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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 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

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ukraine: British Diplomatic Support

1. **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of British diplomatic support for Ukraine. [900619]

2. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of British diplomatic support for Ukraine. [900620]

20. **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of British diplomatic support for Ukraine. [900639]

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): The UK has been steadfast in its diplomatic support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister travelled to Kyiv on 17 June to meet once again with President Zelensky. They discussed the situation on the ground, and the Prime Minister announced a major training programme for the Ukrainian armed forces to help sustain them in their heroic defence of their people and their homeland. The United Kingdom will continue to strengthen the hand of our Ukrainian friends to finish the war on terms that President Zelensky has laid out.

Claire Coutinho: I commend the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the entire team for all their work on diplomacy in Ukraine. We can all be very proud of it. I was pleased to see that the leaders discussed ending the blockade of grain in the south. Will the Minister update the House on how those discussions went?

James Cleverly: The House, and indeed the whole world, should be under no illusion: it is Russia that is blocking Ukraine's grain exports in an attempt to cripple Ukraine's economy and use hunger as political leverage. We support the United Nations' efforts to negotiate a safe corridor for exports by sea and we are engaging internationally to call on Russia to end the blockade. Only Russia can lift the blockade. Ukraine's ports are vital for global food supplies, and we will keep supplying the weapons that Ukraine needs to bring the war to a successful conclusion.

Robbie Moore: Last Sunday afternoon, I spent a couple of hours meeting a Ukrainian family who have moved to the Worth valley in my constituency under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. They are so incredibly grateful for the work that the Government are doing, but they did reiterate that we cannot rest until full Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity is restored in Ukraine and until Putin fails. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on recent conversations that he has had with global allies on how we can take a co-operative approach with international partners to ensure that that happens?

James Cleverly: I thank my hon. Friend and his community for hosting Ukrainian refugees. Praise is due in every corner of the House for our constituents doing just that. I assure him that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and other Ministers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and other Departments, as well as officials at every level, are engaging with our international friends and allies on this issue. It will be raised at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, the G7, the G20 and the NATO meeting in Madrid. I also assure him that the UK will not rest in its support of the Ukrainian Government and the Ukrainian people, and we will not rest in advocating on their behalf with the international community.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: What resources is the Department making available to assist Ukraine with prisoner of war swaps?

James Cleverly: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. With your indulgence, Mr Speaker, I will reassert the position that the Ukrainian Government have confirmed. Foreign nationals fighting as members of their armed forces must be treated as prisoners of war—that includes the British nationals captured by the Russian forces—and all prisoners of war should be treated in accordance with international humanitarian law, including the Geneva convention. We will of course continue liaising with the Ukrainian Government on the treatment of prisoners of war and any negotiations they might have with Russian forces on the issue.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the responses he has given to hon. Members. We as a House of Commons stand united with the people of Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. May I ask the Minister sincerely what assistance the British Government and NATO allies are giving to the people and Government of Ukraine to tackle Russian disinformation?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman makes an incredibly important point. When I speak to my Ukrainian counterpart and others facing direct or indirect Russian aggression, they often bring up disinformation and cyber-attacks. This is a theatre of war, and the integrated review, which was published last year, recognises that. I assure him that we will continue working closely with our friends and allies to counter disinformation and to help them defend themselves against cyber-attack as well as physical attack.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): All our hearts and support are with the people of Ukraine, but the conflict is having a significant impact worldwide. Particularly affected are people in east Africa, where grain shortages have coincided with the most dangerous drought in 40 years, cuts to aid and covid-19. Save the Children and Oxfam report that one person is dying of hunger every 48 seconds in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia. Will the Minister commit to front-loading future resilience funding to bring forward funds now to prevent a famine?

James Cleverly: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly important point. As I said in my earlier answer, Vladimir Putin is using hunger in the global south as a weapon of war and as a point of leverage. It should be noted that the 25 million tonnes of grain currently stuck in Ukraine is equivalent to the yearly consumption of the least developed countries in the world. She is absolutely right to be focused on this issue. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has said that we will prioritise our humanitarian response in future funding for the Department, but I can assure her and the House that it will remain a priority for the Government.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is very clear that Putin is indeed the using the starvation of the world's poorest people as a tool of war. As we seek to fight back against Putin and use all diplomatic powers, does the Minister agree that it would be easier to build a coalition against Putin across the developing world in particular, and of course morally right, if we reversed the cuts to international aid or kept them?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman is conflating two fundamentally different issues. The world should be clear that it is Vladimir Putin alone who is creating these problems with his blockade of grain exports from Ukraine. He could turn on the tap of food to the global south tomorrow, and we demand that he does. We will continue to work with our international partners, including the United Nations, to try to facilitate those grain exports, but the world should be clear that it is down to him and that the Russian blockade of the Black sea and Sea of Azov ports is creating that hunger. He should be held accountable for it.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with much of what the Minister has had to say. The shadow Foreign Secretary and I met a delegation of Ukrainian MPs last week and heard at first hand the devastating impact Russia's illegal actions are having on civilians across Ukraine. May I bring the Minister back to a point I have raised with him a number of times? We need to stay the course in our support for Ukraine, and the whole world needs to stay the course with Ukraine. That will involve substantial costs. Will he look again at not only freezing Russian assets but their seizure and repurposing to ensure that we can support humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Ukraine?

James Cleverly: The hon. Gentleman and I often disagree—that is the nature of being in different parties—but on this issue he is absolutely right that there is a unanimity of voice across the House. I can assure him that we are looking at the issue he raises on seizures and repurposing

the value of those seizures. Nothing is off the table. The pain and suffering being inflicted on the Ukrainian people by Putin and his faction must be paid for, and paid for by them.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I echo the comments that Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office staff and the diplomatic core worldwide do a great job under difficult circumstances, but they are being undermined by talk of politically motivated appointments at home, job losses across the civil service as a whole, and the cut to the 0.7% commitment on aid, a manifesto commitment now betrayed. Surely now is the time to reverse all that talk and actually support civil servants doing tough jobs in tough times?

James Cleverly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the praise he gives to our civil servants both here in the UK and across the world. He is absolutely right: they are doing a fantastic job. I can assure him that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary and my ministerial colleagues across Government Departments liaise with them regularly. They are highly focused, highly motivated and absolutely determined to help deliver the UK's Government priority, which is to support the Ukrainian people and support the people across the world who are being impacted by the food shortages Vladimir Putin is creating. They are doing so in a way that makes me and the whole House proud. I have no doubt that they will continue to do so.

Asadollah Assadi

3. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): If she will make representations to her Iranian counterpart on the case of Iranian diplomat, Asadollah Assadi. [900621]

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): The UK condemns in the strongest terms the targeting of civilians and regularly raises this issue with the Government of Iran. We welcome the fact that those responsible for the plot against the conference in Paris in 2018 have been held to account. The Belgian courts have convicted four individuals, including Asadollah Assadi, who received a 20-year sentence. We continue to work with the international community to ensure that all countries, including Iran, abide by international rules and norms.

Dr Offord: I am trying to hide my disappointment in the answer. Asadollah Assadi orchestrated a planned terrorist attack in mainland Europe that would have resulted in mass casualties, including five Members of the British Parliament, including me. At the Munich security conference earlier this year, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, met his Belgian and Swedish counterparts for private talks, which included seeking a petition for the release of Assadi and others through prisoner swaps. It would have been ironic if those of us who oppose the joint comprehensive plan of action had been victims, as the terrorists were using resources that came from the sanctions. May I ask the Secretary of State again to meet with her Iranian counterpart to make it clear that any future JCPOA must ensure human rights in Iran and must ensure that terrorism activities are relinquished across the region, including those aimed at mainland Europe?

James Cleverly: I am not able to speculate on the context of bilateral talks between Iran and other countries. The UK's position is absolutely clear: the behaviour of Iran in a whole number of areas is unacceptable. We raise this regularly, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has raised our concerns about the Iranian Government's behaviour on numerous occasions. We will ensure that we continue to call on the Iranian Government to abide by international rules and laws and to respect human rights at every level, including the right of criticism on the international stage.

Colombia: Human Rights

4. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with her Colombian counterpart on human rights in that country. [900622]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): Colombia is an FCDO human rights priority country and UK Ministers and senior officials regularly raise human rights issue as well as specific cases of concern with the Colombian Government. Most recently, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad discussed human rights and the security situation in Colombia in his meeting with President Duque on 12 April, and I raised it with Vice-President Ramírez in February.

Mary Kelly Foy: I am sure that the Minister will join me in congratulating Colombia on electing a new Administration committed to peace and human rights under Gustavo Petro.

According to human rights groups, on 28 March the army killed several civilians in the village of Remanso, in Putumayo, with outgoing President Iván Duque later praising the attack and describing the victims as armed dissidents. Given that the Colombian military has a history of killing civilians then falsifying the record, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that a proper investigation is carried out?

Vicky Ford: We congratulate Gustavo Petro on his election as President. We look forward to working with him on many shared priorities after his inauguration in August. He has made it very clear that he is committed to the peace process with the FARC. I also congratulate Colombia on a peaceful election.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Bilateral relations between the United Kingdom and Colombia have gone from strength to strength in recent years, particularly in areas of mutual concern such as trade and investment, tackling drug crime and the environment. Will my hon. Friend assure me that we will continue that same high-level engagement with the new Colombian Administration?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have very many areas of shared interest with Colombia, such as trade and the environment. Tackling drug crime is also a major issue. Colombia is a key partner to the UK and Latin America. We will continue to work closely together on a broad range of issues, and we look forward to working with the new President Petro after his inauguration in early August.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Colombia is once again the most dangerous country in the world in which to be a trade unionist, so when the Minister and the Government engage with President-elect Petro and his new Government will they ensure that the peace process, which is focused on the Government and the FARC, also includes the civil society and trade union groups on which we have perhaps taken our eye off the ball?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Member makes an important point about protecting civil society. Peace in Colombia was always going to be a difficult challenge, but we have been a leading advocate of that peace process. We will continue to prioritise support for the Colombian Government, and the new President has made it clear that he is committed to the peace process with the FARC, so we will continue to work with them.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Minister, Fabian Hamilton.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I have just returned from Colombia as part of a delegation funded by Justice for Colombia, details of which will shortly be declared in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Gustavo Petro's victory in Colombia's presidential election should provide new impetus towards the full implementation of the peace agreement in that divided country, but the UK Government have sat idly by as violence against social activists and indigenous peoples has raged on across the country. As the penholder for Colombia at the United Nations, the UK has a responsibility to play its part, so will the Minister commit to changing course and working with the new Administration to finally bring this appalling violence to an end?

Vicky Ford: I absolutely refute the idea that the UK has been standing by. To date, we have spent more than £69 million through the conflict, stability and security fund. This is supporting the implementation of the peace agreement, and it has been supporting the Government's rural developments, reintegration programmes and transitional justice mechanisms and strengthening the security and participation of communities in conflict-affected areas. We have also put in over £240 million of international climate funding in the past decade. That is helping to stabilise particularly vulnerable environmental areas by tackling environmental crime and the issues that affect local people. We will continue to prioritise that work, because stability in Colombia is vital for the whole of Latin America.

Ukraine: International Support

5. **Anna Firth** (Southend West) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with her international counterparts on support for Ukraine. [900623]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): It is vital that we continue to back Ukraine. This is about freedom and democracy in Ukraine, and it is also about freedom and democracy in Europe and across the world. That is why we are determined to provide more weapons, impose more sanctions and back Ukraine in pushing Russia out of its territory.

Anna Firth: I am pleased that my right hon. Friend mentioned sanctions. Last week she announced a new wave of sanctions, including against Patriarch Kirill, a very public and vocal supporter of Putin's war. Can she confirm that we will continue to put pressure not just on Putin but on his supporters until Putin fails and Ukraine succeeds?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I am proud that the United Kingdom has sanctioned more individuals than any other nation. We have to keep increasing that pressure. Last week we sanctioned Patriarch Kirill, and we also sanctioned the Russian children's rights commissioner, who has been involved in the barbaric treatment of Ukrainian children. We will continue to impose sanctions and to stop importing goods from Russia until we see Russia fully withdraw from Ukraine.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The new head of the Army was very clear this week when he said that the UK must be

“capable of fighting alongside our allies and defeating Russia in battle.”

Does the Foreign Secretary believe that our defence capability, which is a key arm of UK foreign policy, has all the resources it needs to do that?

Elizabeth Truss: It is very true that we face a much more insecure Europe and a much more insecure world, and it is right that we are increasing defence spending. We are increasing our capabilities, particularly in areas such as cyber, but we are also making sure that we have fully trained and efficient armed services, not just to be ready but to ensure that we are training up Ukrainians, for example, and helping our allies, particularly on the eastern flank, who face that direct threat from Russia.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The harvest in Ukraine is going to have to start in the next few weeks. The problem is that there are 25 million tonnes of old crop filling up all the stores, so there will be nowhere to put the new crop. It will have to be piled on the fields, and the Russians will seize it and use it as a weapon of war to buy influence around the world. What more can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that there is international passage for that grain out of Odesa and other ports?

Elizabeth Truss: We are doing all we can to secure the export of that very important grain from Ukraine. My hon. Friend is right to say that we have only a number of weeks to be able to achieve that. We are backing the UN plan, but we are also doing what we can with our allies to provide safe passage and to make sure that Odesa is fully defended. Tomorrow, I will be travelling to Turkey to talk to people there about how we could do more to get the grain out of Odesa.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Part of any diplomatic support for Ukraine must include a strategic diplomatic support package for Ukraine's neighbours in Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. When I spoke to the Polish Defence Secretary a couple of months ago, he detailed what he felt was a very

lonely station on the frontline beside Ukraine. Will the Foreign Secretary update us on how he may not feel that way now?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working very closely with Poland on our joint defence support, and we are working with Poland and Ukraine on helping Ukraine get NATO-standard weapons. We are also backing Poland, our Baltic state friends and others, including Moldova, particularly through NATO and the bolstering of the eastern flank. We have the NATO summit coming up next week and the UK is pushing hard for more support in the eastern area of Europe.

Sri Lanka: Human Rights

6. **Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con):** What diplomatic steps she is taking to help address human rights concerns in Sri Lanka. [R] [900624]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): We are closely monitoring the difficult human rights situation and the lack of progress towards post-conflict accountability in Sri Lanka. It is important that the current economic situation does not distract from human rights. We urge the Sri Lankan Government to engage meaningfully with United Nations Human Rights Council resolution 46/1. We continue to raise our concerns in international forums, including by doing so at the UNHRC on 4 June.

Elliot Colburn: The economic crisis on the island has indeed led to increased militarisation in Sri Lanka. The Rajapaksa Government are falling apart and, as we speak, a draft bail-out is being asked for from the International Monetary Fund. As chair of the all-party group on Tamils, and on behalf of Tamils in Carshalton and Wallington and around the world, may I urge my hon. Friend to ensure that the UK does what it can at the IMF to ensure that any bail-out is attached to human rights conditions, similar to the GSP Plus—generalised scheme of preferences plus—arrangement, so that Tamils can have the peace and justice they have been waiting so long for?

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he does in this area. I reiterate that it is really important that the current very challenging economic situation does not distract from efforts to improve human rights. Although the articles of the IMF do allow for conditionality linked to economic policy or to tackling the balance of payments, there is no provision to impose political-linked or human rights-linked conditionality in the IMF process. Therefore, we will work with fellow members on international debt forums on a solution to the country's debt problem, as well as continuing to lobby the Sri Lankan Government and working in other international forums on human rights.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Minister Catherine West.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Later this week, Commonwealth leaders will meet in Kigali for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, and

this will include Sri Lanka. We expect the Government to voice their concerns about the long-term peace and justice issues, but pressing economic matters will also threaten stability, both within Sri Lanka and in the region. Will the Government go above and beyond what the IMF is offering and recognise the role of the Commonwealth now to step into the leadership gap and support Sri Lanka's people with access to food and medicines, by helping to bring economic stability as soon as possible to this great friend of the UK?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that Sri Lanka is a great friend of the UK. Indeed, our Prime Minister spoke to his Sri Lankan counterpart on 30 May and has underlined the UK's continuing support for the people of Sri Lanka during their economic difficulties. He has offered UK support through multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and IMF, and international forums such as the Paris Club. We have a very significant voice on international debt forums and we are working closely with Paris Club members and multilateral organisations to find solutions to the debt crisis.

Northern Ireland Protocol

7. **Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): What recent discussions she has with EU representatives on the adequacy of the Northern Ireland protocol. [900625]

17. **Stephen Farry** (North Down) (Alliance): What recent discussions she has had with (a) EU representatives and (b) the US Administration on the Northern Ireland protocol. [900636]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): We have been clear with the EU that the Northern Ireland protocol needs to change in order to uphold the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, ensure that we have a free flow of goods from east to west, and protect the north-south relationship. Our preference is for a negotiated solution, but in the absence of the EU being willing to change the protocol, we are pressing ahead with legislation.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful for that reply, but on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill—which, we note with interest, has not yet found a date for its Second Reading—is there any precedent where the United Kingdom has cited the legal concept of necessity for overriding a treaty that it has freely entered into? We should bear in mind that in this case not only did the Government negotiate and sign the Northern Ireland protocol, but the Prime Minister at the time described it as being

“in perfect conformity with the Good Friday agreement”—[*Official Report*, 19 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 583.]

Elizabeth Truss: We are clear that our legislation is both necessary and lawful, and have published a Government legal statement laying out exactly why that is. Our priority as the United Kingdom Government is the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, and we know that the Northern Ireland protocol is undermining that agreement. We have not seen the institutions in Northern Ireland functioning since February, and we know that

the issues caused are baked into the protocol—namely the customs provisions and the VAT provisions—so we do need to change that.

As I have said, we remain open to negotiations with the EU. That is our preferred course, but they have to be willing to change the issues that are causing real problems for the people of Northern Ireland.

Stephen Farry: The business community in Northern Ireland is clear that they want to see mutually agreed solutions, and that those are the only way in which they can protect their access to the EU single market. The key ingredient in all this is trust and partnership. The Minister's Bill is entirely counterproductive in that respect, so what is her strategy for getting back around the negotiating table with the European Union to find those mutually agreed outcomes?

Elizabeth Truss: We are very open to negotiations with the European Union, but they have to be prepared to change the protocol itself. The problems we have with customs and people in Northern Ireland not being able to access the same VAT benefits as people in Great Britain are baked into the protocol itself, and the legislation we have introduced, with green lanes and red lanes, protects the EU single market. It does not make the EU any worse off, while at the same time enabling free-flowing trade from east to west.

We need to achieve both of those things. I want to do so through negotiations, but we have been trying for 18 months; as yet, the EU have refused to change the protocol itself, and we simply cannot allow the situation to drift. We cannot allow more trade diversion, and we cannot allow the undermining of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I hear what my right hon. Friend says about negotiating. We all agree that a negotiated settlement would be the best solution, but there is no point in negotiating with somebody who does not have a mandate to agree with any of the negotiation points being put to them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is up to the European Commission to change the mandate of its negotiator, Commissioner Šeřčovič, so we can have those negotiations and come to an agreement, and so that the people of Northern Ireland can live safe and secure in the knowledge that we are coming to an agreement on this issue?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want a negotiated solution. We have been part of those negotiations for 18 months, but fundamentally the mandate does not allow for the solutions that will help restore the primacy of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and get rid of the unacceptable frictions that we are seeing in east-west trade. I suggest that Opposition Members direct their calls for negotiations towards the European Union and the goal of securing a new mandate. I think that would be a better use of their time.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The protocol Bill introduced to this House last week breaks international law. It risks the integrity of the Good Friday agreement. It divides the UK and the European Union at a time when we should be pulling together against Putin's war on our continent, and it risks causing new trade barriers during a cost of living crisis. It is not even enough to get

the Democratic Unionist party to commit to return to Stormont. Will the Foreign Secretary now quit posturing for Back Benchers who have lost confidence in the Prime Minister, and get back to the hard work and graft of negotiating a practical way forward?

Elizabeth Truss: I am afraid to say that nothing the right hon. Gentleman has just said is accurate. The fact is that our Bill is legal, and we have laid it out in a legal statement. We are putting forward solutions—a green lane and a red lane—that protect the EU single market as well as allowing goods to flow freely around the United Kingdom.

We are very prepared to have those negotiations with the EU, but, at present, we have a negotiating partner that is unwilling to change the issues that are causing the problem in Northern Ireland. The right hon. Gentleman should go to Northern Ireland to see the impact that is having on businesses, hauliers and traders who are facing this customs bureaucracy. It is fundamentally undermining the Good Friday agreement.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): I will confess some puzzlement over this. The EU has negotiated a variety of changes to refine the protocol. There are dispute resolution mechanisms within the protocol. There has been a number of opportunities for talks. I have read this idea that the Government need to invoke necessity when there are already other ways of fixing this. That is garbage from start to finish.

In what possible sense can the Government claim that this illegal Bill, which they have brought forward but not scheduled, is a sensible way to resolve the situation when the EU is ready and open for talks? Most people in the Northern Ireland Assembly support the protocol. I counsel the Foreign Secretary that this is also a grievous miscalculation, because it has massively undermined trust at a point when trust is utterly fundamental to resolving this matter.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. We have been very open to negotiations for the past 18 months, but the EU has been unwilling to change the protocol. He can read last week's comments of Vice-President Šefčovič that these customs procedures have to remain in place. The fact is that it is the customs procedures—the bureaucracy—that is preventing trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. We are seeing trade diversion towards north-south trade and away from east-west trade, and it is undermining the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. That is why it is necessary that the UK Government act. The hon. Gentleman should focus his effort on getting the EU to change its negotiating mandate so that we can have a real negotiation.

Brazil: Violence against Journalists and Activists

8. **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** What recent assessment she has made of trends in the level of violence against journalists, environmental campaigners and indigenous activists in Brazil. [900626]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): I start by reflecting on the very sad disappearance of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in the Amazon region of Brazil. Our thoughts are with their families. I offer

thanks to all those involved in the search and rescue operation that was trying to find them. I pay tribute to both men and their commitment to improving our understanding of the Amazon, to its peoples and to the challenges currently faced there. Both men have left a strong legacy of defending and supporting the rights of indigenous peoples in Brazil.

Attacks on environmental activists and indigenous rights defenders in Brazil have increased in recent years, and we raise that regularly with the Government.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Minister for that response and I echo her comments about the tragic killings of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira, but they are not alone. In 2020, at least 182 indigenous activists and 20 environmental campaigners were killed in Brazil. It is the relentless drive to develop the Amazon rainforest that is behind these murders. What are the Government doing to put maximum pressure on the Bolsonaro Government to reverse that trend, but also to reduce our complicity in this through our supply chains and the involvement of British companies in financing this?

Vicky Ford: We regularly engage with indigenous leaders and civil society organisations. We are in regular contact with Brazil's national foundation for indigenous people. We are absolutely committed to defending and promoting the human rights of all and we continue to monitor very closely developments around indigenous rights in Brazil and raise concerns with the Government. We have already committed £259 million to help protect the Amazon, with £3 billion more of further funding committed at COP. We have also made it clear that trade should not be at the expense of the environment, climate commitments or, indeed, the concerns that the hon. Lady raises.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): It is thanks to journalists and environmentalists such as Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira that record deforestation, mining and logging, predatory fishing and drug trafficking have been exposed. Dom and Bruno were not on some travel adventure in Brazil, as has been suggested; like others who have been killed over the years, they were doing their job to report on the environmental damage taking place in Brazil that ultimately impacts on us all.

Will the Government work with other international authorities to have the case investigated in a swift, transparent and independent manner, without any interference—not just to seek justice for the families of Dom and Bruno, but to protect future journalists and environmentalists in their important work?

Vicky Ford: My hon. Friend is right that the case should be investigated. We are grateful to the Brazilian authorities for their help and engagement to date. There has been very close contact between, for example, the local and national police with our embassy team on the ground. It is really important that those who committed this heinous crime are held to account.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I put on the record my condolences to the family of Lancaster-born Dom Phillips. What steps is the Department taking to support Dom's family through diplomatic means at this difficult time?

Vicky Ford: We have been in close contact with members of Dom's family. We will continue to give consular support to them at this time and through the next processes related to this tragic event.

Rape and Sexual Violence in Conflict

9. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help protect women and girls from the use of rape and sexual violence in conflict. [900628]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The use of rape and sexual violence in conflict is a war crime, and I have made tackling it a top priority. The UK is campaigning for it to be treated as a red line on a par with the use of chemical weapons. We will host a conference against sexual violence in November.

Marco Longhi: We have had terrible reports of rape and sexual assault by Russian troops in Ukraine. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure safe and effective evidence collection, so that those responsible can be held to account?

Elizabeth Truss: We have seen appalling reports of atrocities and the use of rape and sexual violence. We launched the Murad code earlier this year, which sets the global standard for safe evidence collecting. We have dispatched a team from the United Kingdom to the region to help with that evidence collection—by interviewing witnesses and survivors and preserving and collecting images and videos, for example.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Near Upper Committee Corridor there has been an exhibition in the last few days showing the experiences of young women and girls who have been raped and sexually abused in Myanmar, Syria and Nigeria. What the perpetrators of those awful crimes need is accountability. Can there be someone who will take the evidence and ensure those people know that some day they will go to prison, or even worse? They will receive that in the next world, but let us make sure they get it in this world.

Elizabeth Truss: Through the International Criminal Court and the work we are doing on evidence collecting, we are working to make sure that the people committing those appalling crimes are held to account—not just in Ukraine, but more widely around the world. That is one of the key aims of the conference we are hosting in November. We are also increasing our budget for women and girls development aid, specifically to tackle sexual violence.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I place on the record my deepest respect for and thanks to our wonderful development and diplomatic staff, who do a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances. I visited Afghanistan this month, which was truly heart-rending. It appears that my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and I are the only British MPs to have visited. I wonder why the Foreign Secretary has failed to visit, one year since the fall of Kabul. She knows that protecting development gains for women in Afghanistan is fundamental, given that millions are facing starvation, new restrictions and the loss of livelihoods.

Rather than hosting a summit, maybe the Foreign Secretary can explain what she meant when she said that

“we are restoring the aid budget for women and girls back to its previous levels and we are also restoring the humanitarian aid budget.”—[*Official Report*, 8 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 191.]

Given that she failed to give an oral statement to the House on her 10-year international development strategy, will she make a statement to the House on when she plans to reverse the £1.9 billion in aid cuts to women's programming that have proven so damaging to women and girls and to our reputation abroad—or is she following the Prime Minister's lead of chasing headlines and not delivering?

Elizabeth Truss: I utterly condemn the appalling actions of the Taliban in reversing women's and girls' rights. We are doing all we can together with our international counterparts, including hosting a pledging conference to secure more support for the people of Afghanistan. As I have said, we are restoring the women's and girls' budget back to £745 million a year, and we are also ensuring that the humanitarian budget is greater so that we can tackle these issues around the world.

Topical Questions

T1. [900609] **Anne McLaughlin** (Glasgow North East) (SNP): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): This Thursday I will be heading to Kigali for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. In a world where freedom and sovereignty are being threatened by aggressors, the Commonwealth is more important than ever. It represents a third of the world's population and about 30% of the votes at the United Nations. The British Government will be backing Kamina Johnson Smith, the Jamaican Foreign Minister, as the new Secretary-General to ensure that the Commonwealth delivers for all its members in areas such as trade, investment and defending democracy.

Anne McLaughlin: In answer to an earlier question about Sri Lanka, the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), said that she would continue to lobby the Sri Lankan Government, but that Government, and their military, are populated in part by people who are credibly accused of war crimes in a civil war that ended more than 10 years ago. The Americans thought that there was enough evidence to impose economic sanctions on some of those individuals. Is lobbying really the best that she can do?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): On Sri Lanka, let me start by absolutely emphasising again that violence against peaceful protesters is unacceptable. We absolutely condemn the violence we see happening at the moment and we are urging everybody towards calm. We will continue to work to make sure that we support the country through funding from our conflict, stability and security fund, which has supported peacebuilding, and we continue to respect the independence of the prosecutor when it comes to investigating war crimes of the past.

T3. [900611] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): The world-class and well-respected Rwanda plan was designed to save lives in the channel, but the European Court of Human Rights is making a mockery of our attempts to protect our borders. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is now time to distance ourselves from the ECHR?

Vicky Ford: We were disappointed that last week's flight was unable to depart, but we are not deterred from doing the right thing in delivering on our plans to control our nation's borders. We are providing further information to the Court. It would not be appropriate to comment on individual cases at this time. However, we strongly believe that this project meets our obligations under both national and international law, and the Home Secretary has made it very clear that we will do what it takes to deliver this new partnership.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Secretary of State David Lammy.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): As the Secretary of State knows, 10 days ago I visited Afghanistan. Millions face starvation. One widow whose husband was murdered during the Taliban takeover explained that she was so desperate for money that she had considered selling her kidneys so that she could eat. Meanwhile, conflict continues to rage across the world in Yemen, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Mali and of course Ukraine. Given the scale of the conflicts across the world and the hunger crisis being driven across the world, why is humanitarian aid down by 35% on pre-cut levels? Why are we the only member of the G7 cutting foreign aid, and what impact will this have on our national interests and reputation abroad?

Elizabeth Truss: We are a major donor of humanitarian aid. On the Ukraine crisis, we are the third largest donor in the world. Through our international development strategy, we are committing £3 billion-worth of humanitarian aid over the next three years.

T4. [900612] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Chevening scholarships enable exceptional students from around the world to come and study here in the United Kingdom. What is being done to make sure that Ukrainian students can take advantage of this excellent programme despite the horrific war in their homeland?

Vicky Ford: Prior to Russia's terrible invasion, 68 Ukrainian candidates were shortlisted for interviews for those really special Chevening scholarships. Obviously, those interviews could not take place, but I am absolutely delighted to give those brilliant, talented and often young people some good news: they will all be offered scholarships. That will treble the number of Chevening scholarships offered to Ukraine. For those who are unable to take up their scholarships, if, for example, they are defending their country, they will be able to defer.

T2. [900610] **Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Alaa Abdel Fattah is a British national currently imprisoned in Egypt. He is on day 81 of his hunger strike. He is an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience who has been imprisoned for his pro-democracy views for eight of the nine years since Sisi took power.

His family will be outside the FCDO today between 5 and 7 o'clock to ask, "Where is the Foreign Secretary?" Will she consider meeting them to discuss how we can ensure his release?

Elizabeth Truss: I assure the hon. Lady that we are working hard to secure Alaa Abdel Fattah's release. Lord Ahmad has met the family and I am seeking a meeting with the Egyptian Foreign Minister who is due to visit the United Kingdom shortly, where I will raise this case.

T6. [900615] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Last year, I visited Bosnia to understand first hand the situation in the country. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure peace and stability in the western Balkans?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is a vital issue. We are seeing attempts by Russia to destabilise the western Balkans. I recently visited Sarajevo, as has the Minister for Europe and North America, to do what we can to support the country through greater investment, so that there are alternatives to malign investment, and to make clear our support for security in the nation.

T5. [900614] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): Last week marked the 15th anniversary of Israel's blockade of Gaza, which has caused a humanitarian crisis in the region. Will the Minister condemn the ongoing blockade and outline what steps the UK is taking to try to bring it to an end?

The Minister for Asia and the Middle East (Amanda Milling): As it happens, after this session I will be travelling to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which will obviously be a good opportunity to explore a number of different issues and our bilateral relationship with Israel.

T7. [900617] **Sir Gavin Williamson** (South Staffordshire) (Con): Across the horn of Africa, we are seeing one of the worst droughts in 40 years. Coupled with the tragedy of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that is pushing millions of people into starvation. What more can we do to help on the ground and save lives? [R]

Vicky Ford: This is a terrible tragedy. So far this year, we have provided more than £72 million of additional support to countries in the region, which is helping about 8 million people. We played a vital role in convening a roundtable in Geneva that raised about \$400 million. Last week, I wrote to the president of the World Bank to urge it to mobilise further funding urgently. I will meet representatives of the Disasters Emergency Committee later this week to discuss further steps.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Godwin Suh from Bafut in Cameroon, who now lives in Nottingham, came to see me. He described the political violence that, as anglophones, he and his family have suffered. His brother is missing, his nieces and nephews have been hospitalised, and lately his house there has been badly damaged by Government forces. Will the Minister for Africa meet me and Godwin to hear more about the human rights challenges that many face in north-west and south-west Cameroon?

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; the human rights situation in north-west and south-west Cameroon is really concerning. There have been recent incidents with tragic civilian casualties. I would be happy to meet and discuss it with him.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): I welcome the statement last week that we are talking to our international partners about a Marshall fund for Ukraine. I previously suggested that we should consider not only seizing the assets of sanctioned Russians, but monetising them, either by putting a lien on them or by outright sale. Clearly, that would need to be done in conjunction with partners. Has my right hon. Friend considered that?

Elizabeth Truss: We are working with our allies and Ukraine on a new Marshall plan to help reconstruct Ukraine after the appalling war. There will be a Ukraine recovery conference in Lugano in the coming weeks, at which the United Kingdom will put forward our offer. We are looking at how we can seize Russian assets to help fund the rebuilding of Ukraine, which is something we are working on across Government and with our G7 partners.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): A recent report by the Hong Kong Watch non-governmental organisation found that five Hong Kong officials and six lawmakers complicit in the ongoing human rights crackdown currently own property in the UK, so will the Government now commit to using the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 to sanction these Hong Kong and Chinese officials?

Amanda Milling: We remain deeply concerned about the appalling human rights violations in China and about the deterioration of rights and freedoms in Hong Kong. We keep all evidence on potential designations under close review, guided by the objectives of the relevant sanctions regime, but it is not appropriate to speculate about future sanctions and designations as to do so would reduce their impact.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): It is vital that we do not forget the painful lessons we learned in the wake of Hurricane Irma in 2017, a key component of which is always to have a naval presence in the region ahead of hurricane season. Will the Minister please assure me those preparations are already being made?

Amanda Milling: The Department co-ordinated a cross-Government hurricane exercise earlier this month as part of its review of plans to ensure the UK provides a rapid and effective response this year. Officials also hosted a pre-hurricane season conference in May. Having visited Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands and the Cayman Islands, I totally understand the importance of hurricane preparedness. I reassure my hon. Friend that I met the Minister for the Armed Forces last week to discuss how our Departments can work together on an effective and appropriate response in the event of a major disaster.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Sarah Champion.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that the FCDO has set an annual budget limit for the Independent Commission for Aid Impact that will prevent it from carrying out the workplan to scrutinise UK aid that it previously agreed with my Select Committee? Will she look into this, please?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very happy to look into it and to discuss it with the hon. Lady.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I recently took over as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Latvia, and it was a pleasure to meet my opposite number from the Latvian Parliament, Rihards Kols, last week to discuss the importance of our future work together. Does the Minister agree that, now more than ever, it is important that we strengthen even further our long-standing relationship with countries such as Latvia that share a common set of values and principles with the UK?

The Minister for Europe and North America (James Cleverly): I congratulate my hon. Friend on taking up his position. The UK enjoys close diplomatic, security and economic relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. I recently went to Estonia, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has also been to the region and taken part in the three seas initiative that co-ordinates a number of workstreams in the Baltic and other parts of eastern Europe.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Since the illegal revocation of articles 370 and 35a, it has become absolutely clear that the right-wing Modi Government are bolder than ever before in their persecution of Kashmiris and minority groups in India. Most worrying, however, is the acceleration in their use of arbitrary arrest and detention of political and human rights activists, including Yasin Malik and hundreds of others, under the illegal Public Safety Act, which takes away any right to due process, yet the UK Government remain silent once more. Does the Foreign Secretary think it is right to continue negotiating a trade deal with the right-wing Modi Government, even at the expense of the blood of innocent men, women and children?

Elizabeth Truss: We are very clear that it is for the Indian and Pakistani Governments to find a long-term solution to Kashmir.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Canada is a key partner, and this morning I met the Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, Nathan Cooper, who is keen to emphasise the potential for Alberta to help the UK through its present energy crisis. What is the Foreign Secretary doing to further deepen our relationship with Canada?

Elizabeth Truss: Canada is one of our closest allies. It is a fellow member of the G7, NATO and the Commonwealth, and we will shortly be joining it in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. I speak regularly to my Canadian counterpart, and we are looking together at how we can bolster our energy security, in areas such as the one that my hon. Friend mentioned but also in the area of nuclear co-operation.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): On Sunday, Francia Márquez, an internationally recognised environmental and human rights campaigner, made history by becoming the first black woman to be elected Vice-President of Colombia. Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be an environmental activist. Will the Minister commit herself to working with Francia Márquez and her new colleagues to ensure that the social and environmental rights of Colombia's indigenous population are protected, and that UK aid for environmental programmes prioritises the protection of activists?

Vicky Ford: We work in Colombia on projects to promote peace and stability and also on projects to promote the environment and tackle climate change, and we will continue to do so.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The solution to the inflationary crisis that we face, driven by high energy prices and a lack of supply, is primarily international. What is my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary doing to challenge OPEC's position of not intending to take action to increase supply? That strikes me as the single most important thing that the British Government could do to tackle the crisis internationally.

Elizabeth Truss: As my right hon. Friend says, we need to tackle energy supply. In the long term, that means more renewables and more use of nuclear energy, but in the short term, it does involve looking at oil and gas. My colleague the Energy Secretary is working closely with his counterparts, particularly in the Gulf region, and I also have frequent conversations with them. We do need to see supply increase in order to lower global process.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Minister please update the House on the cases of the British citizens Morad Tahbaz and Mehran Raouf, who are still in Evin prison in Iran?

James Cleverly: I can assure the House that the UK Government remain completely committed to securing the full release of British dual nationals held in Iran. That passion has not been diminished. I assure the right hon. Lady and the House that we will continue to work on this with as much alacrity and passion as ever we have.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the issue of the Northern Ireland protocol, can the Foreign Secretary give an assurance to businesses in Northern Ireland that are adversely affected by the east-west trade to which she has alluded that that problem will be solved as a result of her Bill, along with other political problems that will also be resolved as long as she proceeds with the Bill?

Elizabeth Truss: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are proceeding with the Bill. We are also proceeding with close consultations with business on the precise design of the red and green lanes to ensure that it works for companies in Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and also in the Republic of Ireland and the European Union, so that we can deliver the Bill as intended, freeing up east-west trade but also protecting that very important north-south relationship.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): Bangladesh and northern India are facing some of the worst floods for 100 years. Many of my constituents are extremely worried about family and friends, especially in the Sylhet area. Can the Minister assure us that the Government will take action in respect of humanitarian aid, particularly when it comes to food, water and sanitation?

Vicky Ford: I will certainly raise that with the Minister responsible, Lord Ahmad.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): When I led the Joint Committee on Human Rights delegation to Strasbourg last week, we were repeatedly told that threats made by the United Kingdom to withdraw, or even just disengage, from the European convention on human rights risked giving succour to eastern European states, including Russia, which do not have the same respect for human rights and the rule of law that the United Kingdom has historically had. Will the Foreign Secretary tell the Prime Minister to tone down his veiled threats to leave the convention, and tell her more excitable Back Benchers to back off?

Elizabeth Truss: I honestly thought that the hon. and learned Lady would welcome the fact that the UK led in kicking Russia out of the Council of Europe and holding it to account.

BILLS PRESENTED**WAR PENSION SCHEME AND ARMED FORCES
COMPENSATION SCHEME (PUBLIC INQUIRY) BILL**

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Owen Thompson presented a Bill to establish an independent public inquiry into the administration of the War Pension Scheme and of the Armed Forces Compensation Scheme by Veterans UK; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 51).

MINISTERIAL CODE (ENFORCEMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Owen Thompson presented a Bill to make provision about the enforcement of the Ministerial Code; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 112).

MINISTERIAL INTERESTS (PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Owen Thompson presented a Bill to require a Minister to make an oral statement to Parliament if a person is appointed to a paid post by them, in whom, or a company in which, that Minister has a personal, political or financial interest.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 September, and to be printed (Bill 113).

Opposition Day

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

**Access to GP Services and
NHS Dentistry**

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Health.

12.35 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that primary care is in crisis, with people across the country struggling to access GP services and dental treatment; believes that everyone should be able to get an appointment to see a doctor when they need to and has the right to receive dental treatment when they need it; is concerned by the Government's failure to remain on track to deliver 6,000 additional GPs by 2024-25; and therefore calls on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to urgently bring forward a plan to fix the crisis in primary care, meet the Government's GP target and ensure everyone who needs an NHS dentist can access one.

Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to open this debate on the future of primary care, access to GPs and access to dentists. It is a particular delight to see the Secretary of State here. I so enjoyed our exchange of letters last week that I cannot wait to repeat the exchange in real life.

Primary care is the front door to our NHS—for most of us, the general practitioner is the first port of call when we are worried about our health—but after 12 years of Conservative mismanagement and underfunding of our health service, the front door is jammed. Patients are finding it impossible to book GP appointments, serious conditions are going undiagnosed, patients are waiting longer than is safe for treatment, with backlogs building up and greater pressure placed on the rest of the health service, and millions of people are waiting more than a month to be seen, often in pain and discomfort.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made an excellent beginning to his speech. What is his view of my local hospital, where, instead of 350 people daily, we have 710 people coming into accident and emergency at the North Middlesex Hospital? What response does he have to that kind of demand? Where is it going to lead if people cannot see a GP? They are going to end up in A&E.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight that problem. If the front door of the NHS in primary care is jammed, people end up presenting in A&E. As I shall outline in my speech, this is not only a great inconvenience and burden to patients; it comes at an additional cost to the NHS and we all pay the price for that in every respect.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): At the GP practice in Norton in my constituency, it is almost impossible to get an appointment on the phone. I have dozens of cases of individuals unable to access vital care. One tried 196 times. The Care Quality Commission has not inspected this practice since 2015. Does my hon. Friend agree that it ought to be doing so now?

Wes Streeting: Even in the context of the pressures that we see right across primary care—I think every GP practice would acknowledge they face challenges—the case my hon. Friend has just described sounds extreme. We cannot allow the decade or more of mismanagement we have seen from this Government to excuse that kind of care, or indeed absence of care, for patients, and that brings me on to the next point I want to make.

We know why patients are forced to wait: Conservative Governments have cut 4,500 GPs over the last decade, they have closed 300 practices since the last election and they have failed to provide any meaningful reform of the system. The public are sick and tired of waiting. Public satisfaction with GP services stands at the lowest level on record as patients become ever more frustrated with not getting an appointment when they need one, or in a manner to suit them.

It says so much about the NHS at the moment that, while we have the lowest level of patient satisfaction since 1997, when we ask the public whom they trust, nurses and doctors are right up at the top of the list. The public understand that the staff who work in the NHS are trying to grapple with the biggest crisis in its history. Of course, the Government will want to pin that simply on the pandemic, but that does not explain why we went into the pandemic with NHS waiting lists already at record levels, with 100,000 staff vacancies in the NHS and with a decade or more of under-investment, leaving us ill-prepared for the pandemic—or, in the words of the Culture Secretary, “found wanting and inadequate”—but also now struggling to get the recovery from the pandemic that we need to build the health and care service we need for the future.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): The shadow Secretary of State says that we need GP reform. What kind of reform does he have in mind? What does he think should be the right balance between in-person, online and telephone consultations?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will conclude my speech by talking about what a Labour Government will do, but let me answer his direct point about the range of options through which people should be able to access their GP. I value patient choice. Thinking back to my experience of accessing NHS services last year—as many people know, I did quite a lot of mystery shopping on the NHS—I had a range of interactions with GPs. Some were face-to-face. Some interactions at my GP surgery were not with my GP but with a nurse, which was entirely appropriate and much appreciated. Some of my engagements with my GP were over the telephone. I also had a video consultation with a dermatologist. I really valued that flexibility and range of approaches.

I think that the future for primary care has to be different courses for different horses. Of course, people should have a right to see their GP when they want to see their GP—I am clear about that—but there is also a range of ways in which we can offer more flexible access to GPs, particularly for working people who do not necessarily want to traipse down to the GP surgery in the middle of the afternoon if it is something that could be dealt with over the phone or on a video call.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The shadow Secretary of State is making a powerful speech. I commend in particular the point he made that

people still trust their doctors. They are desperate to see them, even if it is online. A 74-year-old constituent of mine contacted me and said that he asked for an online appointment but it would take him 30 days to get there. He appreciates that the issue is not with GPs but with the Government’s lack of planning for the number of GPs who can provide that service in Oxfordshire.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. How is it that the NHS can be one of the largest employers in the world—it employs 1.2 million people—but does not have a workforce plan and strategy that says, “This is the workforce need that we have today, this is what the workforce need will be in the foreseeable future and, in the longer term, this is how we need to change the shape of the workforce to take into account advances in medicine and modern technology, and the changing demographics of our society”?

We gave the Government the opportunity to commission such a report when we debated the Health and Care Bill. It was supported on a cross-party basis, including by the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt)—sadly, he is not able to be with us at the moment—yet the Government voted against it. What is it about the ostrich mentality of the Secretary of State and his ministerial team—or, I suspect even more, that of the Treasury—that they would rather bury their heads in the sand, pretend there is no problem with workforce and not even count the numbers of doctors and nurses needed because they worry that the Treasury might face up to the reality of what they need to provide?

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Is it not the case that, in the pandemic, the Government fundamentally misunderstood the connection between the health of the nation and its economic success? All the argument the shadow Secretary of State makes about the NHS workforce and what they can achieve for our country shows that the Government are still making the very same mistake.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend, who understands well the link between the health of the nation and the health of the economy. Given the labour market challenges in this country, it is simply not acceptable that we are losing so many people who could be in the labour market to ill health. We are also losing so many people from the labour market who are caring for relatives, because there is a disproportionate burden on families. Who disproportionately bears the burden of that care? It tends to be women, so we are losing a whole tranche of women from the labour market who could be contributing to the growth of the nation and the economy.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will give way one more time and then I need to make some progress.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not just about GPs and surgeries; it is about dental access as well. In my constituency and across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, dentists are prepared to take private care and monthly care, but they will not take NHS patients. As poverty levels and

prices rise, dentistry is at the end of the queue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that dentistry is at crisis point and that Government intervention is absolutely critical?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is right to describe the state of dentistry and I will be getting my teeth into that issue very shortly.

[HON. MEMBERS: “Groan!”] It had to happen at some point. I had to get it in at some point. Let me touch on the other issue he mentions, which is about inequality and inequality of access.

The system in primary care is entirely unequal. Some areas have twice as many doctors as other parts of the country, with as many as 2,800 patients fighting over one family doctor. Patient safety is being put at risk. Last week, the BBC revealed the scale of the crisis in GP surgeries with its investigation into Operose Health. Patients who can get an appointment are seen by less qualified staff, standing in for GPs without supervision. Patient referrals and test results were left unread for up to six months: private profit placed above patient safety. When the Health Secretary was asked about that last week, he said:

“we expect local commissioners to take action.”—[*Official Report*, 14 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 140.]

