and work for less pay, less holiday time and more uncertain hours”? Does he think that parliamentary staff, including the staff of the Minister and the Secretary of State, would sign up for that?

Jim Shannon: The answer, as we all know, is that they would not. This House protects the workers here by setting bands of pay, giving them the right conditions for their holidays and if they are sick. It does it here, so I think it should do the same for other workers, which is what I would like to see.

Employers must follow a set minimum dismissal procedure and a collective redundancy process is involved. The depth of this issue has to be met with scrutiny and we must hold business owners to the highest level of account to ensure that our workers are protected.

There definitely needs to be greater communication within Government. I say that with great respect, because the Minister knows that I hold him in the highest respect because of the way he does his job. When we ask him questions, he comes back with the answers—he really tries when giving us answers. I say that for no other reason than that it is the truth; I mean it and I want to put it on the record. There also needs to be greater communication in the devolved Administrations, where legislation may be the responsibility of the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Assembly.

We need to take action and protect our workers. Hire and rehire is an unfair and unjust practice, and the Minister and the Government must take responsibility for the one in four workers who have experienced a downgrade in employment terms, whether financially or with other conditions, such as for sick pay. In this day and age, that is disgraceful. The aim is to tackle exploitative employment practices, increase clarity in the law and make employees aware of their rights.

This debate makes employees aware of their rights, but we need legislative change to protect them. I gently but firmly ask, on behalf of my constituents and all of those across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain

and Northern Ireland, that the Government provide clarity on their stance on fire and rehire tactics. I want to see legislative protection, because the ultimate goal is to protect the workers.

2.59 pm

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey, not least as a fellow north-west MP, and alongside so many north-west MPs here today—as a region we certainly punch above our weight, and I am glad that we are leading the call on fairness, dignity and decency at work.

How many more debates must we have before the Government finally ban fire and rehire. Labour colleagues have tried every possible avenue to get protections for workers whose bosses threaten worse conditions or the sack. We have had countless urgent questions, Opposition day debates, private Members’ Bills and early-day motions—all of those have been scorned by the Government. I nearly said “rogue bosses” earlier, but the point is that, on a technical level, such employers are not rogue; they are complying with the law, which does not prevent this Dickensian practice. That is despite the public being overwhelmingly against it, and despite the misery it has caused to our constituents who work for British Gas, British Airways, the University of Liverpool, Go North West and Tesco. Despite the Prime Minister himself stating that it is unacceptable, still the Government refuse to act.

Voluntarism does not work as an approach—we cannot just hope that employers do the right thing; we need legislation. As with so many issues, the Prime Minister speaks out of both sides of his mouth here. While calling it unacceptable, he and his Ministers also state that fire and rehire is a necessary tool for employers. Unfortunately, that is revealing of their entire mindset towards employment rights and industrial relations. Everything must be based on the stick—on threats—rather than trusting workers and trade unions to be mature negotiators. As a former officer for the trade union GMB, and in my early career at the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, I successfully fought against such practices for almost a decade before becoming an MP. Seeing how widespread they now are, and how employers treat the Government’s inaction as a tacit endorsement of those kinds of practices, is utterly appalling to me.

With examples of fire and rehire spiralling during and since the pandemic, British workers deserve better. As the cost of living crisis turns the screw on household incomes month by month, Ministers must be aware that even those in work are finding it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. Incomes are already way behind prices. Maintaining the ability of employers to fire and rehire gives them the wink from Government that it is an acceptable tool, and one that will continue to grow unless stopped.

Fire and rehire makes employment rights and contractual terms and conditions basically worthless. Long service usually entails some sort of reward and recognition for that service. However, I remember being on the picket line at British Gas during the most recent dispute over the practices, and hearing from someone who had spent 30 years working for the company only for it to seek to tear up everything that he had earned in that three

[Charlotte Nichols]

decades of loyalty and put him on worse terms and conditions. That is a slap in the face for the loyalty he had shown that company.

The skills, experience, insight and knowledge of the people who have worked for companies for years risk being lost in order to save a few quid for the employers. That is totally inhumane and does not make any business sense. It raises an important question about the productivity gap in the UK if we are willing to let experienced, capable and skilled workers be fired by their employers for not taking either a pay cut or a cut to the terms and conditions that they have built up over time. Ultimately, if those sorts of practices become even more widespread, what is next? Where does the race to the bottom in our labour market end?

Fire and rehire flies in the face of the Government's stated aspiration of levelling up. It is yet another opportunity for the Government to change course and offer some security to workers buffeted by soaring costs. It is about the kind of country and society that we want to live in. Ministers boast about employment levels, but this is an opportunity to ensure that work is worth it, that employees have rights at work, and that it pays to be in work. Let us have a commitment today to ban fire and rehire, and let us also have a date for the employment Bill—before we do not have any employment rights in this country that are worth the paper they are written on.

3.5 pm

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) for securing this important debate.

I should begin by declaring an interest: I am proud to call myself a lifelong trade unionist, having served both as a shopfloor convenor and, more recently, as the north-west regional secretary of Unite the union. However, in all my decades in the trade union movement, I do not think I have ever seen workers so much at the mercy of unscrupulous and uncaring bosses as they are today. I say to colleagues in this room that when we at last sweep away this tired and ailing excuse for a Government, one of our first priorities must be not only to outlaw fire and rehire, or even to establish new workers' rights, although those are both vital; we must also unshackle the unions from decades of onerous anti-trade-union legislation, which bears so much responsibility for the parlous state of affairs we face today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Slough has set out the case against fire and rehire with characteristic eloquence, and it does not need repeating. After all, this is hardly a complex matter. Fire and rehire is wrong. It has used the spectre of the dole queue to condemn workers into accepting the most heinous attacks on their pay and working conditions. It is a form of industrial blackmail that has been happening on a massive scale throughout the pandemic, and it must be stopped. My constituents know it, especially the 130 workers at the local Wabtec site who were threatened with fire and rehire only in February. The wider public know it, with 70% of them, including 69% of Tory voters, wanting to see it made illegal. Even the Prime Minister knows it, as he said so many times from the Dispatch Box.

When the Minister rises to make his contribution, much of what we will hear will be familiar: "Fire and rehire is wrong; this Government back good employers; and every worker deserves security and dignity in the workplace." The question now is: what is he going to do about it? Empty platitudes will not comfort the single parent who has just been told to accept a pay cut or face the sack, and nor will they clothe or feed a child in the north end of my constituency who is being forced to bear the brunt of this Tory cost of living crisis.

I warn the Minister that the act is wearing thin. The British public can see clearly now that, for all their mealy-mouthed excuses and empty pledges about introducing a statutory code of conduct, this Government have no interest whatsoever in standing up for British workers. In fact, at every stage they have given bad bosses the green light to treat their workers exactly how they please. When my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) came forward with a credible plan to tackle the scourge of fire and rehire, the Government Whips spun into action to ensure that his efforts were thwarted.

My message to the Minister is this: prove me wrong. Stand up today and show us that there is more to this Government than warm words and empty rhetoric. Show us that this Government are capable of mustering a shred of empathy for the millions of workers whose working lives were totally upended during the lockdowns. Prove to us that you care. Unless the Minister has come here armed with a plan to put an end to fire and rehire once and for all, my advice would be that it is better to stay silent than to confirm all our suspicions. The time for talk is over—what British workers deserve now is action.

3.8 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on his excellent exposé and on all the work that he has done on this extremely serious topic, which affects the whole of society.

Security at work is absolutely fundamental to workforce productivity, but it is also fundamental to stable communities. It enables people to plan ahead and work out what they can afford, and it offers the necessary security to take on the tenancy of a home, or to take out a loan to buy a car that they might need to get to work. It is absolutely vital for people's mental health, because wondering every single second whether they will have a job next week does nothing at all to ease stress or help someone's mental health. There are enough difficulties in life, particularly at the moment, without having to worry constantly about work insecurity.

The growth of fire and rehire is absolutely terrifying, especially when we see what were considered to be respectable and "safe" companies, such as British Airways and British Gas, go down the route of using such tactics. People now rightly feel that no job is safe anymore. Of course, there have always been exceptional circumstances in which, sadly, jobs were lost, but that is very different from the current situation in which companies are seemingly using fire and rehire tactics with very little pretext other than as a cost-cutting exercise, with employees suddenly faced with having to accept much worse pay and conditions with very little warning. Having pay and conditions cut

is bad enough, but it can also affect someone's security of tenure. A permanent contract can be replaced with a short-term contract, with no guarantee that the fire and rehire process will not be repeated a year or two later. Sadly, this situation is not confined to the private sector; it is now affecting workers in many parts of the public sector.

I remind Members of the effect of the casualisation of the workplace. A young man in my constituency worked from the age of 18 in factory after factory, job after job. He did not have a permanent job before he was 25. He was a good worker, but he could only get agency work—last in, first out. Companies and employers are getting a higher and higher percentage of their workforce as agency workers. The workers are paid less, but it costs the companies more because the agency takes a considerable cut.

That has an impact on a young person who is setting out in life. I am sure most of us in this room were able, when we first started working, to go into a job with a stable environment in which we hoped to stay for a number of years. That young man eventually set up as a landscape gardener on his own because it had become intolerable to be pushed from pillar to post. This is in an area where there are many manufacturing opportunities, but the culture has become increasingly difficult.

David Linden: Is that not precisely the problem? Because an employee has such poor rights, they might become self-employed, where they will probably not have the security of a pension, sick pay and holiday pay, and they will be pushed further into insecurity. We therefore need an employment Bill, and we need to ban fire and rehire. We all know that the world of work is changing, so there needs to be a comprehensive package from the Government that includes banning fire and rehire. We need legislation that reflects what is happening in 2022, because time has moved on.

Dame Nia Griffith: Absolutely. As the hon. Member says, there are so many other costs—massive costs to society, the economy and the public purse—wrapped up in the culture of fire and rehire.

This causes constant worry, mental health concerns and disruption. It is okay when someone starts out as a single individual, but it becomes more complicated if they have a partner or children. It is complicated by how far they can travel to work and where the agency sends them. Deciding whether they can accept the gaps between work becomes even more of a nightmare, and of course they have responsibilities. It must be depressing for them to look at someone up the road who they thought had a very good job with British Airways, only to see that he, too, has been subject to fire and rehire and is being asked to sign a new contract. They may have thought that one day they would have a permanent job and security, and now they see older workers having to sign on the dotted line to take worse pay and conditions. That is nothing to look forward to, and it does nothing for the cohesion of society.

As the TUC has documented, 3 million workers in this country have been told to reapply for their jobs. We already have 3 million workers on zero-hours contracts or casual contracts and 5 million self-employed, some of whom are pseudo self-employed. As we know, that is a way for employers to get out of paying the full costs of employing them.

Not only is allowing employers to use fire and rehire bad for the workers, but it undermines good companies that want to play fair by their employees. The willy-nilly use of fire and rehire by unscrupulous employers to cut costs can catch decent employers unawares, undermine them and risk putting them out of work. That can spiral out of control and become a real race to the bottom—who can pay less and therefore cut costs and make more profit with less pay to the workers? This race to the bottom with lower wages leads to much greater reliance on benefits, at huge cost to the public purse.

We are also clocking up a pensions time bomb. The Minister may say that we have auto-enrolment, but there are thresholds for that and part-time workers, in particular, are likely to miss out. When we—the generation coming through now—get to pension age, what will we find? We will find that a far higher percentage have to rely on some form of state help because they have not been able to put money by. Why is that? Because it has gone into the pockets of companies that have not been playing fair.

I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford) on the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) and his careful explanation of how it would work. Of course, we must not accept covid as an excuse—and it is nothing but an excuse. We all know that this is about increasing profit. There is also no truth in the statement “We cannot afford the current contracts.” We have labour shortages at the moment, so we have to afford it.

It is not just about fire and rehire, although that is the subject of today's debate and is very important. We want much greater security from day one at work. I will not set out all of Labour's manifesto commitments on this, but it is fundamental to our belief in a secure, cohesive and stable society that we should have security at work from day one.

The only solution to fire and rehire is an outright ban. That is not revolutionary; it is simply about respecting existing contracts and sticking to the law. A ban would be good for workers, productivity, community cohesion and the public purse. I therefore implore the Minister to take the issue seriously and introduce the necessary legislation without further delay.

3.17 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. While I will not be as impertinent as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), it is rather disappointing that we have not heard from one Government Back Bencher in this debate. I would have thought that this issue affected workers right across these islands—across every nation and region of the UK—so I would have expected at least one of them to contribute. It is disappointing that that has not happened.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on giving an excellent speech to open the debate. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and particularly to my role as chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group and my membership of the Glasgow City branch of Unison—one of the largest branches in the UK. I look forward to going to the Unison conference tomorrow and seeing my fellow Glaswegian delegates.

[Chris Stephens]

It is clear that this practice has been growing for decades. Under Labour control, Glasgow City Council was using the practice of fire and rehire in 1990s. I say that not to make a cheap political point, but to show that the practice has, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says, been growing for too long. My real fear is that the threat of fire and rehire—dismissal and re-engagement, to use its legal term—is used as a negotiating tactic before negotiations even begin. Some employers hold that over trade union and employee representatives' heads, saying "This is what we can do", before negotiations even start. That leads to cuts in terms and conditions and, indeed, dismissal and re-engagement, which has been going on for far too long.