Well, it is not good enough to sit back and wait for others to act. Is an investigation happening? Can he tell us? If not, why on earth has he not launched one? [*Interruption.*] The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), from a sedentary position, talks about the last Labour Government. When are the Conservatives going to wake up to the fact that they have been in government for 12 years? Twelve years! It is remarkable. Twelve years they have been in government.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the hon. Lady could tell us why they want to run away from their record of 12 years.

Felicity Buchan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He makes grand statements in support of the NHS, but I am afraid his actions do not support the NHS. He has backed these train and tube strikes today, which have meant that in my constituency patients cannot get to hospital, and nurses and doctors cannot get to their places of work. Can we have better action, rather than words?

Wes Streeting: I am very, very grateful to the hon. Lady for that intervention. Our party has been clear: we did not want to see the strikes go ahead. We believe the strikes could have been averted if the Government had shown responsible action. The absolute brass neck of the Secretary of State! It is one thing pretending they have not been in government for the last 12 years; now they are pretending they are not in government today and that, somehow, it is down to me, the shadow Health Secretary. Somehow, if I had uttered the magic words, “Don’t go ahead,” the RMT would have said, “Oh no, the shadow Secretary of State for Health has spoken now. We better put a stop to it.” [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to help a little bit. We do not want to open up a debate that is not down for today. We have got a little bit carried away. The hon. Member

for Kensington (Felicity Buchan) got in, and I was quite right to allow a response, but I think we have heard enough now.

Wes Streeting: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I was about to quote the great political philosopher, Jonn Elledge, who, in response to what the Secretary of State said, commented on Twitter that we are “all as ants before the might of the all powerful shadow health secretary”.

When is the Health Secretary going to wake up to the fact that he is in government, he has responsibilities, he is discharging the greatest crisis in the history of the NHS and he is doing nothing about it? Instead of lecturing the Opposition, when is he going to show some leadership and get on with governing?

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The “Panorama” programme also exposed the fact that GP practices are being hoovered up by the private sector. Operose Health now owns 70 practices, with more than 600,000 patients. That exposes the fact that there is now a value to GP patients lists and that they are being sold on. They are collected by GPs, free of charge and then, as they are amassed in great number, they are sold to the private sector. Is my hon. Friend, like me, concerned about that practice?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with the point my hon. Friend makes. It is simply not good enough for the Minister to keep on talking about what the last Labour Government did. If she does not agree with the situation described by my hon. Friend, which is happening on her watch, why does she not legislate? If she is incapable of governing, she should make way for people who can govern.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for the tone of the speech that he is making, because it is vital that we stand up for our NHS, which the Government are failing to do. They seem happy to let everybody be angry with their GPs and about their inability to seek the medical help they need, but very unwilling to do something about it. Is this argument not really one to be had with the Government entirely? They should be making sure that we have sufficient GPs to treat the people in this country.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend; it is the trend with this Government to seek division, sow division, pass the buck, devolve the blame and not take responsibility for anything. What Opposition Members would not give for just one day of being able to govern in the interests of the people in this country! This Government want to give the appearance of being in office but not governing at all. That is what is happening on their watch. If that is not bad enough, against a difficult economic backdrop, with scarce resources, not only is the way in which they manage and govern bad for patients, but it is squandering taxpayers’ money.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con) *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will give way in just a moment. The problems in general practice are storing up problems for the rest of the NHS; as we have heard, people are

[*Wes Streeting*]

presenting in accident and emergency because they cannot see a GP. That failure is costing the taxpayer dearly. A GP appointment costs the NHS £39, but a visit to an urgent care centre costs it £77 and a visit to the emergency department costs it £359. The Government's failure to invest in new GPs may be penny-wise but it is pound-foolish. It is wasting money and inconveniencing patients, and it is not the way to manage the NHS. One of my constituents wrote to me yesterday to say that if she wants a same-day appointment for her baby, her GP sends her to A&E. She wrote:

"I was sent to A&E to check a newborn baby's suspected ingrown toenail that had no sign of infection. How is going to A&E for a non-urgent matter a good thing for anyone."

Yet that is what our constituents are forced to do, because they cannot get a GP appointment. I hope the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham can give us some insight as to why.

Dr Johnson: As part of that, I suggest that the hon. Gentleman remembers that GPs take 10 years to train. He is right to say that we have been in government for 12 years, but most of the current GP shortage is because the previous Labour Government did not train those GPs at the time. One of the first things the Conservative Government did was to set in train the opening of five medical schools to increase the number of medical students. We had enough doctors but they do take 10 years to train. The reason I stood up to intervene on the hon. Gentleman was to say that one of the challenges that doctors—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as a doctor—and members of staff face is being abused in a surgery. I wonder whether he would like to apologise for some of the comments he has made on social media—

Mr Speaker: Order. Interventions are meant to be questions. I know that the hon. Member is down to speak. I would not want you to use up your speech now; I want you to save something for later.

Wes Streeting: Let me first say in response to the final point the hon. Lady made that there is absolutely no excuse for abusing NHS staff whatsoever. Most people in this country do not blame NHS staff for the state of the NHS; they place the blame squarely where it belongs, with the Government who have been in power for the past 12 years. Her first point would be more powerful if we did not have 1,500 fewer full-time equivalent GPs now than we did when her party came to power. Her point would have been more powerful if her party had not whipped its MPs to vote against having a workforce plan for the NHS, but I am afraid that that is what it did. Conservative Members cannot run away from their choices and decisions, and from the fact that they have now been in government for 12 years and there is no one else to blame but themselves. In communities right across the country, we now see the consequences of their mismanagement.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I regret to inform the hon. Gentleman that the situation in Wales is not much better, but I do not want to make a party political point. Will he commend the potential role that pharmacists can play in alleviating

pressure on GPs? I have an excellent pharmacist in my home village of Pen-y-Groes, which provides an invaluable service for the communities in my area.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about the importance of looking at primary care as a whole and the really powerful and valuable contribution that community pharmacies can make, alleviating pressures on other parts of the primary care system, particularly general practice.

Communities across the country are experiencing those problems; let me take one place at random to illustrate the scale of the challenge. Today, after a decade of Conservative mismanagement, the city of Wakefield has 16 fewer GPs than in 2013. In fact, Wakefield has not seen a single additional GP since the Prime Minister promised 6,000 more at the last election, and since Wakefield has been served by a Conservative MP—albeit, thankfully, no longer—it has seen three GP practices close, with some surgeries so short-staffed that 2,600 patients are left to fight over one family doctor. Last month, patients in Wakefield were able to book 25,000 fewer GP appointments than in November 2019, the last month in which they were served by a Labour MP. The only good news for general practice in Wakefield in recent years has been that Simon Lightwood, an NHS worker and brilliant candidate in Thursday's by-election, has successfully campaigned to save the King Street walk-in centre. [*Interruption.*] They don't like it. Conservative Members shout in protest and point the finger at us, but they have been in government for 12 years.

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is talking about problems, but his motion does not include one solution. He has now been speaking for 20 minutes, and he has not outlined one solution. If he wishes to be taken seriously as a politician, will he now turn to some solutions to the problems he has outlined?

Wes Streeting: It is certainly true that I am saving the best until last in my speech, but the hon. Gentleman may have missed the point I have made repeatedly, which is that the NHS—an organisation that employs more than 1.2 million people—needs a workforce strategy. It needs a proper analysis of what its workforce needs are today, the workforce needs of tomorrow, and the future shape of the workforce. We gave Government Members the opportunity to vote for that; the hon. Gentleman voted against it, and he wants to lecture me about being taken seriously as a politician. Who is he trying to kid? I do not know how the hon. Gentleman voted, because it was a secret ballot, but the fact that a majority of Government Members voted to keep the current Prime Minister in office means that they are not in any position at all to lecture anyone else on who is and is not a serious politician.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for giving way. I have in front of me figures from the House of Commons Library on the increase in GPs per 100,000 population between September 2015 and April 2022, which show an 8% increase for Wakefield.

Wes Streeting: I notice that the hon. Gentleman has played the old trick of selecting figures from a specific set of years, but nothing he has said contradicts the facts that I have outlined. In any case, the people of Wakefield will draw their own conclusions on Thursday when they go to vote. The fact is that the Government have had more than enough time to reform general practice in this country, and they have no one other than themselves to blame for the crisis we are in.

Since the Conservative party has been in government for the past 12 years, I thought I would take a trip down memory lane to remind us, the House and the British people exactly what they have been promising since they were first elected in 2010. The 2010 Conservative party manifesto promised that GP surgeries would be open 12 hours a day, seven days a week. The Government failed to deliver that—maybe they blame their coalition partners, although I do not think the Liberal Democrats would have disagreed with GP surgeries being open for that long—so they promised the same again in 2015. That time, they set themselves a deadline of 2020, and guess what? They missed that, too.

In 2015, they promised that everyone over the age of 75 would get a same-day appointment—another promise broken. They said they would hire 5,000 more GPs by 2020—another promise broken. In 2019, they promised 6,000 more GPs, but the Health Secretary has already admitted that he is on course to break that promise, too. They promised 50 million more GP appointments a year, but as the British people know from their experience, appointments are down. That is today's Conservative party: over-promise and under-deliver, never take responsibility, and leave patients paying the price.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This morning, one of my constituents contacted me to say she was standing outside her GP practice at 7.15 am in order to secure an appointment. She said that she was successful in securing an appointment, but a number of people who were also standing outside did not. Does my hon. Friend remember the Health Secretary promising that people would have to do that in order to secure a GP appointment?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. This is the problem: they overpromise and underdeliver. If they will not hear it from me, Mr Speaker, let us remind ourselves of what some of the Secretary of State's colleagues have said. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous), who is in the Chamber, said in Prime Minister's questions only last week:

“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.”—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 283-4.]

Earlier this month, the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) read a letter from a constituent to the Health Secretary. It said:

“Trying to get basic healthcare is a joke in Telford. Maybe I would be better off in...a third-world country”.

If the Secretary of State is not going to listen to us, he should at least listen to his own side. Before Conservative Members leap to the defence of their Government's record, they should probably go back and check the record to make sure that they had not agreed with us in the first place.

As for dentistry, 2,000 dentists quit the NHS last year, around 10% of all dentists employed in England. It is an exodus under the Government's watch. Four million people cannot access NHS dental care and cannot afford to go private either.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. My constituent, Ellie Cokeley, wrote to me. She works as a receptionist in a local dental practice and gets hundreds of calls a week from upset members of the public who are unable to find an NHS dentist. She said that it feels greatly unjust that the poorest in our society are being forced to pay huge amounts for vital dental care or, worse still, having to continue without any at all. Are the Government not failing people in this country when it comes to the care of their teeth? It is vital that we get more dentists in the system.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Some places, such as Somerset, are dentistry deserts because the remaining NHS dentists are not taking on new patients.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Wes Streeting: I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), then to my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and then to the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone).

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned Somerset, but can I also mention Sunderland, to keep up the alliteration? In Sunderland, we cannot find an NHS dentist and the few good ones we have are now turning to private practice to make it work. It is an existential crisis in dentistry—it really is at breaking point. Does my hon. Friend agree that the blame lies squarely with the Conservative Government, with backlog Britain, and that this is the effect on our constituents?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the state of dentistry. It is not alliterative, but I suspect that my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch has similar points to make.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): A constituent of mine told me that she had a terrible toothache, rang 111 and was assigned to an emergency dentist. The system worked, but does my hon. Friend agree that that costs the taxpayer so much more money? My hon. Friend talks about overpromising and underdelivering, but with dentistry the Government have not even promised anything and they are underdelivering.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend knows exactly what she is talking about. Of course, there is no one better in this House to make the point about the waste of public money. That is the outrageous thing about all of this. People are paying more and getting less. Their taxes have been put up, justified in the name of the NHS, but the money is not being directed in the right way to deliver better care. In fact, the Government admit that even with the investment they are putting in, people will be waiting longer for care and that is a disgrace.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for giving way. He is very civil. Can I also go down memory lane? We have had a Government of a rather different colour in Scotland since 2007, and today I have constituents coming to me and saying, “I cannot get on an NHS dentist’s list”. That echoes the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Does the shadow Secretary of State agree that in the event of the present Government sorting this situation out, they would do well to share what they did with the Scottish Government? And in the event of a change of Government after the next general election, will the shadow Secretary of State commit to giving advice to the Scottish Government?

Wes Streeting: This is the thing that the First Minister of Scotland does not want to acknowledge, but for all her noise, bluff and bluster she knows full well that a Labour Government here in Westminster would be good for the people of Scotland. The investment and reform that we would put into the NHS to deliver the same kind of results as the previous Labour Government did would be good for the people of Scotland. I look forward to the day when I can phone the Scottish Government to give them some advice and I look forward to the day when the Governments in Westminster and Edinburgh are Labour Governments delivering for people across the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned the trip down memory lane. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes, regularly blames Labour for what is happening in dentistry. That is because of something that happened 16 years ago: it was a contract that was put in place by the last Labour Government, which we committed to reform in our 2010 manifesto. Unfortunately, that manifesto was never implemented. The tragedy is that the Conservative manifesto that promised reform of the dentistry contract was not implemented either.

In 2010, the Conservatives promised to introduce a new dentistry contract. In 2017, they also promised to introduce a new dentistry contract. What is the Minister’s policy today? She promises to introduce a new dentistry contract. She must make up her mind: either, the current contract is so good that every time she tries to change it, she cannot find a way of improving it, or, the Minister’s Department, her Secretary of State and her Government are so incompetent, so distracted, or so indifferent, that they simply cannot get the job done. It is no good their blaming the Labour party for the problems in NHS dentistry. They have been asleep at the wheel for 12 years. They have failed to do anything to improve the service, and now 4 million people cannot access a dentist. The consequences are severe.

Let me tell the Health Secretary about a constituent of my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). She tells me that this constituent cannot get a dentist appointment anywhere for an unbearable toothache, and that they are in too much pain to sleep through the night. When they contacted a dentist, they were told that they would have to wait two years for an appointment. They wrote in an email:

“I am in such agony that I took Ibuprofen, drank whisky and tried to pull it out myself with pliers, but they kept slipping off and it was agony.”

What kind of country have we become when the most common reason for children to go to hospital is to have their teeth extracted? We have 78 children going to hospital every day to have their teeth extracted. *[Interruption.]* There is no point Members arguing from a sedentary position that it is because of fizzy drinks. That is their approach all the time. The system is broken, so let us blame the patients. It is absolutely outrageous. DIY dentistry in one of the richest countries on the planet, and their answer is to blame the patients. They should get real. This is so far from that original promise of the NHS, where care is provided to all who need it, when they need it.

To be fair to the Health Secretary, he has been in the role for just under a year, and, on that note, I would like to wish him a happy anniversary this Sunday for one year in the job. But I am afraid that that is where the niceties end, because I will now run through what he has said and done in his year in charge. He had a big media splash on “league tables for practices” to pressure them into doing more face-to-face appointments and then he backed down. He achieved great headlines on “nationalising GPs” in January—imagine the excitement—but there has been no action since. He talks about bringing the NHS into the Netflix age. Has he ever actually used the NHS app? I cannot even book a GP appointment through the app because my GP is not on it. Why is it still not available to every patient as a way to book appointments? I visited Israel recently—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—where it has embraced the technological advances in medicine over recent years to massively improve access to healthcare for patients.

I was talking to a start-up, which is developing an app that tracks the recovery of stroke victims, and notifies them when they need to see a physio. I then showed the staff what the NHS app can do and what it cannot do and they laughed. In some senses, the Health Secretary had a point: the NHS is not as modernised as it needs to be to deliver for patients, and nowhere is that more true than in primary care. It is an analogue service in a digital age. Patients should not have to wake up at 8 in the morning and wait on the phone for an hour for an appointment. They should not be told to expect a call back, but given no indication as to what time that will be, and then be considered a missed appointment if they do not pick up because they are at work, or are busy, or are picking up the kids and doing everything else that people do between nine and five.

People have never been so well-informed about their own health. We carry around with us devices that can measure our exercise, our heart rate, how well we sleep, and so much more. Yet our healthcare system puts none of this to use and keeps all the pressure on GPs.

Let me conclude by outlining some of what a Labour Government would do to address this crisis—*[Interruption.]* I am not surprised that Conservative Members are excited; they must be as fed up as we are. First, we would take immediate practical steps to boost the number of GPs available. Why have the Government sat idly by while doctors are forced to retire early, for no other reason than that the cap on their pension contributions means they pay a financial penalty for staying on? Let us change the rules to keep the good doctors we have. Why is it that, at the last count, 800 medicine graduates had not been able to find junior doctor posts? Let us get them to work immediately—

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): That is rubbish!

Wes Streeting: It is rubbish, but it is his record.

Why is it that so many people are accessing NHS services because of a failure to invest in social care, where staff can be recruited and deployed a lot faster? On the dentistry contract, the last Labour Government acknowledged that the 2006 contract was not good enough, which is why we put the reform of that contract in our 2010 manifesto. The difference is that we will not wait 12 years to deliver the promise after the election of the next Labour Government. Those are just some of the practical steps that we would take immediately and that the Government could take immediately.

Let me tell the House about some of the fundamental issues we would fix. First, mental health services in this country are in such a state that GPs are seeing more and more of their own cases present with mental ill-health. A Labour Government would recognise that there has been a surge in mental ill-health following the pandemic and we would not leave it to overwhelmed GPs to see them. That is why we have committed to recruiting 8,500 new mental health professionals, including specialist support in every school and mental health hubs in every community. We would pay for that by ending the charitable status of private schools and closing the tax loopholes enjoyed by private equity fund managers—and do not tell me the Health Secretary does not know where they are; he was using them before he became a Member of Parliament.

That policy—[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members are funny. They ask for our policies but they do not like it when we provide the answers, because we have them and they do not. That policy, which would put mental health hubs in every community and support in every school and speed up access to treatment for everyone in our country, would help to reduce pressure on GPs and to deliver better mental health treatment in every community and faster access to a GP for everyone else who needs to see them. It also tells you something about the choices we would make and the priorities we would have as a Labour Government: better public services enjoyed by the many, paid for by closing tax perks for the few.

I know that there is lots of cynicism about politics. We have a Prime Minister who wants people to believe that we are all the same, that things cannot change and that his shambles of a Government are the best that Britain can do. All I would say to the people of Britain is this: judge them on their record and judge Labour on ours. They have been in power now for 12 years. They delivered the highest NHS waiting lists in history, before the pandemic. They delivered record staffing shortages in the NHS with 100,000 vacancies, before the pandemic. They delivered cancer care that worsened in every year since they came to office, before the pandemic. Now they tell us that patients will be paying more and waiting longer.

The last Labour Government were in power for 13 years, and we delivered the highest patient satisfaction in the history of the NHS, the lowest waiting times on record and more doctors, nurses and new hospitals. There were no threats of strikes in the NHS when we were in government because staff could see the difference we were making and so could the patients. We did not get everything right—nobody is perfect—but Labour's record

on the NHS is one that this Government could not even begin to touch. The longer we give the Conservatives in power, the longer patients will wait. Well, people are sick, and they are tired of waiting. This Government's time is up.

1.13 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): I welcome this chance to come to the House to discuss primary care and dentistry, but I have to say that the audition by the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) did not go very well. I hope that he can see the irony—some might even say the hypocrisy—of his sudden interest in access to public services, today of all days. It is thanks to the strikes that he has been so vocal in supporting the fact that people right across the country cannot make their appointments, that GPs and dentists cannot get to work and that patients do not have access to the treatments they desperately need.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I will take some interventions in a moment.

The hon. Gentleman has had every opportunity to do the right thing, to put patients first and to condemn these unjustified and reckless transport strikes, yet at every turn he has chosen to back his union paymasters.

Catherine West *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I hope the hon. Lady will condemn the strikes.

Catherine West: The Secretary of State speaks about opportunities. In this House, we had a number of opportunities to get workforce reform, workforce numbers and a plan for our health service into the Health and Care Act 2022. Why did he miss those opportunities?

Sajid Javid: We are seeing record investment in the workforce, and we are seeing record increases. For the first time ever, the NHS is also coming up with a 15-year long-term workforce strategy, which I hope the hon. Lady welcomes.

The Government have always been on the side of patients and the people who care for them. I pay tribute to everyone working in primary care and dentistry for the difference they make day in, day out to their patients' lives. I know that the pandemic has brought some unimaginable pressures, and equally I know that many of those pressures have not gone away now we are living with covid.

The hon. Member for Ilford North talks as though he does not know where the pressures have come from—as though he has had his head under a rock for two years. The NHS has said it believes that between 11 million and 13 million people stayed away from the NHS, including their GPs and dentists. Rightly, many of those people are now coming forward for the treatment they need—and I want them to come forward.

John Redwood: When the Secretary of State does the much-needed manpower review, will he ensure that a fast-growing area such as Wokingham with lots of new houses gets proper provision for that growth? Will the manpower plan also address how we recruit the doctors we have authority to get?

Sajid Javid: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend's important point. In fact, I met my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) about that last week, and I agree with them both.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Last month, a constituent contacted me who had developed severe dental pain. He phoned 40 dentists and not one of them could take him on as an NHS patient. It got so bad that he phoned 111 but was told that he was not eligible to see an emergency dentist. What advice would the Secretary of State give to someone in those circumstances? Many other hon. Members on both sides of the House will be able to tell similar stories. In the end, my constituent had to pay to go private, but that should not have happened. Why are our constituents being placed in that position?

Sajid Javid: I am sorry to hear about the right hon. Gentleman's constituent. If he will allow me, in a moment, I will come on to the pressures that dentistry is facing and, most importantly, what we are doing about them.

Those pressures have come about for two reasons. First, there was a fear of infection, which was understandable in a context where 10 minutes in a dentist's chair during the pandemic could have meant 10 days in self-isolation or, perhaps, worse. Dental practices were almost uniquely at risk of spreading covid, so their activity was rightly severely constrained across the world—not just here in England and across the UK—by the infection prevention rules that were necessary at the time. Despite all the innovations in dentistry over the last few years, dental surgeries do not have a Zoom option.

Secondly, the British people stayed away because of their innate sense of responsibility during the pandemic. As all hon. Members saw in their constituencies, people understood our critical national mission. Our GPs were doing their duty vaccinating people in care homes and in thousands of vaccination centres up and down the country, protecting the most vulnerable and working hard to keep us all healthy and safe.

When omicron struck—we all remember that period, which was not that long ago—I stood before this House and asked GPs to stop all non-emergency work once again. I did not take that decision lightly, but we were faced with a stark choice of having more lockdowns or accelerating our vaccine programme. We chose to accelerate, with help from all corners of the NHS and with the backing, at that time, of the hon. Member for Ilford North. I remember him standing at the Dispatch Box pledging his full support for that effort and rightly stating that the Government were acting

“in the best interests of our NHS, our public health, and our nation.”—[*Official Report*, 13 December 2021; Vol. 705, c. 795.]

He recognised that it was the right thing to do then; he has now conveniently changed his mind. I wonder why.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): But people like Mark in my constituency cannot find an NHS dentist. This is not about covid; it was happening before covid. The investment just is not there. He is in pain; he is in agony. The Secretary of State needs to step up, step in and get things right.

Sajid Javid: We are putting record amounts of investment into the NHS, including more funding into dentistry—I am about to come on to that right now—which will help with those pressures.

Clive Efford: Covid is just a pathetic excuse, because even if it was the sole reason, the Secretary of State should have been planning for when we came out of it, but nothing he has said explains why we had record numbers of patients on waiting lists even before covid started.

Sajid Javid: I think that many people working across the NHS will be listening to the hon. Gentleman and realising that he has no idea about the pressures that covid has created for everyone working there, especially those on the frontline.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Excuse me for raising this issue, but I want to draw attention to the fact that there has been news released that the Secretary of State's Government have declined to introduce mandatory reporting of complications resulting from mesh. In the context of problems with waiting lists, and wider issues, if we do not introduce a mandatory reporting scheme to identify problems with a medical product, more people will end up requiring medical intervention and medical treatment, so I urge the Government to look again at their declining to introduce mandatory reporting.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. That is why the Government commissioned an independent report. We have responded to that report. We are still listening to what hon. Members such as herself and others are saying on this important issue, and then we will do a follow-up of the report within a year, so that will be later this year. I know that she will take an interest in that.

Paul Bristow (Peterborough) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that a lot of the issues with primary care services are about leadership? In my constituency, we have the brilliant Thistle Moor surgery with Dr Neil Modha and Dr Azhar Chaudhry, who serve 29,500 patients, 80% of whom do not have English as a first language. Same-day, face-to-face GP appointments are the norm in that practice. In contrast, a Thorney surgery has just temporarily closed a surgery in my constituency due to a lack of admin staff, which is not the fault of the admin staff themselves. Will he back my campaign to make sure that that GP surgery is open again serving local people as soon as possible?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend is campaigning passionately for primary care services in his constituency, and he points to some fantastic practices. I congratulate all the people involved in delivering that and support him in his work with his local commissioners to make sure that they are getting even better local primary care.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the crisis in NHS dentistry, which affects my constituency as it does his, well predates the pandemic, and indeed goes back to at least 2006 when the then Labour Government changed the way in which dentists are paid? Will he undertake to look at the units of dental activity

system, which disincentivises dentists from providing dental work particularly in the most disadvantaged communities?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in his analysis, and I can give that undertaking. I will say a bit more about that in a moment.

If the hon. Member for Ilford North wants to talk about funding for the NHS, I am happy to oblige. Under the last NHS long-term plan, before the pandemic, we made a historic commitment of an extra £34 billion a year. Because of the pandemic, we then necessarily put in £92 billion of extra funding. At the last spending review, we increased funding still further so that the NHS budget will reach £162.6 billion by 2024-25, supported in part by the new health and social care levy.

We have made sure the NHS has the right level of resourcing to face the future with confidence, but we must also be alive to the consequences. The British people expect every pound spent to be spent well, and they expect us to be honest with them that every extra pound the hon. Gentleman calls for will be a pound less spent on education, infrastructure, housing and perhaps defence. I believe in a fair deal for the British people, and especially for our young people. We will be making plenty of changes alongside this funding.

Jonathan Edwards: One of the major problems we face in Wales and across the UK is the need to replace retiring GPs and dentists. There has been a welcome increase in the number of international medical graduates training in Wales, but the British Medical Association informs me that very few GP practices and dental practices in Wales are registered as skilled worker visa sponsors. Will the Secretary of State raise this with the Home Office to see what can be done to help GPs and primary care practitioners retain those international graduates to work in Wales and across the UK, if they so decide?

Sajid Javid: We are working with our colleagues in the Home Office on this and other skills and healthcare issues, so I can give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. He talks about the major problem he is facing in Wales, and that major problem is a Labour Government. I hope he agrees—[*Interruption.*] He is nodding.

Look at the performance of Labour in Wales, whether on health or education: the median waiting time for outpatients in Wales is almost double the median waiting time in England. People in Wales are waiting more than three years, whereas the longest wait in England is more than two years. Thanks to the covid recovery plan we set out in this House a few months ago, the number waiting more than two years has been slashed by more than two thirds in just four months, and it will be almost zero next month.

Thousands of people in Wales are waiting two or three years. In fact, one in four patients in Labour-run Wales are waiting longer than a year. In England it is one in 20, which is far too high and will be lowered, but in Wales it is one in four. It is not surprising the hon. Member for Ilford North had nothing to say about his colleagues in power in Wales.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab) *rose*—

Sajid Javid: I would like to hear what the hon. Lady thinks of the Labour Government in Wales and their abysmal performance when it comes to healthcare.

Kate Hollern: There is much better performance from the Welsh Government than from the UK Government. The Prime Minister promised 6,000 more GPs, which has not happened.

I wrote to the Secretary of State about Blackburn having only 33 GPs per 100,000 people, whereas the south-west has 73. I wrote to him about a young man whose cancer was misdiagnosed, but I have not had a response. I would say Wales is doing much better than the Secretary of State.

Sajid Javid: That is a very strange comment about the hon. Lady's colleagues in Wales. Either she does not know or she is deliberately saying something she does not quite believe. Perhaps I can make her aware of the facts in Wales, where the number of people waiting more than two years for treatment currently stands at more than 70,000. That is more than three times the figure in England. That is more than three times the figure in England. It is at 70,000, and the hon. Lady seems to be very comfortable with that. I am surprised—it tells us all we need to know about Labour's ambitions for government if she thinks that is acceptable.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab) *rose*—

Sajid Javid: Maybe the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) can tell us whether she agrees with her hon. Friend the hon. Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern) on Wales.

Sarah Champion: The Secretary of State knows we are having a debate about the whole UK, but I am asking him specifically about England and his responsibility. Can he answer the original question from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Kate Hollern), which was about the Prime Minister's 2019 commitment to 6,000 extra GPs? We know there are 1,000 newly qualified foreign GPs who are about to be deported by his Government, plus students who are unable to complete their studies because this Government are not providing them with the money for the final years. Under the management of the Secretary of State's Government in the last decade, we have lost 4,500 GPs. Can he talk about what he plans to do to replace them?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to talk about that. Because of the record funding this Government have put in, both pre and post pandemic, we are seeing record increases in the workforce across the NHS. When it comes to GPs, since March 2019 we have seen an increase of some 2,389. On top of that, we have seen a further increase of more than 18,000 full-time equivalent staff working in other important primary care roles. That is in England—I am talking about England numbers.

Of course, we are working hard towards the targets we have set. We are also seeing more GPs in training in our medical schools than ever before, with more medical schools operating than ever before. I hope the hon. Lady will welcome that result and that investment.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): We are talking about GP and dentistry services today, but the wider primary care family includes community pharmacy and

[Steve Brine]

ophthalmology, the vast majority of which are not NHS providers but operate under contract providing NHS services. In my excellent right hon. Friend's second year in the Health Secretary job, will there be a ruthless focus on the wider primary care landscape? When it comes to prevention, surely those people must be the front door of the NHS to ensure that the system is sustainable in the long term.

Sajid Javid: Yes, absolutely. I know my hon. Friend speaks with great experience in this area. I am just about to come on to some of the changes we will be making to primary care, which I am sure he will welcome.

Andrew Selous: When the Secretary of State goes back to the Department, will he have a quick look at how it is that, in Leeds, north-east Lincolnshire, Fylde and Wyre and Stockport in the past six-and-a-half years, we have increased the number of GPs by between 18% and 22%? I am curious to know whether there are any lessons we can draw from those areas for the rest of the country. Will he ask his officials to look into that to see whether there are useful points for us?

Sajid Javid: I will, and I will get back to my hon. Friend on that issue with more detail. I hope he welcomes the investment we are seeing and the record numbers of doctors and GPs in training.

Richard Fuller: I know my right hon. Friend is coming on with some more ideas, but from talking to GPs across my constituency, one of the issues I have found is that, as we have diversified primary care staff beyond GPs to paramedics and others, the role of what might be called receptionists and telephonists has moved far more into triage. It is now a more complicated role. Is he attracted to the idea in the Policy Exchange document of creating an NHS gateway to provide more medically qualified staff at that first point of entry to GPs, but on a nationalised basis, available via internet, telephony and the cloud?

Sajid Javid: Yes, I am. I have seen the report my hon. Friend refers to and have discussed aspects of it with its authors, so the short answer is yes.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: I will later.

In terms of the changes we are making, let me first turn to primary care. The hon. Member for Ilford North, in his motion today, is calling on me to

“urgently bring forward a plan to fix the crisis in primary care”, as he puts it. That is his motion. He is probably too busy supporting the strikers to have read my speech to the NHS Confederation last week. Had he bothered to listen to or read what I said in that speech, or the similar words from Amanda Pritchard, the chief executive officer of NHS England, he would have heard me acknowledge that our current model of primary care simply is not working. I have made no secret of that, or of my desire for change.

We are now working on a plan for change and, based on today's motion, I will be glad to count on the hon. Gentleman's support when we bring those plans forward, because what he has asked for, we are already doing. Our plans, for example, include a much bigger expansion in what our fantastic pharmacists can do. In fact, on the very day that I made that speech in Liverpool, we also announced a new pilot scheme to allow people with signs of cancer to be assessed and referred by pharmacists. That is yet another example of how we are working hard to enhance the role of our brilliant pharmacists and thereby freeing GPs to spend more time with their patients.

Imran Hussain: Thus far, if I have got this right, the Secretary of State has told us that there have been record levels of investment across our NHS services, including GPs and hospitals, and that any minor concerns that have arisen are because of the covid years. Does he think that the British public have been asleep for the last 12 years? Does he think that the British public will buy this? The stark reality on our streets—the Secretary of State may want to go and have a look—is as dire as it has ever been.

Sajid Javid: As I said—I am glad that the hon. Gentleman was listening—there have been record levels of funding in the NHS, and, as we set out in our spending plans, that will continue. But that is no thanks to the hon. Member for Ilford North and his colleagues, who all voted against that record funding. They wanted to deny those resources to their constituents. He should reflect on the impact of that had their wish gone through the House.

On the changes that we are making, we are going further, from improving telephone services to letting others such as nurses and pharmacists complete fit notes. Appointment numbers are already exceeding pre-pandemic levels—for example, in April, GPs and their teams were delivering 1.26 million appointments per working day. That is a phenomenal achievement, which the hon. Gentleman should be commending, not castigating.

The hon. Gentleman raised Wakefield and primary care. He was using dodgy numbers, so he was corrected by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire. He also gave out further dodgy information by somehow claiming that the King Street walk-in centre was under threat. I do not know if you have seen this in the by-elections, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the Labour party has a history of just making things up and creating fake news to scare local people. That is the respect that they show for local people. The walk-in centre has never been under threat. The local clinical commissioning group has confirmed that it has never been under threat. If he had any decency, he would stand up and withdraw his remarks. I give him that chance.

Wes Streeting: I would have thought that the Secretary of State would have learned by now that it is silly to give way to me when he makes these facile points. It is absolutely the case that the walk-in centre's future was in jeopardy. It is absolutely the case that Simon Lightwood campaigned to save it. If that is what Simon Lightwood can achieve as a candidate, imagine what he will do as Wakefield's next Labour MP.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is now using the past tense. A moment ago, he claimed that it was under threat. He clearly has no issues with giving false information in this House. The truth is that, if Wakefield wants a better future, as everyone in Wakefield deserves, only one by-election candidate can provide that, and that is Nadeem Ahmed.

We intend to go much further to build a truly 21st-century offer in primary care. That includes Dr Claire Fuller's independent review, which I found to be extremely valuable, and the changes that will stem from that as well as the many others that we will bring forward shortly. We will work with the population and the profession alike. The hon. Gentleman was right to focus on the importance of the profession, but he did forget to mention, as I referred to earlier, that since March 2019 we have more than 2,380 additional GPs in primary care, record numbers of doctors in training and more than 18,000 additional primary care professionals.

Let me turn briefly to the important steps we are taking in dentistry. Urgent care has been back at pre-pandemic levels since December 2020, and the 700 centres for urgent care that we set up to provide treatment for patients during this difficult period have helped thousands of patients across the country. At the start of this year we put an additional £50 million into NHS dental services, which boosted dental capacity by creating 350,000 extra appointments. Dentists are currently required to deliver 95% of pre-covid activity, and we are planning to return to 100% shortly. I commend all the dentists who are already achieving that.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State referred to an additional £50 million. As he knows, the way in which that was framed made it difficult for dentists to draw down the money. Will he tell the House how much of it has been drawn down and used?

Sajid Javid: I do not have the exact figures to hand, but I know that millions of pounds were drawn down and used to deliver tens of thousands of appointments across the country. That made a huge difference to a great many people.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): The urgent care centres are an important innovation, but it is also important for them to be accessible throughout the country. There are seven in Kent, but the one nearest to my constituents is 33 miles away. Could my right hon. Friend intervene with the NHS in the south-east to bring about a more even distribution?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend's point is important and well made, and I will look at the issue closely and get back to him, if I may.

As we have already heard today—but it is such an important point—the challenge for NHS dentistry predated the pandemic. It is not just about the number of dentists in England, but about the completely outdated contracts under which they are working, which were signed under a Labour Government. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members do not like it, but it is true. These contracts mean that we are operating almost with one hand tied behind our backs. They do not incentivise prevention, they hold back innovation, and they mean that hard-working

families cannot get the dental services that they deserve. However, we will now be changing that; our work with the sector, along with the work of Health Education England on recruitment and retention, will be vital for the future.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Sajid Javid: I will in a moment.

If there is one thing that unites all our work on primary care and dentistry, it is this. We are shifting to a new mode of operating—one that is about helping the whole population to stay healthy, not just about treating those who ask for help. We need to get to a place where we are healthier for longer, because freedom is hollow without our health.

Our new Health and Social Care Act 2022 is an important step in that ambition. Statutory integrated care systems will be responsible for the funding to support the health of their respective areas—not just treating people, but helping people to stay healthy in the first place. The Act also allows us to make safe and effective public health interventions such as water fluoridation, and we will set out further plans for that shortly.

Prevention, personalisation, people and performance: those will be our watchwords for modernising NHS services. They will sit at the heart of everything to come, from the health disparities White Paper to the update of the NHS long-term plan. While the Opposition continue to go off the rails, we remain firmly on track, laying down our plans to deliver a truly 21st-century offer for the profession and, most of all, for patients.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order. As Members can see, there is a great deal of interest in this debate. I am not imposing a time limit now, although I—or whoever occupies the Chair after me—will obviously be free to do so later, but some discipline in this regard would be very useful. We will start with Paul Blomfield.

1.44 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): A range of important issues has been raised by those on both Front Benches and in the interventions on them, but I want to focus specifically on NHS dentistry issues.

We have all had so many constituents contact us, and I would like to share a small selection of mine. One new resident to the city said:

“I moved to Sheffield earlier in the year. I am unable to register for an NHS dentist. I am being quoted waiting lists of eighteen months just for a check-up.”

Another wrote:

“My partner has been trying to get into a dentist for a check-up for around 18 months. We have rung every dentist within a 6-mile radius to be told they are not taking on NHS patients...and he will need to go private.”

One woman wrote to me:

“I have a MATB1 form entitling me to free dental care whilst I'm pregnant and for a year after birth. Unfortunately, I can't use this as I can't find an NHS dentist”.

A young mother told me:

[Paul Blomfield]

“We’re told dental care is important and that we should get our children seen early and regularly. We moved to Sheffield in December 2020. I started to look for a dentist. I’ve been on a waiting list for a year with no progress.”

Another parent told me:

“Our son was referred for NHS orthodontic treatment by his dental practice in February 2019 at the age of 12. He has now been on the waiting list for 35 months and will turn 15 next month. He still has not had an initial assessment appointment.”

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; the Secretary of State seemed to forget to do so. Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, even before the pandemic, the No. 1 reason for hospital admission among children aged five to nine was tooth decay? Is that not a shocking indictment of the failure to address health prevention and care for children and their teeth, and is it not a bit galling for the Secretary of State to suggest that this is the fault of the last Labour Government, when before the pandemic his Government had already been in power for 10 years?

Paul Blomfield: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and she is absolutely right about how that highlights the crisis we are facing in NHS dentistry. That exists right across England, and it was interesting to hear comments from other nations, because significantly less is spent on dentistry in England than in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State blames everything on the contract, but the cuts to dentistry have been deeper than in the rest of the NHS, with spending a quarter less than it was in 2010, and I am not surprised that he made no mention of that.

Last Wednesday, I met our local dental committee to discuss the problem—dentists who are committed to their profession and to NHS provision, and who want a solution—and following our discussion, they commissioned a survey of waiting lists across the city. Some 37 practices responded, which is about half of the city’s providers, but only one practice could offer a waiting time shorter than a year. For 29% it was up to two years and for 32% more than two years. The most significant number was that 35% of practices were unable to add any patients to their waiting lists.

Across England, the number of dentists providing NHS services fell from 24,700 in 2019-20 to 21,500 now, which is a fall of 15% in just two years—

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield) *indicated dissent.*

Paul Blomfield: I see the Minister shaking her head.

However, there is provision for those who can pay. Healthwatch reported last year:

“Whilst some people were asked to wait an unreasonable time of up to three years for an NHS appointment, those able to afford private care could get an appointment within a week.”

That is adding to health inequalities, and it is not because dentists are reluctant to take on NHS patients, but because the system discourages them from doing so. We have patients wanting NHS dentistry and dentists wanting to provide it.

It is true that there are flaws in the 2006 contract. It is based on units of dental activity using figures from the two years prior to its imposition, which are now massively outdated. It contains huge discrepancies in remuneration

rates between practices doing the same work. There are penalties through clawback for underperformance for reasons beyond the control of practices, but no reward for overperformance. I see the Minister smirking, but she has been delivering this contract, and the Government have been operating within it for 12 years. There are limits on how much NHS treatment a practice can provide. That is because of quotas and the way that providers are contractually obliged to spread their NHS work. Dentists have a disincentive to take on new patients, who are more likely to have greater treatment needs, because the fee-per-item system was replaced with a system in which the same is paid for one filling as for 20.

Maria Caulfield *indicated assent.*

Paul Blomfield: As the Minister is nodding, let us review the position as regards the contract. Back in 2008, the Select Committee on Health declared the system not fit for purpose. The then Health Secretary, Alan Johnson, responded by ordering a review of the system. In 2009, the Steele inquiry reported, and in 2010, we committed to reforming the contracts, but 12 years on, nothing has happened.

Ministers also blame covid. Clearly, it has had an impact; there was a backlog of 3.5 million courses of dental treatment after lockdown, and patients are inevitably presenting with bigger problems and increased need, which means longer appointments and extra work, for which dentists get no remuneration. The Ministers sitting on the Front Bench have presided over this flawed system. In quarter 4 of 2021-22, 57% of practices faced financial penalties for being unable to meet the targets that those Ministers effectively imposed; the problem is due to the additional infection prevention control requirements and the lack of adjustment to the remuneration system.

We have reached a tipping point for NHS dentistry. Unless the Government act, the number of complaints that all Members of Parliament are getting will only grow. More practices will move to a private model, which will add to the difficulties, because the system does not work for them.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): NHS services are devolved, but many concerns about them are shared across the UK. Some of my constituents have concerns about the price of NHS dentistry offered through private dental practices, and about transparency in how final costs are calculated. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, particularly given the economic climate, practices must give cost breakdowns before treatment begins, so that patients can budget and understand what they are paying for?

Paul Blomfield: We need transparency, and that starts with a new structure for remunerating dentists—a structure that no longer disincentivises them from taking on NHS patients, and that does not push them towards private care. If we do not make those changes, the system will get worse. Some 50% of NHS practices have already reduced their NHS commitment, and 75% are planning to reduce further their contracts. Patients will face frustration and all the pain involved in not accessing help when they need it. As others have commented, children’s oral health will be severely damaged. It is a disgrace—it shames the country—that last year, hospitals

in England carried out almost 180 operations a day on children to remove rotting teeth, and it cost the NHS more than £40 million. Those problems will impact those children throughout their life. Poor dental health is linked to endocarditis, cardiovascular disease, pneumonia, premature births and low birth weights, all of which add strain and cost to the NHS.

The good news is that there is an answer, but it is in the hands of the Government. We need to restore adequate funding to dentistry in England, and we need a commitment that the long-promised contract reform will take place. It must be real reform, and not tweaks at the edges. Otherwise, we face the slow death of NHS dentistry.

1.54 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): With regard to access to GP services, there is a significant challenge that must be met head-on. The solution must address patients' ongoing concerns, involve long-term strategic workforce planning, and respect, not abuse, the GPs themselves.

The issue that I wish to focus on is access to NHS dentistry, which after 18 months retains the unenviable and scandalous position of being No. 1 in my postbag. It is quite clear that the situation is replicated for colleagues across the House. Access to NHS dentistry is a problem that has been brewing for a long time. It can be likened to a house built on shallow and poor foundations, which—with the earthquake of covid—have led to the house falling down.

The impact on people is profound: millions unable to find a dentist; thousands in agony, resorting to DIY tooth extraction; as yet untold numbers of undiagnosed mouth cancers; children suffering and having whole mouth replacements; and the poorest hit hardest. The solutions are fivefold: a secure, long-term funding stream; a strategic approach to recruitment and retention; replacement of the dysfunctional NHS dental contract; a prevention policy promoting personal oral healthcare from the cradle to the grave; and transparent and full accountability through the new emerging integrated care systems.

To be fair to the Government, measures have been put in place to address the crisis. Locally in Lowestoft, funding has been provided for an established dentist to attend to emergencies. The practice has responded heroically and prevented the system from collapsing. A new long-term NHS contract has been awarded to Lowestoft-based Dental Design Studio. That is welcome, although given that it was not possible to commission similar contracts elsewhere in Suffolk and Norfolk, there is concern that demand for NHS dentistry across the region will continue to outstrip supply, and that the new service could have a large and unserviceable catchment area.

The Government's announcement in February of a £50 million dental "treatment blitz" was welcome, but there is concern that the take-up of that funding has been limited because dentists have been too overstretched to take on the extra work. In the long term, the fact that the feasibility of establishing a dental school in Norwich is being considered is also very much welcomed.

Those initiatives are a step in the right direction, but the underlying causes of the dentistry crisis are yet to be tackled. In May, the Association of Dental Groups' report highlighted the emergence of dental deserts across the country, where there is almost no chance of ever

seeing an NHS dentist. There is a real risk of them merging to form an area of Saharan proportions. The British Dental Association is concerned that the negotiations to reform the NHS dental contract framework are yet to begin in earnest.

I have mentioned the importance of prevention. Back in February, I attended an event in Lowestoft at which community dental services and Leading Lives—a Suffolk-based not-for-profit social enterprise—launched a toolkit to help improve the oral health of young people with learning difficulties. Leading on from that, Lowestoft Rising, which promotes collaboration between statutory authorities and the voluntary sector, got together with local councillors and supermarkets to buy toothbrushes and toothpaste for primary school students. The initiative is to be applauded, but the feedback that I have received is that so much more could have been done if the group had not had to pay 20% VAT; surely this is a Brexit dividend that is looking us right in the eye.

As we have seen with the zero rating of women's sanitary products, we now have more flexibility to vary our fiscal regime. If necessary, such a VAT exemption could apply to children's dental products in much the same way as it does to children's shoes. Children's toothpaste and toothbrushes are distinct and different from those products used by adults. Such a strategy would embed good oral healthcare at an early age, and help to prevent the traumatic and expensive whole mouth replacements that hospitals increasingly have to carry out. Such a policy could form part of the new long-term plan for NHS dentistry that is so badly needed right across the country, and which I look forward to the Government rolling out at the earliest possible opportunity.

1.59 pm

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): I put on record that my husband is a senior manager in the NHS.

Dr Claire Fuller was commissioned by the Government to lead a national review of primary care. In her introduction to that review, she says that

"there are real signs of...discontent with"

general practice,

"both from the public who use it and the professionals who work within it."

Every day, more than 1 million people benefit from primary care professionals and, by Dr Fuller's own admission, primary care teams are over-stretched "beyond capacity". Sadly, we have not heard anything today from the Secretary of State to address that issue.

GPs have been working in local communities for over 100 years. The concept has not changed: GPs are still based in their local community, with the only difference being that the buildings they work in are much more modern. GPs have now moved to a triage system, creating the perception that it is difficult to get a face-to-face appointment, and for some of my constituents that perception is reality. Bookable appointments have now moved to a longer lead-in time, from three to four weeks in advance to seven to nine weeks in advance. Nationally, there were half a million more appointments in January this year than in January 2020, but the number of GPs is roughly the same, despite the Government's promise

[Paula Barker]

in February 2020 that they would recruit 6,000 more GPs by 2024. More than two years down the line, we are simply no further on.

People are frustrated and angry that they are being contacted by GP surgeries to book in for a health check, yet cannot get to see their GP when they feel unwell. While it is undoubtedly important for GPs to carry out health checks, which can enable interventions, that cannot be at the expense of routine appointments. Those health checks are on an enhanced service contract, meaning that the GP is paid for every patient who takes them up. That is in addition to their normal contractual obligations, so it is no wonder that patients are frustrated. At the NHS Confederation last week—the gathering of more than 5,000 senior NHS managers and staff—which the Secretary of State said he attended, the single biggest area of concern was workforce.

We must ask ourselves why the guidance from NHS England predominantly concentrates on emergency care, rather than urgent care. It talks about how many people are waiting in accident and emergency, how many ambulances are delayed, and how many people cannot be discharged on time. Those are all important subjects, but that emphasis diverts people's attention from the important point that the part of the NHS that deals with 90% of patient needs, GPs, only receives the crumbs off the table: 9% of the budget. It is time for the Government to deliver on their promises to recruit more GPs. The biggest threat to the NHS is crippling workforce shortages. If those shortages are not resolved, the Government will eventually start saying, "The NHS is failing." That will, in turn, lead to the hedge funders coming in and taking over.

Our NHS staff are underpaid, undervalued and under-resourced, and are then blamed by this Government—this Government who have been in power for 12 years. Meanwhile, patients are struggling to get GP appointments and, often, when they call 111, they are advised to present themselves at A&E. This Government are hellbent on turning the NHS into the national hospital service, rather than the national health service. The model of primary care must change, and change for the better, to enable our constituents to access GP services in a timely and appropriate manner. Quite frankly, nothing less is good enough.

2.4 pm

Richard Fuller (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Paula Barker). My observations are based on having, in the past six months, spoken and spent mornings with the people at about 11 of the 13 GP networks in my constituency and on some of their observations, which I have shared with the Minister previously.

Part of the issue in my area is that the population has grown so significantly. Since 2000, the number of patients per GP has gone up by about 40% in the constituency, which puts on significant pressure, which GPs are responding to, primarily by recruiting other direct care professionals, such as paramedics and various qualified nurses. That has a role in providing support to deal with the problems, but it has not overcome them. Significant efforts are being made to enable my constituents to

contact their GP. One interesting issue in those observations was that the practice's choice of phone system had a significant effect. Practices that chose system A—I will call it that, as I do not want to say a bad word about a particular practice or phone system—would find that the response for the customers, the patients, was terrible. In effect, when 10 people were waiting, the 11th caller got a signal that the number was no longer obtainable. So they would then go to the practice. This was just after covid, so they would go to the practice, try to get in and there would be a big sign on the door saying, "No entry". These very easy-to-understand problems cannot be solved by the Government but they have a direct impact on people's experience of primary care.

However, there are aspects that can be affected by the Government. One of the biggest concerns in my area has been the level and pace of housing development and the absence of an infrastructure-first policy. Can the Minister update the House on her conversations with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about implementing infrastructure-first? It means that, before a large housing development can take place, the GP services and the school places need to be there. We should not have people moving into their new houses on some of these estates and then finding that there are no GP places, school places and dentists. This was a manifesto commitment of my party and we should be putting it into law.

The comments by the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) about dental contracts also go for GP contracts. There seems to be confusion in the NHS—the Minister is clear that this is not really a Government responsibility—about whether there is value to the partner model among GPs, or whether we should be moving to a salary model and saying, essentially, that we are not going to pay extra for partners. This is an area where the Government need to set some direction of travel. It is an important direction to set for the NHS. I have my views, but I would be interested to hear whether the Minister believes that is something she can do.

Something that has been on my mind this week particularly has been the sclerotic process in NHS Estates and in other groups for getting primary care facilities built. The BBC's "Look East" yesterday carried a story about the new primary care facility being built in Biddenham in my constituency. Eight years since it was first planned, we are hoping—fingers crossed, Madam Deputy Speaker—that that building will be commenced. That is because a lot of people had an interest. The GPs, the CCG, NHS Estates, the local authority, the housing developer and the developer of the facility all had an interest, but who was making the decision? The NHS needs to recognise that in the provision of services it has to be clear on who is saying yes, when, where and how.

I am grateful to the Minister for saying she will conduct a review of the impact, had infrastructure-first been in place. In my constituency, there is a cramped surgery in Great Barford that could move to a perfectly good, agreeable building opposite that would provide better facilities. Arlesey has had a significant increase in population. I visited its GP practice just two weeks ago. There is no air conditioning, and the doors mean someone could walk in on a GP during their session with a patient. The facility needs upgrading, so we need a

decision. I am told that my local authority, Central Bedfordshire Council, has the money ready to convert a site in Biggleswade to primary care, yet the NHS decision process is not making that happen. These planning processes need urgent attention from the Government if change is to be made.

We have talked about the diversity of primary care roles, which is one of the Government's positives, as they have said they will increase the number of roles such as emergency care nurses and other types of nurses and paramedics. We saw the Government's "Data saves lives" paper this week, on how the better use of data can assist in providing solutions. I take the shadow Secretary of State's criticism of the NHS app. I was going to say it is 19th century, but it is certainly 20th century in its user-friendliness. What is the plan not only to harness data but to make it accessible and to put power in the hands of the patient?

People can do things with their health information, such as tracking how many steps they take each day. Diabetics can track information on testing. This is a world of improvement that empowers individuals in primary care. The first port of call in primary care provision is each of us managing our own healthcare. What better way to do that than following examples from the rest of the world through NHS applications?

Will the Minister update the House on the use of artificial intelligence and big data, particularly when it comes to pre-emptive screening? The Government are making a welcome investment in screening centres, but how are we harnessing all this medical data to the task of improving healthcare at a preventive level, rather than later in the day?

My hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) has left, but he is absolutely right that the Government are on the right course in opening up more points of presence for primary care by bringing in pharmacies and screening centres, so that each of us can choose where we want to go to get some of the services we want. It is important that legislation and regulation follow as permissive an approach as possible. Let us focus regulations on the patient and patient choice, not on the provider and provider restrictions.

2.13 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). His points on planning resonated with me as a Lancashire MP. Where we see large expansions of housing that do not go hand in glove with expansions in GP practices, school places and public transport networks, it is hard to get buy-in from the current population in those areas for that expansion, with patients already struggling to get GP appointments.

When I was collecting my thoughts for this debate, I was worried that I might fall into the trap of talking about the huge number of constituents who get in touch with me daily about their frustrations with GPs and dentists, so I will begin by paying tribute to the GPs and dentists who work in my Lancaster and Fleetwood constituency. Having worked very closely with them for seven years, it is clear they are working to the best of their ability in a system that is, frankly, broken.

I will single out one GP in particular. It is always risky to start naming GPs because there will be someone I miss, but I pay tribute to Dr Mark Spencer. When he recognised the health inequalities, the differences in life expectancy and the increased number of cancers and other conditions among his patients in Fleetwood compared with patients in the rest of the borough of Wyre, he started an initiative called Healthier Fleetwood, which has the buy-in of our town, to promote healthier living and exercise. It is for that work that Healthier Fleetwood was awarded the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service last month. I congratulate all the volunteers at Healthier Fleetwood and Dr Mark Spencer on having the initiative and foresight to do that. He established it because of those health inequalities, which are exacerbated when access to primary care is made difficult. The reality is that record numbers of people are waiting for care and waiting longer than ever before. When we say that people are waiting longer for care, it is important to remember that people are waiting in pain and in discomfort, and with conditions that become more severe and more difficult to treat.

Frankly, Tory mismanagement has left England with 4,500 fewer GPs than we had a decade ago. That is in stark contrast to what was promised in the 2019 Tory manifesto, which talked about 6,000 more GPs. Instead, we have 4,500 fewer. It is no wonder that patients are getting frustrated. Many of my constituents at the Lancaster end of my constituency started a Facebook group when they became frustrated with the telephone system of one medical practice in Lancaster. A lot of such issues are down to the fact that there is just not enough capacity to meet demand in that part of my constituency. My constituency feels like two stories. I get far more complaints and grumbles from the Lancaster end of my constituency about struggling to access GP appointments than I do at the Fleetwood end, and that is reflected in the number of GPs recruited.

When patients cannot access GP appointments, they are directed to urgent care or accident and emergency. That is financially illiterate. The cost of a GP appointment is roughly £39. If we direct someone to an urgent care centre, it is £77. If they end up at A&E, it is £359. By not funding and supporting primary care, and by not recruiting and retaining the GPs we need, it is costing the NHS more to deliver healthcare and making it more frustrating for my constituents.

Turning to dentistry, I spoke last week to a nursery teacher in my constituency who teaches a class of three and four-year-olds. They had been learning about dental hygiene and they were given a little toothbrush and toothpaste. She talked about their experiences of going to the dentist. She told me that hardly any of those three and four-year-olds had been to a dentist. That concerns me deeply, but it ties in with what I am getting in my mailbag as a constituency MP: constituents are struggling to get NHS dentists for their children. Adults, too, are struggling to get NHS dentists. One of the most obvious ways people fall out of having an NHS dentist is when they move house. I have many people who moved to live in my constituency from other parts of the country and tried to find an NHS dentist. Years and years later, they are still left waiting. I have examples of parents of school-age children who are still on NHS waiting lists to see an NHS dentist.

[Cat Smith]

One of the most difficult advice surgery appointments I have ever had to sit through was when a constituent put on the table in front of me the teeth he had pulled out of his own mouth. That will, frankly, stay with me forever, but it should never have got to that point. As a result of that case, I have raised the issue of access to NHS dentistry many times in this Chamber, including at Prime Minister's questions. Last year, 2,000 dentists quit the NHS.

The number of nought to 10-year-olds admitted to hospital for tooth extractions is going up. I looked up the statistics for my own area. There were 30 children in Lancaster and 40 children in Wyre under the age of 11 who had been admitted to hospital for tooth extractions. Of those children, 30 were five years old or younger. I have to say that we are getting something dreadfully wrong when it comes to NHS dentistry and access to NHS dentistry. If we do not get it right for children and babies, we are storing up a lifetime of health issues that will become more and more expensive to deal with and have a knock-on effect on wider health.

To wrap up, the Culture Secretary recently admitted that a decade of Conservative mismanagement had left our NHS "wanting and inadequate" before covid hit. It seems that the Conservatives are now breaking their promise to hire the GPs we need and they are overseeing an exodus of NHS dentists. Those who cannot afford to go private are resorting to DIY dentistry or are being left in pain. Frankly, the longer we give the Conservatives in office, the longer our constituents will wait in pain.

2.19 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): All the GP surgeries in my constituency have worked incredibly hard throughout this period. I saw some of that up close when I was volunteering with the vaccination effort in the weeks that I could. The entire period has been a complete whirlwind for them, and they went straight back into there being a huge demand for appointments. I commend them for what they did during covid and what they are doing now.

The job of an MP is to not just champion but challenge. As every other Member of the House has, I have heard complaints about the difficulty of getting GP appointments, which I need to raise with surgeries. Those complaints are about getting an appointment at all, getting a face-to-face appointment, getting through on the phone, or—more for dentists than GPs—being able to register.

We know that the covid pandemic is a huge part of that problem, because we asked the public to stay at home and protect the NHS, which they did almost to a fault. I remember Ministers at the Dispatch Box, as the pandemic went on, pleading with people to come forward if they thought they had something. Understandably, however, people did not want to burden their GP or hospital. They are now rightly coming forward, and they may have had hospital treatments delayed again because of the backlog, so they are going to their doctor instead.

Sometimes, my constituents are unhappy about not getting face-to-face appointments; they dislike eConsult and telephone appointments. I have used eConsult

successfully, and I think it and telephone consultations have a place, but as a GP at one of my surgeries said, the risk with both of those is that GPs do not see the thing that the patient has not come in about. A patient may come in about their leg, and while they are there, the GP says, "Can I just have a look at the thing on your neck?"

Emma Hardy: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point about GPs not being able to identify the issues that people have not come in for. Another thing that doctors can notice at face-to-face appointments is that someone is a victim of domestic abuse or violence.

David Johnston: I completely agree; the hon. Lady has made an important point. Sometimes, what people present with is not the biggest issue in their lives, and a skilled practitioner can uncover that.

As has been touched on, the issue is partly about telephone systems, bizarrely, as I will come on to, but it is also undoubtedly about a shortage of GPs. The Government have a grip on that: we have 1,500 more GPs now than in March 2019; 4,000 more trainees have taken up training places this year compared with 2014; and we have a health and social care levy which, as has been touched on, the Labour party opposes but which provides £12 billion a year to the health and care system, so there is more money to improve telephone systems and face-to-face appointments. Looking at the data this morning, we had 2 million more face-to-face appointments in April this year than in April last year, but we are still below pre-pandemic levels.

The complaints I get about dentistry are more about not being able to register anywhere. There is a particular issue with the promise that we make to pregnant women about being able to see a dentist, because even they cannot get registered. I met the Minister about that recently. The issue there is less about a shortage, as it is with GPs, and partly about the contract; there seems to be cross-party agreement that the 2006 Labour contract needs to be changed. I am also pleased that the Government will allow more internationally qualified dentists to support the dental system here.

There are two things that we need to get better at. One of them was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller). My constituency has also seen a huge growth in housing—we have two housing developments in Didcot alone, which will house 18,000 people—and the promised GP surgeries for these increased populations never arrive. As my hon. Friend said, we must get better at putting in the infrastructure first and at planning for the increased populations.

I shall finish on the second thing. Some Members may know that I worked in social mobility before I became an MP, running charities for disadvantaged young people. Unfortunately, the medical profession is the most socially exclusive profession in the country. Only 6% of doctors are from a working class background. A person is 24 times more likely to become a doctor if they have a parent who is a doctor. That is worse than politics, worse than the media, worse than the law, and worse than any other profession that we can think of. There are many reasons for that. It is about the allocation of work experience, how the recruitment process works,

and the fact that 80% of applications to medical school come from 20% of schools. There is a whole range of things.

The young people with whom I worked were eligible for free school meals. A very high proportion were from ethnic minorities. Medicine was the profession that they most wanted to get into. It was the most popular profession. On the one hand, we have a shortage of GPs, and, on the other, we have this incredible talent pool that finds that it cannot get into the profession.

One thing the Government might consider, as well as how we get the infrastructure in first, is how we make what is a hugely popular profession more accessible for certain groups of young people with whom I used to work, because, at the moment, they simply do not get into it in the numbers that they should, and, if they did, they might help with this GP shortage.

2.26 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issues affecting my constituents in this important debate. Sadly, those issues are now becoming frustratingly commonplace for far too many people in Portsmouth, as record numbers of people are waiting for care, and waiting longer than ever before.

According to research by the Nuffield Trust, published in *The Times* last month, the figures are stark. Portsmouth is the worst affected area in the country, with just 40 GPs per 100,000 people. Meanwhile, one of the key GP practices in my city, the Guildhall Walk Healthcare Centre, closed in September last year, impacting more than 8,000 patients, many of whom are my constituents. Another GP service at the John Pounds Centre in Portsea also remains closed. I have raised concerns with local decision-makers about this, but it is clear that Government intervention is urgently needed to deliver the GP services that my constituents need and deserve.

It is a similar story with dentistry. A recent report from the Association of Dental Groups found that Portsmouth, at 42, has the seventh lowest number of NHS dentists per 100,000 in the country. Local Tory Ministers have claimed that the additional £6.8 million of piecemeal funding for dentistry in the region will help, but during the local dentistry forum that I convened with practitioners and representatives of the British Dental Association, they made it clear that it does not even begin to meet the scale of the challenge. They also underlined that there should be changes to rules and regulations on recruitment and retention to tackle this problem, as we have seen with NHS GPs.

I would welcome confirmation in the Minister's response to the concerns raised by my constituents during my various lobbying efforts that reforming the NHS dental contract is under way, and that the BDA will be involved in its development. However, this cannot just be tinkering around the edges. My constituents need real action, and they need it, now.

In a survey that I conducted to hear the views of Portsmouth people, one respondent told me:

"I've had the same dental practice since I was born and now I don't have a dentist at all because he went completely private due to Government contracts. I'm on universal credit and I can't afford to pay private. My daughter is almost two years old and has never seen a dentist. It's just shocking."

Another said:

"My children and I travel to Watford every six months for our dental check-ups. There is no option to register with an NHS dentist in Portsmouth. I just hope none of us ever need emergency treatment."

Possibly one of the most shocking examples of how bad things have got is that one Portsmouth resident had to resort to pulling out two of his teeth with pliers, after struggling to find an NHS dentist. In 2022, in one of the richest countries on the planet, no one should be forced to take such action because NHS services are hanging by a thread." Portsmouth is now not just a dental care desert: it is a healthcare hell. It is time for the Minister to take her head out of the sand, listen to the people of Portsmouth, intervene to clear the backlog, develop a workforce strategy and finally deliver the NHS services my constituents expect and now desperately need.

2.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): NHS and care services have been under significant pressure over the last few years, due to the pandemic and now in restoring services as we open up. That includes dentist and GP services. I thank all of our NHS and care workers for all that they do and, especially, for all that they did during the pandemic.

Many of my constituents have contacted me because they are struggling to get GP appointments or to register for a place at an NHS dentist locally. I have been supporting many of my constituents to get access to GP services and to get into NHS dentists locally. That is something that we must address. The Government are prioritising £36 billion of additional investment to help to improve our health and social care services, which is very welcome. Primary care must be a key part of that investment and the improvements we need to see. I hope that, particularly with the reforms we are making in the NHS and the development of integrated care systems, we will see far more joined-up local healthcare that focuses on providing the seamless services patients need.

We also need to improve some of the quality issues. In some surgeries in Stoke-on-Trent we see very good quality of care, but the picture is far from uniform. We must also see the CQC taking a greater interest in issues of quality, such as whether someone can actually get an appointment, and not just the issues of safety that it focuses on at the moment.

Bringing decision making to a more local level for primary care will also ensure we can provide more joined-up and coherent health care services in our communities. For far too long, patients have struggled to access the healthcare they need, and both GP and dentist services have buckled under the strain of ever growing demand. Many GPs in Stoke-on-Trent have often raised with me the increasing challenges they face with greater demand for services and the increasing complexity of physical, mental health and wider social issues patients are presenting with. We need to fix the pressures we see in the system to create a healthcare system that shifts the balance far more towards prevention and earlier intervention. Whether it is physical or mental health, the more we can take action sooner, the better the outcome for the patient and the less likely more intensive and costly healthcare will be needed in the

[Jack Brereton]

future. To achieve that, we must see the NHS collaborating far more with wider healthcare partners, including pharmacies, local charities and others who have much to give in terms of preventive healthcare, especially for mental health. We very much need that support so that those GP and dentist services can improve.

I also support the work being done through primary care networks, which is bringing together key health professionals—not just GPs—to support GP services and patients. In North Staffordshire, we need to see the development of the four proposed integrated care hubs, especially in Longton, with the development of the next phase of the new Longton health centre. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) made a point about the problems and processes in developing new buildings and new NHS assets. We have seen significant challenges in doing that, and it feels as though we have been talking about the issues for years. We have had consultation after consultation, but we seem no further forward. We have talked long enough about wanting to deliver those improvements, and we need to now get on and deliver them. They will bring all the local community NHS services together on one site, providing far greater healthcare services at the centre of the community and more walk-in services. I hope the Longton site might also include one of the new community diagnostic hubs—it is important that we deliver those across the country.

Those improvements to local community healthcare services will have the significant benefit of helping to ease the pressures on the Royal Stoke University Hospital as well as on local primary care services. This is not just about more money; given the record increases in the amount we are putting into the NHS and social care, it is vital that we continue to focus on the health and care workforce—something that comes up regularly when I talk to many of the healthcare professionals in the trust that runs the healthcare services in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

Obviously, we cannot train new doctors and nurses overnight; it can take five years or more to do that. However, we are making good progress, with 4,300 more doctors and over 11,800 more nurses than this time last year. We also have 72,000 new nurses in training. We must build on that.

We must build and deliver the improved health and community health services that our communities need, and continue to attract more people to work in our health and social care system, creating more and more integrated healthcare services and supporting GP and dentistry services to meet the future health needs of our constituents.

2.35 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It goes without saying that GP surgeries play an essential role in our communities and in our NHS. They are often the first port of call for anyone in need of medical help, and it is the hard work of GPs that ensures we can all obtain advice, medicine and referral to other services. However, like much of the NHS, GP surgeries are overstretched, under-resourced and understaffed, due to more than a decade of Tory mismanagement.

Frustratingly, my constituents in Coventry North West are suffering the consequences of that. Constituents contact me every week, telling me about the difficulties they face in trying to access their GP. Like so many of the GP surgeries discussed today, surgeries in my constituency are made up of dedicated health and administrative staff who have been stretched often to breaking point and simply do not have the capacity, resources or staff they need to serve their patients.

I will focus on one example—a constituent who reached out to me about their 2-year-old daughter. Their daughter is non-verbal, has recently been having nosebleeds and is exhibiting symptoms of head trauma. Each day, my constituent wakes up and joins a queue to try to access a GP appointment. Even though they are often on the phone for hours, they are still not able to book an appointment. In fact, they have not been able to speak to anybody at all at the surgery. My constituent is understandably concerned for their child's health and, like many others, is desperate to see their GP.

The difficulties facing our GP services are having a knock-on impact on the rest of the NHS. Patients unable to see their GP are more likely to request an ambulance or visit A&E. In the west midlands, we have seen ambulance waiting times skyrocket to more than 8 hours for some people. Another constituent raised a case where the patient had to wait more than two hours for an ambulance to arrive, even though they were experiencing a heart attack. If the Government do not get to grips with the scale of this problem, the entire NHS will have to pay the price.

Before being elected as the Member of Parliament, I worked in the NHS as a full-time cancer pharmacist, and I still regularly volunteer as a pharmacist at my local hospital, Coventry University Hospital in Warwickshire. That has provided me with first-hand experience of the dedication and hard work of everyone who works in our fantastic NHS.

It is important that the Government finally deliver a plan that lives up to the dedication of NHS staff, providing GPs and others with the resources they need to do their job. That is what our GPs deserve and it is what my constituents in Coventry are desperately asking for.

2.39 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The debate is about GPs and dentists, and I will deal first with GPs. I pay tribute to the GPs who work in my constituency, and in particular those at the New Springwells practice and at Caythorpe and Ancaster medical practice, which have outstanding CQC ratings. I also pay tribute to the GPs who delivered the vaccine service. Not only did they work during covid with its challenges, but they delivered a vaccine service as well. They are a very hard-working, admirable group of people.

I agree with the Opposition that much of the overall problem with the NHS is a workforce problem. That is true. There are too many staff overall, and not enough of them are directly delivering or improving clinical care. We have expensive, very highly trained clinical decision makers being asked to do admin tasks that take them away from the clinical tasks that we are

paying them for and which we need them to do. That contributes to our longer waiting times. So we need to increase the number of doctors.

The Opposition are making a big point about 12 years, but it takes 10 years to train a GP, and it takes longer than that to train a consultant. So, actually, the shortage was created during Labour's time in government and we are trying to fix it. That is indeed why the number of medical schools has been increased by five. I am pleased that one of them is in Lincoln, just outside my constituency. It is training a new generation of doctors who will provide services locally—people predominantly stay where they train—which will help the people of Lincolnshire to have more access to doctors. However, the Government should go further. In the year when we had challenges with A-levels caused by covid and more people than expected got the grades required to get into medical school, places were exceptionally increased. There are challenges with that—only so many people can get around a bedside and a patient will be happy to have only so many people listen to their heart or feel a lump or bump or suchlike—but, nevertheless, it has been managed for one year, and I think that it could be managed for more. The best thing that the Government could do for the health service in that regard would be to massively increase the number of doctor places. At the moment, we are turning away keen, enthusiastic potential young doctors doing their A-levels because places are so oversubscribed, but then we find that we have a shortage. That surely cannot be right.

I turn to ease of access. The Secretary of State mentioned making it easier for people to be referred into secondary care, which of course is a good thing, but we need to ensure that training is in place for that. Since I became a consultant, we have seen the number of patients referred into secondary care increase rather rapidly—certainly in the department that I work in—but the quality of referrals has not always been right, and undoing an unnecessary referral can be more time-consuming than just seeing the patient. We need to be mindful of the need to have clinical decision makers doing what they need to do and, as such, if we are to broaden the scope of people making referrals, we need to ensure that either referrals are done with specific guidance or that training is provided so they are good-quality referrals, and not those that add to waiting lists.

On dentistry, we have heard much talk about children having whole-mouth teeth extractions. Clearly, that is a horrific thing to happen—it is unimaginable, really, that a child needs to come into hospital to have all their teeth removed. I look to the Minister to tell us what she doing about that, because it is not, as some have suggested, all the Government's or the NHS's problem. In part, it must be about diet, teeth brushing and dental care—whether the teeth are being properly looked after—as well as potentially fluoride enhancement of water and the availability of dentists. Several stages need to be looked at in a more holistic way to prevent these children from having to go through such an awful experience.

In Lincolnshire, NHS dental care is good, but the service's availability is relatively poor. In the last two years, only 41% of adults in Lincolnshire have seen an NHS dentist, and less than a third of children saw an NHS dentist in the last year. The Minister will be aware that I had an Adjournment debate on the topic in October. I thank her for her engagement with me since

and for her support in identifying potential solutions, as well as local dentists, the local dental committee, Professor Juster from the University of Lincoln and Health Education England for their time. They are just some of the people I have met to discuss Lincolnshire's dental issues and how we can improve care.

The first thing to be solved is, of course, the dental contract. The contract was created by Labour in 2006, but I agree that we have had time and should probably have sorted it out by now. I raised that with the previous Secretary of State when I was on the Health and Social Care Committee in the previous Parliament. The contract pays for units of dental activity. There are three levels covering wide ranges of levels of care. Why Labour signed off on a contract that created such variability in both the value of a UDA and the amount of work required to be paid for one, I do not know, but it is human nature for someone to expect to be paid more if they have done more work, and that someone given the option of earning more for doing the same work will choose to do so. There, fundamentally, are the problems we have with the NHS contract. I look forward to hearing what the Minister is doing on that. I understand that she is in negotiations with dentists at the moment. I hope that she will be able to update the House on progress and that it will be good progress.

The second issue is geography. We know that our medical students predominantly stay where they train, and there is no dental school in the east midlands or in East Anglia. I am grateful to Health Education England and Ministers for discussions about solutions to this following my question at Prime Minister's questions. There are a number of ways of resolving it. In the longer term, a dental school at Lincoln University would be a good way of ensuring that we have locally grown, locally trained dentists. The university is very supportive of that in the discussions, and indeed we have the support of all Greater Lincolnshire Members of Parliament for ensuring that this goes ahead.

I appreciate that it will take time to plan and deliver that, so in the meantime we need more dentists locally. The Minister and I have recently been talking about centres of dental development. The principle of a centre of dental development, which I would like to see in Sleaford, is that postgraduate training is delivered. It is attractive work for the sake of recruitment. People want to work at a centre because they get to deliver training and it is a more attractively remunerated job, but also, the postgraduate people being trained are immediately delivering care. Such a facility could be up and running within 18 months to two years and actively delivering care to my constituents, which is what I am looking for. I am particularly keen to see a centre located in Sleaford, because we have relatively few NHS dentists. We have great local schools, we have a fabulous community and we have great rail links, both north-south and east-west. What progress is the Minister making on these proposals?

Does the Minister have any update on what progress is being made on support for military families? I have a number of RAF bases, including RAF Cranwell, in my constituency. People who have moved around from place to place find that they have dropped off the list in one area and are struggling to get on to one in another. We have a covenant that says that we will ensure that people who are serving in our armed forces, and their

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

families, are not disadvantaged, but clearly in this regard they are. I would be grateful for those updates from the Minister.

2.47 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The Conservatives have been running our health and social care system into the ground for years. Covid has made an already bad situation worse, but it was already bad, and my constituents—patients and healthcare professionals—can really feel it. A constituent who is a professional chauffeur needs to provide regular medical assessment certificates to keep his job, but his GP is not doing them right now, so my team have had to work hard to make sure that his employer will not sack him.

Some of my constituents have managed to see their GPs. One has had a referral for chronic back pain, another for a diagnosis of breast cancer that needs treatment, but having had those appointments they then discovered weeks later that the referral letters were never sent. Another constituent who had a contraceptive implant has had some very severe side effects and wants to have it removed, but she cannot get an appointment. A constituent who contacted her GP to say that she was having suicidal thoughts was asked to fill out a form.

I was so concerned about these reports that I have been to visit our GP surgeries in St Albans. From the other end of the spectrum, it is incredibly shocking. The very second the phone lines open in a GP surgery, there are flashing lights on its big screen. At one minute past the time that its phone lines open, there are hundreds and hundreds of calls on the electronic board. Many of those phone calls are from very distressed callers who are in pain and very concerned. Many of the people at the counter—the receptionists at the other end of the phone—are receiving verbal abuse, and we know that GPs are receiving abuse in their surgery rooms behind closed doors as well. *The BMJ* suggests that violent incidents in GP surgeries have doubled in the last five years.

One of the GP surgeries in my constituency has now employed somebody on a full-time basis to do one job: to chase the local hospitals to send the letters so that the GPs can get the results that their patients need. We have heard Members across the House talk this afternoon about how fantastic it would be if we could use big data and if our constituents could become expert patients and use all the information collected on their phone, but frankly, at the moment, we are starting from a basis where we cannot even get a letter from a hospital to a GP surgery. It feels as though the entire system is creaking at the seams, and that is even before we get to the postcode lottery of the number of patients each GP has, or the length of appointments.

Members across the House have talked about the planning system and the fact that lots of new homes are often built in areas without the infrastructure to go with them. I wholeheartedly sympathise with the calls for new homes, but it seems crazy in the circumstances that clinical commissioning groups are not even statutory consultees for planning applications, for local plans or even for permitted development. It should be a priority for this Government to change that and make sure that CCGs have the right resources to respond to planning proposals.

Then we have the problems with dentists. Like many other Members use, I have constituents who have raised these problems. I have mothers with MAT-B certificates who cannot get dental treatment. I have parents whose children are developing gum disease, but they cannot get an appointment with their dentist. I have couples who have moved to St Albans and, because they have moved, cannot get an appointment with the dentist. The list goes on and on.

I have challenged the Minister before about the Government's announcement earlier this year that they were going to give £50 million to dentists to create some emergency catch-up appointments. When the Secretary of State was challenged on this earlier this afternoon, he said that that £50 million had resulted in tens of thousands of new appointments. That was news to me. Earlier this year, I submitted a number of written parliamentary questions. I asked the Government how many dental practices had achieved the quarter 3 targets to make them eligible for this £50 million. The answer was that the Government did not hold that information centrally. I asked the Government how many expressions of interest had been received by the deadline of 3 January. The answer was that the Government did not hold that information centrally. I then asked the Government how many of those who had offered to carry out this urgent dental practice had been accepted. Again, the Government said that they did not hold that information centrally. So what has happened to that £50 million? How much of it has been drawn down?

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Lady will know, because she raised this in oral questions, that dentists return that data in quarters. We will have that data from the dental community by the end of June, and we will then be able to answer her questions. She knows that; she is making a political point here.

Daisy Cooper: I am genuinely incredibly grateful for that answer, because when I challenged the Minister on this last week I did not receive that answer. I am grateful to receive that response. I submitted a letter to the Minister—I think it was in April—and attempted to come to some drop-in events that were cancelled, so I am pleased to hear that that data will be provided by the end of June. However, my constituents in St Albans have seen absolutely zero appointments created from that money. Every dental practice has said that because of the way the funds have been set up, it has been impossible for them to apply for them. A number of other Members have raised that point.

The truth is that the Government have failed to recruit the GPs that we need. We have a retirement time bomb among our general practitioners, and we know that dentists are leaving NHS work as well. We need to see a serious plan from the Government so that everybody who needs to see a GP or a dentist can actually see one.

2.54 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): Before I turn to the main substance of my speech, I want to take advantage of the presence of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), who is sitting there waiting to sum up the debate, by raising a few points further to my earlier intervention on the Secretary of State. They concern the Medicines and

Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the mandatory logging of mesh complications, which was a recommendation in the Cumberlege review. It has been more than a year since the most recent review, so I think that the Secretary of State may have been a little confused when, in his response, he referred to what was happening a year later. We have just learnt that the MHRA will continue the yellow card system, and will not be introducing mandatory reporting. I am keen to hear the Minister's response to that point.

As joint chair of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, I am also keen to hear from the Minister when we will see the women's health strategy. Although that is not specific to the debate, it does relate to GP services. I should also like to hear her response to the anecdotal news I have been hearing that more appointments for gynaecological procedures are being cancelled than appointments for any other operations, and that gynaecological elective procedures are the least likely to take place. Again, it seems that there is a real issue surrounding women's health.

I hope that the Minister will be able to address those issues of the women's health strategy, endometriosis and mandatory reporting, but I will now turn to the main substance of my speech on access to GP services. Hull has only 40 GPs per 100,000 patients, which is one of the lowest proportions in the area. I want to draw attention to what two of my constituents have said. One, a gentleman called Rob Grimmer, told me about the birth of his granddaughter Nova. That was wonderful news, but unfortunately the family were unable to contact a GP surgery or get through to 111 when they needed to, and eventually they had to take the baby to A&E for treatment. The good news is that the baby is fine, but I am sure that Members can imagine the trauma involved. I have been a new mum myself, and I know that going to A&E with a new baby must be terrifying and very upsetting. I should like to hear from the Minister why we are seeing so many mums and babies having to go to A&E to obtain support.

Another constituent, a gentleman called Steven Draper, said that he waited three weeks for his grandson to see a GP. His grandson is only eight years old. What I really want the Government to take on board in this debate is the impact on children, and particularly on children's education. If a child is repeatedly not feeling well and is unable to gain access to the services that they need, they will miss more school. The Department for Education says that attendance is very important and that it wants children to be back at school—Ofsted and a member of the Social Mobility Commission have also stressed the importance of attendance—but that does not seem to be joined up with children's problems in accessing dental treatment and GP appointments, which lead to their having time off school.

I remember that when I was a primary school teacher there was a "brush bus"—I am not sure whether anyone else encountered one of these—which visited the school so that children could learn about the importance of brushing their teeth. There were even giant teeth in the classroom, which the children loved, so that they could see which bits get missed out during brushing. The problem is not just cuts in dental services, but cuts in public health provision, prevention measures and education. Long before the pandemic, we saw public health information services go.

Having teeth removed when a child is very small has an impact on that child's education, not just in terms of time off but in terms of speech and language, and it will therefore affect phonics. It has a knock-on effect. I must emphasise to the Minister that we need to get this right. We are failing children when it comes to dental treatment. Indeed, we are failing people from cradle to grave, because we are also failing those at the other end of the spectrum.

This is another issue of which the Government should have been fully aware. They should have understood that people were ageing before the pandemic and that older people's requirements are different. A few decades ago, most people in care homes had false teeth, which actually made them easier to look after, especially if they were dementia patients. I raised in Parliament, three or four years ago, the specific issue of dental care for people in care homes, particularly those suffering from dementia, who can find the whole procedure very traumatic while not understanding what is happening to them. This problem has existed for a long time, since way before the pandemic. There should have been plans that recognised that people were ageing, and ageing with their teeth, and would therefore continue to require dental treatment.

We are reaping what the Government have sown in the net spending cut of 25% between 2010 and 2025. We are reaping what they sowed in the five years before the pandemic, when the number of practices providing NHS dentistry fell by more than 1,200. I have huge sympathy for dentists and GPs in my constituency, and I want to add my thanks for everything that they do.

I was contacted by a local dentist about how she had been feeling. It was quite an upsetting letter. She had been pregnant and on maternity leave for part of the pandemic, but while she was pregnant she was trying to do her job in the middle of it. She was obviously worrying about her own baby, and she told me that she was having to give up being an NHS dentist because it was just not working out.

In her letter to me, she says:

"The Government have only offered £50 million in time limited funding which amounts to £40 a week per dentist. After a decade of savage cuts, it is no more than a sticking plaster of no consequence to the wider issues. I am likely going to go private this year despite enjoying helping high-need patients due to the Government's poor contract and lack of funding."

With respect, it is a bit odd for the Minister to blame the Labour party for not changing the dental contract when the Conservatives have had 12 years to look into it. I hope the Minister will urgently address the issue before more dentists step away from practice. That dentist had 3,200 patients in her practice, which means 3,200 more people now looking for support and help.

Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), I have not had a gentleman present me with his teeth, but I have had some really upsetting cases. A lady, who was pregnant and unable to access any other free NHS dental entitlement, said to me:

"Being entitled to free NHS dental care when you're pregnant clearly isn't an option any more. I think the situation needs to be addressed as I am sure it is not just in my area in Hull."

She is absolutely right. Why is it that pregnant women are given free dental treatment? It is because pregnancy is likely to have an impact on teeth, so the lack of access

[Emma Hardy]

to free treatment is storing up problems in the long run. I have had countless emails from people telling me they have been struck off their dentist's list due to not attending during a period of illness. Someone else told me that despite the swelling in her mouth causing immense pain, she had been dismissed as a patient and told that there was a six-to-12-month waiting list even if she was accepted again. Another who needs dental treatment and whose dentist had passed away told me:

"I complained to the ombudsman service. The ombudsman has today telephoned with the news that they are so overwhelmed with complaints that they are only allocating caseworkers to cases where death or serious injury has occurred. Even the ombudsman service cannot cope with the incompetence and failure that we have in the NHS dental service."

Another gentleman wrote to me about how he broke his tooth in July 2021 and was still waiting in pain to have it removed in February 2022. The list of people who have contacted me to say they cannot find a dentist goes on and on. We are storing up more problems for the future. Someone else contacted me to say that their one-year old son—aged one, children are meant to have a dental check whether they have teeth or not—is unable to get a dental appointment. If we do not treat people when they are younger, we will create more problems in the future. Mismanagement of our NHS and our public finances, because of a lack of preparation and things not being thought through, means that everything costs more in the long run,

Our dental services are in crisis. We are facing a collapse that will take years to put right. Waiting lists, delays, cancellations and shortages are the real growth areas in Conservative backlog Britain. My constituents, along with those in the rest of the country, have had enough.

3.3 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): According to the Association of Dental Groups, only a third of adults and half of children in England have access to an NHS dentist. As we have heard, the top reason for children being admitted to hospital is tooth extraction. It is 2022, not 1922. Back in 1947, when the NHS and NHS dental services were brought about by the then Labour Government, many of us naively thought that they would be around for ever, that we would always be able to access those services when we needed them. Unfortunately, we now see the return to the poverty-linked ill health that we saw in the 1940s.

As MPs, we hear heartbreaking stories. There was the Salford man with a badly infected tooth who could barely afford to live, let alone pay for private dental treatment. He could not find an NHS dentist who would take him on. He said to me that, had it not been for the fact that he was on anticoagulants, he would have pulled his own teeth out with a pair of pliers. There was the Salford woman with countless abscesses all over her jaw, and no money to go private. She was in acute pain and putting her life at risk from a spreading infection. She had been trying to get on an NHS waiting list for a dentist for over five years. There was also the Salford mother living on the breadline, yet forced to borrow and scrape together the money to go private. She told me that she had to pay £100 just to get on a dentist's list. There are thousands of stories like this.

Recently, I asked the Government what data they held on the number of people trying to access an NHS dentist in Salford, such as the stories I had heard from my constituents. The Government confirmed that they held no data for my constituency or even across Greater Manchester. Frankly, that is staggering.

So what is at the heart of the decline of NHS dentistry? The British Dental Association details that chronic underfunding and the current NHS dental contract are to blame for long-standing problems with burnout, recruitment and retention in NHS dental services.

On funding, in real terms, net Government spend on general dental practice in England was cut by over a quarter between 2010 and 2020. The £50 million that the Government have announced—as we have already heard today, it is difficult to access that at the best of times—will not even touch the sides given the amount of funding cut from NHS dentistry.

On the contract, the system in effect sets quotas for the number of patients a dentist can see on the NHS and caps the number of dental procedures they can perform in any given year. If a dentist delivers more than they have been commissioned to—say, to try to help a desperate patient in need of urgent care—that dentist is in effect punished. Not only are they not remunerated for the extra work done, but they have to bear the cost themselves of any materials used, laboratory work and other overheads.

It is no wonder that morale among NHS dentists is now at an all-time low, and we are facing an exodus of dentists from the NHS. We are seeing NHS dentistry deserts popping up all over the country, where constituents such as mine in Salford can only dream of trying to get on an NHS dentist's patient list. Around 3,000 dentists in England have stopped providing NHS services since the start of the pandemic. Staggeringly, for every dentist quitting the NHS entirely, 10 are reducing their NHS commitment by 25% on average, and 75%—75%—of dentists plan to reduce the amount of NHS work they do next year.

It is clear that we face a dental crisis and that the Government must urgently address it. There are a number of actions that I hope the Minister will take. First, they must reform the NHS dental contract with a decisive break from units of dental activity, a greater focus on prevention and the removal of perverse incentives.

Secondly, the Government must provide adequate levels of protected NHS dental funding to ensure investment in new and existing NHS dental services, and they must guarantee the long-term sustainability of NHS dentistry for all who need it.

Thirdly, NHS dentistry must be given the status it deserves. That means sitting right at the heart of local NHS commissioning, rather than being treated as an afterthought—a luxury service, as it were, which is how many seem to perceive it.

Finally, the Government must build and properly fund historic public health commitments to prevention. As we have heard—from Conservative Members, actually—this is a crisis in NHS dentistry, but many of the factors that contribute to this crisis are directly related to poverty, people's diets and the amount of money they have to spend as a family on oral health and hygiene.

We are in the midst of a cost of living crisis as well as a dental crisis, and the Government need to be doing far more to support families to make sure that they have enough to live on and a decent range of food that provides them with the nutrition they need in order to have healthy teeth. We naively thought that poverty-related ill health, rotting teeth and gum disease had been consigned to the history books when NHS dentistry was established in 1948, but this Government wind the clock back day after day and those afflictions are now back with a vengeance. NHS dentistry hangs by a thread. The Government have a moral duty to stop the rot today because rotting teeth come from a rotting Government. I hope that the Minister will change my mind.

3.10 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): For many people living in Bradford, being unable to get an appointment with their GP for days or weeks, or being unable to see an NHS dentist at all, is one of the most depressing issues they face—if not the most depressing. Although such a scandal in our healthcare system is of course unacceptable anywhere, the harm that it is causing in Bradford, where we face especially stark health inequalities and where people are dying a decade earlier and facing a higher rate of preventable diseases, is particularly damaging.

It seems that the Government either do not understand or just do not care. Earlier, the Secretary of State opened for the Government. According to him, we have had record levels of investment, the Government are now planning many initiatives, and any concerns were entirely a result of the two years of covid. Of course, everybody in this Chamber would accept that the NHS, GPs, dentists and all the health services faced pressures during covid. I do not think anyone is denying that. The Secretary of State said to the shadow Minister, “You supported us during that period”. Of course we did. We were a responsible Opposition and of course we ensured that any pressures during a very difficult period could be alleviated. But to say that the issues have suddenly resulted from that period is simply untrue, and Ministers know that it is untrue.

The second assertion—those who were in the Chamber will recall that I pressed the Secretary of State about his record investment in the NHS—was that of course there was record investment, but let us look at that investment. Let me go to my district, to Bradford, and see the record investment that Ministers and the Secretary of State want to boast about. Frankly, they live in some parallel universe, because we do not see the effect that they come here and tell us about. In Bradford, one of the most deprived districts—more than 50% of the deprivation in my constituency is in all the top 10 deprivation indices—child poverty is now at a record high because of those on the Government Benches. Nearly 50% of children in my constituency today live in poverty because of the draconian, ideological cuts made by this Government over the past decade. I have said this in the Chamber many times: people who live in the inner cities are likely to live 10 years less than if they live in the leafy suburbs, which are far more affluent and, frankly, get more investment.

What does the record investment that the Secretary of State and Ministers tell us about equate to in Bradford terms? They tell us that, on average, we will get £4 per

patient more than the rest of the country, even though we have the levels of deprivation, poverty and health inequalities that I have gone through. But actually the situation is worse, because even that £4 of investment that they tell us we are getting is fudged figures and smoke figures, because in real terms, if inflation was to be counted, we are getting £3 million less than we had before this Government came to power. On average, we have more than 2,800 patients per GP, whereas the national average is 2,100 patients per GP. If anywhere should be seeing this record investment, it should be in places such as Bradford, but are we seeing it? How does that equate? The hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), who is no longer in her place, talked about the stark reality on the ground. This is why I say that Ministers are living in a parallel universe, because the stark reality on the ground is not as they see it. Most people simply cannot get GP appointments. People start ringing first thing in the morning and are on hold for hours on end. Many people will then have to wait until the next day. Getting through to a GP practice on the phone takes days on end.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): When the Minister comes to her feet, I am sure she will say that X number of people have been able to access a GP, but have they been able to access their own GP? We have heard time and time again from health professionals how important continuity of care is. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is not just about seeing any old GP—it is about someone seeing their own GP?

Imran Hussain: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes the point that I was coming on to raise. Her Luton constituency is not dissimilar to mine. With a single GP having 2,800 patients, it is obvious why those patients are not getting to see their GP. I could spend a long time in this Chamber going through constituency cases that I have recently dealt with. Indeed, I have done that in the past and those cases are on the record. Let me cite just one case today. An elderly lady in her 90s had to go to hospital and was then told to go to see her GP. Her son tried day after day to make a simple GP appointment for her. She had multiple health needs. My office had to intervene and even we were unable to secure a GP appointment for her. People are having to go through this ping-pong of not getting a GP appointment and then going to A&E as they have nowhere else to turn.

I am grateful because I did ask the Health Secretary about Bradford and urgent treatment centres, and he did favourably say that he would arrange a meeting with the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), who joins us now, at precisely the right time. I look forward to that meeting because that is a way through and I am grateful for that offer. But the reality remains that the Government’s promise—or the points the Secretary of State made earlier today—is not apparent on the streets. People continue to suffer, they cannot get GP appointments and they have nowhere else to turn. That point has been made eloquently by a number of Members.