Other hon. Members have referred to the disgusting Zoom meeting where P&O Ferries workers were fired—by a particular person, who, as I understand it, is a former employee of Royal Mail, and who did exactly the same thing to Royal Mail staff, threatening them. He is not a friend of the worker by any means. Firing staff by Zoom was one of the most disgusting things that I have ever seen. Frankly, the Government should have put forward an emergency Bill to deal with fire and rehire at that time, or they should have put it in the employment Bill. I remind Members that that Bill was in the Conservative party manifestos for 2015, 2017 and 2019. We are still waiting for it seven years after it was first promised.

The Minister said in *Hansard* on 25 January—not a date that Scots can forget because it is, of course, Burns day—that there would be an employment Bill "in the Queen's Speech". There was no employment Bill in the Queen's Speech, as other hon. Members have mentioned. That is important for a number of reasons, as we are now seeing, because the casualisation of fire and rehire interferes with people's worker status and cuts terms and conditions. Those of us on the Work and Pensions Committee know that; for the past three weeks, we have been discussing the impact that fire and rehire—and the lack of an employment Bill—has on occupational pensions, because it affects auto-enrolment. The consequences are devastating for wages and pensions, including occupational pensions, which are deferred wages.

I once again outline the SNP's complete opposition to the appalling practice of fire and rehire. I note that most EU countries have some form of block on fire and rehire, and it is illegal in some countries. Once again, we find the United Kingdom lagging behind Europe when it comes to worker protections. I am concerned that that signals a race to the bottom on standards, as the UK risks falling behind the European Union on basic workers' rights.

In the cost of living crisis, job security is perhaps more important than it ever will be. Firing workers in this way is wrong in any circumstance, let alone doing so during a cost of living crisis and an economic crisis. I question the Government's conscience and thinking in not tackling this issue by legislative means. Reform is long awaited and will be crucial. As many hon. Members have touched on, the impact of fire and rehire on black and minority ethnic workers and women is considerable. I recommend that the Minister reads the TUC report of January 2021 in relation to in-work poverty and adequate living standards for many workers. We have had debates on in-work poverty fairly recently, and I am sure that we

will have more, but I am concerned that fire and rehire continues to lead to in-work poverty for many workers across these islands.

I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), who has just concluded his remarks in the Chamber and is not in this debate. He was, of course, the first person to put forward legislation to end the practice of fire and rehire. He has Glasgow airport in his constituency, so he has had the British Airways issues, Rolls-Royce in Hillington and at least one other employer that engaged in fire and rehire. The pressures on workers in his constituency were quite considerable, and his Bill certainly has my support and that of my colleagues and many Members across the House. He will probably be tabling that Bill again tomorrow, and I encourage all Members of the House to support it. He has the support of more than 100 MPs who signed an early-day motion urging them to back that legislation.

My SNP colleagues and I have campaigned tirelessly to update current employment laws. Tomorrow, I will be tabling a Bill on this very issue—the workers (rights and definition) Bill—and I will of course be attaching fire and rehire to that. The Minister is listening to me intently, as he always does. I know that on 29 March, he announced the introduction of a new statutory code on the practice of fire and rehire. However, he will be aware that the Trades Union Congress has said that his plans "lack bite" and

"won't deter rogue employers like P&O from trampling over workers' rights."

I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to respond to me about those remarks from the TUC, because although he is introducing the statutory code, it is certainly the view of everyone who has spoken in this debate that there should be firm legislation to ensure that the practice of fire and rehire is made illegal and ends.

Although employment law is reserved to this place, the SNP Scottish Government, with their Fair Work approach, are committed to doing everything in their power to protect employees from exploitative practices in Scotland throughout the cost of living crisis and beyond. There must be meaningful dialogue between employers and employees and their trade unions. I say that here because I suspect that we will not hear very much about it in the other debate that is going on right now. It certainly was not mentioned when my hon. Friend the Member for Slough and I were in the Chamber. I look forward to the Minister telling us that there will be legislation, and giving us a date for an employment Bill to tackle not just fire and rehire but the many other exploitative practices across these islands. As other Members have outlined, an employment Bill to protect workers' rights is needed now more than it has ever been.

3.27 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms McVey. First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing today's debate and giving us an opportunity once again to highlight why the abuse of fire and rehire really needs a legislative response from this Government—not warm words and future promises but real, concrete action to tackle this national disgrace.

My hon. Friend made a number of very important points and he was right: this Government seem to have shown more interest in saving the Prime Minister's job than in saving those of their own constituents. As has been mentioned, the fact that there is not one Tory Back Benchers here today shows people everything they need to know about where employment rights sit in this Government's list of priorities. My hon. Friend was exactly right when he said that the Government's pledged action will still mean that workers can be dismissed for failing to agree to worse terms and conditions. That is really the nub of it—that is what we need to put an end to.

All the Back Benchers who spoke today put the case very well, but I want to draw attention to some of the contributions—in particular, that from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford). He was right when he said that everyone, even the Prime Minister, knows that fire and rehire is wrong. My hon. Friend said that it was levelling down; I agree. He was also right when he said that it does not make sense economically, either. I am pleased that he spoke about our party's green paper on employment rights, because that fantastic document will transform the lives of working people. It contrasts sharply with the lack of ambition that we have seen time and again from this Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) said that this tactic causes misery for many people and the majority of our constituents want to see an end to fire and rehire, so the Government would be doing something that was popular with the public if they listened to what we are saying. My hon. Friend rightly said that it is not enough to expect employers to do the right thing, because they do not all play by the rules. I pay tribute to her work as a trade union officer fighting against this practice. I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in that regard. We should think for a minute how much worse the situation would be if we did not have trade unions willing to defend workers' rights. Sadly, all we hear from this Government are negative stories about trade unions and how they want to reduce their power, rather than any support for their defence of working people. I agree with my hon. Friend that tackling this practice is about what kind of country and society we want to see.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mick Whitley) spoke of his decades of industrial experience as a trade unionist. I thank him on behalf of my constituents, whom he has represented on many occasions, for the work that he has done to support them. He has shown time and again how a good trade union can really make a difference and work constructively with employers, to the benefit of everyone. I commend him for the direct challenge that he made to the Minister about where we are going to end up. I suspect that my hon. Friend will be disappointed, but we all live in hope.

My hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) made some excellent points about some of the wider issues in the workplace, and said that the fundamentals were about job security and people making financial commitments. We do not talk enough about the impact on people's mental health of the uncertainty hanging over them. She was right that fire and rehire is often used as a pretext for cost cutting. If employers get away with it, they will try it again. She rightly highlighted

the expansion of insecure work. Many young people, like the constituents she referred to, do not have any experience of a secure job.

As we have heard, fire and rehire is not a new development. It has been around for as long as people have had jobs. Just because something has happened for a long time does not make it right or acceptable. Even the Prime Minister seems to agree with that, although, as we have heard today, there is little evidence of him wanting to do anything.

Why, if this power has always been there, is it coming to the public's attention much more now? Sadly, in the last few years we have seen a proliferation of companies, including many household names, adopting fire and rehire tactics as a first port of call rather than the last. British Airways, Sainsbury's and Weetabix are just three household names that have used the tactics, and there are many more less public-facing companies that are doing exactly the same. Wabtec and Valeo in Yorkshire are two more recent examples.

Of course, P&O is the most high profile and possibly the most egregious example of how the scales of justice are tilted too heavily against the ordinary men and women in this country who just want to do a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. They do not want to have the arrangement just for a while, until their employer decides it wants to move the goalposts and takes away their existing terms and conditions, presenting it as a *fait accompli*.

The reason we need action along the lines suggested by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) in his private Member's Bill, which the Government blocked, is that such cases have highlighted how employers price in the cost of riding roughshod over existing laws and conclude that it is a price that they are prepared to pay. They see their legal and moral obligations in the same light as they do the people who work for them—numbers to be counted, risks to be assessed and, in essence, just a barrier to making more money.

The Transport Committee said about British Airways that its use of fire and rehire was "calculated". For too many employers, that is the case. Consultations are simply tick-box exercises, not that P&O even pretended one was necessary. Could the Minister update us on the progress in the P&O criminal investigation promised by the Prime Minister, or will that, like so many other Government promises, never come to fruition?

The genesis of fire and rehire is in the current workplace settlement, which places too much power in the hands of the employer and too little in the hands of the employees. This imbalance does not just manifest itself in this situation, but in a whole range of issues in the employment relationship. We could look at zero-hours contracts and the gig economy, or agency workers, as we have heard. Insecurity is baked into so many workplaces. It is little wonder that many people feel a sense of helplessness.

David Linden: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; he is outlining so many of the issues that we see in terms of workplace insecurity. It is quite clear, given the lack of an employment Bill, that this is not an area that the Government are interested in. Does he, as the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, agree with the Scottish TUC that it is important that we devolve employment law to the Scottish Parliament if Westminster will not act?

Justin Madders: Tempted as I am to get into the niceties of devolved powers, what I will say instead is that the people of this entire country need a strong Labour Government that will bring back employment rights for everyone.

As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the scrapping of the employment Bill, which has been promised by the Government on no fewer than 20 occasions, is symptomatic of a Government that do not see this issue as a priority. Does the Minister accept that a code of practice, even a statutory one, will not be of any use if it comes after the event? Does he accept that it would simply be another factor for employers to bake into their calculations? And does he agree that it will not stop fire and rehire happening again in the future?

I ask all those who oppose the Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North, which was unfortunately blocked, to put themselves in the shoes of one of their constituents. That constituent might have worked for the same company for 10, 20 or even 30 years, giving loyal service and going the extra mile, and only asking in return for stable terms and conditions that remain constant throughout. But then, out of the blue, even though their job has not changed and they have performed their duties well for their employer, who is still turning a healthy profit, they are told that their contract is ending and that, if they want to remain employed by the company, they will have to work the same number of hours, doing exactly the same job, for 20% less pay than they receive now—and if they refuse, they are out of the door without even a redundancy payment. Is that not an injustice? Is that not an affront to the respect that someone who has served their employer for so long deserves? Is that not something that we in this place ought to be looking to end?

We often talk about the cost of living crisis and how wages have not kept pace with inflation for well over a decade now. The obscenity of fire and rehire makes that difficult situation even worse. We know that if someone is fired and rehired and gets a 20% reduction in their pay, they will not be able to get a 20% reduction in their mortgage or their rent, or in their other household bills. What does the Minister say to people who find themselves in that situation? What should they do?

The destructive combination of weak employment laws, opportunistic employers and an indifferent Government is currently allowing hard-won benefits to be stripped away, with a descent into weakening terms and conditions. It is a race to the bottom, which I am afraid has been accelerated by coronavirus. It is time that race came to an end. The Government say that they are on the side of ordinary working people and that they want to level up the country, but how can they do that if time and again we are shown that an employment contract is not worth the paper it is written on?

I wonder sometimes about the level of understanding in the Government about how modern workplaces operate. Some recent examples of their ignorance include starting a petition asking the Leader of the Opposition to call off industrial action commenced by an independent trade union; leaving notes on civil servants' desks asking when they will come back in—Cabinet Ministers think that if someone is working from home, they are not really working—and, of course, the obscenity of security staff and cleaners in Downing Street being abused for

pointing out that lawbreaking was going on. When it comes to employment rights, this Government are as clueless as they are vindictive.

We do not have to accept that this is the norm. We can return stability and respect to the workplace, we can reward loyalty, and we can end the cruel lottery of fire and rehire. We just need a Government committed to doing those things. But let us not stop at ending fire and rehire. I want to see this country becoming a leader in employment protections, not lagging behind the likes of Kosovo, Estonia and Mexico. Let us end the obscenity of British workers being easier and cheaper to get rid of than workers in just about all the rest of western Europe. Let us end the disgrace of this country always being at the head of the queue when a multinational is looking to make redundancies.

Let us end the mindset that as long as someone has a job, that is job done. It is not—security, prosperity and stability are all under threat from this lopsided legal framework. It is in all our interests that we have strong workforce protections. We grow as an economy and a country when we have secure employment. It is one of the cornerstones of a civilised society, and if this Government do not want to legislate to make that happen, then they should step aside for a Government who do want to.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Before I call the Minister, I remind him that the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) will need a couple of minutes to wind up at the end.

3.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

First of all, I congratulate the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on securing this debate on the use of fire and rehire tactics. It is an important issue, and we have heard today how worrying and unsettling it is for people when their employer wants to change their contract or puts them at risk of redundancy, especially when workers are already worrying about how they will pay their bills.

I speak to businesses every day and know that most employers try to do the right thing by their staff, and that decisions to change terms and conditions are not taken lightly. Let me be clear, as I have said many times, that we expect companies to treat their employees fairly and to do right by them. There are legal obligations and procedures that employers must abide by. We expect employers to act with fairness and compassion and to comply with the rules.