At least, after days and weeks of trying, people are able to get an appointment with a GP. Many Members have talking about issues with joining an NHS dentist. There is more chance of finding gold bricks on the street, or of finding the parallel universe that Government

[Imran Hussain]

Ministers live in, than there is of getting on to the list of an NHS dentist. People simply cannot get NHS dentists, and we have heard accounts today of how they are being forced to carry out DIY operations at home, without anaesthetic or any medical care—I have come across such cases in my own constituency—because they have no other option. Frankly, as the fifth largest and richest economy in the world, it is shameful that people are having to resort to DIY treatment at home. Again, that is happening on this Government's watch.

I have been in this place since 2015, and every time we have a debate about NHS dentists or GPs, Tory Members refer back to the Labour Government of 12 years ago. I remember that when I was growing up, under a Thatcher Government, GP practices were back-to-back houses on terraced rows without adequate facilities. The last Labour Government brought in record investment, gave us state-of-the-art health centres, and reduced health inequalities and child poverty. That was all under a Labour Government, but Tory Members cannot pretend that the Labour Government of 12 years ago are somehow responsible for the issues we face today. The Whips are not in their place, but I say to the Tory Whips, "Please do your Members justice and remove that line from the long-standing script you have for them", because it is becoming embarrassing when Tory Members stand up and say, "12 years ago, there was a Labour Government, so it must be all their fault." They can use that line for a year or two, but unfortunately, in nobody's world can they use it for 12 years. Tory Members need to start understanding that.

Can we expect any more from this Government? This is a Government who believe people choose to be poor—they have said so in this very House and on TV. This is a Government who believe people should work extra hours and do more, and that those who are forced into poverty are not forced, but have chosen poverty. The reality is that this is a Government who could not care less about people in Bradford who continue to suffer. [Interruption.] The Minister chunters from the Front Bench; she will have time to address those points when she responds.

Maria Caulfield: I would be interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's opinion on the position in Wales, which was set out in the Secretary of State's opening remarks. Wales faces exactly the same pressures, and its waiting times are actually worse than England's. What is the hon. Gentleman's reason for why the Welsh Labour Government are in exactly the same position as this Government?

Imran Hussain: Again, the first defence is "Labour 12 years ago"; the second defence is "Labour in Wales". The point about Labour in Wales has already been appropriately addressed, but the Minister's job is to address those issues in England. Rather than address those issues, she thinks that saying "What about Labour in Wales?" somehow provides a cover, an umbrella, and a defence against the incompetence that exist across our health sector. That does not wash with the British public, because they have not been asleep for the past 12 years. They have noted the devastation that the Tory Government have caused in our communities, and the

back-door privatisation and ideological agenda they have brought to our health service. I have said it before, and I will say it again: people will repay them with interest at the ballot box.

3.24 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): It is a great honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). I have received a steady stream of complaints from my constituents in Bedford and Kempston about excessive GP and dental waiting times. They are angry, frustrated and bewildered that the system is failing them, but there is also a sense of fear that the NHS they knew and loved is no longer there for them.

For over a decade, Opposition MPs have warned about the impact of underfunding the NHS and of the harmful top-down reforms; and about what would happen if the Government failed to take seriously the recruitment, retention and training problems for GPs and dentists. We expect an announcement on dental contract reform before the summer recess, but we need more than short-term quick wins to reform that fundamentally flawed contract. For patients across the country to see any real difference in the level of access to NHS dentistry, we need genuine, meaningful contract reform, yet formal negotiations on such reform have yet to begin.

Over recent months, I have met GPs across Bedfordshire, who have all made it clear to me that there is a crisis in general practice. In Bedford, there is only one GP per 2,500 people, which makes it one of the places worst hit by GP shortages in the whole country. Those shortages are leading to staff burnout and poor retention, and unfortunately are hitting patients in need of care hardest. Surgeries are being assimilated into trusts to try to rectify those issues, but as GPs take on more acute care from hospitals that face their own backlogs, surgeries are seeing increased demands from patients.

Worryingly, we are also seeing escalating levels of verbal and physical abuse directed at GPs, dentists and surgery staff. Much of the current narrative, which is actively encouraged by those on the Tory Front Bench, is that GPs are hiding behind remote appointments and are working part time. That is not true; the truth is very different. GPs who are considered part time often find themselves in their surgeries covering full-time hours due to the growth in administrative work.

GP bashing only leads to more doctors and their staff leaving the profession. With too few doctors available to treat patients, that combination has led to growing waiting times for patients to access appointments. The BMA says that doctors are feeling a sense of "moral distress", because they cannot give patients the care and support they deserve.

Now that covid restrictions have eased, it is, of course, vital that in-person appointments are there for those who need them. By enabling some remote consultations, many surgeries aim to clear the backlog of appointments more quickly and free up capacity to treat patients who need physical appointments. Covid accelerated and exposed the existing crisis, but the Government know that we were well on our way to this point before the pandemic.

The Government may be trying to patch the funding holes with emergency money, but too often they fail to invest in sustainable long-term plans, such as the well-thought-out Kempston health hub bid that they rejected.

We urgently need a convincing plan to get to grips with the serious workforce crisis and get the NHS back to how it was under the last Labour Government.

3.29 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): People are struggling to get GP and dentist appointments, and this is a crisis of the Government's own making. In their 2019 manifesto, the Conservatives promised 6,000 more GPs in England by 2025 but, in his evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee last November, the Secretary of State said when asked about this target:

"I am not going to pretend that we are on track when clearly we are not."

Dr Richard Vautrey, chair of the BMA's GP committee, said at the time:

"The bottom line is we are haemorrhaging doctors in general practice. While more younger doctors may be choosing to enter general practice, even more experienced GPs are leaving the profession or reducing their hours to manage unsustainable workloads."

Recent statistics show there are now fewer than 6,500 GP practices in England, compared with more than 8,000 in April 2013. As of April 2022, there were the equivalent of 1,622 fewer fully qualified, full-time GPs in England than in 2015. All this has happened on the Conservatives' watch.

The lack of access to GPs has implications for patient safety. We know early diagnosis is important, but it cannot happen if people cannot see a doctor. People who cannot get an appointment, or who face long waits to get one, are at risk of not getting the referral they need, which can lead to health problems down the line. Those who are able to get an appointment but are seen by a GP who is suffering stress and burnout due to the pressures of the job are also put at increased risk.

A poll of nearly 1,400 GPs by Rebuild General Practice in March found that 86% of those surveyed say they do not have enough time with patients, and it found that GPs are seeing, on average, 46 patients a day. This is a matter of great concern, as the safe maximum number of daily appointments, as recommended by the BMA, is 25. Doctors are seeing nearly twice the safe maximum number, which is bad for patients and unfair on very hard-working GPs.

People in Wirral West tell me they have ended up going to A&E because they cannot get an appointment with their GP, which puts more pressure on an already stretched A&E. A recent study by the Royal College of Emergency Medicine showed that, in 2021, an average of 1,047 people a day were waiting more than 12 hours in A&E from their time of arrival, which is wholly unacceptable. People need to be able to access GP services when they need them, both for their own health and to keep the pressure off A&E.

The Conservatives are overseeing an exodus of dentists from the NHS, which is forcing people to choose between paying to go private and going without dental care at all. Research by the British Dental Association shows that around 3,000 dentists in England have stopped providing NHS services since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and that for every dentist quitting the NHS entirely, 10 are reducing their NHS commitment. It also shows that 43 million NHS dental appointments have been lost since the start of the pandemic, which is

equivalent to well over a year's worth of NHS dentistry in pre-covid times. This enormous backlog continues to grow.

The British Dental Association is clear:

"NHS dentistry is facing an existential threat and patients face a growing crisis in access, with the service hanging by a thread."

A constituent, a dentist in Wirral, has told me that people from Manchester and Lancashire are calling the practice to ask if they can register. The Government have told me that there are no geographical restrictions on the practice a patient may attend, which completely misses the point. Services should be available locally. Who wants to travel for an hour, two hours or longer when they are in desperate pain and need to see a dentist urgently?

Shockingly, 50 children in Wirral under the age of 11 were admitted to hospital for tooth extraction last year. That is bad enough, but the figure is much higher in many parts of the country. The Conservatives' failure to fix this crisis is putting the oral health of children at increased risk. No child should have to end up in hospital because they are unable to get the dental treatment they need.

The Government need to come forward urgently with a plan to fix the crisis in GP access and dentistry. Failure to do so has serious and painful implications for patients.

3.34 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): In the time that I have this afternoon, I will focus on the incredible difficulties my constituents have had in accessing NHS dentistry. As others have said, the pandemic has intensified problems in our dental healthcare system, but the architecture for those problems was in place long before the pandemic. We have heard from the British Dental Association that more than 43 million dental appointments were lost between April 2020 and April 2022, including more than 13 million appointments for children.

Helen Hunter, chief executive of Healthwatch Calderdale, which serves my constituency, has argued that the pandemic has made

"a significant problem even worse".

At a national level, dentistry is now the No. 1 issue raised with Healthwatch. Almost 80% of people who get in contact with the organisation say that they find it difficult to access dental care, with the General Dental Council saying that almost a quarter of the population—24%—report having experienced dental pain in the last 12 months.

Healthwatch Calderdale has been relentless in its campaigning on this issue. In August last year, it contacted every dental practice across Calderdale to establish whether it was willing to accept new NHS patients, whether it would register a child and whether it was offering routine appointments. Every dental practice told Healthwatch that it could not currently register a new NHS patient of any age. When neighbouring Healthwatch Kirklees did the same, it had the same outcome.

As others have said, having people get in touch with us, as MPs, because they cannot find a dentist is one of the most difficult issues that we are asked to contend with from a local casework perspective. As things stand, there is simply nothing we can do to help people. We

[Holly Lynch]

speak to the CCG, we call the dentists, we speak to NHS England and we write to Ministers, but the capacity is not there because the system is so broken, and no amount of pleading from local MPs can fix it for someone in need.

One constituent rang more than 30 dental practices, each of which told them that it was not accepting new NHS patients. My constituent could find no available practices in Halifax and none across Calder Valley. There was not even a dental practice available in Huddersfield or Bradford. We have already heard a passionate argument from my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). People are encouraged to look further afield, but those practices are overwhelmed with their local demand, so going further afield does not solve the problem. When we have made representations on behalf of patients in Halifax, we have been advised to search for practices in Leeds, Barnsley and Wakefield. Members can imagine making that kind of journey to get to a dentist. Parents of children, for example, are asked to book appointments that do not impact on the school day. For them to be asked to travel 20 miles to try to speculatively get an appointment is just not good enough.

I recently met Rachel Dille, chief operating officer of Town Hall Dental, which has dental practices in Calderdale, to gain a better understanding of the problems that they are experiencing. Town Hall Dental has had to set up a charity alongside its private and NHS work to help to fund dental treatment, check-ups and the vital oral cancer checks that dentists undertake. That is all necessary, but it goes underfunded. I commend Town Hall Dental for its charitable and fundraising work, but that should not be necessary.

In my desperation to get Government to act, I started a petition on my website for constituents, calling on the Government to improve NHS dental care provision in Halifax, so that residents can access care easily and locally. The petition has more than 500 signatories, and I will be presenting it in the Chamber in the days to come.

One local parent said to me:

“I have been making weekly phone calls to all Calderdale dentists in an attempt to (at the very least) get my children into a dentist as I value oral health greatly. However, I am yet to be successful in my goal which is becoming quite time consuming, as I now have a three year old daughter that has never even visited a dentist and 4 other children who have been without a check up in 5 years. That is half a decade with zero dental care.”

Another constituent got in touch to tell me that, since they had had no luck finding a nearby practice that would take NHS patients, they were forced to make a five-hour round trip to the Berkshire dentist that they had been registered with prior to moving to Halifax.

Such long waiting periods are also undermining what is functioning within the system. One constituent had to wait five years just for braces. When they finally got their braces, the orthodontist informed my constituent that they would need four teeth taken out. Having tried everywhere to find a dentist, my constituent told me, “if I don’t find one, I won’t be able to keep my braces on.”

It is just madness. Another of my constituents, who was already dealing with mental health challenges, had been in pain and needed urgent medical treatment. Her friend

got in touch to tell me that she was sent to A&E and advised she needed to see a dentist. She ended up seeing an NHS dentist in Elland for treatment, but they would not see her on the NHS and told her she had to pay for private treatment. Her friend could not believe that that could be allowed to happen, saying:

“How can this be the case when a young lady with mental health issues and no savings, in a medical emergency, needs to seek help from me, her friend to pay for urgent dental treatment?”

During the pandemic, I organised a roundtable discussion with local dentists, who shared with me the perverse ways in which NHS contracts are broken down into units of dental activity. The UDA system is just not functioning. If we needed any further confirmation, data from the BDA reveals that around 3,000 dentists in England have stopped providing NHS services since the start of the pandemic. Perhaps even more worryingly, for every dentist leaving the NHS entirely, 10 are reducing their NHS commitment by 25% on average. A BDA survey from May 2022 shows that 75% of dentists plan to reduce the amount of NHS work they do next year, with almost half planning to change career, seek early retirement or enter fully private practice.

That is where the current, broken contract system has got us. I urge the Minister, if she believes in being able to see a dentist on the NHS, to scrap the current system, start again and find a way to make the contracts work. One third of people see a dentist privately, but 71% of those people say they do not do so through choice. As the cost of living crisis continues to affect families, more and more people will be priced out of private treatment by inflation and rising bills and living costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) earlier described this as an existential crisis, and it very much is. I say to the Minister, “Please, please fix it.”

3.41 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): There are many issues that my constituents are experiencing when trying to access GP services, but I will focus my remarks on the crisis affecting dentistry across England and the impact that is having on people in Durham. I want to start by paying tribute to the dentists, dental nurses and other key workers in practices in County Durham and across the country.

Sadly, despite the brilliant work of dental workers, NHS dentistry is on the brink of collapse. Whether in Bowburn, Brandon or Pity Me, my constituents are struggling to access the dental services they need and deserve. Four in five people who contact Healthwatch say they have found it tough to access timely dental care, while tooth decay, as we have already heard, is currently the most common reason for hospital admissions among young children. In County Durham, 245 children under the age of 10 were admitted to hospital for tooth extraction between 2020 and 2021. Thousands of children are currently in pain, distracted as they learn, in pain as they eat and struggling to sleep because they cannot access vital treatment. Let that sink in.

Why is it so difficult to access NHS dental appointments? Because dentists are being driven away from NHS dental services en masse. A recent poll of dentists in England found that 45% had reduced their NHS commitment since the start of the pandemic, while 75% were likely to reduce their NHS commitment in the next 12 months.

Alongside that, an alarming 87% of dentists say they have experienced symptoms of stress, burnout or other mental health problems in the past year. In total, 3,000 dentists have moved away from NHS work completely since the start of the pandemic.

As the British Dental Association has said,
“This is how NHS dentistry will die”.

The warning is not sensationalist; it is the reality that dentists and their patients in Durham are facing. This crisis is entirely avoidable. It is certainly not the fault of our rail workers striking today, as the Secretary of State would like us to believe—utterly disgraceful. What planet is he on when he talks about record funding? That is certainly not the case for NHS dentistry, which has faced cuts unparalleled to the rest of NHS services. In real terms, the Government’s net spend on general dental practice in England was slashed by over a quarter between 2010 and 2020, while the Government’s £50 million injection into dentistry will fund less than 1% of the appointments we have lost since March. In fact, the British Dental Association estimates that it would take £880 million a year to restore dental budgets back to the level when Labour left office.

Let us be clear: these issues will hit the poorest in our society the hardest. For many, the fees for private dental treatment are simply unaffordable. As one desperate constituent put it to me, “I can’t afford private treatment, so what on earth am I supposed to do?” There will be terrifying delays for children, adults and the poorest among those in County Durham, and I am sure across the whole country. Children in deprived areas are already three times more likely to have hospital extractions, while oral cancer, which kills more people than car accidents in the UK, is significantly more likely to affect those in our poorest communities. Dentists are frequently the first to spot health problems. Without access to regular appointments, our least well-off constituents will continue to be more likely to develop serious health problems than the wealthiest in society.

I take this opportunity to remind the Minister that it is the Government’s job to reduce health inequalities, not widen them. As elected representatives, we are responsible for protecting and improving access to key public services for our constituents. It is time the Government stopped treating dentistry as an afterthought and urgently took action to widen NHS dentistry. For my constituents in Durham, this crisis in healthcare is very much at the forefront of their minds.

3.47 pm

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank Members from across the House for their contributions this afternoon. I want to praise some of the powerful contributions we have heard during the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) raised the absolutely ridiculously long waiting lists for NHS dentists in his constituency. It is worrying to hear that pregnant constituents cannot even register with a GP, let alone see one. Shockingly, he mentioned the children in his constituency, one of whom has had to wait 35 months to see an orthodontist. He rightly pointed out the issues with the dentist contract, which is disincentivising dentists to take on NHS patients, and reminded us of the last Labour Government’s commitment to reforming it.

We heard from the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), who set out the NHS dentistry crisis in his constituency. He rightly set out that many dentists are simply not drawing down on the £50 million Government funding that the Minister says is being used. He set out, in comments I really welcome, the issue of our crumbling primary care assets. I thank him for raising the issue of the NHS app and I could not agree with him more. When are the Government going to move the app into the 21st century? Finally, he mentioned that patient choice is really important. I welcome those comments.

We then heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), who mentioned the huge number of constituents who are frustrated with their current lack of access to primary care. She mentioned her constituent Dr Mark Spencer, who set up Healthier Fleetwood to tackle health inequalities. I, too, send my thanks to him. She also mentioned that demand is not being met in primary care, and she rightly mentioned the Government’s financial illiteracy, with patients being forced to go to A&E instead of having their demand met in primary care.

On dentistry, my hon. Friend set out how children in her constituency cannot access NHS dentists and the shocking experience of constituents who are resorting to DIY dentistry, as was raised by many hon. Members. She rightly set out that the Government are getting it very wrong. She also set out the Government’s shocking record on GP recruitment and the exodus of NHS dentists. Most shockingly, she mentioned the number of children aged zero to 10 years old who are admitted to hospital for tooth extractions in her constituency in just one year: 30 in Lancaster and 40 in Wyre, of whom 30 were aged five or younger. If that is not a wake-up call for the Minister, I do not know what is.

So many shocking incidents and examples—too many to mention—were raised today, and I thank all hon. Members for sharing their constituents’ experiences. Primary care is in crisis—I know it, Members across the House know it, and the public know it—but the Government continue to bury their head in the sand.

As we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members, our postbags are packed with letters from constituents who are desperate for someone to listen to them. There is the person who cannot get an appointment to be prescribed the medicine they need to manage their chronic pain. There is the person with MS who cannot get an appointment to be referred to a specialist whom they desperately need to see. There are the patients in Wakefield, where every day a child under 11 is taken to A&E for tooth extraction because they cannot see an NHS dentist.

We have heard Ministers come to the Dispatch Box time and time again to lay the blame of primary care’s problems at the door of the pandemic. No doubt, it has had an impact, and we should pay tribute to our amazing NHS staff who have done admirably in the face of an immense challenge, but blaming everything on the pandemic will no longer cut it.

Going into the pandemic, the Government’s preparations were “wanting and inadequate”—not my words, but those of the Culture Secretary. When the argument is not even washing with the Cabinet, how does the Minister expect the public to believe it? After a decade of Tory mismanagement, we went into the pandemic with record waiting lists and staff shortages of 100,000. It is not just

[Feryal Clark]

that the Tories did not fix the roof when the sun was shining; they dismantled the roof and removed the floorboards. The impact of that became plain for all to see.

The Government promised to recruit an additional 6,000 GPs by 2025, yet we now have more than 1,500 fewer full-time equivalent GPs than when records began in 2015—that was in the Minister's response to one of her colleagues in April. Given that we have heard from the Royal College of General Practitioners that the average cost of GP appointments is £40 and that an A&E visit is £359, that is not just an access problem but financially untenable. Even the Secretary of State admitted that the target is beyond reach. With a fifth of GP practices having closed or merged since NHS England was formed in 2013, the pattern is becoming clear. The Government have been completely incapable of delivering for more than a decade, creating not a covid backlog but a Conservative backlog.

On dentistry, the situation is a national scandal. Over a third of adults and half of children do not have access to an NHS dentist and, with paying to go private simply not an option for most, we have children being admitted to A&E for tooth extraction on a daily basis and others choosing to take matters into their own hands with DIY dentistry, as we have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House. In Wakefield, as of 2020, almost a quarter of children have tooth decay before the age of three—double the national average of 11%. How on earth can that be tolerated in 21st-century Britain? Thanks to this Government's complete inability to come up with a solution, we are not just facing a return to Dickensian Britain; we are already there.

I am sure that the Minister, when she responds, will roll out her usual line about the crux of the issue being the 2006 dental contract, and how this is all Labour's fault. I am sorry, but after 12 years of Tory Government that simply will not wash. The issue of access is only getting worse, with figures obtained by the British Dental Association showing an overall drop of 22% in the number of patients seen by NHS dentists in England from March to April. In the Minister's own constituency the figures was 34%. How can she expect dentists across England to have confidence in her when she clearly does not even have the confidence of those in her own patch? If that is not evidence that dentists are leaving the NHS or cutting their commitment, having no confidence that her promised reforms will ever be delivered, then what is? If her idea of tackling the problem is to run scared from even talking to dentists at a conference, then there really is no hope.

This must change. We need a Government who listen. We need a Government who act. Quite frankly, we need a Government who care. This Government have run out of road, have no ideas left and are holding our country back. A Labour Government will give our NHS the staff, equipment and modern technology it needs to deliver for patients. It is time for the Conservative party to move out of the way and let us get on with the job.

3.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to close this debate after a wide range of speeches. First, I

will put my hands up and acknowledge that there are challenges and difficulties in primary care and dentistry. We heard that from Members from Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, which shows that all the devolved areas of healthcare are facing exactly the same challenges.

I start by thanking all those in primary care and dentistry for going above and beyond, and not just during the covid pandemic but as we are coming out of it, whether that was dentists providing urgent treatment under difficult infection control measures, or GPs delivering millions of vaccinations while continuing to see patients. We are now seeing not only the routine number of patients we would usually see, but the two years' worth of patients who stayed at home and protected the NHS, as we asked them to do.

Despite the Opposition's protests, we are making progress and record numbers of patients are being seen—higher than ever before. We are seeing 1.3 million patients per working day in primary care. That is a 44% increase since last year, and 63% of those are seen face to face. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) said, that is 2 million more face-to-face appointments than this time last year.

There are record numbers of GPs, despite what Opposition Members have said—nearly 36,000 full-time equivalents, which is 1,400 more than in March 2019. We are going further, with 4,000 more trainees taking up GP training this year, providing more GPs for the future. We have delivered 30 million extra GP appointments, as part of our manifesto commitment to deliver 50 million more GP appointments. As an indication of the scale of the record numbers of patients coming through the system, we are seeing 11,000 cancer referrals a day, which is a record high.

How are we supporting GPs? We had the £250 million winter access fund, which helped deliver a cloud-based telephony system that some practices took up, which is transforming how patients can get through to their practices. If practices did not take up that offer, NHS England is rolling out the system across the country, so I urge them to look into it because it delivers better capacity, allowing patients to get through to make their appointments. It bought extra hours to pay for staff to do more shifts and see more patients, and it paid for more physical space in practices.

We have delivered 13,000 of the additional 26,000 roles pledged in our manifesto—paramedics, practice nurses, primary care pharmacists, physios and OTs working in primary care. We are tackling the bureaucracy that GPs face, and laid a statutory instrument to address fit notes to allow professionals other than GPs to return people to work. We have developed the pharmacy consultation system, whereby 111 or GP receptionists can refer people directly to a pharmacy for first-line care. We are developing a renewed GP contract, opening up access at weekends and in the evening. We are expanding community pharmacy with our work on Pharmacy First to deal with minor ailments, blood pressure checks and discharge medicine services.

We are also tackling the infrastructure problem through the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill whereby health and local government will work hand in hand to tackle the issues my hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) raised. We are also delivering—

Daisy Cooper: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: No, I will not.

We are also delivering zero tolerance to abuse through the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022. Labour talk the talk, but it was those of us on the Government Benches who voted to double the maximum sentence for those who abuse our emergency care workers. Labour actually voted against giving the Bill a Third Reading. That tells us all we need to know.

With the time I have left—

Holly Lynch: Will the Minister give way?

Maria Caulfield: I will not give way. Members did not—

Hon. Members: Give way!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. If the Minister is not giving way, she is not giving way.

Hon. Members: Frit!

Maria Caulfield: I am not frit, but I am conscious that another debate follows this one. I did not want to play politics, but if Opposition Members want to, I will give them politics.

The Labour party is against everything and for nothing. We have not had one suggestion from Labour or the Lib Dems. They are full of complaints without a single solution. We know that the shadow Secretary of State was busy over the weekend deleting his past misdemeanours, but he cannot delete Labour's misdemeanours with the NHS. As Davina McCall would say, let's have a look at their best bits. There are the PFI contracts that they mysteriously introduced—£1.4 billion a year is still going to private investors because of the deals made under a Labour Government. Full Fact confirmed that £57 billion will be spent in total on those PFI deals.

Moving on to the 2004 GP contract negotiations, evening and weekend cover was taken away, handed to primary care trusts and given to private companies. Changes to the law in 2007, voted for by Labour Members, allowed bigger businesses to buy up GP practices, resulting in the evidence we saw on "Panorama" last week. The top hit is the 2006 Labour dental contract—

Wes Streeting: Oh, here we go.

Maria Caulfield: The hon. Gentleman may say, "Here we go," but Opposition Members acknowledged this afternoon that the Labour contract was causing the problems. We are getting on with dealing with that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) asked what progress is being made. We put the negotiations to the BDA on 24 March and made a final offer—*[Interruption.]* They don't want to listen, Madam Deputy Speaker; they don't care. We put the final offer to the BDA on 20 May, and we are waiting to hear back. We are reforming the dental contract, which perversely disincentivises dentists to take on NHS work.

To correct the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), he did not host that dental summit; it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth

North (Penny Mordaunt), who invited me. The summit came up with a solution, and I am meeting her team so that we can work on that and take it forward.

In addition to the dental contract, we are reforming how we take on dentists from overseas. We consulted the GDC, which recently ran a consultation, and we will be laying legislation to give it powers to allow dentists to come here more easily—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I can hear what Members are saying, and it is just not right. It is simply rude when we are supposed to be listening to the Minister.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): And I think she could do better.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. You are not saying anything while you are sitting down—nothing! I call the Minister.

Maria Caulfield: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Labour Members do not want to hear about the work that the Government have been doing. They are just too busy criticising.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) also mentioned the work that we are doing on centres for dental development. We are already working in places such as Cornwall to start training more dentists in those areas. In Norfolk and Norwich, we have met representatives from the university. The meeting was led by local MPs who brought people together to set up centres. We have also been working in Lincolnshire as well.

We are empowering the dental workforce by changing and upskilling dental technicians, dental nurses, and dental assistants to be able to take on more work. We are also tackling the issue of clawback.

You would think, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is just an issue in England. If we look at Labour-run Wales, we find that the Community Health Councils have acknowledged that Wales is also facing a crisis of access to GPs, and that patients are waiting more than an hour to get through on the phone only to find that there are no appointments left.

The number of dental practices in Wales has fallen—from 1,500 in 2019 to 1,389 last year. In the past year alone in Wales, there was a 71% drop in courses of dental treatment. Why is that happening under a Labour Government? *[Interruption.]* I have given the answer. Opposition Members are too busy talking, Madam Deputy Speaker. They do not want to hear the answers.

Opposition parties need to be honest with the public. Whether we are talking about Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, we are all facing the same challenges. *[Interruption.]* No! There is a Labour-run Government in Wales and an SNP Government in Scotland. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition continue to play politics, but we are getting on with the business of reforming and making those changes. They have no solutions, no answers and no ideas. It is this Government who are delivering the changes. We are being honest with the British public that we will face challenges, but we are making the changes to improve access to both dental and primary care services.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that primary care is in crisis, with people across the country struggling to access GP services and dental treatment; believes that everyone should be able to get an appointment to see a doctor when they need to and has the right to receive dental treatment when they need it; is concerned by the Government's failure to remain on track to deliver 6,000 additional GPs by 2024-25; and therefore calls on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to urgently bring forward a plan to fix the crisis in primary care, meet the Government's GP target and ensure everyone who needs an NHS dentist can access one.

Adviser on Ministerial Interests

4.7 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I beg to move,

That the following Standing Order be made:

“(1) Following any two month period in which the role of Independent Adviser to the Prime Minister on Ministers' Interests remains unfilled, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee shall appoint a specialist adviser, entitled the Adviser on Ministers' Interests, whose role shall be to advise the Committee on the effectiveness of the Ministerial Code and on any potential breaches of that Code.

(2) The Adviser may initiate consideration of a potential breach of the Ministerial Code, and shall consider any such potential breach referred to him by the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

(3) When considering potential breaches of the Ministerial Code, the Adviser may advise the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on the appropriate use of its powers to send for persons, papers and records in order to secure the information needed to consider any such potential breaches.

(4) The Adviser shall submit a memorandum to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee reporting conclusions relating to a potential breach of the Ministerial Code.

(5) The Adviser shall have leave to publish any memorandum submitted to the Committee under paragraph (4) which has not been published in full and has been in the Committee's possession for longer than 30 sitting days.”

What a pleasure it is to open this debate, especially as it is with the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General. I will call him my right hon. and learned Friend now because I see him more often these days than I see my friends. It is always a pleasure to stand opposite him. Hopefully, he will be able to give us some answers today, so that we can build on that friendship.

The truth is that, to lose one ethics adviser is an embarrassment, but to lose a second, just days after the Prime Minister's anti-corruption tsar walked, too, means that it has become a pattern—a pattern of degrading the principles of our democracy; a pattern of dodging accountability; and a pattern of demeaning his office. The Prime Minister has now driven both of his own hand-picked ethics advisers to resign in despair—twice in two years. It is a badge of shame for this Government and it should be for the rogue Prime Minister, too. If he was capable of feeling any shame, Lord Geidt has described the resignation as a “last resort” that “sends a critical signal into the public domain.”

Well, he has certainly sent that signal, Madam Deputy Speaker. In his damning resignation letter, Lord Geidt spoke of the “odious” and “impossible” position that he had been put in. He said that the Prime Minister had made a “mockery” of the “Ministerial Code” and that he would play no further part in this. It was not about steel at all; it was about this Prime Minister's casual and constant disregard for the rules. Lord Geidt could not stomach it any longer, and I do not blame him. To this Prime Minister, ethics is a county east of London.

The truth is that the Prime Minister behaves as though it is one rule for him and another for the rest of us, because that is what he thinks. Scandal after scandal has hit him and his Government. His previous adviser on ministerial interests, the respected Sir Alex Allan, resigned when the Prime Minister chose to excuse the

Home Secretary despite the fact that she had breached the ministerial code by bullying civil servants. Sir Alex could not stand by and condone bullying, and the Prime Minister was more than happy to. After losing his first independent adviser, it took five months to appoint a new one—five months during which ministerial misconduct was left unchecked, creating a huge backlog of sleaze and misconduct by Tory Ministers. Lord Geidt himself complained about this backlog.

This House should not tolerate a repeat performance. We cannot endure another five months with no accountability in Downing Street. We cannot endure another five minutes of it. Since Lord Geidt resigned, the Government have refused to confirm if or how his ongoing investigations will continue. I hope my new right hon. and learned Friend the Minister can tell us today whether the investigation into the shameful allegations of Islamophobia experienced by the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani) will now be concluded. She was due to meet Lord Geidt on the day that he resigned, but the Government have been silent on the issue and have failed to say anything about what will happen when any further suspected breaches of the ministerial code occur.

Take, for example, reports that the Prime Minister, while Foreign Secretary, tried to make an inappropriate appointment to his own office. He reportedly spoke to his aides about a taxpayer-funded position—just another case of dishing out jobs to those close to him. Lord Geidt has suggested that such allegations are ripe for a new investigation, and I agree. As everyone knows, I love a letter, but who should I write the request to? There is no ethics adviser in place to hold Tory Ministers to the standards the British public expect. We all know that Ministers will not do it themselves. Under this Government, more rule-breaking is simply inevitable, unfortunately. Lord Geidt has already said that his role was “exceptionally busy”.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I happen to agree with the right hon. Lady that there should not be a long gap before the appointment of a new independent adviser, but let me put something else to her. Two weeks ago, when she opened a debate on a similar subject, she prayed in aid extensively the Committee on Standards in Public Life, of which I am a member, as she knows, and she did so rightly, in my view. Does she accept, though, that she cannot do that today, because her motion does not accord with what the Committee on Standards in Public Life has said? We believe that the ministerial code must remain the property of the Prime Minister because that is how it derives its authority, and it therefore makes sense that the adviser should give advice to the Prime Minister and not to any Committee of Parliament, however eminent. How is it that the Committee on Standards in Public Life was so right two weeks ago but wrong now?

Angela Rayner: I commend the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life and its report, which I absolutely agree should be implemented in full, but that is not what has happened: it was cherry-picked in what the Government have done with the changes to the ministerial code. This is an emergency measure because we cannot carry on for months and months without the adviser being present, as I am sure the right hon. and learned Gentleman agrees. I hope the Minister comes to the same conclusion. I have written to him and had a

response today in a written answer about when the appointment will be made. I understand the right hon. and learned Gentleman's position and what he is saying, but I say categorically that I absolutely agree with the report and want to see it implemented in full.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I have sympathy with the thrust of the right hon. Lady's motion in that we do not want a long delay, and I am sure the Government have sympathy with it, too—I am sure the Prime Minister would like to appoint as soon as possible—but the rest of her motion seeks to create a new Standing Order. Traditionally in this House, the Procedure Committee would advise on Standing Orders, so would she be amenable, should the Opposition motion pass today, for the Procedure Committee to look at this as a matter of priority, given the timelines involved?

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Member. The thrust of what I am trying to do today, and hon. Members need to understand this, is just to have some probity, standards and ethics we can all agree on. One of the things I think is very damaging, and this has been very damaging for all hon. Members of this House, is conduct that the public out there see as inappropriate not being scrutinised and dealt with. This does not just affect the Prime Minister; it affects each and every one of us in this place, so I am happy to continue further dialogue to ensure we get to such a point. However, this is about making sure that something happens now, because we have seen conduct and standards from this Prime Minister that, quite frankly, I have never seen before from any Prime Minister of any political persuasion.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell), I accept that the Procedure Committee does have a role—and I was a member of the Procedure Committee—but given that Brexit was supposed to be about Parliament taking back control, there is absolutely nothing at all disorderly about the motion on the Order Paper for Parliament to take control and set up its own Standing Order. The right hon. Lady is right: the problem is that the Prime Minister's behaviour will almost certainly start to be interpreted as a plague on all our houses, and that is why Parliament must support this and must vote for this motion tonight.

Angela Rayner: This is about us trying to make sure that we do take back control, and also that we gain the respect of the public. Quite rightly, when they elect us and bring us into this place, they expect us to have the highest standards. Especially when we create the laws that they have to follow, they expect us to have the highest possible standards.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Of course, the resignation of yet another ethics adviser will do little to quieten public concerns that there is something very rotten at the heart of this Government. Next week, I will be presenting a ten-minute rule Bill that would make lying in politics illegal and give our constituents confidence that we are serious about forcing a change of culture within our political system. Does the right hon. Member agree with me that the present culture is corroding trust in politics and democracy?

Angela Rayner: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Member that trust is being corroded in politics, and I do not like that. I do not like that for any of us hon. Members in this place, because I believe that the vast majority of Members who come to this place do so for great public service. Therefore, when hon. Members do not behave to the standards I think the British public expect of us, that actually makes it difficult for all of us. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) mentions the procedures of this place, and sometimes it is challenging for the public when they see people “inadvertently mislead” the House. The public do not always see it as “inadvertently misleading” the House, and therefore they do not understand exactly why we have such a debate on that matter.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Would my right hon. Friend accept that the debate between an independent appointment and an appointment by the Prime Minister has been cast into a different light by partygate, by the appointment of somebody’s girlfriend for £100,000, by the breach of international law with the Northern Ireland protocol and even by what has happened on steel tariffs? Therefore, there is a compelling case for independence or at least for Parliament to decide on those issues, not the Prime Minister, who people, frankly, do not trust for good reasons.

Angela Rayner: Absolutely. During Lord Geidt’s time as ethics adviser, he was swamped—swamped—with allegations of ministerial misconduct. During his session with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, referring to the ministerial code, Lord Geidt said that

“as you look through the calendar, a great deal of the year has potentially had the Prime Minister in scope.”

It is astonishing that we are in these circumstances, but we are where we are.

The Prime Minister’s official spokesperson has refused to confirm when the independent adviser will be replaced, or even if the independent adviser will be replaced at all. It is pretty clear that, if the Prime Minister had his way, he would dispense with the nuisance of transparency and the annoyance of accountability altogether.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I agree with the right hon. Lady about the need to appoint a new adviser but I have looked carefully at her motion, which talks about an adviser. What would the status of that adviser to the Committee be? Would they be an employee of this House? If they were an Officer of this House, there would be an obvious conflict between their duty to Parliament and any involvement they might have in Government affairs. Does she not see that that is quite a problem that needs to be addressed by her and the motion?

Angela Rayner: I do not see the wording of the motion creating a conflict or causing problems in that way. It will allow us to have the scrutiny and probity that we need, because the Government at the moment are not forthcoming in giving us the assurances that I have tried outside this place to get on whether we are going to get a new adviser. That is the thrust of what I am trying to do today. I can see that Members are passionate about this issue, and I am happy for them to work with us to try to get there. I am sure that my friend the Paymaster General would be willing to do that as

well. We all want to see standards in public life, and Ministers of the Crown in particular need to have that authority when dealing with matters of office so that the public can have confidence in them. That is what this motion is about today.

David Linden: Does the right hon. Lady understand the irony of Conservative Members complaining about a conflict of interest when the Prime Minister’s own chief of staff, whom he appointed, is simultaneously an MP, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the chief of staff—a role that is traditionally undertaken by a civil servant?

Angela Rayner: This is part of the problem. We all need to have confidence that processes are being followed and that there is accountability. Nobody is above the law in this country, but the Prime Minister seems to think that he can be. It is astonishing that we are in those circumstances.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for introducing this debate. I think the point she was making very well earlier in response to questions from Conservative Members who have been good lawyers in their previous life is that the thrust of what she is trying to do today is to suggest that we all in this place want to do better, and that we are willing to look at ways to do better. If the thrust of this motion does not meet that high standard, it is open to Conservative Members who have experience and expertise in this area to suggest other ways of doing this, perhaps by bringing forward amendments, and to work with the Opposition in that way. I think she is saying that that is something she welcomes.

Angela Rayner: The last time the Paymaster General was sent here to defend the indefensible, he claimed that the Prime Minister’s recent changes to the ministerial code represented

“the most substantial strengthening of the role, office and remit of independent adviser since the post was created in 2006.”—[*Official Report*, 16 June 2022; Vol. 716, c. 429.]

He must think I was born yesterday. Removing any reference to honesty, integrity, accountability and transparency is not strengthening standards; it is cherry-picking parts of the recommendation and watering it down before our very eyes. Within hours of the Paymaster General saying those words at the Dispatch Box, No. 10 was already refusing to repeat his commitment to that system—a system that the Prime Minister himself had put in place just weeks before.

Now the Government do not even deny the plans to abolish the role of the independent adviser entirely. Today, the Minister answered my written question about his plans to fill the post and said that the Government were “taking time” to consider the matter. Just how long does he expect us to give him? Should we expect half a year of sleaze and scandal without accountability? For more than a year, the Prime Minister used Lord Geidt as a human shield, citing his independence and integrity as the Government desperately staggered from one scandal to the next. Now the Culture Secretary takes to the airwaves to mock and belittle him. That is what they do to decent people. Conservative Members who continue to prop up this Prime Minister and keep his self-preservation society afloat would do well to note that. That is where this House must come in.

Labour's proposal today would put this Prime Minister into special measures, where he needs to be. If he fails to appoint a new independent adviser, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will have the power to appoint one. We will give the Committee the proper powers to launch investigations, to send for papers, persons and records, to report on breaches and to make its judgments public. This Prime Minister has ridden roughshod over the rules. He will not show any regard to ethics, but this House can do that today. The motion before us is a limited, simple measure to address any refusal by the Prime Minister to enforce the ministerial code by allowing Parliament to step in.

Of course, we would like to go much further, which is why we backed the package of recommendations from the CSPL as the first step in our plan to clean up politics. We want to see full independence granted to the adviser to open his or her investigations—without that, it is left to the whim of the Prime Minister. As I said, the Prime Minister cherry-picked the CSPL recommendations and conveniently chose not to introduce this crucial one. While he maintains the power of veto over the independent adviser, there is an inherent risk that he will overrule his own adviser. Today, it is time to show the Prime Minister that he is not above the rules and for this House to draw a line in the sand. If the Prime Minister will not appoint an ethics adviser, we must do so. I commend this motion to the House.

4.26 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Michael Ellis): I thank the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) for choosing today's motion. It is a great pleasure, as always, to appear on the other side of the House from her, and I will endorse the opportunity she gave to call her a friend likewise.

The Government remain steadfast in their absolute commitment to upholding standards in public life and the critical role of the ministerial code in supporting those standards. It is on account of that commitment that the Government cannot support today's motion, for the simple reason that it attempts, by proxy, to change the British constitution by the back door; what it does, without consultation or consideration, would be unreasonable. What would be unreasonable is for any Opposition party to say all this on what is, as they know, a national strike day, when many Members are hindered from attending this House, because Labour Members are on the picket lines for a strike caused by Labour's union backers.

I have set out repeatedly and exhaustively in recent weeks that the Government fully recognise the importance of the ministerial code and its role in maintaining standards in public life. What we wish to do, therefore, is to protect the code. It sets out the Prime Minister's expectations of his or her Ministers, detailing the standards of conduct in public life expected of those who serve government and the principles that underpin them. The code has performed this role for successive Prime Ministers since it was first published by the Conservative Prime Minister John Major as "Questions of Procedure for Ministers" in 1992, 30 years ago. Throughout that time, it has been an evolving document. It is customarily issued—it is customarily released or re-released—when

warranted, by the Prime Minister of the day to reflect changes and to update the guidance. So this business about what is said in the foreword of the document is, frankly, a red herring. What is said in the foreword is very often a reflection of the current affairs at the time the document was released. What it is not is a reflection of the contents of the document, which are as they were before.

Since 2006, recognising the need for independent support on the application of the code, the Prime Minister of the day has appointed an Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests to provide independent advice on how Ministers manage their interests and to assist with the investigation of alleged breaches of the code. But if Labour's motion were to succeed, it could mean in the future a Labour-chaired Committee choosing one of the Prime Minister's advisers or a Conservative-chaired Committee choosing a future Labour Prime Minister's advisers. That would lead to dysfunction and, frankly, gridlock, and it would be entirely impractical and unconstitutional. It simply would not work.

David Linden: The right hon. and learned Gentleman spoke about the fact that the code was designed under John Major in the 1990s, although John Major's Government were not exactly without scandal and sleaze, so perhaps it is time to revisit that. Given his knowledge of history, can he think of any Prime Minister who has lost not one but two advisers on the ministerial code since the days of John Major?

Michael Ellis: There are exceptions in every case and, of course, we know that in the past 30 years Prime Ministers of all political parties have decided for themselves when Ministers have their confidence and when they do not. The Government are very grateful to all those who have served in the role of independent adviser since 2006. It is a challenging role, and increasingly so today. Let me repeat my particular thanks to Lord Geidt for his contribution to the office, but the Prime Minister has also made it clear that the resignation of Lord Geidt and the issues that he and PACAC raised last week demand a moment of reflection. They demand some consideration. Frankly, we think it is right to step back and take some time to consider what we have heard from the former independent adviser and from this House. This is a complex matter and one that touches on Executive functions and the royal prerogative in relation to the appointment of Ministers. As I have said before to this honourable House, we cannot have a situation where we expect any Prime Minister of any political party not to have confidence in a Minister that he or she has serving in their Cabinet. It is crucial that each Minister has the confidence of the serving Prime Minister.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): The Paymaster General talks about exceptional times, but unfortunately this is not exceptional behaviour from this Prime Minister. This is not the first time that we have heard allegations that the Prime Minister has sought to spend hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayers' money on his girlfriends. Just look at his time as Mayor of London. Does the Paymaster General not agree that this is a pattern of behaviour and the role of any new ethics adviser should be, for a start, to get the Prime Minister out of the gutter and find some ethics in the first place?

Michael Ellis: I am not going to dignify that with a response.

Geraint Davies: The Minister mentioned that the ministerial code and the guidance change with the times, but is it reasonable to delete references to integrity, objectivity, accountability, transparency, honesty and public interest? Obviously, these are enduring values and they cannot just be airbrushed out by a PM who chooses to break all the rules for his own self-interest.

Michael Ellis: I respectfully advise the hon. Gentleman to read the document he is quoting. First, those lines were only included in the foreword of the document since August 2019. They are still within the body of the document. What it says in the foreword is very often topical and should not be taken as inclusive of every item that follows in the substantive document.

Sir Robert Buckland: Further to that, are not the Nolan principles set out in annex A to the ministerial code? All this nonsense about their removal is factually wrong. However, will my right hon. and learned Friend commit today to do the process of the appointment of a successor to Lord Geidt as soon as reasonably practicable?

Michael Ellis: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right about the code. I think it is annex A, and it may even be 1(c), although I may be wrong. The foreword is a topical document and how and by whom Lord Geidt is replaced are being worked through in detail.

The Government have only very recently made a number of significant changes to the remit of the independent adviser and to the ministerial code, and those changes were made in response to recommendations from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, as the former Attorney General, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), mentioned only a few moments ago. They represented the most substantial strengthening of the independent adviser's role and office during the lifetime of that post. The role has been strengthened and increased substantially. I will not run through all the details of those changes again. In the light of last week's events, it strikes us as reasonable to not rush in, but pause and reflect on how to do it properly.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): If the changes that the Government recently brought forward are so significant and substantial, why do they feel it is necessary to have a pause for reflection again now, so soon?

Michael Ellis: Those are two different things, as the right hon. Member knows. We are talking about strengthening the role of the independent adviser, on which we had time to reflect and which we then did.

In no way do I suggest that the Government do not regard the role with the utmost importance; we do. In no way do I suggest that something of this importance will be left unaddressed; it will not. All I suggest is that we take a period of time to assess how best to perform that function. I appreciate that the motion allows a limited period of time, as it does not take effect until the independent adviser role has been unfilled for two months, but that timing presents two issues.

First, two months, with a deadline of 14 August, is simply an unduly short period to recruit for a role of such significance and sensitivity. Secondly, the motion allows for no time to think about how the role is delivered.

By proposing the creation of a sort of shadow adviser on Ministers' interests, the motion simply demands the same model again without consideration of any alternative options. It also unwisely, if I may say so, innovates to expand the remit of an existing Committee without considering the impact that that will have on the operation of the ministerial code. As I said, the Government think that the time is right to reflect on this matter more carefully.

Mr Carmichael: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: In a moment; I will just make some progress.

Let me move on to the detail of the motion, which is constitutionally rather important. It is predicated on a misplaced worry about the Government's intentions, and that anxiety has created a jumble of misguided ideas. First, the creation of the new specialist adviser position stands directly at odds with the principle of separation of powers and the necessary distinction between Members and Ministers of the Crown. It would be an extraordinary shift of power from the Executive to the legislature, which would upset the long-established balance in that aspect of the United Kingdom's constitution. It would be a reckless change that has not been thought through.

Her Majesty's Government would not dream of appointing advisers to this House—that is for the House to do, and Mr Speaker would rightly protect the legislature's independence—but the Opposition want the legislature to interfere with the independence of the Executive by appointing one of its own advisers. Effectively, that is a recipe for gridlock and confusion.

It is a fundamental constitutional principle that the Prime Minister of the day, as head of Her Majesty's Government and the sovereign's principal adviser, has sole responsibility for the overall organisation of the Executive and for recommending the appointment of Ministers. The Prime Minister, not Parliament, advises Her Majesty on the appointment of her Ministers. In turn, the Government of the day are accountable to the Commons and must command its confidence. That is our system. The ultimate responsibility for decisions on matters of ministerial conduct is therefore, quite properly, the Prime Minister's alone, who draws his authority from the elected House of Commons. As an elected politician, those are matters for which he or she is accountable to Parliament and, ultimately, the electorate.

Flowing from those arrangements, the ministerial code is the Prime Minister's document. It belongs to the Prime Minister and sets out the standards of behaviour that he expects from his Ministers. Likewise, the appointment of others to advise on the ministerial code is a matter for the Prime Minister. It would be similar to me appointing an adviser to the Leader of the Opposition, which would, of course, be absolute nonsense and would not be accepted by the Opposition.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): As a member of PACAC, I would of course welcome being able to have further advice, but the Minister seems to have misinterpreted that issue. The motion proposes to appoint an adviser not to the Prime Minister, but to a Committee that can make independent judgments on the conduct of different areas of the Executive. The International Development Committee has an independent auditor who reports to it on the functions of the

Department. Other Committees have independent people who report to them on the functions of the Executive. There is no suggestion in the motion that it would be an adviser to the Prime Minister, or that it would take away from the Prime Minister's responsibility to do the hiring and firing. The Minister has misread the motion, has he not?

Michael Ellis: The intent of the motion, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, is to stymie the Prime Minister's power to have his own Ministers. *[Interruption.]* He knows full well that that is the intention behind this reckless motion, which seeks by proxy to turn those constitutional principles on their head, and would surely be a recipe for constitutional gridlock and confrontation. Hon. Members should perhaps consider for a moment what would happen under this new regime when the Prime Minister of the day disagrees with the parliamentary adviser. If the Prime Minister were to disagree with that adviser, he would be put under pressure to not have one of his own Ministers.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I heard the point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). Could the Minister clarify that, if that Select Committee should wish to appoint an adviser, it does not need a motion of the House to do so?

Michael Ellis: Clearly, it is for that Select Committee to decide how it conducts its own affairs, but certainly as far as this motion is concerned, it would be unconstitutional. Rather than allowing the Executive to reflect on the role of the independent adviser, this motion is preoccupied—as I think the House knows—with immediate and short-term considerations seeking to capitalise on a current vacancy, which the Opposition are seeking to do for politically expedient reasons, without taking full account of the constitutional implications. The now repealed Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 is a prime example of what happens if one alters critical parts of the constitution without care.

According to the motion, referring back to what the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) said, it would be for the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to appoint an individual to the new position of adviser on Ministers' interests—not “adviser on the Committee's interests”, but “adviser on Ministers' interests”—and it would be for PACAC to refer matters that that Committee believes warrants consideration to its new adviser. With or without PACAC, that adviser would be able to instigate consideration of a matter, so the motion is an attempt to give the impression that powers have been transferred from the Executive to the legislature.

Given its novel character, perhaps it does not come as a surprise that the proposal stands in direct contradiction to the principle acknowledged in the code of conduct for MPs and the associated guide to the rules. That current document, which the House has approved, clearly states that

“Ministers are subject to... guidelines and requirements laid down by successive Prime Ministers in the Ministerial Code”.

The guide to the rules clearly recognises that those requirements

“are not enforced by the House of Commons”.

The Opposition are seeking to reverse that agreement by the House.

The challenge to constitutional norms is not confined to the operation of the Executive. The motion also proposes to change the way in which Parliament and its Committees conduct their work.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right when he quotes the code of conduct. However, without an ethics adviser to the Prime Minister, we as Members of this House are held to higher standards of behaviour through the code of conduct than Ministers are, including the Prime Minister. What can my right hon. and learned Friend tell us about how, going forward, the Prime Minister and the Government intend to ensure we can expect all Ministers to be held to the highest possible standards, just as we in this House are?

Michael Ellis: I can certainly say to my hon. Friend that those sorts of questions are being worked through now in detail.

As I said, the challenge to constitutional norms is not confined to the operation of the Executive. The motion specifies that

“the Adviser may advise the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on the appropriate use of its powers to send for persons, papers and records”.

The power of Select Committees to send for persons, papers and records is delegated to Select Committees from Parliament itself, and exercised by Members of this House as directly elected representatives. Although Select Committees already have the ability to appoint specialist advisers, introducing a requirement to appoint an adviser whose remit includes advising the Committee on how to use its powers would be different, unusual and undesirable. Although Select Committees may wish to draw on the advice of experts from time to time, this expertise does not ordinarily extend to advising Committees on how to use their historical powers to gather evidence.

Geraint Davies: I am listening carefully to the right hon. and learned Gentleman's argument, but does he accept we are in unusual territory? The conduct and behaviour of the Prime Minister himself have been called into question, supported by the evidence. It would therefore seem inappropriate for the Prime Minister to appoint his own ethical adviser. Given that we have an independent judiciary, does the right hon. and learned Gentleman not think we should investigate the possibility of an independent appointment through the judiciary to enforce ethical standards in our democracy?

Michael Ellis: I am in the business of protecting our judiciary from becoming politicised, which would be a danger with the hon. Gentleman's suggestion.

Select Committees already have a vital role to play in scrutinising and holding the Executive to account, which is why the Standing Orders provide the power to send for persons, papers and records. The creation of this new position would not augment the powers held by Parliament and its Committees but would serve to undermine the fundamental principle of the separation of powers.

As I have outlined, the House has previously acknowledged that Ministers are necessarily subject to an additional set of standards over and above that of Members. Providing a role for Parliament to initiate investigations into potential breaches of the ministerial code would be constitutionally irregular and would pre-empt the review that is currently being undertaken.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is it not the case that a number of Select Committees already conduct pre-appointment hearings for people directly appointed by the Prime Minister? Those Select Committees can already say whether they recommend or do not recommend appointment. The Prime Minister can go against a Committee's recommendation if he wishes, but it will be on the public record. There will be a paper trail so everyone knows what has happened, and light and fresh air will be let in to abolish the darkness of corruption. Would this proposal not do that if it were implemented?

Michael Ellis: No.

The creation of an adviser with the power to initiate consideration of a potential breach of the ministerial code is different, and we can safely predict it would open the door to a wave of frivolous and vexatious complaints. We have to think about that and the reputation of this House because, now and across all future Administrations, there would be no downside in political opponents throwing in complaints like confetti. The Opposition of the day would not face tit-for-tat complaints, because they are not Ministers.

As we saw with the failed Standards Board for England in local government, a culture of petty complaint would undermine not strengthen confidence in democracy, which is precisely why such arrangements need to be thought through, to consider and avoid the unintended consequences that will ultimately afflict both sides of the House.

Sir Robert Buckland: My right hon. and learned Friend is being generous in taking interventions. I agree about the importance of balance between the Executive and the legislature. May I press him on the need for a mechanism to appoint a successor to Lord Geidt? I understand that he cannot give us dates or commitments, but can I have an assurance that a successor will be appointed as soon as practicable?

Michael Ellis: What I can say to my right hon. and learned Friend is that the matter is being given very careful and full consideration. I hope that answers the point.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): I am gravely concerned about what I have just heard. A number of us were given to understand, before the debate began, that the Government were willing to say that there is a strong commitment to finding a replacement for Lord Geidt in short order. I have not heard the Minister say that. Will he please make that very clear right now?

Michael Ellis: I do apologise if I have not made that clear; I thought that I had. I can confirm that that is the position.

Let me conclude by reassuring hon. Members that it is the Government's intention to act swiftly. I emphasise that to hon. Friends around the House. We will act swiftly to undertake a review of the arrangements in place to support the ministerial code and ensure high ministerial standards. During that period, the process of managing ministerial interests will continue in line with the ministerial code, which sets out that the permanent secretary in each Department and the Cabinet Office can provide advice to Ministers and play a role in

scrutinising interests. The latest list of ministerial interests was published just two weeks ago, and the Government's publication of transparency information will of course continue unaffected.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I want to clarify what the Minister said in that last passage. His own Back Benchers seem very keen to establish on the record in *Hansard* that the Government have given them some sort of undertaking that they will act swiftly to appoint an adviser, but what the Minister said there was that he would act swiftly to institute a review. Which is it? Are the Government going to act swiftly to institute a review, or to appoint an adviser? I think that might affect how his Back Benchers vote this evening, so he needs to be clear.

Michael Ellis: It is very kind of the hon. and learned Lady to be interested in how the Back Benchers vote, but she ought to be concerned about her own party in that regard. The reality of the matter is that I have made my position perfectly clear: the position will be dealt with in good time. The how and when are being worked on—[*Interruption.*] I cannot be any clearer than that.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I gently say to my right hon. and learned Friend that he will appreciate that, whether we like it or not, this issue of ethics is proving to be a bit of an Achilles' heel with the Government. It is in the interests of the Government to have a replacement to Lord Geidt as quickly as possible. I have heard what he has said in response to a number of interventions, and so it may be me, but could he say once again for the record that an adviser in this important area of the mechanism of government will be appointed as swiftly as possible? A review of the terms of reference is ancillary.

Michael Ellis: Whether it be the phrase "as soon as reasonably practicable" or "as soon as possible" is somewhat immaterial, but I think I have made it clear. I am trying to emphasise that, while the how and when are to be worked out, the Government will work with every possible expedition.

On this motion, I would say it is in the Government's interests and intentions to bring their review or the arrangements into play efficiently and in good time. As my hon. Friend says, it is in the Government's interests, but it is also in the interests of the whole House, because the matter of ethics and standards is of relevance to all of us. Frankly, Labour's high moral tone is perhaps not quite appropriate when its members find themselves under police investigation in Durham—

Angela Rayner: Your Prime Minister broke the law!

Michael Ellis: My friend intervenes from a sedentary position, but was she or was she not having an Indian meal in Durham? It is something of a korma, korma chameleon, one might say.

Karin Smyth: If we could return to the matter in hand, we are trying to establish whether the Government are swiftly moving to instigate a review, or swiftly moving to appoint. When Lord Geidt came before the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee in May 2021, he told us that his name had been "alighted on" by the Prime Minister. Can the Paymaster General

tell us whether the Prime Minister will be alighting on a new name, reviewing the alighting on of a name, or reviewing an open application process? Can he give us a little bit more about that?

Michael Ellis: The Prime Minister intends to appoint a new ethics adviser. We will announce how that is to be done, who it is and how it works in due course, but it has to be done properly to ensure that Parliament and the public have confidence. This motion pre-empts that review process and unnecessarily seeks to hold the Government to an entirely arbitrary timetable. We firmly believe that it is better to undertake this work with proper diligence and attention than to conclude it in haste, without proper consideration of the issues raised by Lord Geidt and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. It is for those reasons that the Government would oppose the motion.

David Linden: The Minister's repeated reference to "in due course" has piqued the interest of those of us familiar with the work of Sir Humphrey Appleby. Will he go a little further and define what "in due course" means? For example, would it be before the conference recess, or the summer recess? [*Interruption.*] Maybe his Parliamentary Private Secretary is telling him right now.

Michael Ellis: I think that the hon. Member knows what "in due course" means, and, if he does not, he will have to work it out.

Labour chose this debate on a day when the Labour rail strike is in progress. It is utilising its valuable time in the Commons not to discuss policy—Labour Members do not discuss policy because when they do, they lose—as it would rather talk about personality, and I am surprised that it chose this debate at this time when half of its Members are apparently on the picket lines.

4.56 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Well, there we have it, in the Minister's own words, as clear as he could possibly be: it is abundantly clear that the Government have absolutely no intention whatsoever of moving speedily to replace their ethics adviser. If all the crowd on the Conservative Back Benches are prepared to be taken in by that rubbish, God help them when they have to try to consider some of the important issues of today.

We have heard from the Minister that there will be a review into the arrangements about the appointment of an ethics adviser. Why could he not have come to the Dispatch Box to state exactly and clearly what he intends to do, instead of mucking around with all of that rubbish and nonsense, skipping through God knows how many hoops and dancing on the head of so many pins? That would have been more useful to the House. We have had to listen to something like half an hour of unmitigated rubbish, and now we know that they will do nothing other than create some sort of review about how they will take the matter forward.

I do not know where to start when it comes to considering the ethics of this Prime Minister and Government. This is a Prime Minister with the ethics of Caligula and a Government with the morals of the last days of the Borgias. How the Prime Minister is still in place after all of this must go down in the history books as one of the great mysteries of early 21st-century politics. When the book is written and that feature film

is eventually released, people will ask, "Did all of that seriously happen? Surely this must be a fictional account of this particular Conservative Government?"

There has never been a Prime Minister quite like it. He is a weird combination of privilege, narcissism, nastiness and naivety all wrapped up under the bumbling facade that he has carefully concocted to make his multitude of sins evaporate in front of our faces. He is about the worst Prime Minister to be in place at the worst possible time. No one has been more ill-equipped to run a community council, far less the Government of an advanced developed nation and democracy in western Europe. If there is one Prime Minister who is in need of ethical advice and the assistance of a moral compass, it is surely this Prime Minister. Far from doing away with the post—that plan is abundantly clear—the Government should be spending half of the UK's GDP on creating an army of ethical advisers just to get on top of what is going on in the Government.

I have to say that, like the Culture Secretary, I was a little bit surprised to find out that we actually had an ethics adviser. I would not be surprised at all if the Prime Minister had an adviser for hedonism and partying hard, but ethics? He must be keeping his several successes in the course of the past few years hidden beneath a particularly big bushel. I do not know if he was a bit distracted when the Government were breaking the laws that they themselves created, distracted when they were threatening to break international law, distracted when they oversaw a culture at No. 10 that partied so hard that people were physically sick, got into fights and then abused the staff who were there to clean up, or distracted when the Government attempted to prorogue Parliament unlawfully and who continue to put their own cronies and donors in the House of Lords. But I suppose it gets to the stage where enough is enough even for the most patient, distracted and forgiving adviser, and the recognition finally dawns that this is an impossible task beyond the realms of human wit.

It comes as absolutely no surprise that the Government feel they can function quite adequately without an ethics adviser in place. They have been through two in the course of the past few years. Neither felt that they could make any real difference to the ethics and behaviour of this Prime Minister. That leads me to ask: what would an effective ethics adviser to this Prime Minister actually look like? They would need the ability to turn a blind eye and stomach some of the worst possible behaviour at the worst possible time. They must be able to take the abuse and disparaging comments from some of the Prime Minister's friends, such as the Culture Secretary who, in her usual measured and respectful way, calls the current Lord Geidt "Lord Geddit" and says that voters do not care what he was or what he did. As part of the recruitment drive for the next ethics adviser, the Culture Secretary encouraged potential applicants for the post by saying that the public "don't give a fig" about the job. Now, watch the great and good run forward to try to claim that particular prize.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a typically measured speech himself. In talking about ethics and standards, can he confirm whether the SNP Westminster group still has a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment and inappropriate behaviour? A leaked recording this weekend would indicate that that is no longer the case.

Pete Wishart: Obviously, I am not going to discuss any sort of leaked information that has been passed on to the press. What I will say to the hon. Gentleman is that if he is sitting in a glass house with a big rock, it is probably best not to throw it in any direction. I remind him that I was on the Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme and put together the report that is now in place; one of the most successful initiatives we have had to tackle abuse in this place. I will take great pride in the fact that that was part of the arrangements concerning that.

I will finish with the Culture Secretary. Once she has finished her tenure in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, which hopefully will be short-lived, she could maybe go on to become an international diplomat or peacemaker, given her ability to say the right things at the right time on issues that require sensitivity and care, just as she has in the last few weeks.

In an attempt to save face and further discredit Lord Geidt—this is perhaps one of the most concerning pieces of spin from the past few days—the Government were able to develop a narrative that his resignation was nothing to do with the appalling behaviour of the Prime Minister but a misunderstanding about steel. Because of the Government’s remarks and the spin from the Government’s friends in the newspapers, Lord Geidt felt it necessary to write a second letter to clarify exactly why he resigned. He said that it was nothing to do with steel, and that steel was an absolute and utter distraction. He said it was instead about being asked to approve deliberate breaches of international law given the Government’s

“widely publicised openness to this”.

Joanna Cherry: The Minister seemed very reluctant to confirm that a new adviser will be appointed anytime soon. Does my hon. Friend think that that is probably because the Government have it in mind to breach several international treaties in the coming months and it would be very awkward for them to have an adviser in place who would be advising them against that or possibly resigning because of their plans to do so?

Pete Wishart: My hon. and learned Friend is coming to the right conclusions about the Government’s indecision and apparently clear intention of not having an ethics adviser put in place at the earliest possible opportunity. A number of things are coming up—I will mention a couple of them—in the in-tray for any adviser to consider, some of which will greatly concern Members of this House.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would agree that further delay and dilly-dallying in the appointment of an ethics adviser does nothing whatever to restore public confidence in our Government?

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely and utterly right. I do not think that, in my 20-odd years in the House, I have seen it in such a dilapidated condition, when public trust in the activities of the House, the way in which we do business and the way in which we conduct ourselves has been so badly misunderstood and misinterpreted by the public. It is incumbent on the House to start to try and put these things right.

Let us get back to our good friend Lord Geidt. I do not know what it was in his comments that he had been left in

“an impossible and odious position”

and that he could not be

“party to advising on any potential law-breaking”

that led to any misunderstanding about his intention to resign from his role, and the real reasons why he eventually got around to it. Perhaps he had to be got rid of because it was he who had previously investigated the controversy over how the Prime Minister had funded the refurbishment of the flat above No. 11 Downing Street.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) referred to several issues that might require the attention of a future independent ethics adviser, but surely the one at the top of his inbox would be our emerging concern that the Prime Minister was seriously considering appointing his now wife to the role of special adviser in the Foreign Office. That is a matter that I think the House will have to return to in due course, and consider properly. Although Lord Geidt concluded that the Prime Minister had not broken ministerial rules in respect of the prime ministerial flat, the Conservative Party was later fined £17,800 for the improper declaration of donations.

So Lord Geidt is gone, and I have the impression that Downing Street is not particularly upset about that, but what is to be done? I have no problem with the Labour party’s motion, and I will support it; the only thing that I would say to Labour Members is that I would not give them the chance to try and find an independent adviser on the Government’s ethics. In any event, I think that it should be a matter for the House. I accept that some of these issues are relevant and pertinent to Government activity and business, but surely the House should have some sort of say, through the function of its Committees, in who does the monitoring and how that person is appointed. The present system has not worked particularly well in the case of the last few independent advisers. I think that we would need to find someone with the attributes of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Columbo and George Washington combined to perform this role effectively.

In Scotland, of course, we have our much neater and easier way out of this midden, and that is to simply leave all of you to get on with it in your own time and in your own way. I have no idea what Scotland has done in its history to deserve governance such as this, but believe me, Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleagues and I are doing everything possible to ensure that the situation will be rectified. When it is right that we put forward the case for independence—as we will, and we will convince the Scottish people of its merits—all we need to do is to get the Scottish people to turn on the Parliament channel and observe what is happening in the House. That will increase their enthusiasm, and cause them to rush towards the cause of independence. The choice for them will be whether to be governed by these privileged Etonian spivs with their “one rule for them” approach to government, or to become a self-governing nation run by the people who care most about Scotland—the people who live and work there.

5.8 pm

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in the debate.

The motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition is deeply flattering to me—presumably—and to the Committee that I have the great pleasure of chairing. I appreciate the Opposition's confidence in us, but would gently encourage them to have more confidence in themselves rather than deferring entirely to my Committee.

In the exposition with which he responded to the deputy Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. and learned Friend the Paymaster General remarked that the motion was unconstitutional, and I have to say that perhaps it is. However, I increasingly find that the Government themselves advance all sorts of propositions that could be described as unconstitutional in the first place, not least the assertion by some members of the Cabinet that we now have a quasi-presidential system of government. That, I imagine, would be news to Her Majesty. I might ask whether the reading of choice in the Cabinet is indeed Dicey and Bagehot nowadays, or perhaps something a little lighter.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has not requested these powers, but I understand the sentiment behind them. It is the imperative to appoint a new adviser to the Prime Minister on ministerial interests, which, if I am to decipher what my right hon. and learned Friend said earlier, is something that they are keen to do.

I will, if I may, briefly reflect on what happened last week. Lord Geidt appeared before the Committee on Tuesday. He went through an astonishing transformation, it seems, over the course of that week—those who may have been a little critical of his appearance on Tuesday were regarding him as a great national folk hero by Wednesday. I am sure that he was touched by that change of heart. None the less, he certainly had a difficult time, not on the basis of him as an individual—a man of flawless reputation, I might advance, with a distinguished record of public service not least to Her Majesty—but probably because he was defending a sticky wicket. He found the need to bring clarification to the motivation behind his resignation in a letter to me on Friday. It is clear that Lord Geidt is not a political creature, but that is exactly the kind of quality that is needed in the independent adviser.

It should not go without challenge in this House when Ministers appear in the media, but some unhelpful perceptions have been created. I am afraid to say that the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was wheeled out on the radio on Friday—presumably for the nation's entertainment rather than its edification. Her appearance was quite astonishing. I agree with her on one thing though. Let me paraphrase what she said. "Never heard of him", she said. That is quite right. I do not think that the independent adviser to the Prime Minister on ministerial interests should be heard of, because the sort of the work that they undertake should be done thoroughly, but discreetly. It should never capture the public imagination—I think that that is more of a reflection of the times in which we are living, which, largely, are of our own making.

I would further question why my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, felt the need to observe that Lord Geidt had been complaining about the amount of work that he had to do. Well, we know what could be done about that perhaps. All I would say in praise of my right hon. and learned Friend on the Treasury Bench is that he is a

complete contrast to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and I welcome his sensible and considered approach to these matters and indeed the emphasis that he placed in, I think, the urgent question last week, which was that it was vitally important to have such a position filled.

On the question of whether people care, I think that, yes, they do care. The British public are, on the whole, capable of having two thoughts in their minds at once. Yes, they are able—by their own painful experience quite often—to understand the cost of living crisis. Yes, they are entirely able to have empathy and grave concern about the situation in Ukraine, but they are also able to judge the Government on whether they think that they behave—not perfectly, because that is not what people expect—with at least an adequate degree of propriety. I say to colleagues that we might gently remember the Standards Committee report from the autumn, which I thought would have shown that, for many, this was an area of interest that the public thoroughly understood.

I shall conclude briefly, the House will be relieved to know, as this matter does not really need a great deal more from me. Why do we have an independent adviser? It comes from a 2006 recommendation from the Committee on Standards in Public Life. There are practical reasons why these advisers are necessary. It is that they can give objective advice to the Prime Minister of the day. In fairness to the Prime Minister of the day, or the Prime Minister at any time, they have a difficult role in forming a judgment on close colleagues and, indeed, even friends. They need to be able to draw upon and be able to back up their decision with that advice.

I completely support the idea that the Prime Minister has ownership of the "Ministerial Code". It is his code, and it is right that it should be so. We should not be upsetting that constitutional principle. However, we need to make sure that there is an adviser, with the Prime Minister as final arbiter, in a way that allows for that transparency in the difficult decisions that they make.

So, although personally deeply touched by the Opposition's confidence in me, and indeed in the illustrious members of my Committee, I am afraid that I will not actively support their motion, which I know will upset them dearly. But as the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and I go back an awfully long way, to the time when she was union representative at Stockport Council and I was a mere humble councillor for the Hazel Grove ward, I trust that she will take what I have said in the spirit that it is intended. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

5.15 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, of which I am one of the so-called illustrious members and very pleased to be a part.

Only two weeks ago, I spoke in another debate about the importance of standards in political life and how important they are to my constituents. At that time, the Government were trying to move us on, and that has not worked terribly well, but the issues that we are talking about today are important and do matter to our constituents. I said then, as a member of the Committee, that not many members of the public knew about our

[Karin Smyth]

work—the long hours of deliberation, reports and inquiries, and how we had a certain Lord Geidt coming before us shortly. I ended up by saying that because of how our constitution now works and how the Government have behaved, all roads lead back to the chap at the top of the structure. The culture emanates from there, including the non-attendance before Select Committees, the late publication of documents, and the many other examples that were outlined in that debate—so here we are again.

As well as reviewing the evidence that Lord Geidt gave to the Committee last week, it is worth reviewing his post-appointment hearing evidence taken on Thursday 13 May 2021, his name at that point having been alighted on by the Prime Minister following the resignation of his predecessor. In that session, we explored the lessons from Sir Alex Allan’s resignation and the issue of independence and advice. In response to questioning led by my colleague and friend, in this regard, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price)—she is in her place—who asked about recognising that we all have a view on and understand what is good and bad behaviour and what is constitutionally appropriate, Lord Geidt said:

“As I have heard other people say recently, good behaviour is a very difficult thing to legislate for. I join those who suggest that it really needs leaders—of course, the Prime Minister, Parliament and civil servants—to set the necessary example. I hope very much that the work that I do in this role, which is described as “adviser”, will be in the service of advising the office of Prime Minister in the furtherance of that behaviour, taking the Ministerial Code as its point of reference. I agree with you that rules are absolutely not sufficient to stimulate good behaviour.”

We fast-forward to earlier this year and the warnings that Lord Geidt was then moved to give, in the strongest terms he possibly could, in the introduction to his annual report. Before our session last week, on 14 June, I was not sure which Lord Geidt would be before us. Were we to get the one who appeared before us in May 2021, believing, as a chap of the system, I think it would be fair to say, that the system had worked, that his predecessor’s resignation showed that it worked, that updates to his terms of reference gave the independence that was necessary, and that leaders, crucially from the top, set the necessary example; or were we to get the one who was the author of the annual report? Following a fairly intense session of questioning on a number of different issues in the inquiry, we clearly found out just the very next day which Lord Geidt we now had.

Our post-appointment session in May 2021 focused on the issue of wallpaper. Our last session was about a number of things, including the legal advice on the breaking of international agreements. That really is quite a leap, isn’t it, in only a year? I asked particularly about the leaking of legal advice on the breaking of the Northern Ireland protocol. We know that that advice has been leaked. We know that it is a serious breach of the code. We know that this has a profound impact on the UK’s constitution and domestic politics as well as on our international standing. We know that the legal advice is disputed. We know that the doctrine of necessity is extreme. We heard again this morning from experts on international law quite how unusual the new doctrine of necessity that we now have in the protocol is.

In a series of questions, which I am going to refer to, I asked Lord Geidt about where this advice had been leaked from—essentially, whether it was from the Prime Minister or from the Attorney General. I asked him whether he had been asked to investigate that situation. I said that

“we do have a recent leak with regard to the legal advice on the Northern Ireland protocol”,

and asked him whether that constituted “a relevant example” for him to investigate. Lord Geidt said:

“It may well do. You will recall that my new powers are squeaky new and I have not either been asked to or, indeed, pressed my own interest in giving advice in that example.”

I asked Lord Geidt if the Prime Minister

“has not asked you to investigate why that legal advice was leaked”.

Lord Geidt said, “No, he had not.” I asked if the Attorney General was asked how the advice had been leaked? He asked me, “Have I asked?” I said yes, and he said, “No, I have not.” I said:

“But your new powers do allow you to ask”

the Attorney General. Lord Geidt responded:

“I think that my new powers would allow me, unrestricted, to ask questions of the entirety of Government and others.”

I said:

“You raised the issue of the leak”—

he had done that earlier—

“The leak is clearly very serious... I would suggest it breaches the ministerial code, point 2.13. Would you agree?”

Lord Geidt said:

“I have not formed any advice and I have not brought an inquiry to bear on the situation.”

I then asked if he thought it breached the ministerial code. He said:

“Again, I would want to ensure that I could consider that fully before reaching a determination. By the way, as you know, the determination is then only advice to the Prime Minister.”

I asked:

“Have you looked at reaching a determination before?”

and he said, “In this case, no.” We would seem to have been going round in circles.

Part of that emanated from some correspondence from the shadow Attorney General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). She had written to Lord Geidt to ask for advice, and he said he had responded to her, but that had not been received at the time. She has now received an answer, and again we are somewhat going round in circles. Lord Geidt responded to her finally, saying: “In the event of an allegation of unauthorised disclosure of information by persons unknown, it is open to the Government to commission an internal leak investigation where the Government in the circumstances considers it is appropriate, but that would be a matter for the Government to take forward and would not, at least in the first instance, be a matter for the independent adviser.”

We are left on a circuitous route of trying to understand where a very serious leak has occurred. It is a clear breach of the ministerial code that seems to be no one’s job to investigate or move forward. That is simply one example of the very many outstanding breaches of the code now lurking behind the doors of Downing Street. Where do we now go? Ideally, we would like to return to

decency in politics. This motion provides an interim solution. As I said when I intervened earlier, it is up to other hon. Members in this place to come forward with other solutions if they do not think this solution is suitable. The Government are being given a window, should they wish to take it, to do something decent.

Our Committee, as the Chair has outlined, has a long list of current inquiries and a future work programme. We are not particularly looking for extra work, and this is clearly a matter for the Government under our constitution. However, I know that Parliament takes this seriously, and Parliament can and will step up. We will find a way through this to bring decency back into our politics. Again, at the end of these very long days, our commitment is essentially to our constituents. This is being taken seriously by a number of Members of the once great Conservative party. Our commitment remains on the Opposition Benches, and we will continue to pursue bringing back good standards of government, despite what the Prime Minister wishes to happen.

5.23 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): At the outset, I should like to remind the House that I am a member of the Committee on Standards and of the Committee of Privileges. Accordingly, I will keep my comments short and away from any specific incident or series of incidents, or any particular personalities involved or alleged to have been involved, in any particular case or cases. My comments this afternoon relate to our constitutional arrangements and why I am unable to support the Opposition's motion.

I have long championed enhanced standards in this place. I have been instrumental in putting forward proposals to develop our standards processes, and ensure that both complainants and those complained of are given a fair, transparent hearing, with a good appellate system. But I think the comments of my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General should be carefully listened to by all Members of the House. He rightly referred to the separation of powers, an issue that I regularly raise on the Committees on which I serve. It is useful for the House to remind ourselves of what we mean by "separation of powers". It may be trite of me to do this, but some Members have come to me stating that they do not believe that the UK has any separation of powers, so it is important to remind the House of what we mean by separation of powers.

There are, of course, three arms to the British state—three organs of the state: this place, with the House of Lords and the sovereign in Parliament, which is the legislature, whose principal role is to make law; the judiciary, which comprises the courts and tribunals across the whole of the UK, whose principal function is to enforce the law that we make; and the Executive, who are of course a creature of this legislature, but are separate from it. They are separate from it and have their own staff, whom we call civil servants. Civil servants are loyal to the Government of the day and act impartially, but they are not neutral; they are there to further the democratic and legitimate aims of the elected Government of the day.

Part of our democratic and constitutional arrangements is that the Prime Minister of this country, the Head of Government of this country, has very limited defined powers, but one of them is patronage: choosing his or

her Cabinet, choosing those who serve the Government. That includes choosing those who are operationally independent of government but part of the Government. That includes a very large number of people. This place also appoints individuals who are called "operationally independent" of the House, but who are officers of the House. Given that we are having a discussion on standards, let me say that the most obvious office holder who is a creature of the House of Commons—the office is created by this body—is of course the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Notably, the other House of the British legislature has its own Commissioners for Standards, separate from the officer of this House.

So it is imperative that in order to consider how Members might vote on this motion, we clearly understand the delineations of the separations of power. That is why the comments made by the able Minister at the Dispatch Box were absolutely correct; it would be utterly irresponsible to pass a motion that would create confusion and create the very opposite of what we want to see, which is transparency. What would happen is that the legislature would, in effect, be given authority over another arm of the state. We would not dream of appointing a House of Commons adviser on standards to the judiciary, would we? Would we impose our standards on day-to-day operations of the judiciary? That would be absurd. In fact, it would be dangerous.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I share in some of what my hon. Friend is saying, but we are talking about Ministers who are both simultaneously Members of this House and members of the Government. The fact remains that Back-Bench Members of Parliament are subject to more scrutiny through the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards than we have in the current situation with Ministers responsible to the Prime Minister through the ministerial code, unless there is some transparency through a process through an ethics adviser. Will my hon. Friend comment on that?

Alberto Costa: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention because it allows me to clarify what I consider to be an error. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) said that we must have a system of conduct that affects each and every one of us, but we do: all members of the Government are Members of this House or of the other place, and they must abide by a code of conduct. That code of conduct is adjudicated on by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in this place and the commissioners for standards in the other place, as well as the respective Committees on standards.

Most importantly, I should add that, under our system, the de facto sovereign body—the supreme governing body—of our country is this place, ultimately, Ministers are accountable to all hon. Members when they are at the Dispatch Box, and so is the head of Government. Under our constitution, if the head of Government loses the confidence of this House, they lose the role. That is the ultimate conduct check that our system allows for. Any moves to change that system, whatever the intentions might be—they might be noble—ought to be properly debated and consulted on, and must be cross-party in approach. It would be highly irresponsible to force through such a motion, which seeks to fundamentally alter our British constitutional arrangements vis-à-vis the Executive.

David Linden: I would contend that the motion is more an issue of House business than necessarily of the constitution, but we may disagree on that. I want to go back to what the hon. Gentleman said about this place not interfering with the judicial system. Is it not the case that many Conservative Back Benchers, although perhaps not him, would be quite happy to see, for example, the Supreme Court taken out of the equation because it has become unnecessary, unyielding and not helpful to the Government? Are the Government not guilty of trying to interfere with the judicial system?

Alberto Costa: I understand why the hon. Gentleman makes that point, but the counter-argument to that is that this is the locus and the forum for having thorough debates. When the Government of the day make proposals in respect of our legal system—of course the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament are wholly in control of the Scottish legal system, which is another great legal system of the United Kingdom—our respective Parliaments are the arenas to discuss, debate, vote on, challenge and scrutinise them. This motion and this short debate do not begin to scratch the surface of the scrutiny required in those sorts of debates, so hon. Members who are thinking about voting for this motion ought to ask themselves whether this short debate is justifiable in terms of length and scrutiny before making such a change.

I re-emphasise the Minister's point about the accountability of the individual appointed. At present, as I said, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards is an officer of this House and is not accountable to the other place or to the Government; she is accountable to us—this House of Commons. It is wholly unclear in the motion whether, in appointing an adviser, that adviser would hold the same authority as an officer of this House. Would that individual also acquire the right to conduct investigations under parliamentary privilege? Would they have the power to command any witness to appear before them and demand the disclosure of evidence? Exactly what is meant by an "adviser to the Committee"?

PACAC is a distinguished Committee, and it has a distinguished Chair in my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), but exactly what sort of powers does the motion suggest should be given to that putative standards commissioner? That is what I think the motion entails: it creates another standards commissioner.

John Penrose: Does my hon. Friend agree that one worrying thing about the motion is that there is no end date to the adviser's position, once established? Were the adviser to be in place and then the Prime Minister were to appoint his or her own adviser, we would have two different advisers, one advising the Committee and one advising the Prime Minister, potentially arriving at different conclusions from the same facts.

Alberto Costa: Indeed, and of course that emphasises the political motivation behind the motion, which is to create mischief and the very opposite of transparency. It would just create the opportunity to castigate the Executive of the day. I say gently to the Opposition that what is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. We have a mature democracy in our country, and whoever wins at election time—whichever party holds a majority in this House—becomes the Government immediately.

There is no transition period. With this motion we would be seeking to fetter that Executive, and particularly the Head of Government, preventing them from undertaking their important constitutional duties.

For those reasons, and many more that would come out if we had a proper debate on the motion and proper scrutiny of it, I believe that it is deeply misguided. I encourage all Members to put aside party politics and vote it down.

5.36 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard a good discussion today and a good speech by the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), although I do worry that he was dancing on the head of a pin in some of his constitutional reflections.

It is as simple as this: the public have lost trust in the Prime Minister, and 140-plus of his own Members of Parliament have lost trust in him on these matters. Add that to the number of Opposition Members, and a majority of Members do not trust him. This House therefore has a duty to act. That is the constitutional reality, and all the other academic waffle is for the birds. What is important is good behaviour—the system relies on that. The Prime Minister has not behaved as well as he should have done, and his colleagues know that.

It might well be that some actions are excusable, and that they are not all sackable—I mean breaches of the ministerial code rather than the Prime Minister's behaviour—and that is why we need a fair and just system to make that determination. At the moment, the danger is that the public just damn us for everything. Small, vexatious issues are brought up about a Member delaying the registration of an interest here or there, and of course those administrative matters require slaps on the wrist, but they are not resigning issues. The public conflate those issues with serious misbehaviour, whether it be corruption such as trying to appoint friends or family, law breaking or sexual assault.

This place realised that marking our own homework on sexual assault was not good enough—the public will not accept that, however much we dance on the head of a pin about it as a constitutional issue. We therefore had to come up with a hybrid system. Members could have an input and act as a reality check, but the independence of the system had to be guaranteed, complaints had to be investigated and outcomes had to be public. That is what we need in this situation. More importantly, we need a commitment that independent advisers will be appointed and listened to.

The fact Lord Geidt had to clarify his resignation letter because the Government manipulated his words to try to condemn him for resigning over steel tariffs, which he said was not the case, shows the depths to which this Government will go. In that clarification letter, he agreed that

"When the Prime Minister is asking his own adviser to advise on the Prime Minister's conduct it really doesn't work."

How do we, as a Parliament and as the people who fundamentally decide on the Prime Minister's conduct, get our advice? How do we get the information we need, bearing in mind that the Prime Minister's consideration is behind closed doors? We know about this only because Lord Geidt felt he had to resign.

The motion is probably imperfectly worded, and it could probably be improved and tweaked. Our constitution is evolving, and it can always be improved and tweaked. Not only should the Prime Minister have an adviser—I would welcome it if he appointed one—but Parliament should have an adviser and a watchdog so we can decide whether we continue to have trust in the Prime Minister and the Ministers he appoints. That is perfectly constitutional, and those who are trying to make out it is not are misguided. It might not be useful politically, it might be a distraction and it might be unnecessary if we improved the whole system—

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): With a new Prime Minister.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Yes, if we had a new Prime Minister who obeyed the rules and if trust returned because people believed there is good behaviour, I could buy the political argument that Parliament having an adviser might be unnecessary, but we currently have a situation in which a Minister was sacked because of Islamophobia, a breach of the ministerial code. There is meant to be an investigation, but we are none the wiser. The Prime Minister is one of the main witnesses in that investigation, and he will determine how his own witness evidence is balanced against other witness evidence. Surely everyone can see there needs to be independence in the process.

The witness evidence should be balanced and released to the public, even if the Prime Minister still makes the final decision. Surely we can all agree that one of these stages should be made public. As much as people want to talk about the separation of powers, the separation of legislation, law enforcement and deliberation on whether the law has been broken is a fundamental principle of justice in this country.

We currently have a situation in which the Prime Minister writes the rules, the Prime Minister or his proxy starts the investigative process and the Prime Minister determines whether the rules have been broken. That is a fundamental breach of any sort of natural justice, and it is not fair on Ministers who are stitched up for technical breaches, not fundamental breaches, and are sacked for no good reason, while other Ministers who have done the same thing are not sacked because it is politically expedient. That is not fair or natural justice for Ministers, either. It does not protect them.

I am not saying the motion is a perfect solution, but there needs to be a process. Having a process in which a parliamentary Committee can make recommendations is not new. We currently have a system in which certain appointments made purely by the Prime Minister go through Select Committee appointment hearings. I sit on the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which is being offered the opportunity to have greater responsibility, and it already does that in a number of areas, and other Committees do it, too. Our recommendations can be ignored, but at least they are made in public. The motion would make no change to that constitutional provision, but it would make ministerial appointments and abidance by the code open and fair. The motion makes no change to that constitutional provision, but it would make ministerial appointments and abidance by the code open and fair. I do not think that it is unreasonable. I do not think that it is unreasonable

to support the motion, but more fundamentally, it is not constitutional and is only necessary because the Prime Minister has acted badly.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Just a gentle reminder that we still have quite a lot of speakers to get in before the wind-ups start, so below 10 minutes is best—as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) did, after catching my eye.

5.45 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow such illustrious members of a series of Committees, all of which focus on this area and all of which have shown the importance and critical nature of the issue that the motion is trying to address—*[Interruption.]* I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will turn my phone off.

The debate also shows that there is a high degree of cross-party unanimity on the central importance of having somebody in the position of the independent adviser on the ministerial code. It is absolutely essential that everybody, from all parties, who has spoken so far has started from that fundamental principle. Everybody agrees with it. That was why I was delighted at what was said. I think we got there in the end, but I hope that when my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister winds up, with the leave of the House, he will take the opportunity to repeat his comment, which we prised out of him after a number of interventions: that he and the Government agree that a successor to Lord Geidt must be appointed, and must be appointed as promptly as possible. I think he wants a degree of flexibility about the process through which that happens and should the role be split, for example, between people so that we ended up with a panel or something like that. I think he wants the flexibility to allow those changes to be introduced, but the principle that there should be somebody or some group of people—

Michael Ellis *indicated assent.*

John Penrose: Let the record show that the Minister is nodding vigorously. It is essential that we get on the record the principle that the role must be pursued and continued. I think that he has said that already, but I hope that he will take the opportunity to make that clear again in his concluding remarks. It is essential that that is clarified, because a number of us were expecting it to be made clear and I hope that we have heard it and will hear it being made clear again.

An awful lot of the concerns that led the motion to be tabled in the first place would be greatly allayed by such a clarification. People are worried, as there have been briefings in the press saying a successor to Lord Geidt might not be appointed at all, and that it might not be an important position to fill in future. I think that the Minister has already said, and I hope that he will repeat, that that is not true, it is not the way that the Government are thinking and that there will be successors appointed to make sure that that crucial role is filled. It is vital that it is filled, because it is independent, and because the independent reports are made public, it provides not

[John Penrose]

just the Prime Minister but everybody in this Chamber, more broadly in society as a whole and in the press with an independent set of facts on which to proceed, to say, “This happened, this did not; this is serious, that is not,” and from which we can all start our conversations, discussions and debates about essential items of probity, integrity and, ultimately, honesty from a shared base of fact.

I venture to make a suggestion to my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister as he goes around trying to find the successor to Lord Geidt. A number of people have said that that might not be terribly easy at the moment and I have a couple of gentle suggestions that might make it a simpler and easier succession. It might be easier for the Prime Minister to find successors if he were to upgrade the role further than the power enhancements that have already been made. I think he should consider two further enhancements of the role. The first is that the adviser or advisers, whatever format the thing takes—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. I definitely turned my phone off, but it keeps coming on.

The problem is that at the moment, the adviser believes that they must resign if their advice is not followed. I do not think that is the right approach at all—just take the case of Chris Whitty, who was advising the Prime Minister throughout the pandemic. If he had had to resign every single time his advice was not followed, he would have been resigning every week and we would not have got anywhere. Advisers advise; Ministers decide.

Jackie Doyle-Price *rose*—

John Penrose: I will give way in a second.

This is an advisory post, and if the adviser’s advice is not followed, they may decide they want to resign if they are fed up, but they should not feel constitutionally required to do so. [*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. The hon. Gentleman needs to bring his remarks to a close, but we will take one intervention.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I hear what my hon. Friend is saying, but the difference is that ultimately, Chris Whitty’s advice was based on policy. What we are talking about here is behaviour, and whether there are breaches of the ministerial code. That brings the whole area of ethics into much sharper focus.

John Penrose: I take my hon. Friend’s point. All I am saying is that it should not be axiomatic and automatic that the adviser should feel they have to resign every time their advice is not followed. Their advice is made public and is clear, and therefore it should not be automatic that they have to stand down.

Equally—this is also crucial—Lord Geidt said that he did not feel he could offer an independent set of advice on the behaviour of the Prime Minister, alone among all Ministers. Lord Geidt would have felt able to, and did, offer advice independently to the Prime Minister about other Ministers’ behaviour, but he felt he could not do so when the Prime Minister’s behaviour was in question. That is clearly wrong: there should be no free

passes for any Minister, up to and including the Prime Minister, and in the same way that the adviser should not feel duty-bound to resign if their advice is not always followed, they should feel able to offer public advice on whether or not the Prime Minister has erred and strayed. If the adviser’s role is improved in those two ways, I believe that finding a successor to Lord Geidt will be a great deal easier, because the role will be a great deal clearer and more practical to fill.

I will just add one further point about the motion. It seems to me that it does not actually confer any extra powers on PACAC, and the Chairman of that Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), has already said that he is delighted and honoured to be offered these opportunities, but would politely decline them anyway. He does not want this set of powers, and is politely declining the offer that is being made. Because the motion does not offer any extra powers, it would be perfectly acceptable, constitutional, and within the rules of this House for PACAC itself to launch an inquiry into the ongoing discussions and investigations, should it wish to do so. If it felt the position was not being filled fast enough, it could fill that gap.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle *rose*—

John Penrose: I will happily give way to a member of PACAC.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: PACAC has requested a number of times that Sue Gray come in front of our Committee, and we have been declined that opportunity through being blocked by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State. Is that not a problem of parliamentary scrutiny that this motion might help to prevent?

John Penrose: As I read the motion, it does not confer any fresh powers on the Committee, and therefore it would not solve the problem that the hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out. There may be a broader question about whether some people can be compelled to come in front of Select Committees—not just PACAC, but others as well—but this motion does not solve that problem either and therefore, I am afraid, will not move the ball down the pitch at all.

None the less, Madam Deputy Speaker—with apologies for my phone misbehaving throughout—there is an essential point here that I think everybody agrees on. A successor to Lord Geidt must be appointed. I think we have heard that one will be appointed; I hope we will have that reconfirmed in words of one syllable, and while we can allow the Government a little bit of time to decide precisely how and in what form that successor will be appointed, it must be a proper replacement, ideally with the additional powers I have described.