The Government have always been clear that the threat of dismissal and re-engagement on reduced terms—so-called fire and rehire—should not be used as a negotiation tactic. We expect employers to engage properly and meaningfully with their workforce and representatives, and to consider alternative options. Dismissal and re-engagement should be considered only as an option of absolute last resort, if agreement cannot be reached.

The UK has a strong labour market and its success is underpinned by balancing flexibility and workers' protections. It is vital that we continue to strike that balance, while clamping down on the poor practices of some unscrupulous employers, some of which we heard

about earlier. Our response to fire and rehire has been carefully considered, reflecting the seriousness of the issue and the importance of avoiding inadvertently creating a situation where employers have no choice but to make their staff redundant.

When the pandemic led to cases of firing and rehiring, we asked ACAS to conduct an evidence-gathering exercise to help us better understand the issue, so as to get behind the headlines and work out a quantitative and qualitative understanding. The Government then went further and asked ACAS to produce new guidance, to ensure that employers were clear on their responsibilities. That guidance was published in 2021 and clearly sets out the employer's responsibilities when considering making changes to employment contracts.

The guidance is clear that fire and rehire should be used only as the option of last resort. I urge all employers to make themselves familiar with that. ACAS stands ready to help mediate disputes, should either party seek its services. ACAS has also published guidance for employers and employees.

The Government are going further still. As has been mentioned, on 29 March, I announced that we would introduce a statutory code of practice on dismissal and re-engagement.

Chris Stephens: Can I say gently to the Minister that there is some confusion in his position? He says that it is the Government's view that fire and rehire should not be a negotiating tactic. Surely, the problem is how employers can go into negotiations if they can legally dismiss and re-engage. Is he saying that if an employer, or a representative, in a negotiation says, "We can dismiss and re-engage and we may very well do that," they are in breach of the code that he has just outlined?

Paul Scully: I will come to the statutory code in a second and explain how that works. Even the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner), who talked of banning fire and rehire and ran a campaign that involved many Members here, actually explained in the debate in the Chamber that his Bill would not ban fire and rehire. It would limit it but not ban it. Even he understood that, in certain circumstances, there needs to be that flexibility.

The statutory code includes practical steps that employers should follow if they are considering changes to terms and conditions and there is the prospect of dismissal and re-engagement. A court or employment tribunal will take the code into account when considering relevant cases, including those related to unfair dismissal. The tribunals will have the power to apply an uplift of up to 25% of an employee's compensation if an employer unreasonably fails to comply with the code where it applies.

Most employers do their best to comply with the law, but the code will clarify best practice standards and deter those employers who try to cut corners, pushing the bar even higher for employers who seek to do the wrong thing. We will hold a public consultation soon, to seek views from across employers, individuals, unions and beyond.

Jim Shannon: I know that the Minister genuinely wishes to see betterment, as we all do. We gave some examples. Three or four Members referred to P&O Ferries. The

Minister and the Government condemned the chief executive of P&O Ferries for his tactics, and they were right to do so. British Gas is another example of doing it totally the wrong way and disregarding the workers. I note that 20% of my constituents in Northern Ireland found that fire and rehire tactics were wrong. What will the Minister and the Government do to protect workers where, as the Minister and the Prime Minister have said, companies have done wrong?

Paul Scully: I will come to P&O Ferries now before I address the other points that Members have raised. The Government have been clear that the dismissal by P&O Ferries of 800 loyal seafarers without any notification or consultation was absolutely unacceptable. I was sat behind the chief executive—literally, not figuratively—during the Select Committee hearing. Like everyone else, I was appalled when I heard him say that he would do the same thing again. That was absolutely horrific to hear.

Justin Madders: As I asked in my speech, can the Minister provide an update on the criminal prosecutions?

Paul Scully: I will develop that in a second.

As I was saying, the chief executive of P&O Ferries admitted to breaking employment law. He demonstrated—not only in his actions on that weekend, but in the Select Committee hearing—absolute contempt for workers who had given years of service to his company. That was not just a case of fire and rehire, which is the subject of the debate; in the main, it was just fire, because the vast majority of those workers had no prospect of re-engagement. We have urged P&O to reconsider, but those calls have fallen on deaf ears.

David Linden: The Minister has probably made this point better than the rest of us: P&O's acceptance that it was breaking the law very much makes the case for an employment Bill to strengthen workers' rights. Anecdotally, the number of cases of fire and rehire is on the increase, partly because companies see others getting away with it. Do the Government hold any data on how often fire and rehire is happening, and if so, will they publish it? If they do not have that data, why not?

Paul Scully: I will talk a little about that in answering the question from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), about what the Insolvency Service is doing in relation to P&O Ferries.

We engaged ACAS to better understand exactly what fire and rehire actually is. A lot of the reports in various media are not strictly about fire and rehire, because it is never quite as binary as it appears. However, there are some egregious examples, and I think we can all agree that we want to eliminate them, or at least push the bar so high that it is just not viable for employers to take that sort of action. As a result of the inability of P&O Ferries to hear not just what this House was saying but what the country was saying, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport set out the nine steps that we are taking to force it to rethink its decision and to prevent such cases from happening again in the maritime industry.

[Paul Scully]

To come to the shadow Minister's point, the Insolvency Service is now pursuing its own inquiries. It has commenced formal criminal and civil investigations into the circumstances around the redundancies. Those investigations are ongoing, so I am not in a position to comment any further on them for the time being, but I wish the Insolvency Service every speed in its efforts, as we all want a result that holds P&O Ferries to the highest account.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Minister for outlining the statutory code and the Government guidance on improving working practices. To improve modern working practices, when will the Government finally legislate on the 51 recommendations that they accepted from the 2017 Taylor review?

Paul Scully: I will come to that in a moment.

I mentioned that ACAS has been helping us on both quantitative and qualitative data. We have moved to guidance, and are moving towards a statutory code, and my colleagues can see that action is taking place. Members have asked where my colleagues are. A number of them are in the main Chamber, tackling the issue of the rail strikes; if they go ahead, there is a distinct possibility that they will affect smaller businesses and workers. My colleagues are paying attention to that immediate risk to people up and down the country.

We have discussed fire and rehire on a number of occasions, and will continue to discuss it. As I have said, we want to eliminate the most egregious instances of its use. There has been a lot of conversation about the employment Bill. I must correct the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden): our manifesto commitment was not to bringing forward an employment Bill, but to bringing forward measures that might be put in it. I bore all my officials and civil servants with my talk of the difference between output and outcome. I doubt any worker with a rogue employer is thinking, "I wish there was an employment Bill." They are probably thinking, "I need carer's leave," "I need neonatal leave," or, "I need flexible working." Those are the things that affect people up and down the country; it is not that they need a single piece of legislation, tied up with a bow. That would be neat, clearly, but it is the measures to which we are committed, and that we will deliver.

Chris Stephens: Frankly, I think that implementing the 51 recommendations of the Taylor review does require a Bill. On 25 January, the Minister said that such a Bill would be in the Queen's Speech. Why was it not?

Paul Scully: I will look back at my words, because I am not sure that I have ever pre-empted what Her Majesty was going to say. I will certainly look back at exactly what I said.

Chris Stephens: The Minister is being very generous in giving way. Let me quote *Hansard* for his benefit. He said, in a Committee chaired by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies):

"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.]

Why was the Bill not in the Queen's Speech?

Paul Scully: I said, "in parliamentary time." It will be when parliamentary time allows. We have a manifesto commitment to delivering these measures in this Parliament. The Queen's Speech relates to this Session, not this Parliament. Clearly, it would be neat to have the measures in a single legislative vehicle, but I think we would all find that workers up and down the country are interested in the net result—what happens to them in their daily life. We are task-focused, rather than process-focused.

Christian Wakeford: There is a bit of a debate now about whether there will be an employment Bill or an improvement to employment rights. The main question is: when will it be delivered?

Paul Scully: As I say, our manifesto commitments remain. The hon. Gentleman will see employment measures come forward both in this Session and before the end of the Parliament, because we want to act. We have pledged to do many things, and we absolutely want to stick to those pledges.

The hon. Member for Glasgow East talked about productivity. I will not comment on individual workers, but there is no doubt that companies in the UK are less productive than companies elsewhere in the G7, so we need to work on our productivity as a nation, and as businesses. That involves a whole raft of things, including working practices, the relationship between employers and employees, and infrastructure. If we raised our productivity to German levels, it is estimated that we could add £100 billion to our economy. Those are pretty substantial gains, if we can get there.

David Linden: I caution the Minister against making too many comparisons with Germany, which has much higher statutory sick pay. If he wants to make international like-for-like comparisons, let us look at the whole package, and the wider picture.

Paul Scully: I am going wider than workers' rights and productivity. That is why we are rolling out the Help to Grow management scheme for smaller businesses, and other things. This is huge. We need better transport connections. That is part of the levelling-up agenda. There are lots of things within that, and I do not underestimate what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Our employment landscape is very different from that in Germany. In Germany, they tend to ask permission—it is courts first there, whereas we tend to be tribunal led. There are big differences.

One of the key things I want to raise about productivity relates to what the hon. Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith) said. She was absolutely right to say that job security leads to a better, more productive, happier and more loyal workforce. That allows workers and employees to plan and it results in better mental wellbeing. That is why, by setting statutory minimums in legislation, guidance and codes, we want employers to go further. Frankly, it makes business sense for employers to go further, rather than follow the egregious example of P&O. What is the point of taking people on and training them, which involves costs, time and resources, only to then cast them aside and have to do the same thing again?

Dame Nia Griffith: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Scully: I will give way, but I will then need to make progress so that I allow time for the hon. Member for Slough to respond to the debate.

Dame Nia Griffith: The Minister says that rational and good businesses would not do this, but the fact of the matter is that hundreds of businesses are being undermined because some businesses are using fire and rehire. It is being used repeatedly and in many different sectors. It is no good saying that it does not make logical sense; we need the legislation to back that up. That is what we want the Minister to bring forward.

Paul Scully: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about parliamentary staff. Before becoming a Member, I worked in this place for a little while. I was an avuncular figure because I was about 20 years older than everybody else. People would come to my office in tears because former colleagues—they are not in this place any more—did not know how to employ people. The way in which they treated some of their staff was absolutely appalling. I have seen it at first hand.

The hon. Member for Llanelli rightly mentions the behaviour of some employers, and we have heard a number of examples today. Almost a year ago, *The Independent* reported that one employer was making a third of its workforce redundant and then taking on other people on less secure contracts. The Labour party claimed that by doing so it was putting itself on a firmer and fairer footing ahead of a general election, when it was telling people to use their own laptops, anti-virus software and firewalls, and to work from home. That is what I mean about outcomes and outputs. We can have great words, but if an organisation is not acting on

them, that is no good to the employees who trust it. People want something that is flexible and that works to protect jobs but that also gets the best out of workers. It is really important that we work for that.

Let me leave the House in no doubt that this Government will continue to stand behind workers and stamp out unscrupulous practices where they occur. We will provide further updates regarding the consultation on the statutory code in due course, and we will inform the House and keep Members up to date on what we are doing on fire and rehire.

3.58 pm

Mr Dhesi: As a proud trade unionist, I am extremely grateful for the role that trade unions play in supporting their members and workers. I am also grateful to hon. Members from across the House—or perhaps I should say from across the Labour party, the SNP and the DUP, because not a single Conservative Member attended to support their constituents—for speaking eloquently about the need to stop this Dickensian practice, and to ensure that workers are not being levelled down.

Many of us are extremely irked by the fact that the Minister gave a lot of warm words but no action. There is no Bill to ban fire and rehire. There has been no mention of adopting into legislation the 51 recommendations that the Government accepted from the 2017 Taylor review of modern working practices. If the Minister is running out of ideas, I gently suggest that he should perhaps copy-paste the Labour party's proposed Green Paper on employment rights. People will be left in no doubt from today's debate that the Government are not on the side of workers.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Middle East Peace, Security and Development and UNRWA

4 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will call Sarah Champion to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will be no opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in 30-minute debates.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered peace, security and development in the Middle East and the role of the UN Relief and Works Agency.

Thank you for chairing this session, Ms McVey; it is always a pleasure to serve under your guidance.

At the end of last year, I met the commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, Philippe Lazzarini, who was in London for his first official UK visit. UNRWA is the UN agency that helps millions of Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the west bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, providing them with humanitarian and developmental services. I have seen at first hand its work helping Palestinian refugees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I am hugely grateful for what it does, and I do not doubt that it is a good example of Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office money being well spent.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an extremely good point. Although I have not had the privilege of meeting the commissioner-general of UNRWA recently, I know that it does hugely important work in helping to reduce poverty and to prevent, as much as it can, hunger and joblessness in the Palestinian territories. Does she agree that UNRWA's finances should be a continuing source of worry? It often struggles to get the funding it needs, so would it not be good to hear the Minister say that she and the Foreign Secretary will lead an international process to try to ensure that UNRWA has the resources it needs?

Sarah Champion: I very much welcome my hon. Friend's intervention, which pre-empted what I am about to say. I completely agree that a stable funding base is needed, and let us hope that he has also predicted what the Minister will say, because he is absolutely right: this requires ministerial leadership. I know the Minister well, and I know that if she is able to give that, then she will, so let us keep that hope for the next 20 minutes.