5.55 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When the lawyers are out in force on the Government Benches—with all the references to learned and right hon. and learned Members—you can tell that the Government find themselves in a bit of a sticky situation. I have a degree of sympathy with the Paymaster General, who, if he is not the Minister for “Newsnight”, is definitely the Minister for crisis who has to make statements and answer urgent questions in the House.

We all know that the Prime Minister likes to compare himself to Churchill. On one of his recent holidays, he posed while painting in the exact same way as Winston Churchill. People can compare this Prime Minister to a number of things, but in style of government he is probably more like Lloyd George, who was arguably one of the most centralising Prime Ministers. Many people will be familiar with the garden suburb—these days, they call it the flat suburb, but at least the flat has much nicer wallpaper!

The garden suburb aroused particular hostility, even more so than the activity of Sir William Sutherland and undercover deals with the press and trafficking of titles and honours in return for contributions to Government or party funds. It is funny how history reinvents itself. Critics have also quoted Dunning's famous resolution against Lord North's Government in 1780 that the power of the Prime Minister was "increasing and ought to be diminished". That gets to the heart of the debate, which is symptomatic of a wider presidentialisation of government. To be fair to the current British Government, this is not new—Tony Blair, for example, was keen on sofa government, and there is the idea that Cabinet government started to break down.

One reason why the House feels the need to step in and take control of the situation is that the current Prime Minister is like no one we have dealt with before. Most of us would accept that he has been described by his own colleagues as a bit of a slippery pig that can get out of situations. I do not doubt that, and I would not be surprised if the Prime Minister survives and leads the Conservatives into the next election. There is a great irony, which I will come back to at the end of my remarks, about our reliance on Tory MPs to remove him. This is a Prime Minister who has not played by the rules; perhaps learning from the effects of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, he has tried to clip the wings even of the Treasury. The desire to centralise more and more power to No. 10 was the reason the right hon. Friend Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) stood down as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and it is something that the House should be mindful of.

The Tories would do well to support the motion. I see this as an issue not of tinkering with the constitution but fundamentally as one of House business. The motion delegates powers and tasks to a Select Committee of the House. I know very well the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) and had the privilege of serving on a Committee with him in my first Parliament. I will have no difficulty trusting the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee to fulfil these functions. In many respects, the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) is dancing on the head of a pin somewhat, because he knows fine well that the Minister has not given the undertaking that the Government will move—

John Penrose: I thought I heard it. The hon. Gentleman might not have heard it, but with any luck we will both hear clarification later.

David Linden: I respect the Paymaster General enormously but it will take a lot for him to reassure me about the Government's role on ethics.

When I asked the Paymaster General earlier to define "in due course", he was not able to say that the appointment would take place by the summer recess or the conference recess. We might—who knows—have a general election

in October. I would not be surprised if the Government ended up not appointing an adviser. As they have said before, they are tired of experts. I think they see the role of an adviser as a hindrance, particularly at a time when they will almost certainly have to break international law, albeit in a "very specific and limited way" as the Government like to do in their legislation.

I find some of the contributions I have listened to in this debate a little jarring, with people talking about accountability and respecting the importance of democracy. Let us not forget that this Government have increasingly taken recently to appointing people who are essentially failed election candidates to the House of Lords.

Look at someone such as Malcolm Offord, now Lord Offord, who is now a junior Minister in the anti-Scotland Office. He has given money to the Conservative party, he has not had to have the inconvenience of going through an election and was appointed as a junior Minister to the Scotland Office. Or there is Ian Duncan, a former Tory candidate against my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart). He could not beat my hon. Friend in an election, but he got into the House of Lords anyway. Zac Goldsmith, a friend of the Prime Minister and his wife, who failed in the last election to be elected to this House is in the House of Lords as a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister. When the Tories start to talk about accountability, we should be slightly aware of the context, because it is not a particularly good one.

I have one suggestion I want to pursue. The Government seem to think that the way out of this is talking about an office of the Prime Minister. That is a half-baked suggestion. I do not disagree with having an office of the Prime Minister, but if we are going to have one, they should have something akin to what they have in New Zealand. At the moment, the office of the Prime Minister is merely a rebuttal in a press release; it will create a new office with a new permanent secretary, but who will it be accountable to?

We in this place trust that the Prime Minister is accountable every now and again to the Liaison Committee, but we all know that the Liaison Committee, with the greatest of respect to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire on the Front Bench and the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), is largely an opportunity for Select Committee Chairs to grandstand. If we are going to have an office of the Prime Minister, there must be a mechanism through which we can hold it to account. That is why I think the idea is half baked.

Mr Carmichael: In terms of accountability, does the hon. Gentleman agree that where an allegation of impropriety is made against a Minister and is investigated, as a matter of principle the outcome of that investigation, whatever it is, should be published?

David Linden: In short, yes I do.

The final point I want to make is that, while in many respects this is a very noble motion before the House and I will happily vote for it tonight, there must be a realisation in this place that with the current holder of the office of Prime Minister, politics has changed enormously, and we as Members of the House of Commons are going to have to get used to that. This is a Prime Minister who has defied all the norms of politics, who has now outlived Trump and may go even further.

[David Linden]

I ask Members of this House to remember who the current Prime Minister is. I know I cannot refer to him by name, but on issues of racism he wrote:

“It is said that the Queen has come to love the Commonwealth, partly because it supplies her with regular cheering crowds of flag-waving piccaninnies”.

In 2018, he compared Muslim women to “bank robbers” and “letter boxes” and said he would ask a person with a niqab to remove it before speaking to him. He wrote that single mothers were to blame for producing a generation of,

“ill-raised, ignorant, aggressive and illegitimate children”.

In 2002 he said in a book:

“If gay marriage was OK...I saw no reason in principle why a union should not be consecrated between three men, as well as two men, or indeed three men and a dog.”

The point is that this Government can have all the advisers on ethics they like, but I am fairly sure that if another one is appointed, they will have to resign again. The issue here is not necessarily the role of an adviser for ethics; the issue is that we have a Prime Minister who has no ethics.

We find ourselves in a remarkable situation where, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) just mentioned, a majority of people in this House do not have confidence in the Prime Minister. Remarkably, members of my party are told we cannot have a second referendum on independence, but for hon. Members on the Conservative Benches, the only opportunity they have to remove the Prime Minister is a second vote in a year’s time. That irony is lost on nobody.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): In order to give all the remaining speakers equal time, I need colleagues to stick to about seven minutes.

6.4 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I shall endeavour to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have quite a lot to say on this, because I am so disappointed. The ministerial code really does matter, and it says everything about the leadership and culture of our style of Government that some of the responses to Lord Geidt’s resignation from some quarters of the Government have been rather disappointing. It is really important that everyone in public service abides by the rules of the game. That is what maintains respect and honour in all our institutions.

There are a few messages that I would like to land. The end does not justify the means, and, taking back control does not mean pleasing yourself, must be clear principles. Those two principles need to be looked at in the context of Lord Geidt’s resignation, because he has been clear that he was, in effect, being asked to give the Government a bye to wilfully break their international obligations under law. That is not acceptable, and, frankly, that should not be acceptable for any self-respecting Conservative Member of Parliament, because if there is one thing that we do believe in, it is constitutional propriety. It is about upholding the law, and that is central to the ministerial code. It is really important that we sustain that.

We are the Conservative party, the party of Margaret Thatcher and Churchill, not the party of Donald Trump. That is exactly what we are talking about. If such law breaches are sanctioned—even if there are the best of motives, such as to save our steel industry—I am afraid that sets a precedent for people to use law breaches for much more malevolent intentions. It should be in the DNA of Conservative Members, for whom constitutional propriety is so important, to ensure that we play by the rules of the game, however politically inconvenient, because there is always more than one route to achieve an outcome.

This is fundamentally not British behaviour. If there is one thing in the British DNA, it is a belief in fair play and upholding the rules. Our global reputation is built on our respect for the rule of law and how we have exported that around the world. It is incumbent on all of us to ensure that we uphold the most important standards.

I remind Conservative colleagues that also central to the British brand is belief in free trade, but Lord Geidt felt compelled to resign—he was being asked to turn a blind eye to waiving our obligations in respect of the WTO—on an issue that seems to be the complete antithesis of the ethos underlying why we left the European Union in the first place. The world expected us to be free traders, yet our actions fly in the face of that.

It is essential that the Government, in taking the matter forward, look at who should be the next ministerial adviser—although anybody would be taking a massive reputational risk in taking the job without being offered some very clear guarantees. Perhaps the biggest question mark facing our credibility in government right now is not about policy but about our behaviours. We have had two years of one story after another, with perhaps the most notorious being partygate, and that has led the public substantially to conclude—the jury were already out on us anyway—that we do not live in the real world and, “It is one rule for them and another for the rest of us”. We need to reboot public confidence by actually respecting our obligations under the law and maintaining that the ministerial code is important. Central to that is upholding the law.

My request to the Government is really to take stock. We have seen not just the recent resignation of Lord Geidt—actually, we have lost two advisers on ethics—but the Greensill scandal, which also raised issues about how the ministerial code applies to outgoing Ministers, who are still obliged to abide by it even though there is no sanction to deal with them. We have heard evidence in PACAC from Lord Pickles, as chair of the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, that the volume of inquiries that he is getting is rather more than the small honorarium that his members are asked to deal with.

Essentially, we have got a regime that relies on everybody behaving appropriately. When everybody knows what represents good behaviour, and everybody is prepared to behave and to do the right thing, we can get by with a light-touch regulatory regime. The romantic in me thinks that we still can, but, day by day, that confidence is being diminished. I do not want to see any kind of statutory regulation of Ministers under the ministerial code, but if we are going to avoid that, it is incumbent on the Government to seize and recognise the difficulty

that our current standards regime is in. I ask the Government in all sincerity to properly reboot this and have a proper look at the ministerial code.

By way of illustration, when I became a Minister, the ministerial code was given to me as a flimsy photocopy at the bottom of my first box. No importance was set on it, yet the code should come from the top. We expect the principles of the code to be in the DNA of all our Ministers when they are delivering their obligations and undertaking their duties. This is not just a little bit of PR to say, “Aren’t we all doing terribly well?” This is fundamental to how we should operate our Government, and we need to really articulate that message and have a proper regime for overseeing that.

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will always be here, and we will still shine some light on those issues that we are not very happy about. In fact, we have probably spent more time looking at these things than we ever intended to, being rather more interested in constitutionally nerdy positions than in ferreting out scandals, but I would much prefer that we had far less material in that regard. Institutions such as PACAC and the Committee on Standards are still here. We do not need to go down the road of statutory regulation, but we do need the Prime Minister and all Government Ministers to recognise that the rule of law and upholding the law are not just optional extras; they are essential.

6.11 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): May I say at the outset that Lord Geidt is a personal friend of my family? I do not wish to go any further than that, other than to say that I should like, along with everyone else here, to express my thanks for all that he has done.

What is at stake here, as the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) admirably hinted, is the issue of trust, and I want to give an example of how this works in practice. My predecessor bar two was Robert MacLennan. Bob was first elected in 1966 with a majority of 64 votes. After that, as the elections went by, he increased his majority and stayed as the Member for Caithness and Sutherland and latterly for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross until he retired. What is interesting about Bob’s career is that he changed party twice. He was elected as a Labour Member in 1966. He was then a founding member of the Social Democratic party and was one of the few SDP Members to hold his seat in 1983. He subsequently joined the Liberal Democrats, and that was what he was when he retired. That is most unusual for a politician, but the reason he held his seat was that he was trusted. He was known to be a man of integrity, decency, kindness and diligence. So, trust is crucial in what we are talking about this evening.

We describe ourselves with pride as the mother of Parliaments, but when I have talked to people in my constituency in the last few weeks, they have said, “Can you trust anything that is said in that place? How do you feel about it?” That saddens me greatly, because if we are to be the mother of Parliaments, and if we are to stand up for democracy across the world, we need to know that we do things absolutely by the book and with absolute integrity. If there is any hint that we do not, that damages the reputation of this place, and I regret

that massively. I find myself in agreement with the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), who is no longer in his place. He also came to the nub of the issue when he said that this is about trust and about being seen to do things properly.

If I were to find myself in deep trouble and in a court of law, I would have no hesitation in hiring the services of either the Minister or the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), because I am certain that those august gentlemen would provide me with a most eloquent defence and probably get me off. But we are being looked at by the general public, and the general public are not fools. They are more than capable of coming to conclusions about people. Is this person—he or she—telling the truth? Is this person to be trusted or not? Let me give the House one good Conservative example of somebody who I believe was trusted: John Major. He was seen to be a straight guy and a straight Prime Minister. So trust is there. What I say to the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General is this: be careful. Be careful about clever arguments. Be careful about the use of words that can have all sorts of different meanings, because the British public has no time for that whatsoever.

I agree with other Members. I very much hope and expect that the Minister will clarify exactly what he means about the appointment of a new ethics adviser. That is essential. It sounds a bit apocalyptic but let me say it: I believe the nation is watching right now and at stake is the reputation of this place. If we take it seriously then it matters absolutely not just how we do things or how we are seen by our electorate or the country, but across the world. I await and I hope.

6.15 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The origins of this debate are more than six months old and lie in the farce that was the investigation into the refurbishment of the Downing Street flat. I call it a farce not because I want to undermine Lord Geidt—I cannot hold a candle to the Prime Minister in doing that—but because it is clear that he was led a merry dance by the Prime Minister in the first place, when the Prime Minister failed to disclose a series of crucial WhatsApp messages between himself and Lord Brownlow.

The accidental omission of those messages in the “dog ate my homework” style that must have been forged in the gilded halls of Eton made sure that Lord Geidt was pretty embarrassed that he had been taken for a fool in that way. He said as much in the second letter he wrote to the Prime Minister about the investigation:

“It is plainly unsatisfactory that my earlier advice was unable to rely on the fullest possible disclosure of relevant information.” That is a very polite way of putting it. The nub of it is when he wrote that

“this episode demonstrated insufficient regard or respect for the role of Independent Adviser.”

That was a very clear warning sign about where this was all heading. What did we get then? The Prime Minister, without a hint of irony, wrote back to Lord Geidt and said:

“I very much value your work as my Independent Adviser. The role is critical for the effective government of this country.”

That strikes me as quite a contrast to the position six months later.

[Justin Madders]

It is still not entirely clear, despite what the Minister said, whether the Government believe an ethics adviser is necessary. Even worse, the Culture Secretary said this week that nobody gave “a fig” about him resigning. Well, I certainly disagree with that view most profoundly. Where I find more common ground with the Culture Secretary is when she said that Lord Geidt was always complaining that he had too much work to do. I can well believe that with this Government and this Prime Minister, anyone concerned with ethics would certainly have a heavy workload. Perhaps we need two ethics advisers in future. We find ourselves in a position where six months ago the ethics adviser effectively put the Government on notice that he was very unhappy with the way he was being treated.

Last month we had the annual report from Lord Geidt in which he states:

“It may be especially difficult to inspire that trust in the Ministerial Code if any Prime Minister, whose code it is, declines to refer to it. In the case of the Fixed Penalty Notice recently issued to and paid by the Prime Minister, a legitimate question has arisen as to whether those facts alone might have constituted a breach of the overarching duty within the Ministerial Code of complying with the law.”

There is a pattern here. As with the missing WhatsApp messages, anything inconvenient is ignored in the hope that it will eventually go away. But of course the Prime Minister could not ignore such a clear signal in the report. We need not have worried, because he wrote back to Lord Geidt and said he did not think he had broken the ministerial code and how silly it was for any of us to think that actually breaking the law might also be a breach of the ministerial code. All of us can see the benefits of being judge and jury, and why robust checks and balances need to be in place.

On the resignation letter, Lord Geidt said that an intention to breach the ministerial code deliberately in advance

“would be to suspend the provisions of the code to suit a political end”

and that would make a mockery of the code. I agree with him, but I think we reached the point of mockery of the code when the previous adviser resigned after his recommendations were also ignored. We cannot pretend that what Lord Geidt said there is anything other than a damning statement. For the Prime Minister’s own ethics adviser, appointed by the Prime Minister, to walk away after having his patience tested repeatedly, having warned repeatedly that trust was being eroded, is a state of affairs that should send a shiver down all our spines. Every single one of us in this place who is concerned about the probity of Government, who thinks that it is our job to uphold the law, not to break it, should see that statement as the ringing of the loudest of loud alarm bells.

The ethics adviser is not there to provide cover for the Prime Minister who wants to bend the rules. The ethics adviser is not there to be ignored when the advice proves inconvenient, and the ethics adviser is not there to be made a fool of. They are there as a safeguard for the wider responsibility, which we all have, for the way that politics is done. None of us is here for ever, but while we are here, we need to remember that we are the guardians

of democracy. What we say and where we set the limits of adherence to the rules while we are here matter because they become the starting point for the next generation to work from.

If we do end up in a position where the Government of the day decide that an ethics adviser is no longer needed, or we never get to a point where one is appointed, even though, six months ago, it was said to be a critical position, where does the conversation go after that—to a further erosion of the safeguards that any mature democracy needs? Let us be clear: we do need those safeguards, because democracy is fragile and it cannot be taken for granted; it has to be cherished and defended by us as its guardians. Every watering down of the rules, every reduction in transparency, every erosion of accountability have to be fought against because many Governments want—to coin a phrase—to take back control. Most Governments, however, also have a respect for the rules, understand their place in history and know that having clear rules to which everyone is accountable is the glue that holds our democracy together.

When we have a Government with a track record like this one, it really is up to us to push back against that. Whether it be breaking the law in a specific and limited way, trying to wriggle out of treaties signed, changing the way that the standard rules operate, or excusing breaches of the “Ministerial Code”, this Government have shown, time and again, that they do not think that they need to abide by the rules. However, rules do matter. The rules about how our politics is conducted should be there long after we have all gone and they should not be jettisoned because it is convenient for the Government of the day to do so.

Parliament should be the beacon of fair play. It should be an example for others, both in this country and abroad, to look at and say that, yes, democracy is a good thing, and that it can change people’s lives for the better. Not all politicians are self-serving, but when we see a bending of the rules, the ignoring of them, or the changing of them to suit a short-term political agenda, those looking in on this place can rightly say, “Who are you to lecture us about responsibility? Who are you to tell us about showing leadership?”

Leadership is what this is all about. Those at the top need to behave with honour, to respect conventions and to recognise their wider responsibility to the body politic. That is all put at risk when those in power do not see the importance of that, and the weaknesses in our unwritten constitution become all too apparent. That is when our democracy is diluted, and with a Government who, because of the size of their majority, grow contemptuous of the need for probity and bit by bit dismantle the safeguards that we need, we enter this dystopian world where newspaper stories mysteriously disappear and the Prime Minister tells the world that no rules were broken when they clearly were.

This motion tonight will not reverse the dark path down which we are already heading, but it will slow it a little, and with persistence and, dare I say it, a little more courage from the Conservative Benches, we might begin to reverse it. We owe it to ourselves and to the democratic ideals in which we must all at one time have believed to do just that.

6.23 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Two ethics advisers gone, two months gone—and all the Paymaster General can offer us is a review. No one needs an ethics adviser more than the current Prime Minister. I studied maths, philosophy and economics at university and am therefore intrigued by how many times the Prime Minister is economical with the truth. Ethics is about right and wrong. It is about truth and falsehood. We heard in partygate about a Prime Minister who made the rules and broke the rules. He said that he did not understand the rules and that he did not know how they applied. We do not know whether he was guilty, innocent or drunk.

The situation is that we simply cannot trust the Prime Minister. That is the view of the great majority of MPs. Only 211 Tories voted with confidence in him, so more than two thirds of the nation's MPs have no confidence in the current Prime Minister for what he has done.

Talking of ethics and philosophy, Kant's categorical imperative—I know Members will be thinking of this—states

“act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can... will that it become a universal law.”

In other words, if you are going to have a party, everyone should party, and if they should not, you should not. It is not that complicated. According to Aristotle,

“We are what we repeatedly do.”

So what does that make the Prime Minister? At virtually every Prime Minister's Question Time, he gets up and says that there are half a million more people in jobs than there were before the pandemic—although the Office for National Statistics says that there are 512,000 fewer people in jobs—because he inadvertently forgets to include the self-employed. Was that, in fact, an inadvertent mistake, or was it a piece of choreographed rhetoric to lead people up the garden path? There is a long list of things of this kind which undermine our democracy, this place, and politics in Britain.

Of course, ethics is about outcomes as well. People say, “Haven't we done well on covid?”, but 170,000 people are dead thanks to the policies here, which led to the highest death rate in Europe. People say that the economy is all right, although ours was the worst recovery in the G7, and about 8 million people are hungry and in food insecurity. There is not really any accountability, other than the democratic process. We have just seen the Government provoke an unnecessary rail strike by demanding cuts in wages and jobs. There are alternatives to this. Germany, for instance, is saying that it will give everyone a public transport ticket for a month for €9 to boost the economy and jobs, rather than picking fights.

We have parliamentary privilege here, which means that there are limitations on what the courts can do when we breach the rules. The dampening and watering down of the rules here is therefore problematic, as is, of course, the attack on the judiciary itself. The all-party parliamentary group for democracy and the constitution published a report commissioned by the Rowntree Foundation and prepared by the Institute for Constitutional and Democratic Research. We found that there had been a sustained attack on the courts by Ministers through the media. That is undermining and chilling even the Supreme Court, which has reversed seven of its

decisions in the last two years. This was, of course, getting back at the judges, because they had made various decisions about giving us the right to vote on the Brexit deal. They made the Prime Minister return when he tried to abandon democracy.

What we are seeing is the weakening of internal laws governing the behaviour of politicians here, and, at the same time, an attack on the courts themselves. Meanwhile, there is an attack on international law. The withdrawal from the Northern Ireland protocol undermines our reputation abroad: it means that people such as the Americans do not want to have trade agreements with us. There is an attack on our democratic values and rights, such as the right to peaceful protest. There is an attack on human rights, as we are seeing in Rwanda, and an attempt to pick a fight with the European Court of Human Rights itself, a forerunner to withdrawal from the European convention on human rights—which, of course, was set up by Winston Churchill.

In the round, what we are seeing is a Prime Minister corroding and eroding the rules that govern our behaviour and our ethics, alongside an attempt to disengage from controls that may be applied and to which all countries and all people elsewhere are subject. So we cannot be trusted. “Values” of this sort feed into the hands of people such as Putin, who hate the democracy, human rights and rule of law that we are now undermining.

Lord Geidt has said that the Prime Minister has made a mockery of the ministerial code. He has said that we have broken international laws in the form of World Trade Organisation rules. We urgently need a replacement. No doubt some people will suggest that Lord Ashcroft might be the person whom we need. After all, he revealed David Cameron's relationship with a pig, did he not, and indeed revealed the current Prime Minister's relationship with the lover whom he offered a £100,000 job. [*Laughter.*] People may find these things funny, but they are of course true.

We do need to uphold higher standards here, and, in particular, the Prime Minister should and does not. It is imperative that we get a replacement, and it is imperative that in the interim, at least, we introduce some sort of system. That is what this motion aims to do, and I fully support it.

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

6.29 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): This could have been a very quick debate. The Paymaster General could have stood up at the beginning and just given us a date for when it would all happen—when the adviser would be reappointed, with a lovely timetable attached—and we would all have been happy and could have left it at that. However, I am now, to be honest, more concerned about what is going to happen than I was at the beginning of the debate.

Labour has called this very important debate today because the whole of our ministerial standards system is unravelling before our eyes. Corruption does not arrive in any country unannounced or with a big bang; it creeps and corrodes, and honour and trust, once lost, are very hard to win back. That is what is at the heart of this debate. This Labour motion would put the Government into special measures and ensure that the ethics adviser

[Fleur Anderson]

is recruited as soon as possible and the post is not ditched. We are concerned about the Paymaster General's comments about pausing and reflecting, and about having a review instead of appointing. We want to know that a very clear decision will be made about this adviser position, because otherwise ethics and integrity will slip away.

The Prime Minister is leading the way in being unethical and breaking the rules, and that is why the person whose role it is to hold Ministers to account, to investigate breaches and to stop the rot felt that he had no choice but to resign. The motion calls for urgent action to appoint an ethics adviser because otherwise, quite simply, we do not trust the Government to appoint at speed. We do not trust what Ministers will do without this oversight. We have heard that a review will be conducted before the appointment "in due course". That is very concerning. We know that for this Government it is one rule for them and another for us.

I thank all Members for their excellent contributions, including agreement on both sides of the House that we need this urgent appointment. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who is a member of PACAC, the Committee focused very much on today, outlined the evidence given to it by Lord Geidt on issues from wallpaper to the Northern Ireland protocol to leaks by Ministers under investigation, and the need to bring decency back into our politics. My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle), also a member of PACAC, said that it is quite simple: the Prime Minister has lost the trust of the people and of his own MPs as well. He highlighted the circularity of the process by which the Prime Minister appoints the adviser, and then has to look into evidence given by himself about himself and to be the judge of it. The system does not work; it needs to change.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) talked about how difficult Lord Geidt's position has been and the fact that he said six months ago that there had been insufficient respect for the role of the adviser. Then there were the fixed penalty notice warnings from the adviser, setting alarm bells ringing, as is still the case, that bit by bit probity is being ignored and it is a dark path we are heading down. That is the dark path we want to stop with our motion today. My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) pointed out that Aristotle said:

"We are what we repeatedly do."

He talked about the Prime Minister's corroding of our rules and ethics, the weakening of internal laws, and the attack on international law as well.

We have a cost of living crisis. My constituents and the British public are worried about how they are going to pay the bills, feed their children and get to work. They have to know that Government Ministers are acting in the public's best interests and not in their own interests. They have to know that Government Ministers are not acting in the interests of their families or friends, or party donors, or pub landlords, or their own wives. They have to know that they are acting with impartiality, with no fear or favour.

I realise that the position of the independent adviser will not be an easy position to recruit for, as many hon. Members have said. It will be a tough job description to

put together and a tough job advert to write. Last time it took five months to appoint a replacement ethics adviser, and now Downing Street has been hinting at not reappointing one at all. That is why we have tabled the motion today. The outcome of the review could be not to appoint and that will be unacceptable.

Labour's motion puts an essential backstop in place, so that if the Prime Minister cannot get his act together in two months' time, the cross-party Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee will appoint that adviser. That adviser will be given the powers and information that they need to investigate potential breaches of the code by Ministers, and that adviser will report to the Committee, so that there is transparency, honesty and integrity.

Without anyone in post, with the ethical vacuum that we currently have, there will be no one for Ministers to give their full list of interests to that may be thought to give rise to a conflict. There will be no one to investigate possible breaches of the ministerial code—and there could be many. There will be no one to advise the Prime Minister on the code, which is particularly worrying, given the Prime Minister's seeming lack of literacy in the code, and no one to complete investigations that have been started, such as the allegations of Islamophobia by the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani).

Senior civil servants are also worried. Dave Penman, general secretary of the FDA, the senior civil servants' union, said,

"confidence in the process has been severely damaged. If the prime minister does not intend to replace Lord Geidt, then he must immediately put in place measures to ensure a civil servant can, with confidence, raise a complaint about ministerial misconduct."

We cannot just leave a vacuum at the top—it is far too worrying.

Labour would introduce a stronger standards system. We would appoint at speed, but we would go further. We have called for the expansion of the scope of the statutory register of lobbyists, a ban on MPs taking up lobbying jobs for five years after leaving office, and the establishment of an independent integrity and ethics commission with actual powers, not in hock to the Prime Minister.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport said that voters "don't give a fig". They do give a fig. A recent poll showed that 74% of the public think that the Prime Minister is untrustworthy. That is up by 30% in the past two years. Another survey, conducted on the day Lord Geidt resigned, found that nearly 70% of the public believe that the Prime Minister behaves in an unethical way, with 46% thinking he behaves "very unethically". This is unacceptable. I would counsel the Minister and his colleagues not to insult the British electorate. They do give a fig about honesty; they do give a fig about integrity.

I want to end by asking several hugely important questions that the Minister failed to answer in his opening speech, but I am sure he will come to now. First, can he confirm whether ongoing investigations launched by Lord Geidt will now be completed? Can he confirm whether there would be an interim position or role holder for the ethics adviser if the recruitment process is not completed within two months? When will the replacement be appointed? Can the Minister assure us that there will not be another five-month gap? When is

“due course”? Is it September or October? Is it Christmas? Is it next year? And who is holding Ministers to account in the interim? “Wait and see” is not an acceptable answer. With no ethics adviser in place and no obvious backstop, Ministers are free to do as they please without consequence. It is a blank cheque for bad behaviour. While the cat’s away, the mice will play. This may be an attractive position for the Government, who have always found the rules to be incredibly inconvenient, but it is not attractive and not acceptable to the British public.

I commend the motion to the House.

6.38 pm

Michael Ellis: With the leave of the House, I would like to close this debate.

As set out by the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) in her opening remarks, and for the reasons I explained to the House in my opening remarks, the Government will not be supporting the motion. The Labour party has called the debate to throw mud, but I would caution that those who throw mud often find that some of it sticks to themselves. I would also caution and place on record that the Government remain absolutely steadfast in their commitment to upholding the standards in public life that we all respect, to the critical role that the ministerial code plays in standards in public life and to supporting those standards. On account of that commitment, the Government cannot support today’s motion, which would, counterintuitively perhaps, by proxy, weaken the ministerial code. As I said earlier, it would at the same time change the British constitution by the back door, without consultation and without consideration.

On the appointment of a new adviser, can I answer with this word: yes. The Prime Minister intends to appoint a new ethics adviser and we will announce how that is to be done and who is to do it in due course. But it does have to be done properly and in a way that will ensure that Parliament and the public have confidence in it. I think that I may be asked what “in due course” or “in good time” means. It means doing it right, and getting the right people to come forward, to be interviewed and to go through the process. It means actually getting it right, not just responding to the latest headline. It means making a process that might actually work in the longer term.

David Linden: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, but he knows exactly what is meant by this.

David Linden: I am very grateful to the Paymaster General for putting on record that the Government do intend to appoint an adviser, but can I just push him a little further and ask him to say whether that appointment will take place before, say, the conference recess?

Michael Ellis: The answer is a very simple one: the process will be done properly. It will be done in a way that will give confidence to the system; it will be done in a way that the House, Ministers and everyone concerned will be confident in. So it is not possible to give a particular date for it. After all, it is only a matter of days since this situation came about. What is meant is clear: we are still considering this carefully, and we

remain fully committed to making sure that all Ministers, including the Prime Minister, whose code it is, are held to account for maintaining high standards of behaviour and behaving in a way that upholds the highest standards of propriety, as the public rightly expect.

Karin Smyth: I think that what the Minister is trying to say is that what has gone wrong is either the process of appointing the last two advisers, or indeed the last two advisers—both of which seem to me to be dishonourable things to say, if I may say so—rather than the fact that both have resigned because of the behaviour, as they have admitted, of a Minister and the Prime Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I do not think the hon. Lady was implying that something dishonourable had been said. If she was, I would want her to withdraw that.

Karin Smyth: I withdraw it.

Michael Ellis: I think the hon. Lady misunderstands the position, which I have made perfectly clear and will repeat. This is about getting the process henceforth right—a process that will have the confidence of this House, the Prime Minister, Ministers and everyone else. It is right to consider these things carefully and take time to reflect on them before taking a decision on how best to fulfil the Prime Minister’s commitment. It is the Prime Minister who has made a commitment to ensuring rigorous oversight and close scrutiny of ministerial interests. As I have said, we are looking at the best way to carry out this function, given some of the issues raised recently and set out in our plans. But I could not be clearer when I have given the single-word answer “yes” on the Prime Minister’s intention to appoint a new ethics adviser. We will announce how that will be done and who is to do it in due course. We will make sure it is done properly to ensure that Parliament and the public have confidence.

In the meantime, the Labour party, when its rail strike is in progress, has chosen today of all days to discuss this matter. I suppose half its Members are on the picket lines at the moment, blocking hard-working people from going about their daily business. They debate this matter for the umpteenth time and the umpteenth hour—so much so that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) says that she sees more of me than of her friends. The feeling is mutual, although I think she has far more friends than me, except on the Government Benches, where I have a lot more friends, of course, because the Prime Minister wins elections. He does not talk about personalities; he talks about policies. On policies, this party and this Government win.

Mr Carmichael: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way eventually. I am sure that we all share his aspiration to have a process in future that commands public confidence, but he has not yet mentioned what it was about the previous system that did not command public confidence. What was it?

Michael Ellis: I will leave that to the right hon. Gentleman’s already active imagination, but I would say that not everything is a conspiracy. He should bear in mind the responsibility that he and his party have for

[Michael Ellis]

ensuring that this country's railway system is working correctly and is not subject to industrial action. Why not support the people of this country in doing that? The red herring that he focuses on is symptomatic of where we are with this debate.

I have made it clear that Labour's motion seeks to confuse the constitutional position of this country; it confuses the powers of the Executive with those of the legislature. We propose to move on and appoint an ethics adviser, as I have said. We will ensure that an announcement is made as to how it will be done and who will do it in due course, but I emphasise that it must be done properly. In the meantime, I respectfully caution the Opposition to get their Members off the picket lines and to support the people of this country, which is what this Conservative Government will continue to do.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 161, Noes 252.

Division No. 17]

[6.47 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie	Elmore, Chris
Ali, Tahir	Esterson, Bill
Amesbury, Mike	Evans, Chris
Anderson, Fleur	Farron, Tim
Ashworth, rh Jonathan	Farry, Stephen
Barker, Paula	Fellows, Marion
Beckett, rh Margaret	Fletcher, Colleen
Benn, rh Hilary	Flynn, Stephen
Blackford, rh Ian	Foxcroft, Vicky
Blackman, Kirsty	Foy, Mary Kelly
Blake, Olivia	Gibson, Patricia
Blomfield, Paul	Gill, Preet Kaur
Bonnar, Steven	Glindon, Mary
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Grant, Peter
Brown, Alan	Green, Kate
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Greenwood, Lilian
Burgon, Richard	Greenwood, Margaret
Byrne, Ian	Griffith, Dame Nia
Cadbury, Ruth	Gwynne, Andrew
Callaghan, Amy	Hardy, Emma
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Harris, Carolyn
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Healey, rh John
Carden, Dan	Hendrick, Sir Mark
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Hillier, Dame Meg
Chamberlain, Wendy	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Champion, Sarah	Hollern, Kate
Charalambous, Bambos	Hopkins, Rachel
Cherry, Joanna	Hosie, rh Stewart
Cooper, rh Yvette	Howarth, rh Sir George
Creasy, Stella	Hussain, Imran
Cruddas, Jon	Jarvis, Dan
Cunningham, Alex	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Davies, Geraint	Johnson, Kim
Davies-Jones, Alex	Jones, Darren
Day, Martyn	Jones, Gerald
De Cordova, Marsha	Jones, Sarah
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Keeley, Barbara
Docherty-Hughes, Martin	Kendall, Liz (<i>Proxy vote cast</i>
Dodds, Anneliese	<i>by Pat McFadden</i>)
Doogan, Dave	Khan, Afzal
Doughty, Stephen	Kinnock, Stephen
Dowd, Peter	Kyle, Peter
Duffield, Rosie	Lake, Ben
Eagle, Maria	Leadbeater, Kim
Edwards, Jonathan	Linden, David
Efford, Clive	Long Bailey, Rebecca

Lucas, Caroline	Qaisar, Ms Anum
Lynch, Holly	Rayner, rh Angela
MacAskill, Kenny	Rees, Christina
MacNeil, Angus Brendan	Reynolds, Jonathan
Madders, Justin	Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Mahmood, Shabana	Smith, Alyn
Maskell, Rachael	Smith, Cat
Matheson, Christian	Smith, Jeff
McCabe, Steve	Smith, Nick
McCarthy, Kerry	Sobel, Alex
McDonald, Stuart C.	Starmer, rh Keir
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Stephens, Chris
McGovern, Alison	Stevens, Jo
McKinnell, Catherine	Stone, Jamie
McLaughlin, Anne	Streeting, Wes
McMahon, Jim	Stringer, Graham
McMorrin, Anna	Sultana, Zarah
Mearns, Ian	Tami, rh Mark
Miliband, rh Edward	Tarry, Sam
Monaghan, Carol	Thewliss, Alison
Moran, Layla	Thomas, Gareth
Morgan, Stephen	Thompson, Owen
Morris, Grahame	Thomson, Richard
Murray, Ian	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Newlands, Gavin	Trickett, Jon
Nichols, Charlotte	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Norris, Alex	Whittome, Nadia
Oswald, Kirsten	Williams, Hywel
Owatemi, Taiwo	Winter, Beth
Owen, Sarah	Wishart, Pete
Pennycook, Matthew	Yasin, Mohammad
Perkins, Mr Toby	
Phillips, Jess	
Pollard, Luke	

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Jessica Morden and
Liz Twist**

NOES

Adams, rh Nigel	Caulfield, Maria
Afriyie, Adam	Chalk, Alex
Aldous, Peter	Chishti, Rehman
Anderson, Lee	Churchill, Jo
Ansell, Caroline	Clark, rh Greg
Argar, Edward	Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Atherton, Sarah	Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Atkins, Victoria	Cleverly, rh James
Badenoch, Kemi	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Bailey, Shaun	Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Baker, Mr Steve	Colburn, Elliot
Baynes, Simon	Collins, Damian
Benton, Scott	Costa, Alberto
Beresford, Sir Paul	Courts, Robert
Berry, rh Jake	Coutinho, Claire
Bhatti, Saqib	Crabb, rh Stephen
Blackman, Bob	Crosbie, Virginia
Blunt, Crispin	Crouch, Tracey
Bowie, Andrew	Daly, James
Bradley, Ben	Davies, David T. C.
Braverman, rh Suella	Davies, Gareth
Brereton, Jack	Davies, Dr James
Bridgen, Andrew	Davies, Mims
Brine, Steve	Davies, Philip
Bristow, Paul	Davis, rh Mr David
Britcliffe, Sara	Davison, Dehenna
Browne, Anthony	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Buchan, Felicity	Dines, Miss Sarah
Burghart, Alex	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Butler, Rob	Docherty, Leo
Cairns, rh Alun	Donelan, rh Michelle
Carter, Andy	Double, Steve
Cartledge, James	Dowden, rh Oliver
Cash, Sir William	Drax, Richard

Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Edwards, Ruth
 Ellis, rh Michael
 Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Evennett, rh Sir David
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Ford, Vicky
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hands, rh Greg
 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
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, rh Mr David
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keegan, Gillian

Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kruger, Danny
 Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
 Lamont, John
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Lewer, Andrew
 Lewis, rh Brandon
 Loder, Chris
 Logan, Mark
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackrory, Cherilyn
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 Menzies, Mark
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Damien
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Morton, Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Patel, rh Priti
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, Chris
 Pincher, rh Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, rh Dominic
 Randall, Tom
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rowley, Lee
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Shelbrooke, rh Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, Greg

Smith, rh Julian
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tracey, Craig
 Vara, Shailesh

Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallis, Dr Jamie
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike
 Young, Jacob
 Zahawi, rh Nadhim
Tellers for the Noes:
Alan Mak and
Michael Tomlinson

Question accordingly negated.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):
 With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 2 and 3 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Government (Exclusion of Non-commercial Considerations) (England) Order 2022, which was laid before this House on 25 May, be approved.

ENERGY

That the draft Smoke and Carbon Monoxide Alarm (Amendment) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 11 May, be approved.—(*Marcus Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will take motions 4 and 5 together.

Ordered.

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

That Matt Vickers be discharged from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee and Sara Britcliffe be added.

PETITIONS COMMITTEE

That Katherine Fletcher be discharged from the Petitions Committee and Scott Benton be added.—(*Sir Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION
Universal Credit Deductions

7.2 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Many of my constituents in the Carmyle area have been in touch to raise awareness of research from the Child Poverty Action Group that shows that approximately 5,000 households in the constituency claiming universal credit are receiving on average £58 less each month. That affects 4,400 children in Glasgow East, including in Carmyle.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reduce Universal Credit deductions and allow families to access more of their Universal Credit award.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Glasgow East,

Notes that analysis by CPAG shows that in the constituency of Glasgow East there are approximately 5,000 households claiming Universal Credit who are receiving on average £58 less each month than they are entitled to because of automatic deductions; declares that these deductions affect an estimated 4,400 children; further that immediate changes to universal credit deductions must be made in order to allow families to access more of their universal credit award, which will in turn ease the pressures of the cost of living crisis on struggling families; further that having to repay a universal credit advance which sustains claimants through the five week wait for the first universal credit payment, is the most common reason for a deduction; further that every month, families across the east end of Glasgow lose a total of £153,000 from their UC payments to service advance debts to the DWP; further that a further £31,238 is paid by UC claimants to HMRC for historic tax credit overpayments; further that the British Government should reduce the maximum deduction rate for government debts to 5 per cent of the UC standard allowance, in line with other creditors; further that the British Government should also reduce the cumulative level of deductions taken from peoples' benefits from the current 25 per cent down to 15 per cent, and further that this cost-neutral intervention would provide up to £53 more a month for a couple and up to £33 more a month for a single person or lone parent.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to reduce Universal Credit deductions and allow families to access more of their Universal Credit award.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002738]

**Battersea Funfair Disaster:
Child Trauma Support Services**

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

7.3 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): This year is the 50th anniversary of the Battersea funfair disaster. I want to start by remembering the victims, their families, and the survivors. I also want to pay tribute to and thank two of the survivors, Hilary Wynter and Liz Haigh-Reeve, for their tireless campaigning to have the tragedy recognised and remembered.

The Big Dipper rollercoaster was the main attraction of the Battersea Park funfair which opened as part of the festival of Britain. Tragically, on 30 May 1972, a carriage of the rollercoaster broke loose and plummeted backwards through a barrier killing five children—Alison Comerford, Thomas Harmer, Shirley Nash, Debora Robertson and David Sait—and leaving 13 injured. The disaster is one of the deadliest rollercoaster crashes in history. However, it has largely been forgotten and there has been no justice for the victims, their families and the survivors.

To mark the anniversary of the disaster, I attended a special memorial ceremony together with families and survivors in Battersea Park where a plaque was unveiled and a tree was planted. That is the first step to creating a new legacy and a permanent memorial.

There is another silent tragedy associated with the incident, on which I will focus the rest of my speech. It is something that I am determined to change. Survivors have spoken about the devastating impact that childhood mental trauma has had on their lives. As one told me, “bones are mended, physical injuries fixed, but the dreadful damage to our mental health goes untreated.”

Damage from trauma is not necessarily skin deep: some wounds penetrate through to our minds, leaving lasting damage that can be just as debilitating. Although the funfair and the big dipper are long gone, some of the survivors of the disaster still struggle to go to Battersea Park, and have been unable to shake off their horrific memories of that incident. I am sure many survivors of other tragedies, such as Hillsborough, the Manchester Arena terrorist attack and the Grenfell Tower fire, have been through similar experiences.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate on childhood trauma support services. I would mention helpfully to her, and probably to the Minister as well, that we in Northern Ireland have faced 30 years of a terrorism campaign during which many young children, women and men have lost their lives. Such trauma can last way beyond the time that it happened. Does the hon. Lady agree that some discussions with the responsible Minister in Northern Ireland might be helpful when it comes to devising a policy and a strategy to address trauma and child mental issues, which I know she wishes to see?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Gentleman is right: we can all learn, and it would be useful for the Minister to say whether she would like to meet Ministers in Northern Ireland to look at what works well.

Childhood trauma can have a lifelong effect, and can have lasting consequences for a child or young person's development, including psychological, behavioural and emotional problems. Those problems can occur into and throughout adulthood, presenting related challenges in many aspects of that person's life. According to the UK Trauma Council, childhood trauma refers to the ways in which some events and experiences are so extreme that they overwhelm a child's ability to cope. Many different experiences can lead to such trauma: for example, physical or sexual abuse can be traumatic for children. One-time events like the tragedies I have mentioned can take a psychological toll on children as well. Ongoing stress such as the effects of the pandemic can also be traumatic for a child, even if it just feels like everyday life to an adult.

We know that the pandemic has had a huge negative impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The Children's Commissioner's Big Ask survey found that one in five children was not happy with their mental health, and that figure rose to two in five for some groups. Childhood trauma does not have to involve experiences that are directly related to the child: for instance, watching a loved one endure major issues can be extremely traumatic, as has been highlighted by the impact of the cost of living crisis on children's mental health. According to the Childhood Trust's latest report, 47% of children surveyed felt stressed, 21% of parents said that their children smiled less, and most concerningly, 9% of parents claimed that their children had started self-harming. The results of that report should worry us all, as all those types of trauma will affect children's development and wellbeing.

The Government need to invest in mental health services to ensure that children who experience trauma today do not face the same painful ordeal that survivors of the Battersea funfair disaster have gone through over the past 50 years. Spending on children's mental health remains behind investment in adult mental health services. It is worrying that children and young people's mental health services are among the most under-resourced and that the quality of care varies between different parts of the country. A BBC freedom of information request revealed that 20% of children are waiting more than 12 weeks to be seen for mental health support. That is why I was pleased to secure this debate on better provisions for children's mental health services and childhood trauma.

The Government need to correct the historical underinvestment in children and young people's mental health and the postcode lottery of services and support provision. To do that, they must create a comprehensive child mental health strategy, and childhood trauma services must be prioritised as part of that. The UK Trauma Council has called for the Government to invest in the development and delivery of specialist trauma provision so that children and young people have access to the support that they need. It also called on the Government to equip all professionals who work with children and young people with the skills and capacity to support those who have experienced trauma.

Labour has already set out its plan on tackling the mental health crisis, which includes giving adequate funding to mental health services. We have also committed to radically expanding the mental health workforce, including, crucially, investment in children's mental health

that includes putting open-access mental health hubs for children and young people in every community and ensuring that a full-time mental health professional is in every secondary school and a part-time professional is in every primary school.

Labour's focus on early intervention is so important, because it can prevent the ongoing effects of trauma into adulthood. It would ensure that children are properly supported and resolve problems before they escalate. I will therefore ask the Minister about the Government's plan for children's mental health services and, specifically, childhood trauma care. When will her Government introduce a comprehensive child mental health strategy that includes prioritising trauma and investment in the development and delivery of evidence-based trauma service provision? How are they ensuring that children's mental health services are a high priority in the NHS? That includes increased investment.

The Government have made £139 million available to support children and young people's mental health in the community, but we need to see more investment. How are the Government working with professionals in contact points including in schools and the third sector so that children can access support when problems emerge?

Much work also needs to be done to ensure that every child and young person gets the support that they need for their mental health and wellbeing. We need to step up as a society and be more ambitious in our call for better support for children and young people's mental health. More funding and resources will be an investment in our children's future. It is time for the Government to act and listen to the voices of children and young people, especially those suffering from trauma. If we do not act now, when will we?

7.13 pm

The Minister for Care and Mental Health (Gillian Keegan): I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing the debate. I must admit that I was not aware of the tragic events that unfolded 50 years ago, on 30 May 1972, and I am sure that others were not, either, so it is fantastic that she secured the debate to remind us all. However, I discussed it with my husband when I got home last night. At the time, he was a 10-year-old boy growing up in London. He was very much aware of what happened and he vividly remembers it. What should have been a happy day in Battersea Park, on the bank of the River Thames, resulted in five children losing their lives and a further 13 being injured, and it shocked many more. I very much hope that the survivors' campaign for a permanent memorial in Battersea Park is ultimately successful, so that that terrible event is never forgotten—maybe that is the plaque the hon. Lady referred to, or maybe there is something else that they are still campaigning for.

Undoubtedly, many affected by the Battersea funfair disaster will have suffered from what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, but let us not forget that PTSD was not even added to the International Classification of Diseases until the '80s, and guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence was not published until 2005. Events have taught us that people affected by any traumatic incident must be able to access timely mental health support when and if needed, but I am not sure there was the same understanding all those years ago.

[Gillian Keegan]

Luckily, PTSD can be successfully treated even when it develops many years after a traumatic event. The treatment depends on the severity of symptoms and how soon they occur after the traumatic event. The hon. Lady reports that survivors of the tragedy remain concerned that mental health support for children who have suffered trauma has not changed much since 1972. I too would be very concerned if that was the case, but I must respectfully disagree with that assessment.

If a child has witnessed or experienced a traumatic event, it is quite natural for them to be stressed, upset or frightened. That should not usually last beyond four weeks, but if it does, it may indicate post-traumatic stress disorder and it is then important to seek help via their GP. There are now some really effective treatments, including cognitive behavioural therapy, for children and young people who are experiencing the effects of trauma.

To respond to the hon. Lady's specific question, NHS England and NHS Improvement have issued guidance on responding to the needs of people affected by incidents and emergencies, which stresses that plans for incidents and emergencies must provide psychosocial and mental health care for people affected, since early intervention for people at risk of developing mental health problems may reduce their severity and chronicity and, ultimately, related costs.

In general, psychological support can be accessed four to six weeks after the event for those who are exhibiting signs of needing professional help, as per NICE guidelines. Those who require urgent support may be referred to services sooner than that, and it is important to ensure that messaging about support services is appropriate. Not all people need psychological support, and many recover over the course of time without specific interventions, but it is still important that such people continue to look after their health and wellbeing after a traumatic incident. That includes getting enough rest, eating well, returning to their routine and staying connected with others.

Marsha De Cordova: I just want to ask about the support that is available via NHS England and ensuring that it is available, as the Minister says, within a four to six week period. Can she assure me that that is actually happening? Is there any evidence base to ensure that children who experience trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder are getting that support in a timely fashion?

Gillian Keegan: Yes, and of course we always try to ensure that, as the targets we put in are worked throughout the system, those targets are met. That is why we measure those things. Maybe it would be helpful to the hon. Lady if I gave some recent examples. In the wake of the Manchester Arena terrorist attack, which sadly affected many children and young people, the Greater Manchester Resilience Hub was set up to provide a central point for mental health advice for those directly affected, including children and emergency responders. The hub worked with other agencies to develop packages of care.

In response to the tragic fire at Grenfell Tower, more than £10 million has been spent on treating the mental health of those affected. In the year after the fire, 2,674 adults and 463 children were screened for symptoms of

post-traumatic stress disorder, and the St Charles Centre for Health and Wellbeing was opened up so that those affected could be treated in dedicated therapy suites. I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that we have seen a dramatic change in both attitudes towards mental health since the days of the Battersea disaster, and the NHS services available to support people with their mental health.

Jim Shannon: I am very encouraged by what the Minister has just said. In my intervention on the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) I suggested some contact with the authorities in Northern Ireland, which unfortunately have a long 30 years' experience of trauma, especially among children. Has that happened?

Gillian Keegan: I have not met my counterpart in Northern Ireland but, having heard the hon. Gentleman's intervention, I sent a WhatsApp message to request that a meeting be set up, because it is probably long overdue. We can learn a lot from each other, and I am always keen to learn from anyone I can.

Over the past 50 years, we have seen the transformation of NHS mental health services for children and young people. From the passing of the Mental Health Act 1983 and the establishment of mental health trusts to more recent developments including the Time to Change campaign, which between 2007 and 2021 helped to improve the attitudes and behaviours of some 5.4 million people towards those living with mental health problems, these are all important steps along the way towards destigmatising mental health.

The publication of the five-year forward view for mental health in 2016 made the case for transforming mental healthcare in England. The implementation of the "Transforming children and young people's mental health provision" Green Paper from December 2017 has seen the introduction of senior mental health leads and mental health support teams in schools and colleges. We regularly talk about that programme, and I am sure it will make a massive difference to young people, particularly those affected by the pandemic. The 2019 NHS long-term plan commits to expanding and transforming mental health services in England so that an additional 345,000 children and young people will be able to access NHS-funded specialist mental health treatment by 2023-24.

We are continuing to build up those services and the staff, as in some cases demand outstrips supply. As part of this work, we have all-age 24/7 urgent mental health helplines in all areas of England so that people experiencing a mental health crisis, or those worried about someone experiencing such a crisis, can speak to a trained professional. The helplines were established during the pandemic, so they are a relatively new addition to the landscape, but I am sure they are very welcome because many people have sought these services.

We are also accelerating the coverage of mental health support teams in schools and colleges from the 287 currently in place to over 500, covering around 35% of pupils by 2023-24. There are currently 16 mental health support teams operating in or planned for south-west London, so they have already started to roll out.

Our hard-working NHS community mental health services treated over 420,000 children and young people in 2020-21, an increase of around 95,000 on the previous year, so we can see there has been a massive increase

in demand for these services, which is why we are working very hard to try to build up the mental health workforce.

Although none of us wishes to see a repeat of the events in Battersea Park and the many things that have happened since, not only in mental health but in safety, I assure hon. Members that the NHS will always be there to support the survivors of such tragedies. However, it is important that we never forget. I am therefore

grateful to the hon. Member for Battersea for securing this debate and for making us all aware of something that happened. This issue is important to her constituents, and this debate will ensure that we all remember the tragedy and learn from the events of that day.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 June 2022

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

World Press Freedom Day

9.30 am

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered World Press Freedom Day 2022.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. In the 21st century, speaking truth to power is an increasingly dangerous business. While we have in our minds the war in Ukraine and Russia's atrocities in that country, I want to start the debate by remembering the eight journalists who, as they have gone about trying to show the world the truth of Russia's atrocities in that country, have been murdered in their line of work. Frédéric Leclerc-Imhoff, a French journalist working for BFMTV, was killed on 30 May 2022. Mantas Kvedaravičius, a documentary film maker, was killed on 2 April. Maks Levin, a photo reporter for Reuters, was found dead on 1 April. Oksana Baulina, a journalist for *The Insider*, was killed on 23 March. Brent Renaud, a documentary film maker, was killed on 13 March. Oleksandra Kuvshynova was killed on 14 March. Pierre Zakrzewski, a journalist for Fox News, was killed on 14 March. And Evgeny Sakun, a media assistant for the Kyiv Live TV channel, was killed on 1 March.

They are among the 29 journalists and two media assistants who have lost their lives in their line of work this year so far. There have been eight in Ukraine and eight in Mexico. There are also atrocities against journalists and suppression of journalists' voices elsewhere in the world, particularly among the freedom movement in Hong Kong, and in Ethiopia, where commentary on the brutal civil war has been banned by the Government. These people are trying to inform the world and inform the communities that they serve of the truth of what is happening, and for it they are losing their lives.

When we had the debate last year on World Press Freedom Day and also strategic lawsuits against journalists, I mentioned the case of Catherine Belton, and it is nice to know that people do listen to these debates when we gather together in Westminster Hall. In that case, the person who listened to it was a public relations representative, working for Roman Abramovich, who wanted to call me in to speak about what a great humanitarian he was and why some of the issues raised in Catherine Belton's book, *"Putin's People"*, did not accurately reflect those issues as he saw them. They say a week is a long time in politics. A year is an eternity, and the work of journalists such as Catherine Belton highlighting the activities of Russian oligarchs such as Roman Abramovich has now come to much fuller attention and, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, some of these issues are taken much more seriously now than they were a year ago.

We now take much more seriously the web of networks and influence of highly wealthy people, particularly oligarchs from countries such as Russia, and the way they have sought to suppress commentary and suppress

the active work of journalists to hold them to account. It is right that, under the sanctions regime, the use by such people of London lawyers and London PR firms has been restricted, but we must recognise that that has also been a considerable issue in the suppression of free speech and a free press brought about by wealthy people using British courts to close down British journalists speaking truth to power. The Government want to bring in new legislation, particularly with regard to strategic lawsuits and the abuse of the courts to silence commentary in the press. It is important that we consider a wide range of issues, such as the need for a proper register of people who work for foreign Governments but work in the UK without declaring that interest, as we create a much better legal framework for journalists to operate in.

Since the outbreak of war in Ukraine, we have also been reminded of just how vital our own news-gathering services are. I was pleased to see the Government award an additional £4 million to the BBC World Service to support its commentary on the war in Ukraine and political relations in Belarus and in Russia in particular. Even though the Russian Government have sought to close down British reporting and the BBC in those countries, we have still been able to help people to access the news from the BBC through alternative routes. Some people are using, and have been shown how to use and download, VPNs—virtual private networks—so that they can still access BBC services from within Russia without the knowledge or sight of the Russian Government. The use and the ability of our infrastructure to report news, to share news and to get truth to people around the world is increasingly important, and it is right that we continue to support strongly the World Service and the work of British journalists around the world.

We are seeing an important change in the UK as well with the introduction of the Online Safety Bill, which is currently before Parliament, and in the Queen's Speech, the commitment from the Government to bring in competition legislation in the digital environment is very important as well. First, with regard to digital competition, it is right that all journalists and news organisations have a fair opportunity to reach their audiences, and that all those organisations have the right to be fairly compensated for the use of their media.

One of the biggest acts of suppression of journalistic voices in the past 20 years has been the demonetisation of media as a consequence of the aggregation of social media platforms. It is much harder for newspapers to make money as they used to, by selling advertising to place against news stories to pay for the journalism that goes into reporting them, if they cannot be remunerated. The way in which social media platforms aggregate news by allowing people to share stories but not sharing any of the data or information about that news and information with the journalists and the news organisation that created it in the first place has taken a lot of money out of the market.

We have all seen our own local news organisations hollowed out. They are much smaller than they used to be and can employ far fewer journalists. That has affected national as well as local media, and we should take that issue very seriously. The introduction, through competition legislation, of a news bargaining code, similar to the one already created in Australia, will be

[*Damian Collins*]

hugely beneficial to media in this country. It will mean that the big tech platforms such as Google and Facebook will have to make a contribution to the news organisations whose content they profit from but do not currently share the benefits of that profit with.

The code has been introduced in Australia with considerable impact. It is enabling news organisations to hire journalists again and to beef up their reporting capability in a way that they could not have done before. Canada is looking at introducing such legislation, and it will be welcome if we do that in the UK, too.

The second point about the Online Safety Bill is the protection of freedom of speech and the journalism that can exist within it. The Government have been asked, through the report of the Joint Committee that I chaired, to create a provision that journalistic content from a recognised news organisation should be presumed to have a right to be carried on platforms. It should not be for major social media platforms to become the editor-in-chief of what the free press can write about. There is a great danger that if platforms decide to strike down news content because they disagree with it, that content will not reach the audiences for which it is intended.

In the modern world a media organisation cannot not use services such as Facebook and YouTube to reach their audiences. There should therefore be a presumption that the news content produced by a recognised news organisation has the right to reach its audience, whether it is in line with the platform policies of a company or not. News content should have such an exemption because there are already existing routes to complain or take action against legitimate content when it is there. Ultimately, a news editor is legally responsible for all the coverage that they endorse and place in their publication. There are complaints procedures that people may use if they are unhappy with a story that has been written.

Ultimately, the mark of journalism is that people put their name to what they write. People are accountable for what they say and the stories that they tell to the world, and they can be challenged. Much of what is called journalism that exists on social media often does not correspond to those aspects at all. It is often produced by nameless, faceless people and organisations that do not exist, who seek to hide their identity in order to spread lies and disinformation. We have struggled to hold such people to account for the stories that they tell. In fact, a report and study produced by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate during the pandemic traced back most of the anti-vax disinformation in the world to just 12 sources that used their platforms to propagate disinformation around the web.

So we have to think about how legitimate journalism, written by credible journalists, can have the opportunity to reach an audience when it is competing not just against the forces of demonetisation, taking away the revenue that it should generate from producing good stories, but also against a wall and sea of disinformation that is propagated online. One way in which we can protect that is by ensuring that the news organisations are recognised, that they have a right to be carried, and that when their stories are there and are carried they can be challenged or disagreed with, not just struck down.

In the report of the Joint Committee that I chaired on the Online Safety Bill, we recommended that there should be a presumption to carry. The Government have said that they are interested in introducing special provisions in the Online Safety Bill requiring an online media platform that sought to take down a piece of journalistic content that it disagreed with from a recognised news organisation to give notice to the news company before doing so, and a period of time for an appeal process would be allowed. However, I think we can and should go further and say that there should be a presumption to carry, so that proper journalism from accredited news organisations can reach the audiences that it deserves.

It is now more important than ever that people have the opportunity to be challenged by issues that they disagree with, and that the funnels of social media through which people consume news, which tend to give people more extreme versions of what they agree with, can be challenged with alternative opinions. One of the benefits we have seen from the very brave work that journalists are doing, particularly in a war zone such as Ukraine, is that it is becoming harder and harder for states to suppress real news and information within their countries. The Ethiopian Government cannot cover up the atrocities that are taking place on a daily basis in Ethiopia, because of the way in which citizen journalists and others bring such information into the public domain. Similarly, film from within Ukraine about what is really happening on the ground and in cities such as Mariupol—reported by journalists some of whom I named at the beginning of the debate—cannot be suppressed when people can bring it to the world. We should be opening up those channels and making sure that their voices have a right to be heard.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I had not intended to intervene in this debate, because I am afraid that I have to leave. My hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on the Online Safety Bill; I am chairing it in Committee, so I am not allowed to speak about it. Before he sits down, will he pay tribute not only to the people who we see on “ITV News”, “Sky News” and “BBC News” every night from Ukraine and who are incredibly brave, but to the cameramen and soundmen behind them, who are unseen and unheard but equally brave?

Damian Collins: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. As I said at the start, 29 journalists have died, as have two media assistants—exactly the sort of people he refers to. They work together on the frontline, and without the work of those production assistants, the stories that people seek to tell simply would not be heard, because they would not reach their audiences. It is absolutely a team effort. My right hon. Friend is right to say that sometimes we focus on the journalist we see on the screen, but they are just one person in a team who are integral to bringing that truth and that story to the world, and we should remember them as well.

The flashpoint of a war brings home the importance of truth and news. It brings home the reality of the suppression of free media in a world in which we seem to have an increasing number of authoritarian Governments, more restrictions on media and reporting,

and a greater challenge to democracy. There is a lot more to being a democracy than holding elections, and the ability of people to speak truth to power, to challenge Governments with information that they do not want to hear, and to tell their stories is increasingly important. We have to acknowledge the fact that democracy is in retreat in many parts of the world. The first sign of that retreat is the suppression of the free press, which is why our ability to discuss that today in this House is so important.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate may last until 11 o'clock. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench speakers no later than 10.27 am, and the guideline limits are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition, and 10 minutes for the Minister. Damian Collins will have two or three minutes at the end to sum up the debate. Until 10.27 am, we are in Back-Bench time. Five very distinguished Back Benchers are seeking to contribute. I do not wish to impose a time limit, but if everybody keeps themselves to about eight minutes, everybody will have an equal share of the debate. The individual who will lead by example is Kenny MacAskill.

9.43 am

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins). His speech was not just wide-ranging, but remarkably interesting and erudite. I congratulate him on bringing all those aspects to our attention, and I concur with him.

We are in difficult times, and it is important that we hold power to account so that the truth will out. To do so, we need to ensure that those who seek to expose it—often benevolently, and certainly under difficult circumstances—are protected. That is why I pay tribute to those whom the hon. Gentleman mentioned, but I would also put on record the Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, who was sadly murdered by Israeli Defence Forces not that long ago. I was glad to see on Al Jazeera at breakfast time this morning that the matter is being pursued by the news organisation at the International Criminal Court.

The comments I want to make relate to our own country because we are not immune—either in the UK or, indeed, in Scotland. We are in a better position with regard to what is happening in Israel with the Palestinians and those who seek to report on that, and we are in a better position, obviously, with regard to what is happening in Ukraine, but we are by no means a paragon of virtue and we must ensure that we uphold the standards here, which brings me to the case of Julian Assange. I know that others will be commenting on it. The case is important because Mr Assange has brought power to account. He has exposed war crimes, as well as a lot of other malevolent actions—not simply by the United States of America, but by other Governments, including our own, but also, as I will go on to describe, the Government of Sweden.

I read with interest the book, which I think all MPs were sent, by Nils Melzer, "The Trial of Julian Assange". I did not know of Mr Melzer before that, but he is the

UN special rapporteur on torture. He narrated his journey to his conclusions about Julian Assange, and spoke out vehemently against what had happened. I share his position.

When I first heard of Julian Assange, I was surprised. There was reporting of a sexual misdemeanour in Sweden, a country I know well. One of my best friends in Edinburgh was the Swedish consul general, who I still keep in touch with although he has returned to Sweden. My son studied for two years in Gothenburg—not at the Chalmers University, which is a legacy of Scottish immigrants, but at the University of Gothenburg. I was and remain a big fan of Swedish social democracy, and indeed of Olof Palme. Surely this could not have happened in Sweden. Surely Sweden would not be involved in anything that was duplicitous or wrong. The sad thing is that it was. Clearly, Sweden has now exonerated and the investigation of Mr Assange there has come to an end. I have to draw the conclusion that Mr Assange exposed the fact that the Swedish security services were narrating that they were doing things and co-operating with the USA in a manner that their Government did not know about and probably would not have approved of, which may have had something to do with it.

What occurred with regard to Mr Assange in Sweden was shameful, and the United Kingdom is being both supine and sadly complicit in his return to the United States. He has committed no offence in the US other than to expose its war crimes. The US has given an assurance that it will not execute Mr Assange, but we know from the attitude of the US that he is unlikely to see the light of day from a federal prison if he is sent there, and given his current state of health he is unlikely to survive. It is simply unacceptable that we should have had the ongoing UK Government collusion, through the Ecuadorian embassy, with the US, and indeed even the US contemplating a hit job—to put it in its parlance—upon Mr Assange in this country.

Equally, we have to challenge some of the media reporting in this country. I, too, was shocked when I saw Mr Assange looking like some wild man of Borneo, being brought out of the Ecuadorian embassy. That did challenge people's assumptions about who this person could be—somebody so dishevelled and who could appear like that. How could anybody possibly have any faith or trust in him?

Only when I read the book did I realise that Mr Assange had been detained, that the Ecuadorian Government had changed, that their attitude had changed, and that they had refused to allow in any cleaning equipment, as well as refusing him access to scissors or shaving items. Mr Assange looked like that, not because he chose to appear in such a way, but because he was deliberately set up so that when he was forced out of the Ecuadorian embassy his looks would leave people aghast and turn them against him. That was deliberate manipulation of the media, which is just as bad as a failure to report the truth.

I am conscious of time. I would have liked to say that my own country was exempt. I served for 20 years as a defence agent in Scotland and was proud of Scotland's distinctive criminal justice system, and indeed its legal system. I also served for almost eight years as Justice Secretary, but something has gone fundamentally wrong, not with regard to Julian Assange, but with the situation of Craig Murray.

[Kenny MacAskill]

Craig Murray has spent almost six months in a Scottish prison for a reporting offence, while others who did similarly were not punished or even brought before the court. I shall leave that matter aside, as Craig Murray will seek to raise it with courts in Europe as appeal in Scotland is precluded, but the logic of Lady Dorrian, the presiding judge, in the actions taken by the prosecutors in Scotland was fundamentally wrong. They took the view that the mainstream media were all perfect—given what I have mentioned about Mr Assange, I have to wonder about that—but that bloggers were in a different category and should be treated differently. As the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe said, we are in a changing world. There are obviously issues with Twitter and social media platforms, with anonymous sources. The points made about those who post anti-vax content are quite correct; such material cannot be given any basis, support or substance. However, Mr Assange was quite clear in his facts. They were checked; everything was there. Mr Murray was doing something not dissimilar to what others had done, and yet he was singled out and picked on.

Her ladyship seemed to be suggesting that no cut or guarantee could be given, and that somehow the mainstream press were to be protected. Given that most incidents of people seeking recompense through claims for damages have involved the mainstream press, not bloggers such as Mr Murray and Mr Assange, that raises questions.

There has to be acceptance that society moves on. Just over 100 years ago, papers were closed down by the British Government because they were viewed as subversive during world war one. They became mainstream, because the Independent Labour party was elected to power. The paper that was the voice of the Independent Labour party was subscribed to by my parents. The logic of Lady Dorrian would be that that paper could not be a legitimate enterprise because it was not part of the mainstream press. It was legitimate almost immediately after the two weeks that it had been closed down. It had been legitimate because it had been bought by many before then.

Things move on and we live in a world where people do not buy newspapers. I say that with some sadness, as I am a fan of paid papers, and write for them. People go to online sites, and those who write for online sites and are legitimate—not the chancers putting up disinformation—require protection. It is right to challenge this situation. We must ensure we protect the media and truth throughout the world, but we must look to ourselves. The case of Mr Assange is a shame upon the United Kingdom, and the case of Craig Murray is a shame upon the current Government and judiciary in Scotland.

9.51 am

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing the debate, on the second attempt, after Prorogation got in the way last time. As he said, we had this debate last year, when a great number of concerns were expressed. Since then, the freedom and safety of journalists have deteriorated markedly. The World Press Freedom Day global conference this year set the theme of journalism under digital siege.

Sadly, since then, it is no longer under digital siege. Journalists are being killed simply trying to do their job, while displaying enormous courage in doing so.

The good news is that last year I lamented the fact that the United Kingdom was 33rd on the list of countries for press freedom, when I said we should be doing much better. I am pleased that this year we have been ranked at number 24. To some extent, that is not because of dramatic improvement in this country, although there has been improvement. It is more due to the disastrous deterioration in a large number of countries across the world.

I want to highlight some of the things we have done in this country. I was responsible for drawing up the national action plan for the safety of journalists, which has now been emulated in a number of countries. We talked to journalists, the National Union of Journalists, the Society of Editors, the News Media Association, the police, the prosecuting authorities and campaigning organisations, such as Reporters Without Borders and Index on Censorship, to draw up a strategy to improve the safety of journalists in the UK. We also issued a call for evidence, which had 360 responses and showed that a high proportion had encountered threats, violence or intimidation. One in three female journalists in the UK do not feel safe doing their job.

There is clearly still work to do, but measures are being taken. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend's comments about the Online Safety Bill. It is an important measure, but we need to make sure that legitimate journalistic content is protected in the Bill. I welcome the measures already taken, but I think more could be done. I also strongly welcome the measure the Government are considering to counter SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—which are used by rich oligarchs to try to suppress investigative journalism. I also welcome the measures to establish the digital markets unit, which, as my hon. Friend rightly says, will seek to try and right the balance between the big tech platforms and the news organisations on which they feed but to which they give little remuneration.

The UK's record is generally good. I am also proud that this country was one of the founders of the Media Freedom Coalition across the world, with 50 countries now signed up to the global pledge. I lead the UK delegation to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly. We will meet for the annual conference in Birmingham next month and I am delighted that the motion I have tabled on the safety of journalists will be debated there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe was right in saying that there are a large number of countries where journalism is quite a dangerous profession. In many cases, journalists have suffered intimidation, violence, imprisonment or sometimes even death. I want to concentrate on two countries in particular. The first is Ukraine, where journalists are displaying incredible bravery. My hon. Friend was quite right to name the eight who have sadly been killed during the course of the conflict. However, it is not just since the Russian invasion that journalists have been under threat.

I want to highlight one organisation, called Ukrayinska Pravda, or Ukrainian Truth, which was set up by two journalists in 2000. Since then, it has expanded and recently published a leaked list of more than 100,000 names of Russian military personnel inside Ukraine, as

well as inventories of oligarchs' yachts. It has fought corruption in that country. I want to put on record that the news organisation was founded by two people, Olena Prytula and Georgiy Gongadze, to expose corruption. In September 2000, Gongadze disappeared. Two months later, his beheaded body was discovered in farmland near Kyiv. Prytula was urged to flee. She did not; she carried on and established a relationship with another journalist, Pavel Sheremet. In July 2016, he too was murdered—assassinated when her car exploded while he was driving. Journalists have been working in Ukraine against corruption and against the Russian influence for a number of years. In doing so, they have too often paid the price with their lives.

The other country where media freedom has now almost been extinguished in its entirety is Russia itself. We know through Justice for Journalists that there were something like 24 attacks on journalists in the last few years, as well as 78 non-physical attacks, and Russia has now passed new laws that make it almost impossible for legitimate journalism to take place. It is now a crime even to describe what is happening in Ukraine as a war, and journalists are being imprisoned. As a result, independent journalism has been snuffed out. The Russian people are denied the ability to access the truth, because at the same time, Russia has closed down access to international social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, with the result that Russian people are dependent entirely on state-run and state-controlled media.

Most recently, Russia has retaliated against the work of independent journalists seeking to expose the truth of what is going on. I am one of the Members of this House—I have no doubt that others in this debate are also included—who are on the list of parliamentarians who have been sanctioned by Russia and are no longer allowed to visit the country. That list has now been extended to include 29 British journalists, and I have no doubt that Richard Sharp, Tim Davie, Clive Myrie, Nick Robinson and Orla Guerin will be almost flattered to find that they are on that list, in the same way that we almost regard it as a badge of honour to have been identified by Russia as people who speak out against the appalling abuses that are taking place in that country and which they are inflicting on Ukraine. It is not just the BBC but Cathy Newman of Channel 4, Sophy Ridge of Sky, John Witherow, Chris Evans and Kath Viner: some of the most distinguished journalists in Britain are all now banned, like ourselves, from visiting Russia.

I fear that media freedom is suffering very seriously across the world, but no more so than in Russia and Ukraine. The purpose of the debate is to cast a spotlight on that, and I hope that we will continue to do so each year as long as those abuses take place.

10 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing a debate to mark World Press Freedom Day 2022, albeit a little delayed by Prorogation last month.

A lot has happened in the world over the past year, such as the withdrawal from Afghanistan and Putin's invasion of Ukraine. For those stories and many more, if we are interested we have a wealth of detail at our

fingertips on mobile phones, laptops, physical newspapers and magazines on almost any issue. Whether light-hearted, serious, international or closer to home, there will be a series of articles available to bring readers the story.

It can be easy to forget the work that goes into each article—the research, investigation and writing itself. More than that, journalists may put themselves in great danger to report a story—often, the stories of the greatest importance that most need bringing into the light of day for public consumption. I want to speak about a woman who paid the ultimate price in the name of journalism. It is still a largely male-dominated field and the achievements of women in the industry are no small success. This story feels quite important in the light of the current situation in Ukraine. I have said before that the crimes of Putin or the Russian state must not be unfairly attributed to every Russian citizen: this story highlights the power of Russian journalists perfectly, should they choose to use it.

In addition to her career as a journalist, Anna Politkovskaya was a dedicated human rights activist. She made her name covering Russian political events, most notably during the second Chechen war. Her reporting of what was happening in Chechnya was award-winning, highlighting many human rights abuses by Russian military forces and the pro-Putin regime. She painted a picture of the brutal conflict and the atrocious acts both throughout the war and after it—torture, abductions and murders. She was highly critical of Putin and the federal security service in Russia, foreseeing how unchecked power would worsen freedoms and human rights in the state. She urged western Governments to consider how they welcomed Putin's involvement in the war on terror in the aftermath of 9/11. She exposed high levels of corruption in his Administration.

Anna's work was groundbreaking, but her career was not without difficulties. She was blacklisted from Kremlin news conferences, the target of a campaign of death threats and was victim of a poisoning on a trip to negotiate a hostage situation, in an attempt to prevent her reporting. In 2001, while investigating a story in Chechnya, Anna was detained, beaten and humiliated by Russian troops, before being subjected to a mock execution. I cannot imagine the terror she must have felt but, a resilient woman, Anna did not let it show.

Anna was assassinated on 7 October 2006. She was found dead in the lift in her block of flats, having been shot several times at close range. Most likely it was a contract killing, but no one has ever been held to account for it. Anna's desk at *Novaya Gazeta*, the outlet she worked for, was never re-allocated. Instead, it became a shrine and a memorial to an incredible woman. Her legacy has inspired the next generation of female journalists and truth seekers in Russia. Anna's bravery and that of women like her—Lyra McKee, Marie Colvin and so many others who paid a similar price—is commendable.

In the UK, we might feel we have excellent practices when it comes to press freedom, and we do have it better than many others, but the UK ranked only 33rd in the 2021 world press freedom index, putting us firmly in the yellow category of satisfactory, but definitely with room for a lot of improvement.

As other Members have raised, last week the Home Secretary ordered the extradition of Julian Assange to the US—a decision that has been widely criticised. There are real questions about what that means for

[Margaret Ferrier]

press freedom. I understand that Mr Assange has some time to appeal, but while he exercises that right, he remains detained in the high-security Belmarsh prison, despite not being a violent or high-risk offender.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation are a mechanism used against journalists, media outlets, whistle blowers and academics, as a bully tactic to prevent publication or remove publicly available information. They are open to abuse in order to censor matters of public interest. Several states in the US have already removed SLAPPs, with campaigns for federal legislation under way. The EU is considering its options. I would like to see the UK set a gold standard for journalistic integrity and press freedom, and learn from nations such as Norway and Finland, which sit right at the top of the index. I hope the Minister will be able to speak to how that might be done.

While there might be some room for growth here at home, that does not stop us from using our voices to advocate for greater press freedoms in the countries that need it most. There are currently at least 127 journalists detained in China—it is the largest detainer of journalists in the world. According to statistics from Reporters Without Borders, seven reporters and one media assistant have been killed in Ukraine this year. Let us not forget the contributions of those journalists: Maks Levin; Oksana Baulina; Brent Renaud; Oleksandra “Sasha” Kuvshynova; Pierre Zakrzewski; Evgeny Sakun; and Frédéric Leclerc-Imhoff. They lost their lives ensuring the world would see what was happening on the ground.

10.6 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for setting the scene so well, as well as all the other Members who have contributed so far and those who will follow. I look forward to hearing the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) and also the Minister’s response. I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. How important World Press Freedom Day is; it is a day on behalf of those who have had their human rights abused and been subject to persecution. The APPG that I am privileged to chair stands up for those with Christian beliefs, those with other beliefs and those with no beliefs. We believe very passionately that everyone across the world has a right to worship their god as they wish. It is the press across the world that highlight those things and enable us in this House to be aware of what takes place.

We speak for those in China, in Hong Kong—we have spoken about Hong Kong before—and in Myanmar, where we know that unbelievable atrocities are taking place because the press have highlighted them. In Iraq and Iran, the press have shown the marked persecution that takes place with the Yazidis and Baha’is. We had an event on Kashmir in this House last week—the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) attended—which I visited in 2018, and I know that it is the world press that highlight the issues there and make us aware of them. I hope that, if God spares me, I will get a chance to go back to Pakistan in September to understand where things are four years on. I think of where, across the world, Hindus and Muslims have their rights violated,

as well as the Sunnis, the Sikhs—and the Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia. There are so many examples. We know of those things because of the world press.

I want to put on record my thanks to the press for doing the job that they do. I associate myself with the comments of the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe, as well as others who have mentioned individuals who have stood up for press freedom across the world and have given their lives as a result. The roll of honour in Ukraine illustrates the impact that the commitment to world press freedom can have on the lives of those who stand up for it. These are really important matters.

I totally understand the concerns that members of the public have with the press—that, rather than sticking to reporting the news, members of the press sometimes seek to create a news agenda. I have seen that in operation more than I would like, and never more so than on the issue of Brexit. I am a Brexiteer—that is no secret. I know you are, too, Mr Hollobone; others present may or may not be. Nevertheless, any knee-jerk reaction to restrict press freedom can only be detrimental to the cause of democracy. I will defend and uphold that to the best of my ability and with all my energy and commitment.

I may not like the way the BBC reports the news. That is probably the truth. A recent example of that was when the BBC decided not to cover the 12 July parades in Northern Ireland live, as it has done in previous years. I think of the people who are elderly, vulnerable and housebound, who are unable to attend but very much look forward to the live coverage on 12 July. I wrote to the BBC Northern Ireland interim director, Adam Smyth, on the matter, but, I have to say, his answer was totally erroneous and wrong. He has not grasped or fully understood the issues. The BBC does sometimes fall down when it comes to fully illustrating the issues.

However, we are very pleased that the answer has come in the form of GB News, which has offered to cover the parades. It just so happens that Arlene Foster, former First Minister of Northern Ireland, features prominently on that channel. With the rise of more online options for news, perhaps the days of the press shaping the news, rather than reporting it, will come to an end. I am pleased that there is at least an answer on that matter.

The rise of the so-called online journalists, many of whom—I say this with great respect—seem to be either bullies or trolls, seems to call for some regulation. However, that must be all it is: regulation, not restriction. There is a fine line there. I am sure the Minister will give us some idea of the Department’s thoughts on that. We must ensure that those who identify as journalists and seek to live under the freedom of press banner also abide by the code of conduct that the press should be under. It is a delicate balance to find, but one that we must certainly take the time to find and get right.

We are living in a world that attempts to say, “If I hate your speech, it is hate speech,” but that is not always the way that I see it. I have a very clear point of view that is, in many cases, a religious and moral point of view. I strongly uphold and adhere to my point of view, and it is my right to have it. It is also somebody’s right to have a different opinion, but it is not their right to say that I am guilty of hate speech, just as I am not saying they are guilty of hate speech. It is about freedom.

I absolutely refute the principle of “If I hate your speech, it is hate speech”; we must be careful with personal censorship. I must and will defend the right of the press to report as they choose, in so much as it is factual—even if, sometimes, it might be biased. It is about getting it right.

“Be careful with your words”—I have tried to follow that idea my whole life. Like all Members present, I try to pick my words carefully. Words can destroy, change the mood of a debate and turn into actions on the streets that we do not want. We must always be incredibly careful about what we say. Freedom for one is freedom for all. That is my opinion, and the opinion of all present. I know, certainly, that it is as clear in the mind of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Leeds North East, as it is in mine. It is worth fighting to achieve that.

As chair of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief, I am convinced that we need the world press and the freedom it has to give examples of how the world is and to report on countries and dictatorships and what those in power are doing against people of a different religion when they should not. For that reason, I am happy to support what the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe put forward. I want to put forward that point of view and have it on the record.

10.15 am

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) on securing this crucial debate. It is always a pleasure to follow a speech by such an assiduous Member of Parliament as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

I will confine my comments to the particular case raised in detail by the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), and referred to by the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). It is the case of a journalist who, as we hold this debate, is in Belmarsh maximum security prison, in our country, and who has been languishing there for a number of years: Julian Assange. On World Press Freedom Day, it would be strange not to reflect on a journalist who is in prison in our country—a political prisoner—when the Home Secretary has signed a warrant for his extradition to the United States of America where, because of his journalism, he could be incarcerated with sentence of up to 175 years.

Julian Assange exposed war crimes and human rights abuses in Iraq, Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay that were carried out in our name. It is precisely because, as a journalist, he exposed those crimes, carried out in our name, that he is being extradited to the United States. That has a chilling effect, not only on Julian Assange, whose human rights have been abused—he has languished in Belmarsh prison, alongside convicted terrorists and dangerous people who have been convicted of very serious crimes—and his family, but on other journalists, because by choosing this course of action, powerful politicians in the United States and our own Home Secretary have sent a warning to journalists in our country and around the world. They have made an example of Julian Assange, so journalists who may come into possession of information, such as that revealed

by Julian Assange about Afghanistan, Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, may think, “If I reveal this as a journalist, what will happen to me? Will my fate be the same as the horrific fate of Julian Assange?” It is an act of intimidation by the US Government and our own Government, not only against Julian Assange but against other journalists, including budding journalists in our society and people growing up with the ambition to be journalists.

Julian Assange worked with *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* and *El País*. He was invited to our country by *The Guardian* newspaper. What he revealed was in the best traditions of journalism and whistleblowing, because it is really important that we know what is done in our name. That is part of the democratic function of journalism. Reporters Without Borders, the International Federation of Journalists, the National Union of Journalists and Amnesty International have spoken out against the action taken against Julian Assange as a journalist. John Simpson, famous for his fantastic work over so many decades with the BBC, said:

“Journalists in Britain and elsewhere will be very worried by the decision to extradite Julian Assange to the US—both for his own well-being & for the precedent it creates for journalism worldwide.”

I am known for being on the left of this Parliament, but this is not an issue that is confined to concerns among those on the left. For example, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) has spoken in detail about the case and said recently:

“Sadly I do not believe Mr Assange will get a fair trial. This extradition treaty needs to be rewritten to give British and American citizens identical rights, unlike now.”

Others from the world of journalism who do not share my politics—people such as Andrew Neil and Peter Hitchens—have spoken out against the decision, which should concern us all.

It is important to reflect upon the fact that Amnesty International has not raised concerns about this issue lightly. The secretary-general of Amnesty International has labelled the case “Politically motivated and unjustified” and said that it

“undermines press freedom, the rule of law, and the prohibition of torture.”

Reporters Without Borders and the International Federation of Journalists, to which I referred earlier, along with press freedom groups Article 19, Index On Censorship and the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, as well as our very own National Union of Journalists, issued a joint declaration, stating that Julian Assange

“is being prosecuted for exposing US rendition, unlawful killing and the subversion of the judiciary. And the UK government is allowing extradition proceedings to continue.”

The declaration makes the point that

“The prosecution of Julian Assange was a political decision taken by the Trump administration”,

and that it

“creates a dangerous legal precedent, allowing any journalist in Britain to be prosecuted and extradited.”

Even the executive editor of *The Washington Post* has felt compelled to comment on the case, saying that it is “criminalising common practices in journalism that have long served the public interest.”

That should concern us all.

[Richard Burgon]

When we look at the extradition treaty that has been used to sign off the extradition of Julian Assange to the United States, we should be concerned about the fact that when it was brought to Parliament in the first place, assurances were given that the intention was to exclude extradition for political matters or for so-called political crimes. It was made clear in this place that that was the intention, so it seems to me and to others, including the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden, that the spirit of that extradition treaty and the intention behind it have not been honoured by the Home Secretary's decision to extradite Julian Assange.

At the end of the day, people have different views on Julian Assange as an individual—I view him as a hero who has exposed war crimes committed in our name; others take a different view—but people's view of Julian Assange should not matter in relation to this issue. What matters is the implication for his human rights and the message that it sends to journalists around the world. If we believe in press freedom—as we do—and if we believe that journalism is not a crime and that exposing war crimes is not a crime, and if we want journalists to be able to practise their honourable trade without fear or favour, we should speak out against the extradition and speak out in favour of Julian Assange.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the speeches from the Front Benchers. I call Steven Bonnar for the Scottish National party.

10.23 am

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for once again securing this important debate on World Press Freedom Day. Every year it seems to get that bit more important.

Mantas Kvedaravičius, Oksana Baulina, Oleksandra Kuvshynova, Pierre Zakrzewski, Brent Renaud, Maks Levin and Yevhenii Sakun—war has always claimed the lives of those brave enough to report on it, and sadly Ukraine is no exception. The list of names of murdered journalists that I have just read out will unfortunately grow longer, as Vladimir Putin's futile but deadly war continues.

In last year's debate, we heard about journalist Roman Protasevich. He had been hauled off a plane by Belarusian forces. Sofia Sapega, his girlfriend, was arrested last month and faces trial behind closed doors for the crimes of "inciting social hatred" and "violence or threats". She is 24 years of age and faces six years in a Belarusian prison—another victim of Lukashenko and his cowardly regime.

Outside Europe, the killing of journalists continues with the same wretched fervour. Juan Carlos Muñiz is the seventh journalist to be murdered in Mexico this year. Mexico is perhaps the most dangerous country for journalists to operate in that is not an actual warzone. The persecution of journalists is endemic there. In the 10 years since investigative reporter Regina Martínez was suffocated in her own home, 100 reporters have been killed in Mexico.

The reason why journalists are murdered, whether by oppressive regimes or criminal gangs, is always the same: fear—fear of the truths that they want to tell. There may be no more noble cause than pursuing the truth and rooting out corruption around the world, especially in cases of extreme and grave danger. In countries where journalists are persecuted, it is so important that the judiciary defends them. If the perpetrators of these crimes are given impunity, it can only embolden them.

UNESCO's "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development" report states that "85 percent of the world's population experienced a decline in press freedom in their country".

Britain, which sits at No. 33 in the world press freedom index, must do better both domestically and abroad. I would never wish to belittle horrific events abroad, but I caution the Minister and ask her to pass this on to the Prime Minister: every time politicians, leaders and Governments are equivocal with their use of the truth, it weakens our institutions.

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Member is right to say that No. 33 was a poor placing for the UK but, as I indicated, we are now up to No. 24. There has been an improvement.

Steven Bonnar: I am happy to take that point on board. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will agree that there is still vast room for improvement.

I commend journalists for their tireless work domestically in exposing criminality right at the heart of Government—in Downing Street. Regardless of how much politicians try to wiggle from the truth, journalists should keep pushing for it, even when those whose job it is to investigate criminality seem reluctant to do so.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (John Nicolson), who is unfortunately unable to attend the debate. I wish to impart some of his sentiments, based on his vast journalistic experience. He has done a bit of foreign affairs correspondence and anchored some dramatic moments—none more memorable than the horrors of 9/11. He was on air when the twin towers were attacked and had to find the words to describe the unspeakable brutality and cruelty of the unfolding events. He said:

"I kept my cool, I think, during the hours of live broadcast, but I wept when I got home. Some of the images that we could not show that day, such as the people jumping from the towers, will be forever seared into my mind. However, my work has mostly been confined to political correspondence—a safe place for journalists, even at Westminster."—[*Official Report*, 27 May 2021; Vol. 696, c. 203WH.]

There have been so many killings of journalists that it seems almost invidious to single out individuals, but we all remember Marie Colvin, the celebrated *Sunday Times* correspondent who was killed when Assad's troops, who were almost certainly targeting her, shelled the building in Homs where she was sheltering as she covered the Syrian regime's atrocities.

Perhaps not so well remembered is Scotsman Malcolm Rennie, from Barrhead near Glasgow. In 1975, he was tortured and shot by the Indonesian military in East Timor, alongside four Australian-based journalists. Campaigners claim that the UK Government were reluctant to look into the unlawful killings because of important

arms sales to Indonesia. In the nearly four decades since, successive British Governments have tried to keep clear of the case, arguing that the murder of Malcolm Rennie and his colleagues is a matter for Australia to investigate. In those four decades, successive UK Governments—under both Tory and Labour leadership—have continued to supply the Indonesians with arms, such as Hawk jets, Alvis Scorpion tanks and other lethal warfare. Like Mr Rennie, each and every one of the journalists was brave and fearless. Armed with only a pen, microphone or camera, they were killed carrying out their duty: reporting the truth.

As we have heard, the threats to journalists take many forms. The spread of disinformation through social media and attacks on professional journalism are perhaps the most insidious new ways. The lies disseminated by the likes of Putin and Assad in order to spread disinformation about the murder of journalists and political opponents, to disguise their responsibility for chemical gas attacks and to blacken the name of—among others—the White Helmets are amplified online by the malevolent and the naive. Here today, as we honour the journalistic craft, I hope that whatever our politics, we parliamentarians resolve to affirm the right of journalists—whether at home or abroad—to scrutinise and examine, and to probe and uncover, without fear or favour.

10.29 am

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Hollobone. I want to start by thanking the hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing such an important debate and for not giving up when the previous date was cancelled because of Prorogation. Freedom of the press is a right that we celebrate in our country, but sadly it is still severely limited across the world. In the hon. Member's opening comments, he very appropriately remembered not only the journalists who have been killed for telling the truth about Russia in Ukraine, but others among the 29 journalists and two assistants who have been killed thus far this year. It is a tragedy.

The hon. Member mentioned the wealthy people using our British courts to try to silence journalists with whom they disagree—a shocking but true fact. He also mentioned the hollowing out of local and national media in the United Kingdom through the loss of advertising revenue, partly because of the rise of social media. He rightly said that the protection of journalistic content should be part of the Online Safety Bill, and I certainly support that. Finally, he mentioned something even more important: journalists who publish in their own names are truly accountable for what they write and are often exposed to the risks involved. The truth in news is vital to freedom and democracy.

We then heard from the hon. Member for East Lothian (Kenny MacAskill), who mentioned Shireen Abu Akleh, who I too will talk about shortly, and Julian Assange. He concentrated on Sweden's treatment of Assange and his condemnation of Assange's extradition to the United States, which was mentioned by other hon. Members as well. The hon. Member, who is the former Justice Secretary of Scotland, also mentioned Craig Murray, whom I have met, his treatment in Scotland and the media's attitude.

We then heard from the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who talked about the achievements of so many women journalists in what is still a male-dominated profession. She made an important point. She mentioned the tragic story of Anna Politkovskaya, who was murdered on 7 October 2006 in Moscow at the age of just 48—a brave woman journalist, who was murdered for what she published and the truth that she found and exposed. The hon. Member suggested that the UK should outlaw SLAPPs and also mentioned that 127 journalists are currently detained in China.

After that, we heard from my dear friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who as we know is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. He mentioned China, Hong Kong, Myanmar and the persecution of religious minorities and the journalists who expose those abuses. He said that we know about the persecution of religious minorities only because there is freedom of the press. When that is clamped down on, we no longer hear about the appalling abuses of religious minorities. He rightly said that any restriction of press freedom is an attack on democracy.

Then we heard from my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), who concentrated on the case of Julian Assange, currently in Belmarsh prison as a political prisoner. He mentioned the support for Assange from across the political spectrum and the condemnation of his extradition to the United States, speaking of its chilling effect on other journalists in the UK and around the world. He said that the Assange case was “an act of intimidation” against all journalists, and the fact that so many politicians and journalists, of all political views, condemned it said a lot about why what is happening to Assange is totally wrong.

Just last month, the killing of journalist Shireen Abu Akleh and the disgraceful scenes at her funeral served as a stark reminder of the threats journalists face every single day and that many pay the ultimate price simply for doing their jobs. Shireen's death was also an attack on the freedom of the press and the independence of journalists working around the world. As we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members today, it was sadly not an isolated incident. It is vital that the UK acts urgently to protect journalists who are increasingly under threat and puts diplomatic pressure on those who choose to violate their fundamental rights.