There is no doubt that the plight of Palestinian refugees is both tragic and a recurring obstacle in the search for a two-state solution. Established in 1949, UNRWA has an important role to play in providing much needed education, healthcare and social services for the Palestinian people. Its original mandate—to provide humanitarian and development goals, pending a just and lasting solution—clearly still remains unfulfilled. In order to meet its goals and support two states for two people, which is the UK's and the international community's long-standing position, UNRWA must receive the funds it needs.

UNRWA is unique, in that it effectively offers state-like services in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, but relies on voluntary contributions,

including donations by the UK, to educate hundreds of thousands of children, support the poorest, and take care of the sick and injured. Throughout 2021, despite the challenges presented by covid, UNRWA managed to maintain quality primary healthcare services for 1.9 million Palestinian refugees, which included over 7 million in-person and telemedicine consultations, as well as further care at UNRWA-contracted hospitals. UNRWA provides essential healthcare, particularly for the 87,000 pregnant women relying on antenatal care, which is critical for the safe delivery of newborn babies and the health of their mothers. UNRWA delivers its services at the maximum of its available budget, but because of understaffing, doctors can spend only three minutes with each patient, and after two years of covid, health services are severely strained.

In 2021, UNRWA provided education for over half a million children, nearly 400,000 people benefitted from social safety net assistance, including cash and food, and 8,000 young people accessed technical and vocational education and training. On his visit to the UK, Mr Lazzarini explained to me how he believes his organisation is providing hope in a region beleaguered by conflict. What he told me about the work of UNRWA was sometimes harrowing, but he also shared many inspiring examples, such as Loay Elbasouni, who attended UNRWA schools and was part of the master team that developed the Mars rover, Perseverance.

Following years of cuts to its funding, the financial crisis faced by UNRWA means not only that it runs the risk of not being able to pay salaries, but that its installations, car fleet and computers are in such a state of disarray that its delivery of services is put at risk and the integrity of its staffing threatened. That is despite reforms promoted by Governments, including the UK Government, in exchange for financial support that has made UNRWA more efficient.

Since 2018, the UK's support for UNRWA has decreased by nearly 60% from approximately £70.3 million to £28.6 million. In the last year alone, UK-funded support for UNRWA's core budget has been cut in half, from approximately £42.5 million in 2020 to £20.8 million in 2021, while the UK's funding for UNRWA's emergency humanitarian work in Syria was cut from £7 million in 2020 to zero in 2021. The UK has yet to make any contribution to UNRWA for 2022.

Robert Largan (High Peak) (Con): The hon. Member is talking about education and bringing hope to the region. She will be aware that in its education work and the schools it runs in the west bank and Gaza, UNRWA uses the official Palestinian Authority curriculum. Does she share my concerns that the European Union review found that textbooks on that curriculum contain a number of examples of extensive antisemitism and incitement to violence? Does she agree that the Government are right to take a position of zero tolerance on antisemitism?

Sarah Champion: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on some of that, and I will go into a little detail. Of course we should have zero tolerance of antisemitism. We should have zero tolerance of any form of hate crime. I have no reason to doubt the criticism contained in the Georg Eckert Institute review of the Palestinian Authority textbooks, and I believe action has been taken as a result of the report.

To quote the then Minister, the right hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) said in response to a written question last January:

“UNRWA has a robust review system of each host country’s textbooks to ensure education in its schools reflects the values and principles of the UN.”

I am sure that the hon. Member for High Peak (Robert Langan) reads the House of Commons Library’s updates on international news. Today it published that the EU has resumed funding UNRWA in full, based on its research on the textbooks he mentioned. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, but the evidence points to that issue having now been resolved. Of course, no agency is perfect, and I will come on to that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on her tenacity and all she does speaking for those who are oppressed and disadvantaged. Does she agree that the role of the UN as an impartial agency is vital and that all steps must be taken to ensure its neutrality from top to toe? Does she agree that its staff should be careful about the expression of their personal opinions, which can be detrimental to those who need help but feel excluded by UN workers because of a perceived bias?

Sarah Champion: My friend, the hon. Gentleman has wise words. I am proud to be the MP for Rotherham and to be the Chair of the Select Committee on International Development. We have done a lot of inquiries on the subject of UN practice—on sexual exploitation by its staff, on misuse of funds and on racism in the sector. In such a vast organisation, of course there will be some rotten apples, but when those failings are highlighted it is inexcusable that they are not rooted out and safety measures put in so that such issues never happen again. As the hon. Member rightly says, one rotten apple taints the whole barrel. The UN does amazing work, but it is a big organisation and some people feel emboldened to make ridiculous personal comments that damage everybody.

The British Council, which recently signed a co-operation agreement with UNRWA, has granted the British Council’s international school awards to 80 UNRWA schools during the past two years, with many others having gained this recognition previously. The World Bank has confirmed that UNRWA students are on average one year ahead of their peers in public schools in the region. MOPAN—the Multilateral Organisation Performance Assessment Network—of which the UK is a member, recognises that UNRWA is a “competent, resilient and resolute” organisation.

UNRWA was created more than 70 years ago by the United Nations General Assembly. The UK voted in favour of its formation and has since approved the renewal of UNRWA’s mandate every three years. In establishing UNRWA, the UN General Assembly recognised that continued assistance for the relief of the Palestinian refugees was necessary

“to further conditions of peace and stability”.

UNRWA has carried out multitudes of positive work in the middle east in the absence of a political solution between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It has already educated more than 2 million children, and today creates significant livelihood opportunities through its construction

projects throughout the middle east. UNRWA’s provision of human development services and humanitarian relief provides an anchor of stability in a troubled region.

Of the nearly 6 million Palestinian refugees living in the middle east, more than 2.6 million live in poverty. As the number of refugees falling into poverty continues to rise, UNRWA faces increased demands on its services. Refugees are increasingly reliant on UNRWA for the education of their children, their health and their livelihood.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): As the hon. Lady highlights, we on the International Development Committee have investigated these issues. She has rightly highlighted key problems in Palestine, but, more generally, some of the cuts to the aid budget, particularly to health and education, were arbitrary and have had a real impact on people’s lives. Can we urge the Minister to look again at some of those decisions?

Sarah Champion: I fully support my fellow Committee member and thank him for repeatedly raising his concerns about this issue. The forthcoming budget that goes alongside the development strategy is due in the next month, and it very much seems that global health will be the biggest casualty. The concerns that he raises are right. There does not seem to be a joined-up strategy on the impact of the cuts. If the Minister could outline that, it would help us all to understand the Government’s logic.

The impact of UNRWA breaking down because of donors such as the UK continuing to significantly decrease or stop its funding is unimaginable. Have the Government considered the consequences for millions of people in the middle east if the cuts cause significant reductions in UNRWA’s services? UNRWA has the expertise; it has proven effectiveness and can provide its services much cheaper than any other UN agency. Let me be frank: if people are left with no healthcare, no education and no job, what does the Minister think will happen to them?

The world already has a formidable tool to provide support to people in the form of UNRWA. Why would we want to weaken our own investment in it to the point of hundreds of thousands of people feeling they have no future? More needs to be done to work with the organisation. Of course, as we have outlined, UNRWA is not perfect—nothing is—but the Government’s cuts are threatening its capability to deliver support to a vulnerable population in the middle east. We need to maintain trusted relations with the people of Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon. Palestinian refugees are a key constituency for peace in the region in terms of their number, socio-political relevance, and the refugees’ personal stake in the search for a lasting solution.

Without UNRWA, we risk destabilising the region further and emboldening those who do not share our belief that the best way to bring peace and stability to the region is through a political resolution to the conflict. The millions of people who access UNRWA’s services would be forced to turn elsewhere to survive. If we are to remain committed to our vision of two states, surely we should provide support to UNRWA, which has proved itself a reliable partner by which the international community can address the refugee constituency. Although it is non-political, UNRWA’s presence and role have been recognised as having significant implications for regional security and stability.

[Sarah Champion]

The Prime Minister has consistently highlighted that girls' education is his top priority for UK aid. UNRWA directly supports that objective by operating one of the largest school systems in the middle east and providing primary education to over a half a million students, 50% of whom are girls. Gender parity in school enrolment was obtained in the early 1960s at UNRWA schools—long before any other country in the region. UNRWA is providing government-like services such as elementary and preparatory education, and, through that commitment to sustainable development goal 4, is playing its role as a major contributor to the 2030 SDG agenda.

It is clear that UNRWA is essential for the stability of that volatile and fragile region, so will the Minister explain the substantial cuts in UK funding to UNRWA, despite Ministers telling the House for years how excellent UNRWA's services are? Why are the Government slashing funding to this essential and efficient organisation? Will the Government carry out an analysis of the impact of the funding cuts on UNRWA? Is there any plan to reinstate our financial support to previous levels, and what discussions has the Minister had with other potential donors to encourage them to back UNRWA? If the UK cannot or will not sufficiently support UNRWA, we have to ask: do we not have a responsibility towards these people? Is not stability in the middle east what we are aiming for, and why are we not doing all we can to achieve it?

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) for securing the debate, and for the work that she does as Chair of her important Committee. I thank her and other hon. Members, who have made insightful contributions. I will try to respond to as many of the points raised as possible.

The UK and the Government are long-standing supporters of UNRWA, and value the vital role it plays as a humanitarian service and a stabilising force in the region. In 2021, we provided the agency with over £27 million of support, including £4.9 million to the flash appeal that it launched following the Gaza conflict in May. Our annual contribution helps UNRWA to provide education to more than 530,000 children every year, and helps 3.5 million Palestinian refugees to access critical health services. Our support to the flash appeal for Gaza helped to promote life-saving aid in the aftermath of the conflict. We recognise that UNRWA needs to be on a more secure financial footing to ensure that Palestinian refugees' basic needs continue to be met, and that it can play a full role in supporting regional stability. We are working with UNRWA, other donors and host countries to help ensure its sustainability in the years to come.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) asked whether there would be a pledging conference. The UK will be supporting and attending the pledging conference in New York on 23 June, which is a week tomorrow. I cannot say any more in advance of that, but I know that hon. Members will all be pleased to hear that we will be there, and we are encouraging other donors to step up.

Gareth Thomas: Will the Minister give way?

Vicky Ford: I will take questions at the end, because there is quite a lot that I would like to say. If I have time, I will take the hon. Gentleman's intervention later.

UNRWA's essential work is focused not only on the Occupied Palestinian Territories; it also supports vulnerable Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and across the region with essential services, including basic education and healthcare. Some £7 million of our UNRWA contribution in the 2020-21 financial year went to UNRWA's regional emergency appeal in Syria and Jordan, which has helped to provide humanitarian assistance to more than 450,000 vulnerable Palestinian refugees in those countries. The final status of Palestinian refugees must be agreed as part of wider peace negotiations. Until that time, I confirm that the UK remains firmly committed to supporting Palestinian refugees through UNRWA, and the other valuable work that UNRWA does in the region.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) asked how aid is being allocated post the decision to reduce official development assistance from 0.7% to 0.5%. It was a challenging decision to make, but we must recall the massive impact the global pandemic has had on the UK's own finances. It is a temporary decision, and the Chancellor has set out the methodology by which we would return to 0.7%. I suggest my hon. Friend looks at the international development strategy that we published a few weeks ago, which brings together our key global priorities for the allocation of ODA, in particular bringing back humanitarian aid and girls' education—both of which, as the hon. Member for Rotherham pointed out, are key for UNRWA.

Dr Poulter *rose*—

Gareth Thomas *rose*—

Vicky Ford: I said I would not take interventions until the end, but now I will take both.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) for provoking the Minister to giving way to me. It is good to hear that a pledging conference is taking place and that Britain continues to work with other nations to help secure longer-term funding for UNRWA. Can the Minister say specifically whether there will be ministerial representation from the UK at that pledging conference, as that might give our nations some confidence to pledge significant sums of money, given Britain's record of support to UNRWA?

Vicky Ford: I cannot confirm that at this stage, but I can confirm that my right hon. Friend, the Minister for Asia and the Middle East, who covers this territory, is very focused on the issue.

Dr Poulter: I thank the Minister for giving way. I think we all accept the challenges the pandemic has caused for finances in this country and more generally. The Committee recently heard from the Foreign Secretary and some of the permanent secretaries, who were unable to provide details on reductions to in-year funding. It would be helpful if the Minister could confirm that education and healthcare funding will be prioritised.

Vicky Ford: As I said, the international development strategy talks clearly about our key priorities. One priority is women and girls, within which is girls' education, which is key to driving development and change. There is also access to women's healthcare, which is a key part of the women and girls strategy. I spend a lot of my time travelling around different countries and looking at some of the amazing work we have done to support access to women's healthcare and humanitarian aid.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire. Alongside our support of UNRWA and our bilateral programmes, the UK provided £2 million to UNICEF in 2021 to help feed and clothe vulnerable people and ensure that children can continue their education, keeping the hope of a better life alive.

We continue to stress to the Israeli authorities that restrictions on movement, access and trade for the people of Gaza are damaging the lives of ordinary Palestinians. As I will say again and again, we urge all parties to drive for a durable solution for Gaza and take the necessary practical steps to ensure Gaza's reconstruction and economic recovery. We welcome the continued engagement between the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority on economic matters, but urge more rapid progress.

Improving the economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories remains a priority for the UK, so in addition to our support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the UK Government have funded a number of development programmes in the occupied territories that work to preserve the prospect of a negotiated two-state solution, as the hon. Member for Rotherham pointed out, and to improve the lives of Palestinians throughout the west bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem. A key part of this work is building the capacity of the Palestinian Authority to provide essential services, and the basis for a future Palestinian state.

We continue to work with the Palestinian Authority to reform its security sector, and strengthen its financial management, including revenue collection and enhancing transparency and accountability. Through our programmes, we are improving electricity and water infrastructure across the west bank and Gaza, and helping to improve conditions for trade and exports; there is a wide variety of issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Robert Langan) mentioned the issue of educational textbooks. We urge the Palestinian Authority to remove problematic content from its textbooks. We have robust conversations with the highest levels of the Palestinian leadership, challenging them on the need to prepare their population for peace, including by promoting a positive portrayal of others. We have zero tolerance for all forms of incitement to violence or antisemitism. It is worth pointing out that the UK does not fund textbooks in the OPTs.

The situation on the ground demonstrates the need to accelerate progress towards peace, which is one of the reasons that the conference has been called next week. We remain committed to the two-state solution as the best way to bring peace and stability to the region. We support a negotiated settlement, leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian state, based on the 1967 borders with agreed land swaps, Jerusalem as the shared capital of both sides, and a just, fair, agreed and realistic settlement for refugees.

We firmly believe in a just and lasting resolution that ends the occupation and delivers peace for both Israelis and Palestinians. It is long overdue. We will continue to press both parties on the need to refrain from taking actions that make peace more difficult to attain. We call on all parties to abide by international humanitarian law and to promote peace, stability and security.

We are deeply concerned about the fragile security situation in the west bank and Jerusalem, and look to all parties to take urgent steps to de-escalate tensions.

Sarah Champion: I am grateful for all the Minister is saying. I know she is going as far as she can today. I hope that whoever goes to the pledging conference will take their chequebook with them because, to be honest, money counts. I hear what she is saying about stability and the robust conversations she is having with all sides. Will the Government go as far as they have gone with regard to the Russian invasion and start imposing sanctions, if they see international law being broken?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady raises a number of questions. On going with our chequebook, it is important to say that we remain key supporters of UNRWA. I cannot say any more at this time. We have limited amounts of money. We set out in the international development strategy how we want to prioritise. That will mean difficult decisions—we cannot do everything—but it is vital that we continue to try to prioritise as best as we can, and that we continue to support the UK economy in its recovery so that we get back to 0.7%.

We believe that honest and open discussions, rather than imposing sanctions or supporting anti-Israeli boycotts, best support our efforts to get progress on peace and on getting a negotiated solution. We were totally appalled by the recent terror attacks in Israel. We condemn them in the strongest possible terms, and reaffirm that our thoughts are with the victims and their families. We will engage with Israeli and Palestinian leaders to support co-operation on building stability and economic development. I look forward to any news coming out of New York next Thursday.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Universal Basic Income

4.30 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a universal basic income.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) for his contributions in this place on the issue of a universal basic income. There is no better time to reopen the discussion on this subject. We are up to our necks in the cost of living crisis, which is pushing households across this country further into poverty and destitution. We need change, and we need it now.

Over more than a decade, the Conservative Government have carefully crafted a welfare system that designates recipients as being deserving of payments only if they meet conditions. I appreciate that the idea of implementing a universal basic income and removing the conditions on welfare payments would not normally sit comfortably with the Government. However, it seems that the Conservative party has had a change of heart. On Monday 6 June at the Treasury Committee, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer was questioned on the universal nature of energy bill discounts, which will leave third home owners £1,200 better off, he said:

“there will be some people who do not need the help. That is, unfortunately, the consequence of having to do policy in practical terms.”

He said that, having looked at all the options, the Government decided that the discount was “the most effective way” of reaching a “large number of people” and helping them when they needed it. Clearly, this Government have had a change of heart, and are open to universal policies, depending on who benefits, so it seems that the biggest barrier to implementing a universal basic income is ideological. I urge the Minister to consider extending his party’s new, compassionate approach to the benefits system, and to abandon the cruel and unforgiving system that depicts desperate people as undeserving.

I come to the benefits of a universal basic income. As we have heard many times here and in the main Chamber, a universal basic income would mean that every citizen was provided with a subsistence income. It would mean secure, regular payments into every individual’s bank account, without threat of disruption. In real terms, it would ensure that every person in this country was always able to afford food, keep a roof over their head, provide for their children and have a minimum standard of living.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): In principle, the concept of a universal basic income is promising, but just so that I understand, will the hon. Lady answer these questions? Under her definition, would the universal basic income be the only income that a person received? Would they receive additional benefits if they were unemployed or had disabilities? At what amount would she consider setting a universal basic income?

Angela Crawley: I thank the hon. Member for addressing those points. To be clear, we already have a system that recognises that individuals will need an approach that is

tailored to their needs. Those who have disabilities will need additional support. Those who need additional support because of family requirements will have it. We have a system that already accepts that.

This is about acknowledging that every single person has the right not to be destitute. That is a basic, fundamental tenet. I find it uncomfortable that anyone in this place would consider it a radical motivation. A recent study by the University of York found that a universal basic income would cut poverty by more than half, bringing it to the lowest level for 60 years. It would cut child poverty and pensioner poverty by more than half and working age poverty by a quarter. It would be a driver of economic equality. Further research has shown that it would stimulate local economic growth. Introducing a universal basic income would allow us to incentivise people into work properly, and to move away from the current focus on cruelly sanctioning those who are desperate. Instead of our pushing people into precarious forms of employment and pretending that work programmes are actually working, a universal basic income would provide financial security. It would enable everyone to pursue employment that was more suitable for their lifestyle, hopes and ambitions, and it would allow everyone to engage in socially and personally productive activities, such as community or voluntary work, care giving, or entrepreneurial or creative activities.

The Scottish Government explored the feasibility of introducing a universal basic income, but found that it was impossible under the devolved settlement. With independence, the Scottish Government could be ambitious and look to a future where we could ensure that every citizen in Scotland had the support they needed. We do not have those powers yet and, without independence, we will not have them.

Instead, the Scottish Government commissioned research on a minimum income guarantee, which would transform Scotland’s fight against poverty. Rather than leaving those in need at the mercy of universal credit sanctions, it would at least guarantee that they did not drop below the poverty line. One of the Government’s core contentions, when this matter was last brought to the House, was the expense of setting up such a system. However, the UK Government already have the technology to implement a minimum income guarantee. We already have the tapers in place for the universal credit system, which has markers to ensure that those who need additional funds will get them; that answers the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter).

Universal credit was supposed to streamline and simplify the welfare system. Instead, it has led to the Government ploughing excessive funds and resources into empty work programmes, processing sanctions, and a target-driven jobcentre workforce unable to help those most at risk of poverty. If the Government wish to cut 90,000 civil service staff, and expect to keep this very complex welfare system running, it has another thing coming.

I ask the Minister to read through the numerous studies that have shown the benefits of introducing a universal basic income; to keep a close eye on the Scottish Government’s work on the minimum income guarantee; and to explain how the flawed and damaging universal credit system is in any way an adequate system by comparison.

The country is in crisis. As the cost of living crisis continues, we cannot ignore the worsening mental health crisis. The two are most definitely linked, and introducing a universal basic income would help to alleviate both. Innumerable studies show the detrimental impact of welfare conditionality and its impact on the mental health of welfare recipients. I do not think anyone here is in a position to argue with that. A universal basic income pilot scheme, conducted in Germany and Finland, showed that reform of the welfare state directly impacts the mental health of welfare recipients and their overall mental and physical wellbeing.

The Mental Health Foundation found that children who receive payments were less likely to use drugs and alcohol, more likely to stay in education, and more likely to have improved physical and mental health outcomes. The Finnish system showed that universal basic income helps improve cognitive functioning in adults, reduces feelings of anxiety and depression, and generally increases overall life satisfaction.

A universal basic income is a holistic policy that will have holistic effects across a whole area of social policy. Studies have shown that a universal basic income, although expensive in the beginning, pays for itself over time, through its far-reaching impacts.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and giving a considered and well thought-out speech. Will she clarify that point on expense? The cost of this programme, even if it were rolled out using a modest income, would be around £316 billion annually, according to one study. Can she clarify what her research has shown about the overall annual cost?

Angela Crawley: As the hon. Gentleman will appreciate, there are no studies that can show comprehensively the long-term benefits of such a scheme, because there has been no extensively researched pilot here or in most countries. I think we can all agree that when an individual does not have to think about how they will fund their next meal, pay for the electricity or subsist and survive, they can start to think about their life chances and opportunities, and can begin to fulfil their ambitions in life. There is so much to be gained from a pilot, which would give the hon. Gentleman the evidence, studies and statistics that he asks for.

A universal and destigmatising, more compassionate welfare system would decrease depression and anxiety rates. It is not over-dramatic to say that it would save lives. If the Government are committed to addressing the mental health crisis, will they reform the system responsible for pushing so many people to the edge? I end my contribution by calling on the Government to consider seriously the prospect of a universal basic income. I do not believe such a policy is as radical or unattainable as it seems. We already have the technology and a substantial Department for Work and Pensions budget that could cater for most of these measures. It is wasted, however, on empty work programmes and on processing sanctions, which scar people mentally and financially and abandon those most at risk to life in poverty.

Universal basic income represents a fairer system. I encourage the Minister and his Department to consider establishing a pilot scheme, and to speak to the results

rather than to the rhetoric. The biggest issue is cutting through the damaging Tory ideology that people have to work for their basic human rights. I urge the Minister to rethink his Government's approach, and to seriously consider a universal basic income pilot scheme.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I am mindful that there will be a vote at about 5.5 pm, and we want to get to the Front-Bench speakers no later than 5.10 pm.

4.41 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Thank you, Ms McVey. The actions of this Government are really hammering working people and the working class, and are driving more and more people into poverty. People's incomes and living standards are under attack on many fronts, as we face the worst cost of living crisis in living memory.

The Government have imposed cut after cut to social security benefits, and increased benefits by only a paltry 3.1% in April, though inflation stands at 10%. We have seen freeze after freeze of public sector pay. We clapped for our key workers—be they care workers, Government workers or NHS workers—throughout lockdown, but they have not been rewarded. There is a debate in the main Chamber about the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers, who have been forced to strike next week because their reasonable demands for better pay and terms and conditions have fallen on deaf ears. On pensions, the Tory Government have broken the triple lock.

All that has had a devastating impact on far too many people. Some 14.5 million people live in poverty. That includes the 4.3 million children who live in relative poverty—nine in every classroom of 30 children—and the 10 million people who use food banks. We should be angry that we, the fifth richest nation on the planet, have allowed this situation to arise and become normalised. That is a political choice.

There are alternatives, however, and universal basic income is one of them. We must do everything we can to achieve a fairer and more resilient society as we come out of the pandemic. A vital part of that is replacing our dysfunctional benefits system with one that provides financial security for everyone. UBI—an unconditional and regular cash payment to everybody, regardless of their income—is gaining significant traction as a solution to many of those issues. It is underpinned by the principle of universality, which I endorse. It would provide everyone with enough to cover the basic cost of living, and would ensure that financial security was a basic human right.

Universal basic income has lots of merits. It enables us to ensure that people's human right to an appropriate amount of money to live on is met; it overcomes the negative features of means testing, particularly the stigma associated with claiming social security benefits; it is simple, unlike the current complex welfare system; and it would stimulate demand in the economy by putting money in people's pockets.

I am particularly proud of the universal basic income campaign in my country of Wales. That grassroots, bottom-up campaign, led by a gentleman called Jonathan Williams of UBI Lab Wales, has been successful in

[Beth Winter]

getting constituency Labour parties, local authorities and Assembly Members to sign pledges in support of universal basic income, and it has also participated in various groups here in Parliament.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I apologise for my late arrival to the debate; I was detained elsewhere. Does the hon. Lady welcome, as I do, the small-scale pilot scheme that is being run by the Welsh Government? It will target money at 250 care leavers, who are a particularly vulnerable group. I look forward to the results of that pilot. However, it will take three years, and I am sure that she will agree that we need something larger scale, very quickly.

Beth Winter: I do agree, and thank the hon. Member for that intervention. I will come on to the universal basic income pilot scheme that the Welsh Government are introducing in the next few weeks. Mark Drakeford, the First Minister of Wales, is a strong proponent of universal basic income, and it is part of the radical and more progressive policies, particularly when compared to those of the UK Government, being pursued by the Welsh Government. It forms part of a co-operation agreement between the Labour party and Plaid Cymru that I fully support. The pilot is as ambitious as can be expected, given the financial constraints placed on the Welsh Government by the UK Government; the financial settlement is decided by the Barnett formula. From what I understand, attempts by the Welsh Government to discuss potential assistance from the UK Government fell on deaf ears.

I welcome the pilot, which gives care leavers £1,600 per month. That amount is significantly higher than the amount in any other basic income pilot globally. It is broadly equivalent to the real living wage. There is a comprehensive methodology associated with that, and there will be a very robust evaluation process. Michael Marmot is one of the advisers, as is Guy Standing, who is world-renowned on UBI. The pilot has a technical advisory panel. It is a very well thought-out process that goes as far as it can. Even I would admit that it has some limitations, but it is trying to look at progressive, radical and alternative ways of supporting people.

Any pilot or roll out of UBI must form part of a much broader transformative agenda. We need a benefits system that ensures that everyone has equal access to a safety net that will ensure that they can meet their needs, and we need a progressive tax system. I propose the reinstatement of the £20 universal credit uplift, and that benefits and wages be inflation-proofed. I am a proponent of the wealth tax. UBI must form part of a more transformative agenda. I will continue to work alongside colleagues in Parliament, but crucially, I will work outside the bubble of Parliament with organisations such as Anti-Poverty Alliance in Wales, Child Poverty Action Group and trade unions—in particular, Unite Wales community—to promote radical, alternative and socialist policies. I want to celebrate and congratulate the Welsh Government on the ambitious pilot. *Diolch yn fawr.*

4.48 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton

East (Angela Crawley) and every Member here. I welcome any debate about moving our economy forward and helping the most vulnerable in society. However, I am afraid, although it may come as a complete shock, that I disagree with the proposal of UBI. I want to set out four reasons why, in good humour and constructively.

First, there is a great deal of uncertainty about how much UBI would cost taxpayers and the British Exchequer. “Universal” means “everybody”; in our country, over 65 million people will receive some form of income under a universal basic income policy. If we provided just a basic income—even a modest income—it would result in hundreds of billions of pounds of extra money being spent. We would have to find that money from other Departments, or raise new money through higher taxes. That is a perfectly noble argument to make, but it is a fact of running a budget that the money has to be taken from somewhere else, or it has to be raised.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) *rose—*

Gareth Davies: I am not sure what the argument of the Welsh Government or the Liberal Democrats is, but I am happy to hear it.

Christine Jardine: I also apologise for being a little late; I was caught unawares by the broken lifts in Portcullis House. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the universal basic income is still a concept—an idea? Those of us who earn much more than what it might offer should perhaps not look for any payment at all. We should accept that we already have that income. We can calculate how much it would cost to give it to everybody, but that might not be in line with the spirit of the universal basic income.

Gareth Davies: It is beyond the bounds of my intellect to debate what “universal” means. I take it to mean, “being received by everyone.” It could be up to people to give it back, but as we have seen in recent policies, that does not always happen.

Hywel Williams: I do not want to be argumentative, but the Chancellor has agreed to give us all, including everyone here, the princely sum of £400, so the principle is accepted by Conservative Members, although I agree that there might be rather larger sums involved in the universal basic income. We have talked about the gross cost, but we might be able to net off a considerable amount of money in view of the wellbeing, better health and happiness, and everything else that comes with having a proper income.

Gareth Davies: The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), who introduced the debate, made the point that the Conservatives recently implemented a universal policy. She will be aware, as will the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), that in exceptional circumstances—be it the first pandemic in over 100 years, or a national crisis in energy prices—we would expect the Government to protect as many people as possible, and to act at pace. I accept that point, but that is not what we are talking about today, which is, as I understand it, a complete and permanent root-and-branch reform of our welfare system.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Gareth Davies: I will make some progress, if that is all right; I am sure that colleagues will disagree with other points that I make. That was my first point, about cost.

My second point is that a universal basic income could exacerbate, not alleviate, inequality. Under a universal system, everybody would receive the payment. Millionaires would receive a cheque through the post. Even an RMT driver on £70,000 a year would receive a cheque. There is, however—I would like the Minister to address this—a point to be made about the need to simplify our benefits system. I accept that, having dealt with hundreds of cases in my constituency. A lot of the time, vulnerable members of society are not aware of all the many benefits that are available to them. I would endorse any effort that the Minister made to inform people of them, and to simplify our benefit system. As a universal system would exacerbate inequality and give billionaires and millionaires a cheque through the post that they did not need, I cannot accept this policy suggestion.

Beth Winter: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I said, he would have heard me say that the policy would have to be part of a more general transformative agenda. I was here yesterday, speaking in a debate on a wealth tax. According the Wealth Tax Commission, such a tax would raise £260 billion. Does he agree that that would be a good way of raising funding?

Gareth Davies: It will shock the hon. Lady to hear that I do not agree. We are going a little off-course, but on a wealth tax, a lot of people invest in our country, and a lot of people start from nothing and go on to achieve great things. I do not want to hamper their ambition for a better life, and their aim of setting up a business and employing lots of people. A wealth tax would not only put people off from investing in and coming to this country, but dissuade people such as my dad, who is not a particularly rich man, from doing what he did: he set up a business because he wanted to do better for himself and his family. He ended up employing a lot of people. A wealth tax is not the way forward, in my view. Incentivising economic growth and the dignity of work is the way to go.

That brings me to my third point. Time and again, the dignity of work and the security of a regular pay cheque have been proven to be the best way out of poverty. However, people in work do not just get an income; they get so much more. They get friends; sometimes they meet their wives. They get meaning in life and a purpose. The dignity of work gives people things to get up for in the morning.

The work environment and the people who we work with add so much to our lives, but jobs also give us skills that develop over time. I am afraid that I disagree with my friends from the Scottish National party about the effect of introducing a universal basic income, which will dissuade people from going to work. It will not encourage work in the way that they have said it will.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): There is absolutely no evidence from any pilot programme from anywhere in the world that shows that people are indolent and do not want to work. In fact, the current welfare system punishes people for going back to work. As for the basic income, I am not taking people's basic income away if they go and get some part-time work or to go

back to university to study, so it actually encourages them and gives them the confidence to go back into work.

Gareth Davies: The hon. Member makes a reasonable point about evidence, but I will point out to him that there is also no evidence of universal basic income working anywhere in the world. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East—

Angela Crawley *rose*—

Gareth Davies: I can pre-empt it. The hon. Lady rattled off a number of examples—I will hurry up with my speech because I am being asked to move on, although I have taken a number of interventions, which will hopefully be acknowledged.

There have been a number of studies and pilots, not least the one in Wales that is going on at the moment, but not one has been executed. There is not one example from around the world that we can point to where universal basic income has been implemented. The reason is that, although such pilots may show some benefits for mental health, wellbeing and other points, not one of them has not shown any Government around the world that universal basic income is the right model for alleviating poverty in the future. *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that I will end my speech here, by saying thanks to you, Ms McVey, and thanks to everybody for listening. I feel a little alone on this side of the Chamber, but I am pretty sure that the British people are with me.

4.56 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

We are living in unprecedented times—although I am loth to say that, because every time that I have said it in the past two years, things have got worse. However, we are living in unprecedented times, and the problems we face now demand very different and potentially more far-reaching solutions than anything this country has attempted since the end of the second world war—or, perhaps there is no evidence from anywhere else in the world, and we might need to be first.

Now more than ever, we see clearly how easily any of us could find ourselves needing support. There is a generation out there who had no thought that they might ever need benefits, because they had good, well-paid jobs, but they are seeing that that now is no security. In my constituency of Edinburgh West, foodbanks are telling me that the people who used to bring donations are now themselves coming for help. So it can happen to any of us: that we would need support and perhaps find none.

Sadly, we are learning that the welfare state, which has served us so well for seven decades, is not fully equipped for the new reality that is the consequence of the series of crises that we have faced in the past two years. During covid, I spoke to too many people for whom the many Government schemes offering furlough, business grants or support for the self-employed simply did not provide support. Coronavirus made no exception in who it attacked, yet the Government were unable to say the same about who they supported. Yes, we have heard examples today of payments that are now being made to everybody, but the Government repeatedly tell us that they cannot help everyone all the time.

[Christine Jardine]

I do not think that is good enough, but I recognise that what we face now is a mammoth task. But we have to find a way. We cannot lose sight of the question that so many people will face this coming winter: how will they feed their family, keep a roof above their heads and stay warm? When even the welfare state, which generations in this country have worked hard to maintain, is not able to do that, we have to accept that the time has perhaps come to do things differently. What has become abundantly clear is that what has been missing throughout all these crises is a crucial element of universal protection—something that perhaps none of us realised we would need.

The hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) said that universal basic income does not exist anywhere in the world and asked how could we provide it. In 1942, Beveridge's vision did not exist, but it is undoubtedly one of those iconic British systems of which we are rightly proud. Because that generation took the risk, we benefited. Now we need to take the risk so that future generations can benefit and to realise that we need a new vision to equip us for the 21st century and the very different challenges it brings.

The concept of a universal basic income, a guaranteed basic income or a universal right to a standard of living that looks at the country and says that everybody should be able to be sure that they will have food on the table, a roof over their heads and some warmth in the winter. That is what we are talking about: the principle. We are not talking necessarily about sending everybody cheques every month, and millionaires getting cheques. We are talking about looking at people and seeing if their standard of living, income and quality of life reaches a basic level. That is what we are talking about today.

As a constituency MP, with every passing day and every desperate phone call from someone in trouble who is frantically searching for a financial lifeboat that does not exist, I become more convinced that some form of universal basic income has to be the solution in this country. Nobody should be left behind. Moving forward after the pandemic and this cost of living crisis, unemployment and financial insecurity will be major challenges for any Government. A basic income, a basic standard of living or a guaranteed income will be the best, fairest and simplest way to safeguard the most vulnerable in society and care for those who need it.

Hywel Williams: Given that we are talking in high terms and with a breadth of vision here, and apropos what the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) said about the dignity of work, we must crack this paradox whereby it is said that to get the poor to work harder, we must provide them with less support, and to get the rich to work harder, we must provide them with other support, such as cutting their taxes. We need a much more universal view of income support and dignity for everyone.

5.2 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.27 pm

On resuming—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed and the debate may continue until 5.55 pm.

Christine Jardine: I agree wholeheartedly with the comments from the hon. Member for Arfon (Hywel Williams), which are very welcome.

I will wind up simply by saying that in the current circumstances, with the series of crises we are facing, including the cost of living emergency, we must find a way to free people from the insecurity and anxiety that they face so often. If that means we have to try more than one way of providing and ensuring a universal basic income, a guaranteed standard of living or whatever we want to call it, we have to do so. We simply have to find a way and ensure that this generation does not let down future ones.

5.28 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I say at the outset how pleased I am that the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) has brought this issue forward? I fully support what she is trying to achieve. Everything that the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) has just said supports my thoughts as well.

I say respectfully that we do not always hear from someone with an opinion that is from what we are putting forward here, so I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) in his place and arguing his point, which is the right thing to do. I probably do not agree with much of it, but that is not the point. The point is that the hon. Gentleman had the courage to come here and say his piece, which is something I admire in anybody.

I am also pleased to see the Minister in his place, because I know that he always puts forward his point of view compassionately and respectfully. We would hope that the Minister might agree with us—we will wait to see whether that is possible—but we will make our points.

I have highlighted in this House numerous times over the past few weeks that I have real concerns about the working poor. Maybe that is because—I say this for no other reason than that it is factual—when I was a young boy growing up, we did not have very much. We did not have many goods or toys, but we always had plenty of love in the house from our parents. I say that because it may give a perspective on those who do not have much today. That is the reason I have come here to speak in support of what the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East has put forward.

For those who were working hard this time last year but barely making ends meet, increasing costs mean difficult choices—poverty is staring them straight in the eye. For example, how do parents explain to a seven-year-old why a school trip to the local aquarium is not accessible, and why they will have to stay in school with another class while everyone else's parents pay the £11? How do they get across to the child the fact that the school only informed them mid-month and they were expected to pay within the week, that Mummy literally does not have a spare pound until the child benefit comes in, and that the money usually goes towards topping up the electricity, as it does today more than ever? If that sounds far-fetched to some people, I can assure them that it happened in my office just last week. A member of my staff stepped in and paid that amount for a parent who had come in for a food voucher and broke their heart with that story.

The three hon. Ladies who spoke—the hon. Members for Edinburgh West, for Lanark and Hamilton East, and for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter)—reiterated the importance of food banks. That parent hated asking for the food voucher, but they were desperate. That is life today in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; that is what we face. I do not say this to score points, but to speak up for the people who we have to speak up for. That is what I am here for, and I know it is what everybody else is here for.

That school trip was not essential for that seven-year-old, but it is life at present for their Mummy who works in the local shop and whose partner also works, and that will be their life until we in this place reduce the cost of fuel and electricity and uplift the cap. I want to see the cap uplifted. It is not about millionaires getting money; it is about the working poor and those in poverty. This year they simply cannot manage and that is only going to get worse.

We can give the food voucher and we can point to the wonderful local charities that help parents in need, but we in this place must address the fact that the working poor are working full time but can still not make ends meet. That is the reality in my constituency and many others—maybe including yours, Ms McVey.

That is why we need to consider a universal basic income. That burden cannot fall only on small business owners by demanding increased wages from them, because sometimes that is not possible. Businesses are on the brink and that could tip them over. For example, one small business owner told me that he used to be able to buy for 80p a toilet roll that he then sold for £1. Because the price of shipping has gone up by £9,500 per container, he cannot buy it for £1 anymore; he now buys it to sell for £1.29, an increase of 29%. If we tell him he has to top up the wages of his staff again, the product will be £1.50 and the price will continue to increase. It is about viability and sustainability for small businesses.

When the Government created the universal credit system, it was with the idea that it would give flexibility to working people to ensure that they have enough money. For example, £20,000 a year for a couple without Government assistance may have been enough last year, but it certainly is not enough this year. I ask the Minister, with respect and with a plea from myself, all the hon. Members in this corner of the Chamber and the shadow Minister, on behalf of working families in poverty, will he go back to the Cabinet and the Treasury and uplift the cap, and get hard-working people who want to work, such as my constituent, the help they need to survive?

I am talking about surviving. It is not like getting a passport to take a much-needed holiday, or saving for a TV or a new sofa. Instead it is about people feeding their children and allowing those children go on educational school trips, instead of being left with another class feeling left out, embarrassed and ostracised. That is why this is not okay.

I have great affection for the Minister; he and I speak about many things and there are not a lot of things that we do not agree on, from a human rights or persecution point of view, and we are on the same side. But I say to him and to the Government that this is not okay. This House has the ability to make changes. I ask that we make them, please.

5.34 pm

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on bringing forward this debate. Basic income and the phrase “an idea whose time has come” seem to go hand in glove these days. It has been around for a long time. Recently, thanks to Guy Standing, it has been linked with Magna Carta—or, to be precise, the Charter of the Forest—which makes it at least 800 years old.

There is a growing body of thought that is engaging with the concept of a common good, commonweal or commonwealth. Our current welfare system is failing. It is abused and misused, which is a great pity. Like the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), I invoke the spirit of William Beveridge. In December 1942, when considering establishing a welfare state, Beveridge released a report in which he wrote:

“A revolutionary moment in the world’s history is a time for revolution, not for patching.”

The welfare system he established was once the cornerstone of a brave new Britain, but sadly it has fallen into disrepair. Once again, we are looking at a time for revolutions. I say to this Conservative and Unionist Government that that is not just for welfare, but for transport, heating, energy, employment and constitution.

Will basic income cost a lot to implement and run? You bet it will. It will cost a shedload of money. But is it cost-effective? I could argue until I am blue in the face that once we consider the cost of the existing system, the health benefits of basic income—both physical and mental—the increase in start-up businesses, the greater take-up in further education, the freedom it gives people to live a life well spent, it is more than cost-effective. It is a must if we are to raise people out of financial poverty and poverty of aspiration. What price can be put on releasing children from the crushing poverty that they currently experience? What price for hope, aspiration and ambition?

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), whom I welcome to the debate—it really puts the pleasure into debating if people come and put their side of the argument in such a well-informed and well-mannered fashion—this tax system is for everybody. We adjust the tax system accordingly. If I am given £12,000 extra through basic income and I earn an MP’s salary, I will pay back that £12,000, so it nets off. Alternatively, we could use sovereign money, or we could have a citizens’ wealth fund. It does not have to be topside down.

Basic income does not make people indolent. Every pilot that has been run across the world has shown that it frees people to go out and work without being financially penalised. Do we know everything about how it will work? No, we do not, but I am not asking the UK Government to take a punt on this; I am asking them to consider the evidence, and that is why they should embrace the opportunity of pilot projects. These are projects designed to investigate and identify the pros and cons of basic income. I am pleased that in Scotland—backed by the Scottish Government, who provided £250,000 over two years to support the undertaking of a feasibility study for a citizens basic income pilot—we are planning four pilot projects in Fife, North Ayrshire, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

[Ronnie Cowan]

I am equally delighted that there are similar projects in Wales, Northern Ireland and England, with 32 motions calling for UBI trials passed by local councils. Those projects will provide substantial data for academic research, which we can learn from and use to form future policy, but they need financial and administrative support from the UK Government. All I am asking is that the Government make policy based on evidence and stop hiding their head in the sand.

I led the first ever debate in this Parliament on basic income, on 14 September 2016. Sadly, the UK Government are no further forward, and we are now experiencing increased poverty and an increasing gap between the richest and poorest in society. The status quo is unacceptable. Basic income represents something better: hope and opportunity. It is a platform to build on and a safety net if required. I will end today as I ended my speech in 2016, with a quote from Noam Chomsky:

“Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, you are unlikely to step up and take responsibility for making it so.”

Once again, I am asking the UK Government to take responsibility.

5.39 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing the debate, which has been good, although slightly interrupted. Her argument against financial insecurity was a very good one. It is stressful to tackle poverty. A family that does not have enough will almost certainly experience significant mental health challenges and will not lead the kind of life that we would wish for them.

The hon. Lady also made a good argument for what has gone wrong in the Department for Work and Pensions since 2010. There are numerous examples where the actions of Government have caused simply unnecessary stress and pressures. All hon. Members argued against poverty and for a universalist approach for a United Kingdom where no one is left behind. That is where we agree. But I was not clear what the hon. Member was arguing for. She mentioned several times that it is not possible to give full details and that is why UK Government should do more research, or that somehow we need to progress this, and then there might be information about what would be available under a universal basic income. However, we need some simple facts in order to make the case for such a radical change to our system. Those facts are how much the universal income might be and how it would be paid for.

Ronnie Cowan: Is the hon. Member aware that Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, is pushing for a basic income to be trialled in the Greater Manchester area? He seems to understand that by trialling these things and learning from them, we will all be better informed.

Alison McGovern: I will go on to say why universal basic income is not the Labour party's policy.

Basic facts are important. The hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East could tell us more about the situation in Scotland. She mentioned the experience of

the Scottish Government, and I think she could make her argument by giving some more basic facts. It is difficult to see exactly what she wants the change in system to do when we do not know exactly what is being proposed.

The hon. Lady mentioned supporting the idea of a minimum income guarantee, as did several Members. That, however, is not the same as a universal basic income. A minimum income guarantee is about a standard below which no one should fall, whereas a universal basic income—as I understand it from her—is about a universal payment for everyone, regardless of circumstances.

We need to think about this from first principles. Our social security system has two purposes: first, to smooth incomes over a person's lifetime. We therefore have universal aspects to our system that we all agree with, such as the idea of the state pension being universal on the basis of age. Other aspects of our social security system, such as child benefit, are paid on the basis that children have limited possibilities to generate income. In fact, we absolutely think that children ought to be supported, though we could have a long debate about the two-child policy and the fact that it rather contravenes the principle. That smoothing of income over a lifetime is exactly as Beveridge envisaged the system would work.

Secondly, our social security system addresses the needs that people have in order to enable their full participation in society—so, those who have extra costs, the obvious example of which is people who have a disability .

Angela Crawley: The hon. Member has made it very clear that the Labour party does not support universal basic income, which I find profoundly fascinating. However, that is not the point that I want to make. She also said quite clearly that she felt the benefit system had started to change since 2010. What lessons have been learned by the Labour party, which itself had a system that was far less than perfect, and what exactly is she proposing to ensure that those living on the lowest incomes can at least have the basic subsistence that is required?

Alison McGovern: I will come to that point, because I will set out shortly, if I may, what I think is the important way in which we should take our country forward.

Hywel Williams: I remind the hon. Lady that there are three particular principles of social security and the support that we give to each other. One is income replacement, the second is addressing particular needs, such as childcare or whatever it is, and the third one, which is important for those of us in this part of the Chamber, is the need to promote solidarity and cohesion, using the system to ensure that we all realise that we are all in this together, as it were. In that sense, the system should be generous—indeed, much more generous than it is at the moment.

Alison McGovern: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the universality of the system, which we all pay into and we all take out of when we need to. That is the contributory principle—the principle that we are all part of the same system.

This is where I think there is an important point that is at risk of being missed, because the contributory principle—the idea that we are all a part of this system—is

failed when people are left behind. Beveridge and Eleanor Rathbone—whose history you know well, Chair—created a system of social security that was not in isolation from the other work that they did in analysing the problems that had happened in the 1930s and assessing which institutions were needed for a good economy that would leave no one behind and in which people could pay into the social security system when they were able to, through working, and take out of it when they needed to. Their point was to ensure that work would help to support families and that the social security system would be there to provide a minimum level of income, as needed, to support a family.

The Beveridge report required two other things to be in existence to support the system of social security. The first was the creation of the NHS and the second was the assumption of full employment—a labour market where everybody could take part and where work would provide enough to help to support a family.

As various Members have already said, that is what is going wrong right now. The Prime Minister crows about jobs, but he does so in the middle of a crisis of huge price rises while wages are falling. For me, that is the definition of a broken jobs market.

Beth Winter: As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, prior to the 2019 Labour manifesto, the then shadow Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), commissioned Guy Standing to undertake a research project on a pilot of basic income. A document was produced, which I expect she has read, that proposed a UBI pilot and piloting UBI was included in the 2019 manifesto. Is that something we continue to support?

Alison McGovern: I will set out the rest of my argument about what I think we should do to help to improve people's incomes. And I will do so very quickly, Ms McVey.

People have mentioned the various pieces of research, which are important, because they tell us about how people respond to different systems. However, I think that this broken jobs market that we now face, whereby businesses are crying out for staff and there are vacancies left, right and centre, but too many people are stuck in work that is far too low-paid, shows exactly what is going wrong.

The problem with what the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies) said about work having been proven to be the best route out of poverty is that, for the past decade, the Tory Government have set out on a mission to prove that that is not the case. We need a social security system that does what it was designed to do—help people through different life stages when they need it, and help lift people out of disadvantage and into the dignity of work. There will always be people who are unable to work, but the vast majority of people want to be in work.

It is not obvious to me that there is a proposal on the table that does either of those things. Labour's approach will be different. We need to change jobcentres—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I need to hurry you along, because we still need to hear from the Minister and have the wind-up at the end.

Alison McGovern: My apologies, Ms McVey.

We need to change jobcentres to help people move on and move up in work, and progress our country to real full employment that involves disabled people and everybody in our country. That would be a plan towards progress.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Minister, will you be mindful of the need to leave a minute at the end for the Member in charge to wind up the debate?

5.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (David Rutley): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey—one of Cheshire's finest. I am mindful of the time that is available, and I am sure you will give me a reminder as we go on.

It is an honour to be involved in the debate. I know that all Members have sincerely held views. It is also pretty clear that there is still quite a lot of debate about this subject, even within the Opposition parties. I look forward to seeing how that debate moves forward.

As Members are aware, our welfare system is centred on the support provided by universal credit, which offers a streamlined and simplified benefits system that supports those on low incomes, as well as those who are unemployed or who cannot work. Universal credit is a dynamic benefit that reflects people's needs from month to month. It ensures that claimants are paid depending on their circumstances, with claimants' awards changing depending on how much they earn from month to month. That is in strong contrast to a universal basic income, which does not fluctuate based on earnings in the same way but mandates a standard monthly allowance paid to all working-age adults—although I am mindful that there are still details to be worked through in the proposals from the Scottish Government.

I want to reassure colleagues—not least the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), whom I congratulate on securing the debate, but also my friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) and so on—that my views, and those of my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), are not ideologically held. They are concerns based on practical issues that, as we have heard in the debate—in particular during the past 10 or 15 minutes—need to be properly worked through.

We have real, evidence-based concerns about UBI on a practical basis because it does not provide the work incentive that we believe is vital in these sorts of systems. We have fundamental concerns, too, about what it might mean for targeting. Many of the UBI schemes that have been put in place are not targeted at those with greatest need. We feel that it is vital that targeted approaches are put in place. We saw that from the Chancellor on 26 May, when he set out our targeted measures to help those who need support through cost of living challenges, whether that is those on means-tested benefits, those on disability benefits or pensioners. By the way, that legislation will come to the House next week.

We have fundamental concerns, which are held not just by the Government but by many think-tanks—they were also expressed by the Work and Pensions Committee back in 2020. They are concerns based on evidence from trials in different parts of the world, such as Spain,

[David Rutley]

Canada and, in particular, Finland. The Finnish Finance Minister concluded that the case was closed and there must be conditionality in the social security system.

It is for those reasons that we have concerns about UBI, whether in the form put forward initially by the Scottish Government or that in the Welsh Government's planned pilot. I look forward to being a fly on the wall in the discussions between Opposition Front Benchers and the Welsh Government on these matters.

5.54 pm

Angela Crawley: I thank hon. Members for contributing to the debate. On the question of where the detail and the facts are, I direct the hon. Member for Wirral South

(Alison McGovern) to the fact that the Scottish Government fully costed, in two feasibility studies, a model that is workable, but the simple fact is that this winter will be the hardest yet for too many families and too many children will continue to grow up in poverty. I do not think UBI is a radical concept. With the greatest respect, if the Queen's Speech is anything to go by, I think this Government need some radical ideas and a new vision. I urge the Minister to seriously consider a pilot of this scheme and to give families a chance.

5.55 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 15 June 2022

DEFENCE

Defence AI Strategy Launch

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

Today I am pleased to publish the Defence Artificial Intelligence (AI) strategy. This strategy sets out our ambitious plans to harness responsibly the game-changing potential of these ubiquitous, enabling technologies to rapidly modernise the UK's armed forces and secure our military edge. Our vision is that, in terms of AI, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) will be the world's most effective, efficient, trusted and influential defence organisation for our size.

The strategy articulates how we will transform the culture of defence to become truly "AI ready", developing the skills, technical enablers and research and development programmes to dramatically accelerate the adoption of AI-enabled systems and capabilities. In doing so we will champion and strengthen the UK's industrial and academic base to secure national strategic advantage in AI technologies, supporting the Government's wider ambitions for the UK to become a science and technology superpower by 2030. The strategy also sets out how we will address the global security policy challenges associated with the use of AI in a defence context, from geostrategic technological competition to counter proliferation and strategic deterrence.

We recognise that getting right the ethics of military AI is a particularly important requirement. That is why, alongside the strategy, we are also publishing a policy document: "Ambitious, Safe and Responsible - Our approach to the delivery of AI-enabled capability in Defence". This document sets out the robust controls framework that will be applied for all AI-enabled military capabilities, throughout system lifecycles, providing assurance to the public and our partners that our use of these systems will always be in line with UK values, standards and legal obligations.

We have engaged extensively with partners across Government, civil society and our allies in developing these approaches, and will continue to do so over the coming months.

I am placing copies of both documents in the Library of the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2022-06-15/HCWS101>

[HCWS101]

Royal Navy, Royal Military and Royal Air Force Police: Inspection Reports

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans (Leo Docherty): I wish to inform the House that I am laying today, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Defence, the reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary Fire and Rescue Service (HMICFRS) inspection of the service police (the Royal Navy Police, the Royal Military Police and the RAF Police).

The Armed Forces Act 2011 places a duty on HMICFRS to inspect and report to the Ministry of Defence on the independence and effectiveness of investigations carried out by each service police force, and this is HMICFRS's third statutory inspection report on the service police.

I welcome these reports on service police investigations into rape, serious sexual assault, and domestic abuse investigations from an independent civilian authority. While the reports recognise that such investigations are done to comparable or higher standards than most civilian police forces, some areas of concern have been raised, specifically around the safeguarding of victims. We have work in hand to improve the safeguarding and support to victims of these most serious offences including through the setting up of the victims and witness care unit, under the defence serious crime command which will be fully operational by December 2022. More widely, there were a total of 30 recommendations and 13 areas of improvement for the Royal Naval Police, 32 recommendations and 19 areas of improvement for the Royal Military Police and 30 recommendations and 21 areas of improvement for the Royal Air Force Police.

A third of these were common to all three services. The Department accepts the reports' findings and will consider the recommendations and areas for improvement in detail.

Copies of the reports will be available through the Journal Office.

Attachments can be viewed online at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2022-06-15/HCWS104/>

[HCWS104]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Drugs Strategy Guidance

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

As the cross-Government Minister with responsibility for combating drugs, I am pleased to announce today the publication of guidance for local partners helping to deliver the commitments and ambitions laid out in the 10-year drugs strategy by this Government in December.

This is an important next step in the ambitious whole-of-Government plan to cut crime and save lives, and sets out a framework to help local partners reduce drug-related harm and monitor their progress.

Drugs can have devastating effects on individuals, families and neighbourhoods, and the cost to society is nearly £20 billion a year in England alone. Drug-related deaths are at the highest levels recorded, and drug use is associated with nearly half of all homicides and acquisitive crimes such as robberies, burglaries, and thefts. The drivers behind drug-related harm are clearly complex and cut across the responsibilities of a range of different organisations.

As a result, dedicated funding of nearly £90 million was announced with the strategy in December, taking the investment in combating drugs to £3 billion over three years across enforcement, treatment and recovery, and demand reduction.

Now, as the focus turns to implementation and delivery, local partners such as local authorities, public health services, police forces, prisons, and probation services

are being asked to step up and fulfil their collective role as the engine room of this drugs strategy. It is these local delivery partners that are best placed to address the needs of their local communities.

The new guidance provides an important framework for how local partners in England should work together to reduce drug-related harm and drive join-up across sectors and a framework for Combating Drugs Partnerships. A single senior responsible owner (SRO) in each locality will chair these partnerships and be responsible for reporting to central government on local cross-cutting delivery against the national combating drugs outcomes framework, alongside their own specific organisational objectives.

The outcomes and metrics included in the framework aim to provide a clear line of sight between action and the impact experienced by individuals, families, and neighbourhoods across the country and in local areas. This is how delivery of the commitments and ambitions of the 10-year drugs strategy to level up the country will be most effectively monitored. The potential benefits are significant and wide-ranging, including improving people's safety, productivity and wider health and well-being.

I look forward to confirmation of the partnerships and working with the local SROs.

While this guidance is aimed primarily at partners in England, we have referenced Wales where it touches on reserved matters. More broadly we will continue to work with the devolved Administrations to embed collaboration on these issues.

The guidance will be available on gov.uk and placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS103]

TRANSPORT

Future of Freight Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): As a proud, free-trading nation, moving goods domestically and abroad has always been the backbone of the United Kingdom's economy. Throughout the pandemic and in our work to deliver Brexit and a global Britain we have been reminded of the vital role that the freight and logistics sector has supporting the supply chains that maintain our economic wellbeing. Across Government we have worked collectively, and collaboratively with industry to mitigate disruption to our supply chains. We have delivered unprecedented action with 33 measures to help the sector tackle the shortage of HGV drivers. This included making more driving test slots available than needed and introducing bootcamps, which has seen the number of available HGV drivers stabilise. We also provided vital support to ferry and freight operators to weather the start of the pandemic. This, alongside other actions, has led to sector reports of pressures easing following global challenges on the supply chain, and supported this highly effective and adaptable sector to maintain the smooth flow of goods into, out of and across the country.

It is now important that we look to ensure that the sector is ready to grasp opportunities in the medium and long-term. The future of freight is the first time that the UK Government has developed a long-term cross-modal plan for the freight and logistics sector. The plan is a collaboration with industry and we have engaged stakeholders extensively in its development, including through the freight council. It sets out how the UK Government and industry have agreed to work more closely together, and with the devolved Administrations, to deliver a world-class, seamless flow of freight across our roads, railways, seas, skies and waterways.

The vision set out in the plan is for a freight and logistics sector that is cost-efficient, reliable, resilient, environmentally sustainable and valued by society for its role in supporting our way of life. The plan is also clear on the importance of the sector to achieving some of the Government's strategic priorities. The sector is ideally placed to support levelling up, driving economic activity across all corners of the UK and providing secure employment, for example in ports and distribution centres sited in levelling up priority areas, and opportunities in all our communities. The plan also supports our efforts to strengthen the Union improving connectivity across the United Kingdom.

The plan focuses on five priority areas of challenge identified with industry. It is the start of a long-term collaboration which will raise the status of freight within Government. It sets out Government and industry commitment to collaborate on a number of actions:

The National Freight Network: We will identify a National Freight Network (NFN) across road, rail, maritime, aviation, inland waterway and warehouse infrastructure. Our long-term aim will be to remove the barriers which prevent the seamless flow of freight.

Transition to Net Zero: We want to support the entire sector in its transition to net zero. We will launch the freight energy forum with industry, focused on collaborating with industry to assess future energy and fuel needs and paths to providing the requisite infrastructure.

Planning: We will further embed freight in planning, transport and design policy and guidance, and ensure freight is represented in planning reform. We will publish a call for evidence with industry to support this work.

People & Skills: We will expand awareness of the sector and freight careers amongst the public, particularly through the industry-led and Government-backed generation logistics communication campaign. This will maximise the impact of cross-Government employment and skills programmes for the freight sector.

Data & Technology: We will maximise opportunities for uptake of innovative technology and digitalisation, including through delivery of a dedicated cross-modal £7 million freight innovation fund.

Moving goods efficiently has underpinned Britain's historical growth, prosperity and global influence. In today's increasingly interconnected and competitive global economy, we require a world beating freight and logistics sector that will deliver the greener, fairer, and stronger economy we need. A sector that will help build a truly global Britain.

I will place a copy of "Future of freight: a long-term plan" in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS102]

Petition

Wednesday 15 June 2022

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Industrial waste

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Environment Agency should reconsider the permit allowing thousands of tons of industrial waste to be spread on the Musden Low area; notes that this is one mile from the conservation village of Calton and within the Peak District National Park; declares that there has been a detrimental impact on wildlife, especially the RED listed Curlew which was common in the area before the spreading started but has now virtually disappeared; further that the spreading has caused a pungent smell which penetrates people's washing and homes and makes it unpleasant to be outside; further that there is unsuitable access for road tankers, which are causing damage to roads and verges; further that several public footpaths cross into the designated spreading area; and further that the risk assessment presented to the Environment Agency had various points that were questionable or omitted such as underground water courses and soil type.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the concerns of the petitioners and urge the Environment Agency to withdraw the permit allowing industrial waste to be spread on the Musden Low area.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Karen Bradley, *Official Report*, 9 February 2022; Vol. 708, c. 1052.]

[P002712]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow):

Thank you to the residents of Calton and the Musden Low area for raising this issue. I am sorry to hear the residents' concerns around land spreading activities. The permitting and risk assessment of spreading waste to land sits with the Environment Agency (EA) which issued the relevant deployments permits under The Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2010.

The EA have a rigorous process in place for evaluating applications before a permit has been issued. This seeks to ensure the activity is fully utilising these materials, in this case, to supply nutrients to meet a crop and soil need, while minimising the risk and impact of said activities. This can include conditions relating to odour, potential pollution—such as run-off risk—and to minimise any impacts on locally vulnerable species, such as curlew.

I requested the EA to assess the use of permits raised in the period in question to ensure that permit conditions were complied with. In this instance, the EA has found no evidence of compliance issues with the issued permits and as spreading has not yet commenced on the current deployment permit, the agency has no grounds to withdraw it. When the operator notifies the EA of their intention

to spread, the EA will inspect the operation to determine whether the spreading is compliant with the deployment permit and any other associated rules.

However, in response to community concerns, there have been a number of steps taken to further minimise the impact of these spreading activities since then. I believe the EA has met and discussed this with my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), and I have also raised this with them. In terms of actions derived from the specific concerns raised in the petition:

Impact on wildlife

Since the issue of the previous deployment permit, the EA has become aware that certain fields at the site in question come under the environmental impact assessment regulations and countryside stewardship schemes which aim to protect various aspects on the land such as the nesting curlews. It is the responsibility of the farmer-landowner to ensure they are meeting the requirements of any stewardship scheme they are involved in and to inform the relevant authority of any changes.

Pungent smell in the village

While some of the wastes being spread are of an odorous nature which cannot be eliminated, in response to concerns raised about the smell, the operator is now using ground injection methods to minimise this. If residents continue to experience odour issues, they should report these to the EA for investigation.

Unsuitable access

Traffic movements and damage to roads and verges are the responsibility of the local council, Staffordshire County Council in this case, and should be reported to it for investigation.

National Park/conservation area

The area in question is in a remote agricultural area with limited public access. Spreading should only take place during appropriate conditions and should avoid any footpaths. Any specific details about issues with footpaths being impacted by this activity should be reported to the EA.

Risk assessment

Through the permitting process, the operator is required to identify potential pollution pathways including any impacts to groundwaters, air, people, and designated sites. They are also required to put in place management controls to remove or reduce any risks and control any risk to human health or pollution of the environment. As touched upon above, fields covered by the countryside stewardship scheme are included in a site-specific risk assessment. This risk assessment was reviewed and agreed through the EA's robust permitting process. The permit is a standard rules SR2010No4 mobile plant for land spreading which has standard rules and conditions that are not alterable. This along with the agreed individual deployment should limit the risk, if implemented accordingly. Actions in the risk assessment include:

- delivery of waste in daylight hours;
- no spreading at weekends and bank holidays;
- complying with the agreed spreading plan;
- no spread zones and being aware of local aspects (access and footpaths);
- only spreading when the ground conditions are appropriate, when there is a crop need and at the correct application rates, and;
- injecting the waste at sub surface level.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 15 June 2022

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Ofwat: Strategic Priorities

The following is an extract from the debate on Ofwat: Strategic Priorities on 9 June 2022.

Rebecca Pow: Water companies also need to play their part in reducing nutrient pollution in rivers, which was mentioned by a few colleagues. Through our landmark Environment Act, we propose to set a legally binding target to reduce phosphorous loadings from waste water by 80% by 2030 against the 2020 baseline.

[Official Report, 9 June 2022, Vol. 715, c. 1042.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow):

An error has been identified in my contribution to the debate.

The correct information should have been:

Rebecca Pow: Water companies also need to play their part in reducing nutrient pollution in rivers, which was mentioned by a few colleagues. Through our landmark Environment Act, we propose to set a legally binding target to reduce phosphorous loadings from waste water by 80% by **2037** against the 2020 baseline.

ORAL ANSWERS

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PETITION

Wednesday 15 June 2022

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Wednesday 15 June 2022

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Wednesday 22 June 2022**

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Observations

Ministerial Correction [Col. 3MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