Today I shall focus my remarks on one of our country's most influential institutions abroad: the BBC World Service, which reaches 465 million people every single week. It is a vital part of this country's soft power and international influence. However, we have seen journalists at the BBC World Service in Russia and Ukraine under constant threat, with their journalistic freedoms severely limited. In the face of those threats, the United Kingdom must support the BBC in using its considerable influence to extend British values around the world. It is firmly in our interests to act.

The BBC has provided reliable information to the Russian people as Putin continues to wage his illegal and unprovoked war, which he claims to do in their name. We certainly welcome the £4.1 million in emergency funding provided to the BBC World Service so that it can continue its vital work in Ukraine and Russia, but that money took far too long to arrive. The UK must

[*Fabian Hamilton*]

act far more urgently if we are to protect journalists abroad, particularly when we have such an important tool in Britain's armoury against Putin's misinformation.

The Russian public deserve to hear the truth about Putin's illegal war. Whether they work for the BBC or not, the courageous journalists who report from some of the most dangerous areas of the world should not be threatened as a result of providing that service. The limiting of the BBC in Russia is part of a series of measures as part of which President Putin has weaponised his own laws to target independent journalists. The worrying amendments to the law on foreign agents, which expanded the grounds for designating individuals as "foreign agents", was rightly condemned by the Venice Commission as constituting "serious violations of basic human rights, including the freedoms of association and expression".

It is not just Russia that has introduced restrictive legislation. We should apply diplomatic pressure to every country that seeks to undermine the work of journalists. Across Council of Europe member states, many journalists are detained as criminals, with the vast majority in Turkey. I urge the Minister to raise that at the earliest possible opportunity with her Turkish counterpart.

In Afghanistan, a ban on foreign media has formed part of the crackdown to prevent reporting from several media outlets. The Taliban's attempt to censor the media has led to a huge reduction in the number of media organisations in the country. Will the Minister tell us whether the UK has any plans to help those organisations to continue to report from that country?

It is extremely disturbing that 98% of jailed journalists are local people imprisoned by their own Governments and that 70% of jailed journalists imprisoned globally were arrested on so-called anti-state charges, including, appallingly, terrorism. We all have to do more to bring such appalling repression to an end. Across the House, we must also put an end to the increase in dangerous rhetoric, with journalists who do not agree with one's political opinion being labelled as enemies. That simply contributes to the problem, as we have seen not only in Turkey but across the world in countries as diverse as the United States and Iran.

The UK must play its part in protecting journalists who deliver high-quality, independent and accurate information to the public at home and abroad. It is completely unacceptable that journalists face so many threats, as we have heard from both sides of this room today. The freedom of the press is an essential part of any democracy, and we all have a responsibility to help to extend the freedoms we enjoy in this country to the rest of the world.

10.39 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. Like other hon. Members, I will start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) for securing this really important debate. I am grateful to him and all the other members of the all-party parliamentary group on media freedom for their dedicated commitment to this cause.

Thriving independent journalism is one of the cornerstones of democracy but, as such, journalists are a common target for those who want to disrupt, disturb and devalue it. Reporters across the world are being intimidated, arrested or even killed, but now more than ever we need journalists to speak truth to power, to counter misinformation and to highlight wrongdoing. The UK is, as ever, a vocal champion of media freedom and of the journalists who do this important work. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) reminded us, we must also always remember the camera operators and others behind the scenes who support the journalists in this vital work.

Like many of us here today, I want first to discuss the appalling and tragic situation in Ukraine. There is an old adage that the first casualty of war is truth, and Mr Putin's war is built entirely on untruths. The Kremlin has used disinformation and propaganda to create a false pretext for its invasion, to obscure the truth of what is going on on the ground and to cover up potential war crimes. Despite the clear dangers that they face day after day and night after night, brave journalists are putting their lives on the line to expose the truth of Russia's abhorrent actions. Elected officials, civil society activists, journalists and religious leaders in Russian-controlled areas of Ukraine have disappeared. Russian forces have attacked and abducted journalists. We have seen credible reports of torture.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) reminded us of the names of some of the individuals who have laid down their lives in Ukraine. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders, 12 journalists have lost their lives since the war began.

Russia's abuses also continue at home. The Kremlin's brutal crackdown on independent media and dissenting voices continues, with journalists who refuse to stick to the script facing up to 15 years in prison. It is vital that the facts, and alternative perspectives to Kremlin propaganda, remain available. We will continue to support Russian independent media, including by providing them with the tools they need to continue their work. On 10 March, with our partners in the Media Freedom Coalition, we issued a statement condemning the brutal crackdown and calling on Russia to respect journalists' rights. We are giving the BBC World Service more than £4 million in emergency funding for its Ukrainian and Russian language services. We have extended our existing £9 million project to support media freedom in Ukraine with an extra £1 million of urgent support. We have provided journalists on the ground with protective gear and medical equipment, to help them to work as safely as possible. We are also using our programme funding to support media freedom in Belarus, where dozens of journalists, bloggers and media workers are under arrest or in jail, and websites of reputable media outlets have been declared extremist by the Belarusian regime.

Unfortunately, as many Members present have noted, these attacks on media freedom are also happening in many other countries. Like the many colleagues who have mentioned it today, we were all appalled to see the recent death of the Palestinian-American al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh while reporting on the

west bank and to see those really awful scenes at her funeral. Her death is a tragedy, and the UK has joined calls for an impartial and transparent investigation.

At this sad time, I would also like to reflect on the disappearance of Dom Phillips and Bruno Pereira in the Amazon region of Brazil. I offer my thanks to all those who have been involved in the search-and-rescue operation to find them. I would like to send my condolences to Dom's family, whom we continue to support. I pay tribute to both men and to their commitment to improving our understanding of the Amazon, its people and the challenges currently faced there. Both men have left a strong legacy of defending and supporting the rights of indigenous people in Brazil.

Across the world, from 2016 to the end of 2021, 455 journalists were killed either in the course of their work or because of it; almost nine out of 10 of these killings are unresolved. The voices of many thousands more have been stifled by threats, harassment, online censorship and vague security laws that outlaw criticism of authoritarian regimes. Every day our network of embassies and high commissioners works to protect media freedoms through engagement and lobbying, as well as by offering direct support for threatened journalists. Much of that work, quite rightly, happens away from the spotlight, but we do also take a strong public role in promoting media freedoms around the world.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) asked me about some specific countries. In Turkey, we have concerns about media freedom, and we have long encouraged the country to protect freedom of expression—it is essential to the long-term health of democracy. Our diplomats engage in regular dialogue with civil society, and regularly attend high-profile trials, including those of journalists and human rights defenders. We do that alongside some EU member states and other like-minded missions as a sign of how firmly we support the individuals affected.

In Afghanistan—such a challenging country—we are concerned about the increasing restrictions on freedom of expression. Censorship and self-censorship have worsened. There have been detentions and threats against journalists, human rights defenders and civil society activists. We are working with international partners to hold those responsible to account, including, in March, through the renewal of the mandate for the UN mission in Afghanistan to strengthen human rights monitoring and reporting functions. Afghanistan's membership of the Media Freedom Coalition is also under consideration.

Back in 2019, we co-founded the Media Freedom Coalition with Canada to speak out against attacks and to hold to account those who harm journalists. The coalition has highlighted problems in so many countries, from Myanmar to Belarus. Alongside UNESCO, it set up the global media defence fund, to which the UK has contributed £3 million over the past three years. During that time the fund has supported more than 3,000 journalists, 490 lawyers and over 120 civil society organisations.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe clearly pointed out, today's media face other threats that we must urgently address. Global newspaper advertising revenue has fallen by half in the last five years, and many outlets are closing, leaving news deserts, where there are no local sources of trustworthy news. Through our support to the BBC World Service and

others, the UK has given more than £500 million in the past five years to support independent journalism and the free flow of information across the world. We will be supporting the BBC World Service with more than £90 million per year over the next three years so that it can continue that work. During our presidency of the G7 we secured strong commitments to improve the assistance G7 members give to independent media globally.

To have any influence abroad, we also need to set an example at home. We have made good progress in our national action plan for the safety of journalists since it was launched over a year ago. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) mentioned, the UK has risen nine places in the global press freedom index since last year, to number 24 out of the 180 countries in the 2022 index. The index is a valuable tool for evaluating media freedom around the world, and tackling the threats faced by journalists.

My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, and others, mentioned the new Online Safety Bill. It will create new protections for news publishers and journalistic content when shared online on other platforms. That is important, so I thank Members for mentioning the Bill. Many Members also voiced their concerns about SLAPPs. Recent events have accelerated the need for action to ensure oligarchs and anyone who wishes to silence free speech cannot abuse the rule of law. The Government are absolutely determined to move quickly on that issue. We have already consulted on reforms that are designed to tackle the challenges SLAPPs pose to free speech and to our legal system. We are considering the most appropriate reforms to pursue as a matter of urgency.

I conclude by quoting the great American journalist Walter Cronkite, who once said:

“Freedom of the press is not just important to democracy, it is democracy.”

Recent events in countries such as Ukraine, Belarus, Myanmar and others mentioned today reaffirm the vital role that independent journalism plays and the real threats reporters face every day. I think I can speak for all Members here today and across the House of Commons when I thank all the courageous journalists working so hard to bring the truth to light. The Government will continue to support them and stand up for them and their colleagues around the world.

10.50 am

Damian Collins: I thank the Minister and all right hon. and hon. Members for their participation in this excellent debate. A number of cases have been raised relating to media freedom and the suppression of journalism around the world, and it is right that those cases have been heard in the debate today.

I do not wish to repeat what Members have already said, but in closing I note that since the debate we had last year and today's debate, the Nobel Committee awarded its annual peace prize to two journalists: Dmitry Muratov and Maria Ressa. It was reported this morning that Mr Muratov has sold his Nobel peace prize medal for £80 million and will donate that money to charities supporting the victims of the war in Ukraine.

Maria Ressa, whom it has been my pleasure to meet on several occasions, gave evidence to the Joint Committee on the Online Safety Bill last year and I close with the

[Damian Collins]

remarks she made in her Nobel lecture last year, when she collected her peace prize. She summed up the essence of what we have been discussing when she said:

“Without facts, you can’t have truth. Without truth, you can’t have trust. Without trust, we have no shared reality, no democracy”.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered World Press Freedom Day 2022.

10.52 am

Sitting suspended.

SEND: Carshalton and Wallington

11 am

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered SEND services in Carshalton and Wallington.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. In addition, I will speak about the special educational needs provision at the London Borough of Sutton and its arm’s length company Cognus.

Every child deserves access to good education and the support that they are entitled to, for the best start in life. But for too many children and their families in Carshalton and Wallington, getting that access is a daily fight because of a Lib Dem-run council that does not seem to care about the most vulnerable children in our borough. Every single week at my surgery, a parent, carer or family member raises complaints about getting their child access to the support that they are entitled to when fighting for an education. They have shown me the countless emails, meetings, phone calls back and forth with Cognus and even with councillors responsible for running the service, but I hear the same story week on week. Messages are going ignored, support gets refused and parents are having to escalate cases up to the tribunal and/or the ombudsman in order to get support.

The problems with SEN provision in Sutton have been well documented. In 2018, concerns were raised by the Care Quality Commission about Sutton’s SEND department, and by Ofsted, which delivered a damning inspection report. The report found that there had been insufficient progress made on implementing the 2014 reforms, poor communication and over-optimistic self-evaluation, among other issues. It was estimated that approximately 700 children had been unlawfully rejected for education, health and care plan—EHCP—assessments since 2015. In any other council, at the very least, the lead member would have resigned, but all have remained in post and the same councillor remains in charge of the service today. What was the Lib Dems’ response to the Ofsted report? No humility, no shame and no remorse for the pain that they had caused children and their families. Instead, they called for Ofsted to be abolished.

Since 2018, the council has claimed that it has improved its service, that Cognus is working well and that it has the backing of the majority of parents in the borough, but that is not reflected in reality for parents in Carshalton and Wallington. It was around that time that a local mum Hayley Harding set up the Sutton EHCP Crisis group. She has amassed the backing of hundreds of local parents and families who have been through similar situations as she has. I pay tribute to Hayley—I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who is Hayley’s MP, does too—and to the hundreds of campaigners who have been battling for their children to receive access to the support to which they are entitled.

The struggle to get EHCPs has continued for many parents since 2018, despite what the council might claim. Sutton Council and Cognus have been the subject of many local and national media scandals since 2018, most notably when Sutton shamefully appeared on a BBC “Panorama” exposé in 2020. Did that spark a change in attitudes at the council and Cognus? I am afraid it did not, and the parents’ fight has continued.

Last year, a shocking set of Cognus board minutes were leaked. The unredacted copies reveal a shocking truth. Not only was Cognus in a dire financial situation, with a loss of £717,000 a year, despite Sutton consistently appearing as one of—if not the—highest-funded boroughs for SEND, the council is aiming to save money by cancelling around 200 children’s EHCPs by the end of the year. Did that revelation start the winds of change for parents? No. The unredacted minutes were there for the world to see, yet the council and Cognus denied their contents. Let me just emphasise this point: printed official minutes were obtained, and the response from the council and Cognus was to deny that what was printed in them was true. That is absolutely shocking.

In 2022, four years on from the Ofsted report, it appears that no lessons have been learned. Just a few months ago, the Department for Education’s own figures showed that Sutton, once again, was found to be the highest rejector of families applying for EHCP assessments in the country. Almost half of all children were rejected. To put that into perspective, the national average is 23%. That comes back to what the 2018 Ofsted report initially found, when it took particular aim at the leadership of the service—in other words, the Lib Dem councillors in charge of running it.

Since 2018, I have seen countless examples of the council setting itself against parents and families of children with special educational needs and disabilities. Not only do parents struggle to get an EHCP in the first place, but the plans that are issued are often completely inadequate. For example, parents have shown me obviously copied and pasted EHCP plans. Many of them had not even bothered to change the child’s name from the plan it was copied from, meaning not only is the wrong child named on the plan, but it has the wrong support in it.

That leaves parents and families spending months, even years, fighting with the council and Cognus all the way to a tribunal and/or the ombudsman to get what they deserve. This is not a group of parents deliberately trying to make trouble for the council. The figures show that around 90% of cases are found in the parents’ favour. While the council is wasting taxpayers’ money, taking families through expensive proceedings such as this, rather than providing the support they are entitled to, the children are left in the middle, not getting access to the support that they need. This is a real mark of shame on Sutton and cannot be allowed to continue. If councils such as Sutton’s continue to turn against families of children with special educational needs and disability, the frameworks must be in place to support the families.

I know the Government recognise that, which is why they conducted a review into SEND. I have a few questions for the Minister about how the SEND review will support families of children with SEND in places such as Carshalton and Wallington. I want to know how the SEND review will make it easier for families to raise disputes and have them resolved more quickly; what mechanisms will be put in place to ensure that councils comply with their statutory obligations; and how, overall, the SEND review aims to change the negative experience that many families have of fighting for their children’s education. Children deserve the best possible start in life. I look forward to hearing how the Government can help achieve that.

11.7 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) for securing this important debate on special educational needs in his constituency of Carshalton and Wallington, and the London Borough of Sutton more generally.

I will start by saying that I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend when he says that every child deserves access to a good education—in fact, I would go further and say a world-class education. It concerns me greatly to hear how many parents in his constituency are having to fight the system just to get their child or young person the support they deserve. That is not right, and I will say more about how we plan to change the system, in particular the adversarial nature of it, which he pointed out.

My hon. Friend raised the poor implementation of the 2014 reforms in Sutton. He is right to do so, though it is sadly not an issue that is exclusive to Sutton. I will come on to that in a moment. He also referred to the work of local mum Hayley Harding, who is inspirational. I have had the pleasure of meeting her, and join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to her for the important work she does in supporting other parents and campaigning for change in this area. I can assure my hon. Friend that I have listened. I hope that the SEND Green Paper, which I will come to in a few moments, reflects that listening exercise.

My hon. Friend talked of the struggle to get education, health and care plans. He is right to raise that point, and I will say more in a moment about our proposed changes as part of the review. He concluded with a number of important questions about the SEND review and the Green Paper, which I will now address. Before I do that, though not wanting to embarrass my hon. Friend, I will say this. It is important that his constituents know how hard, and how passionately, he has campaigned on this issue. To be frank, I cannot walk down a corridor in Westminster and pass my hon. Friend without him raising either a local SEND case or this issue more generally. I appreciate that I am biased on the issue, but in my view a council’s greatest responsibility is to its children, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged, which is why his testimony about Sutton depresses me greatly. We need to change the system.

I know how hard my hon. Friend works to ensure that every child in his constituency—as well as children across Sutton more generally, when he works with other MPs—has access to the world-class education they deserve. I commit myself to continuing to work with him to hold Sutton Council to account and to ensure that it treats the education of vulnerable and disadvantaged children as seriously as he does, and indeed I do.

Let me turn to the specific points and questions that my hon. Friend raised. First, I will cover funding. Although my hon. Friend, and indeed parents, will want to hear more about our ambitious plans for reform of SEND and alternative provision more generally in the Green Paper, I am conscious of the fact that they will also be concerned about the here and now, especially if they have children with SEND who are in the education system. Importantly, we are increasing the high-needs

[*Will Quince*]

budget for children and young people with the most complex needs by £1 billion this year, 2022-23. That brings it to a total investment of £9.1 billion. That unprecedented increase comes on top of a £1.5 billion increase over the past two years.

Let me turn specifically to the London Borough of Sutton, which will attract an increase of 12.5% per head of its two-to-18 population this year, compared with the previous financial year's allocation. That brings its total high-needs funding allocation for 2022-23 to £52.6 million. Alongside that is our capital investment programme. We very much recognise the need for more special school places, so we have secured £2.6 billion to build or create around 33,000 additional SEND places. We are pump-priming that by investing early, so £1.4 billion of that allocation will be spent this year. Although we do not have exact figures for Sutton, I am conscious of the fact that there is a need for special places across London. I will be able to update my hon. Friend at a later date as to those plans.

Let me turn to the SEND review and the Green Paper. I will briefly touch on why those reforms are so desperately needed. My hon. Friend has set out many of the reasons for them, but they are first about outcomes, which are just not acceptable at present. It is not acceptable that we have so many children and young people with SEND who are falling behind their peers.

When I meet with parents and carers, and with children and young people with SEND, they tell me that, too often, they feel unsupported by the system, locally and nationally and, as my hon. Friend mentioned, too many parents feel that they have to fight, fight and fight just to get their child or children the education and support they deserve. They tell me that the system is too adversarial, and that that is not helped by the culture in local authorities, which my hon. Friend mentioned in relation to Sutton, especially when it comes to tribunals, as he pointed out.

I am told of a lack of SEND support in mainstream settings, of needs not being identified and met early enough, of a postcode lottery and, as we know, of significant local authority deficits. There is a lack of join-up between local health systems and the education system, as well as insufficient clarity about what parents and children should be entitled to. As my hon. Friend pointed out, there are poor accountability and redress mechanisms in the system, which means that parents feel powerless.

All the above and more are why the Government committed themselves to the SEND review in September 2019. Despite a delay largely caused by the pandemic, the Green Paper was published in the first quarter of this year. The consultation is now live, and we have extended the deadline for submissions to 22 July. I would encourage everyone to take part. Although we have set out a clear plan, and aspiration and ambition, we need those with lived experience and experience of SEND up and down our country to take part and ensure that we get it right.

Given the negative experiences of his constituents and the issues that he, and indeed I, set out, my hon. Friend rightly asked how the Green Paper and the review will bring about the change we all desperately want to see. My aim is to create a more inclusive

education system, with excellent local mainstream provision, that will improve the experience and outcome for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities and, importantly, those who need alternative provision.

How do we intend to achieve this? At its heart, it is about ensuring every child gets the right support, in the right place, at the right time, tailored to their individual needs. We will establish a single national SEND and alternative provision system, setting out clear standards that will be underpinned by the introduction of a national framework. We will provide targeted support for children and young people, where required. Using that £2.6 billion, we will make available excellent specialist provision and alternative provision support for those children who have more complex needs.

We will set out clear roles, responsibilities and accountability measures. We will standardise and digitise EHCPs, making them more accessible to parents and those who advocate for and support them. We will strengthen mediation arrangements so that individuals can work through disagreements with their local authorities at an earlier stage, trying to take the adversarial nature out of the system.

We will establish new SEND partnerships at a local level that will require local areas to co-produce an inclusion plan with parents locally. We will introduce new local and national inclusion dashboards that will strengthen accountability and transparency.

Importantly, we will improve initial teacher training, as every teacher teaches children or young people with SEND, but many tell me that they do not feel confident in that role. If we are to identify early and get children and young people the support they need as early as possible, that starts with highly skilled teachers who have the confidence to teach those with SEND. To help us with that, we will introduce a new SEND national professional qualification.

As I mentioned, these plans are backed up by our £2.6 billion capital investment programme and by learning from the lessons of the 2014 reforms. The ambition and aspiration of the 2014 reforms were right, but sadly the implementation was poor, as evidenced by my hon. Friend. We know that the implementation in Sutton was nowhere near as good as it should have been. Sadly, we see that replicated in other local authorities up and down the country. That is why we are determined to get implementation right as part of these reforms, and we are investing an additional £70 million specifically for implementation. It is important to repeat that the consultation is now open and live until 22 July. I encourage as many people as possible to take part, and it is available on gov.uk.

Finally, my hon. Friend rightly focused on accountability, especially by local authorities. With the support of the Department of Health and Social Care, we have commissioned the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted to develop a new area SEND inspection framework, which will be launched in early 2023. Its overarching aim is to give a greater role to the views and experiences of children and young people with SEND, their parents and carers. The public consultation for that is also currently live and can be found online or through Ofsted.

In closing, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington for his support for this incredibly important agenda. He has raised important

concerns, and I hope he knows that I and the Government are not just dedicated but determined to continue to listen to children and young people with SEND, their parents, their carers and all those who advocate for them in the system. I hope my hon. Friend feels assured that the work is under way and that he feels confident that we are committed to delivering changes within the SEND system, both locally and nationally, so that every child and young person across our country, regardless of the challenges they face, is able to achieve their full potential.

Question put and agreed to.

11.19 am

Sitting suspended.

Sentencing: Repeat Offenders

[SIR GARY STREETER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the sentencing of repeat offenders.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. Attendance at today's debate is affected by the debate in the main Chamber on access to GP services and NHS dentistry, but there is plenty to get our teeth into with the issues that we will be discussing over the next 90 minutes or so.

My initial point is that the Government are failing to deliver an efficient and effective criminal justice system. Instead of defending the indefensible and playing down law-breaking in Downing Street, the Justice Secretary should tackle the crime wave caused by repeat offenders, who are menacing our communities. The criminal justice system is failing communities at every level, and the Government are also failing our police, Crown Prosecution Service, Prison Service and probation service, thereby compromising public safety.

I must declare my interest: I was honoured to be invited to, and to speak at, the Prison Officers Association annual conference in Eastbourne last month, where I heard from numerous prison officers about ever worsening conditions in our jails. I am also a member of the justice unions parliamentary group, which is a coalition of the Prison Officers Association and its sister unions, including Napo, which is the probation officers union; the Public and Commercial Services Union; the University and College Union, which represents prison educators; and the Police Federation of England and Wales.

Before I continue, it would be remiss of me not to take this opportunity to thank the exceptionally hard-working neighbourhood police teams who serve my constituency of Easington in County Durham. From the many conversations we have had, I know that they are frustrated, and I share their frustrations. Recruits join the police service to serve their community, to be on the streets and to protect the public. They do not expect to spend hours on the telephone effectively handcuffed to the desk, waiting for the overworked and understaffed Crown Prosecution Service to return charging decisions. While police officers are tied up with administrative tasks, the community clearly loses out, because the officers are not available to tackle the issues on the streets. Added to the mix is the loss of 20,000 police officers since 2010, which—make no mistake—was a political choice by the Conservative Government. I welcome moves to restore police numbers, but it will take many years, if not generations, to recover the years of lost experience.

Police officers work under challenging circumstances on the frontline, and they pick up the pieces when repeat offenders are released back into the community. In a letter to the Minister dated 9 June, I outlined the case of a prolific offender who has been charged more than 100 times with various offences. When he recently went to court, he was handed a community sentence—a non-custodial sentence—and a £10 compensation order, which is being paid at 25p a week. The victim is understandably disgusted and said he lacks confidence and faith in the criminal justice system.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I completely agree with what the hon. Gentleman says on the facts that I have heard about this matter. He can accuse the Government of many things, but the sentencing function is for the independent judiciary or magistracy; it is not the responsibility of the Minister. There is much to be discussed on a political level, but certainly not sentencing policy and what sentences are imposed in such circumstances.

Grahame Morris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and what he says is reasonable. I have just been reading a book about the former Director of Public Prosecutions and his early career; he is now the leader of the Labour party, I believe. [*Laughter.*] He was at pains to provide sentencing guidelines in discussions with Ministers—Conservative Ministers, I might add—to try to address some of these issues. I do not think that Ministers can completely wipe their hands of responsibility.

I will elaborate some of the related issues and explain why prison is not as effective as it might be, although it is an important alternative, particularly for serial offenders. As I said, the victim of the particular crime that I referred to has completely lost confidence in the system and has said that he would not give evidence in future, because he thought that the sentence that was given was inappropriate—in fact he said that it was laughable.

When a case goes to court and the outcome is an affront to justice, it is the police who experience the fall-off in public confidence. Members might be aware that YouGov regularly conducts a survey in which it asks the public whether they have confidence in the police's ability to deal with crime in their area. The trends are very worrying; 47% of the public lack confidence in the ability of the police to tackle crime, compared with only 43% who are confident in the police. Overall, the number of people who believe the police are doing a good job—nationally, and not in County Durham; I think we have an outstanding police force—has fallen from 75% to 53% in the last two years. I hope that sets alarm bells ringing for Ministers.

The failure is systematic. When I presented my Prisons (Violence) Bill in the previous Session of Parliament, I warned that offenders often left prison more damaged and more dangerous than when they arrived. The out-of-control levels of prison violence make rehabilitation in the current circumstances practically impossible. That leads to more reoffending, at a cost of tens of billions of pounds a year to the criminal justice system, as well as causing misery for millions of victims and their loved ones, who have to live with the consequences of even more crime.

That situation is more than an appalling waste of both public money and people's lives; it is nothing less than a crime against our communities, and I must say that the Government are complicit in it. The Conservative Government and all Ministers are responsible, first, for the devastating cuts to the budgets of the Prison Service during the coalition years of austerity. It was those cuts that triggered the escalating level of violence in prisons. For example, the number of prison officers was cut by a quarter. That meant that a massive amount of experience, held by experienced prison officers, and of that most precious resource, which prison officers refer to as jailcraft, was taken out of the system at a stroke. The vacuum that was created was quickly filled by prisoners

who had become more experienced than many officers on the landings of our prisons. The vacuum has also been filled by violence.

Despite recent recruitment drives, the Prison Service has lost almost 90,000 years—I repeat, almost 90,000 years—of prison officer experience since 2010. That is a shameful statistic, but it just gets worse every year. As the experience of the prison officers who are in charge of our prisons goes down, violence goes up; there is a direct correlation. In turn, that leads to even more officers leaving the service. Not surprisingly, the retention rate for prison staff is at a record low, as of course is their morale.

It has not helped that this Government have raised the retirement age for prison officers to 68. Frankly, for prison officers—both men and women—who are grappling with young and fit criminals, 68 is far too old. It is a cruel policy, which we have discussed on many occasions in this place.

The Government consistently ignore the advice of their own experts. The Prison Service Pay Review Body has proffered advice that prison officers should be given a proper pay rise. Ministers have ignored experts for three years running, and we are currently waiting for them to respond to this year's pay review body recommendations.

The Government broke our Prison Service when they robbed it of resource, in the name of austerity, and now they need to fix it if they want to have any chance of reducing reoffending. The Government have also broken our probation service with a failed privatisation experiment. They took an award-winning service, envied and held up as a model and example around the world, and smashed it—fragmented it into little pieces, each to be run for private profit.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con): I had the opportunity to visit Thorn Cross prison on Friday and meet the excellent governor, Richard Suttle, who showed me around the site. I was struck by the number of employers now based in the prison, helping young people who are about to leave to find work. The hon. Gentleman talked of reoffending. The Government have taken significant steps to ensure that, when young people in particular leave prison, there is a work-based route for them. Does he acknowledge that that makes a significant difference to the number of people returning to prison?

Grahame Morris: That is a good and sensible point, but I draw the hon. Member's attention to the report of the Select Committee on Education, chaired by the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon). That is quite scathing about the opportunities provided by the education service in prison.

Andy Carter: The Committee visited the same prison I did, and highlighted the outstanding work at Thorn Cross. Businesses such as Timpson ensure that, when people leave prison, they have a solid job to go to. That work starts inside the prison. I acknowledge many of the comments in that report, but Thorn Cross was highlighted as one prison with an outstanding performance of reducing reoffending.

Grahame Morris: That must be one of the prisons on my list to visit, though I hope not as an inmate. I received numerous invitations from prison officers when

I was in Eastbourne. I held a surgery for prison officers to raise concerns, anonymously if they wished, and there is a catalogue of issues to be addressed. Prison education is certainly one of those, but that is normally delivered by members of the UCU, the prison educators, who have an unenviable task, which I will come to in a moment.

I want to continue my point about the role of probation. In the complex jigsaw of the criminal justice system, there are vital elements: the police; magistrates; the Crown Prosecution Service; prison officers; the prisons themselves, which should be properly staffed and resourced; probation and prison educators. Those are all important elements of that mosaic. Probation officers play a vital role that is largely unrecognised in reducing reoffending. That is what their jobs are all about and how we gauge their success. They perform a vital public service, protecting our communities from crime, while helping ex-offenders to develop the skills they need to turn their lives around.

By introducing a profit motive into probation—a mistake since acknowledged—the previous Government betrayed the highly skilled and priceless work done by probation officers with many years of experience, leaving their pay, terms and conditions at the mercy of private firms, which tried to reduce their role to little more than a tick-box exercise. That led to a flood of resignations, with people leaving the system, and all the problems we saw as a result.

Even now, two years after the Government admitted defeat and announced a full reintegration and renationalisation of probation, the service is still in the midst of a recruitment and retention crisis, very similar to the one in prisons. Napo has told me about the workload crisis facing its members. Many probation officers are working over their recommended offender management levels—the number of cases they have to look after—by between 20% and 50%, and in one case, by over 90%. The staffing and workload crises in probation have had terrible and tragic consequences in the past. It is no wonder that the mental health of many probation officers is at breaking point.

The Government have put the public at serious risk from reoffending by trying to run prisons and probation on the cheap, and undermining the pay and terms and conditions of those critically important workers in the process.

James Daly: The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. I have the greatest of respect for him, but I am failing to follow what he is trying to say. I assume that on behalf of his constituents he is saying that we need to impose more custodial sentences on repeat offenders. If that is the case, he is arguing that we should send more repeat offenders into a custodial environment. He is then arguing that we need to do something different in the custodial environment. Rather than using generic figures, will he tell us precisely what he disagrees with in terms of Government policy being implemented in prisons to aid the rehabilitation that we all seek?

Grahame Morris: The hon. Gentleman has got the thread of my argument precisely. I am not arguing in a contrary fashion, because I believe that repeat offenders—people involved in serial offending—need to be incarcerated for the protection of the communities and themselves.

However, I do feel that in prisons, over a number of years now, the resources have not been made available to effectively prevent reoffending by offering alternatives and rehabilitation to those people who are incarcerated. I hope I can go on to develop that argument, but it was a good point, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

The greatest tool to tackle record rates of reoffending must be effective rehabilitation. At the heart of rehabilitation is education, which is desperately needed by so many prisoners. Prison education is a complete mess; that has been confirmed by independent inspectors, by the Education Committee, which is highly respected, and by Ofsted. The Government have announced plans for yet another shake-up, promising a new prison education service—I hope the Minister will say something about that. Unfortunately, details are still very thin on the ground. Ministers have had little to say about teachers, who, it might be thought, would be central to any new strategy to turn around the current, failing system. The Education Committee's report said:

“Poor pay, lack of career development, unsafe working environments and no time or respect to do a quality job has left the recruitment and retention of qualified and experienced prison educators at crisis point.”

I hope that the Minister will listen, if not to me, then to the Education Committee, which is chaired by a Conservative, the right hon. Member for Harlow.

The problem is the Government's ideological obsession with running key services, including the criminal justice system, for profit. Four giant prison education providers compete for business while cutting all sorts of corners to maximise profits. According to the union sources I have spoken to, pay and terms and conditions can vary widely. Any serious plan for fixing our broken prison education system should start with standard contracts across the whole sector, plus a pay rise to bring wages up to comparable roles outside. I do not want to go into the details of the issues that have been highlighted to me, but there are things that I hope will be included in the new prison education strategy, which the Minister might refer to when he responds.

Prisons are simply not fit for purpose. In the main, that is as a result of this Government's savage cuts and poor treatment of the workforce—and all of us are paying the price. However, I believe that prison can and must work. A custodial sentence for a repeat offender provides the community with respite from their offending. In the communities that I represent, which in the main are fairly poor, a relatively small number of prolific offenders cause havoc and cause the majority of crime and antisocial behaviour.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate today. He rightly talks about being tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime, which is a Blairite mantra; I am sure that we are all Blairites in that respect today. Does he agree with me that in respect of stopping reoffending, there is a particular challenge with the number of people in prisons who are dependent on opioids and other drugs, and that it is important that we get the right planning in place for those people when they are released from prison to make sure that issue is tackled, because it is a root cause of reoffending?

Grahame Morris: A whole section of my speech was on the need to reform drugs policy. Quite frankly, many of the most prolific offenders are linked to organised crime gangs and their links with the illicit drugs trade. I have done quite a bit of work as vice chair of the drugs, alcohol and justice all-party parliamentary group and I was heartened by the report published by Dame Carol Black in her review of drugs policy. She highlighted the need to divert resources into that area and quoted some quite interesting figures, showing that

“a cohort of around 300,000 heroin and crack users drive nearly half of all acquisitive crime and homicides. Spending an average of £40 to £50 per day on drugs, these users cycle in and out of prison”

in a kind of revolving door. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) is right; that is a huge issue that we, and the Government in particular, need to address.

It is important that we address rehabilitation and proper prison education. There are some good models where they work very well. When the criminal justice system fails, it fails communities such as mine, which suffer from crime, antisocial behaviour and all the things that go with that. The Conservatives have portrayed themselves as the party of law and order and they like to claim that tag. However, the reality is that if we look at the prison system and the amount of reoffending, the Conservatives are the party of crime and chaos.

Cutting police funding by £1.6 billion since 2010 means it is not surprising that the number of people saying they have never seen a police officer on foot patrol has doubled in that time. I look forward to making the case and standing on a manifesto at the next election setting out Labour’s commitment to community policing. Multi-agency neighbourhood police hubs will deliver not only responsive policing but, more importantly, preventive policing. Highly visible policing may have an up-front cost and seem expensive, but effective policing can deliver significant savings further down the line in the criminal justice system. More importantly, effective and preventive policing creates happier, healthier and safer communities, reducing the number of crime victims.

In conclusion, I have some questions to put to the Minister. Twelve years after taking office, when will we have more police officers, police staff and community support officers than in 2010? The 20,000 promised at the last election was, in my opinion, an admission of failure—that the cuts had gone too deep. For our prisoner officers, my ask is this: what action is the Minister taking to tackle prison violence and allow prisons to reform, rehabilitate and educate offenders? Why are the Government refusing to measure the level of violence against prisoners and staff as part of their new key performance indicators, as I called for in my private Member’s Bill in the last Session? We want prisons to reduce reoffending and not hold offenders only for a defined period.

On the causes of crime, can the Minister deliver a practical and sensible solution to disrupt organised crime gangs and break the cycle of offending and reoffending with a reform of drugs policy? We need to overcome misinformation and political dogma to focus solely on cutting crime and the causes of crime.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. I have been lenient as the hon. Member made a very powerful speech, but he has ranged wide in terms of the subject. We are discussing the sentencing of repeat offenders. I know Mr Mangnall will be very well behaved.

2.55 pm

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): You will wish you had not said that, Sir Gary, but thank you for chairing this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

It is welcome that the Government have committed to 20,000 new police officers and that we are on target to meet that number. It is interesting that in areas like ours, Sir Gary, such as the South Hams, we have 170 new officers and are due 217 more by the end of 2024, which we are also on target to meet. We have local initiatives such as the councillor advocates scheme, set up by our police and crime commissioner, Alison Hernandez, that help local parishes engage with the police to ensure better representation and visibility and a better ability to disrupt crime networks. Such structures will make a difference and, hopefully, alleviate the problems of crime in rural areas.

Andy Carter: We have similar experiences in Cheshire. The police and crime commissioner, John Dwyer, reported just this week that Cheshire is in line to have more officers than ever before in the history of the force by the end of March—a commitment that the Government made and are delivering on. Does my hon. Friend accept that although we often hear about having more police on the beat, many crimes are committed online and behind closed doors? The real value of having forensic investigators working behind the scenes is paying off with higher arrest rates, particularly in areas such as child exploitation.

Anthony Mangnall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The nature of policing has changed and we have to be clear about how we tackle crime. I do not expect to see as many officers on foot patrol, but I expect to see more of them driving about. Sir Gary, you did say that this debate is about sentencing, so I will get back to that topic. First, it is about crime prevention, and secondly—the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) touched on this—it is about people who repeatedly commit crimes and find themselves with unduly lenient sentences, such as his constituent.

It is not for Members of Parliament to stand in this place and decide what a sentence should be, but perhaps the Minister will clarify what the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act will do to enhance sentencing, because our understanding was that we would have the opportunity to be more stringent when it comes to those who repeatedly commit crimes. I do not want to take up a significant amount of time, but I do want to talk about one way in which we can deal with repeat offenders, which is rehabilitation.

There are three programmes that are relevant to where we are from, Sir Gary. The first is LandWorks, a local organisation in south Devon that works with those who are at risk of going to prison or are coming out of prison and likely to reoffend. It does it in three ways: engagement through a market garden, through pottery and through woodwork. It is a hand-holding exercise for those leaving prison to ensure that, from

leaving prison to re-entering society, there is an opportunity to help them to re-enter and ensure that recidivism is not just something that we presume will happen.

I have visited LandWorks and I have asked the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), to visit. The Minister answering the debate today is of course welcome anytime in south Devon—it is amazing how many Ministers want to come down over the summer, so he could take a quick holiday and a jaunt to that extraordinary organisation that works to reduce reoffending. It helps the police and the Prison Service, who feel helpless, by ensuring that we do not have more and more prisoners going back in. As a Conservative, I believe passionately that we should have a tough stance on crime but I also believe that the purpose of prisons is rehabilitation and that people deserve a second chance, so we have to find a balance between those two positions.

The second group I will reference is Pathfinder, which has been launched with the police. It is an evidence-based intervention that reduces harm and reoffending and can hold offenders to account for their actions. The scheme integrates offenders and the police, so that they can work together to ensure that offenders do not go down the predicted path of reoffending and are held to account through targets and checklists that they must fulfil. Strict adherence to the programme is already showing some successes.

The third initiative is NHS Reconnect. I recently met someone who was working intimately with the NHS Reconnect service who made the point that after they had left prison they never thought they would be able to get a job in something as big and as brilliant as the NHS. NHS Reconnect is the perfect example to show, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) said, how businesses and public organisations and institutions can play a role. If we can help offenders to find a way into those schemes and structures, we can divert them from the predicted course, and that is where we have to focus.

Using those three initiatives—Landworks, Pathfinder and NHS Reconnect—we have the opportunity to disrupt the chain, the concept and the belief that reoffending is the natural course after leaving the prison system. The statistics accurately prove that crime in our part of the country is going down; I am sorry to keep referring to south Devon but, anecdotally, I am sure there are similar examples across the country, and in fact the statistics prove that. With the police and others coming up with innovative schemes, such as the councillor advocate scheme, we have a way to disrupt.

Grahame Morris: I am a great believer in statistics and often quote them, but my constituent told me that he, and others in the same boat, would not report crime in the future because of his terrible experience in the criminal justice system and because he is dissatisfied with the outcome.

Anthony Mangnall: I absolutely accept the hon. Gentleman's point. I am not for a second saying that everything is rosy, but when we look at the crime statistics there are some positives to be taken away. That is not to say that there is not more work to be done;

complacency can never have any foothold in our legal or police systems, or in the system of support against reoffending.

I have taken up more time than I expected, but I finish by asking the Minister, can the 2022 Act be improved in relation to the points raised? Will he also speak about the prison strategy White Paper that is coming forward? My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the drugs strategy. As I understand it, the drugs strategy was launched in 2021 and we have made £780 million available for it, of which £120 million will be made available to prisoners. Is there any interest in expanding that? Will the Minister report back on how that scheme is working and operating, and whether it has an impact on reducing reoffending?

3.3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Sir Gary, and to follow the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall). Either he follows me or I follow him, and I am happy to be following in his footsteps on this occasion in making my contribution, which will back up what he said.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on introducing the debate in such a knowledgeable, factual and detailed way. I am here simply because the subject of the debate interests me and my constituents. To be fair, things are slightly different in Northern Ireland, where some of the people who walk the streets in Northern Ireland after having offended happen to be in positions of Government. It distresses us greatly that those people did not get their just deserts and do due time in prison for their crimes, but I digress. I understand that those issues are not the purpose of today's debate.

Many constituents come to me and express concern about someone who is a repeat offender and, unfortunately, continues to repeat offend. Some of the cases that we have seen are particularly harrowing. There are different levels of crime, and I understand that there are different levels of punishment as well. That is reflected when the courts—

James Daly: The hon. Gentleman is clearly going to develop his points in respect of this issue, but the title of the debate is somewhat troubling, in that repeat offenders receive two types of sentence. One is a custodial sentence, and the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) has spoken about the rehabilitative measures that are required within the custodial environment but not touched on licence conditions. Secondly, the vast majority of reoffenders are sentenced to non-custodial disposals, so their contact with the prison system is less important than what is happening in the community. I would be very interested to hear from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on those two separate strands of sentencing.

Jim Shannon: I will try to develop my points and, I hope, answer the hon. Gentleman's question. I look forward in particular to his contribution to the debate.

With regard to my party colleagues, I am ever mindful that this is a devolved matter and therefore what we do in Northern Ireland is not the responsibility of the Minister here, but this Minister, when he replies to our

[*Jim Shannon*]

contributions, always does so with knowledge and also with help to try to develop the requests that we put in for his attention.

It is no secret that I am a firm believer in strict, fair prison sentences. The sentence should fit the crime: that is where I am coming from. I fail to understand and see the reasoning behind overly lenient prison sentences for repeat offenders, which appear only to normalise the concept of repeat criminality. The issue here lies with the word “repeat”. As legislators in this House and, indeed, for the Assembly back home and for the other devolved Administrations, we must do all we can to ensure that there is no repeat offending. That is ultimately the goal that we are all trying to achieve, and that may be done, as the hon. Member for Totnes described, with the schemes that those coming out of prison can get involved in to take them away from a past that we hope they will not return to.

Lady Chief Justice Dame Siobhan Keegan, from back home in Northern Ireland, recently revealed that from March 2022 there would be harsher sentences for those repeat offenders guilty of abhorrent domestic abuse crimes. That is one of the types of crime that I am thinking of when I say, in relation to repeat offending, that the punishment should fit the crime. I fully support the Lady Chief Justice’s statement. There is no doubt that that is a step forward. But there should be no allowance for repeat offending in the first place. The Department of Justice revealed that adults released from prison had a proven reoffending rate of 38.6%, which is a huge amount of criminal reoffending. In addition, a large number of criminals getting off charges with no lessons learned and a mere smack on the wrist is not acceptable. The general public deserve protection and they want to see justice.

There is also the very strong argument from the side of the victim of crime—I will often speak up for the victim of crime—in relation to harsher sentencing. Whether we are talking about a burglary, assault or something considerably more serious, there is a victim who must be protected and assured of a fair, decent sentence. Repeat victimisation has become a major issue as a result of repeat offending. Sexual assault and robbery were among the crimes with the highest percentage of repeat offending—often against the same victims. Those figures alone emphasise the real need for harsher sentencing at the beginning to ensure the protection and safety of victims.

There will not be many of us who do not know or cannot give an example of a case from our own constituency in which the person who carried out the crime gets out of jail—I am thinking particularly of cases of sexual assault—and suddenly is walking around the neighbourhood where it took place. I tell you what, Sir Gary: if I were a victim, I would feel pretty disturbed, angry, annoyed and concerned that the person was able to walk round the countryside, the town, the lanes and the villages where the crimes took place. I want to see protection for the victims.

I will ask the Minister this question—if, of course, it is within the remit of this debate, Sir Gary—because I am very keen to find out what the intention is. When it comes to offenders getting out after carrying out crimes, there should be an onus on us to notify the victims that

they are returning. Indeed, it would be better if a person did not return to the village where they carried out a despicable crime, but we must make sure that protection is there. We have often heard about assailants getting out and being able to wander close to the family home of the person they assaulted.

There is a debate to be had about how we treat petty crimes, such as public drunkenness, using a mobile phone while driving, or underage drinking or smoking. The hon. Member for Easington has raised before the call for community service and electronic tagging for petty crimes, and I support that. For petty crimes, the right thing to do is not to be harsh when trying to pull people away from a life of crime and point them in the right direction. Although I agree that the statistics on reoffending must be looked at to see if that is a beneficial form of punishment, we must consider stronger prison sentences if there is reoffending for petty crimes. As has been stated, lessons must be learned, as there is always the potential to be a victim.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office has undertaken work to develop a strategy to stop adult reoffending—the Minister, having looked into all these issues thoroughly, will be aware of it. This will ultimately rehabilitate offenders so that they do not reoffend after completing their sentence. It has shown considerable success.

Difficulties at home, financial issues, deprivation, or problems with alcohol, drugs or mental health can result in a continuous negative pattern of behaviour, which repeatedly brings people back into the system. People with mental health issues need to be rehabilitated and helped beyond prison. Repeat offenders are responsible for 75% of all offences recorded per year—a truly astonishing figure.

Although justice is a devolved matter, there must be more collaboration between the Departments to tackle repeat offending. I ask the Minister, has there been any contact with the devolved Administrations, in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, to exchange ideas? I am a great believer in the idea that we can all learn from each other—I will do that to the day I die. We can do things better when we talk to those who have a system that works.

To conclude, there are ways to tackle repeat offending that reflect the callousness and intensity of the crime. For example, I believe that sexual assault cases should be harshly sentenced to start with, as community service does not reprimand the evil of assault. However, for petty crimes there are other ways to teach people the difference between right and wrong and keep them on the straight and narrow—to use a biblical term—and to ensure that they stay away from the wrong path. The issue remains what steps we should take when lessons are not learned from a certain kind of punishment. I always try to make a contribution from a Northern Ireland perspective, but I would also echo the comments of other hon. Members and I look forward to their comments.

3.13 pm

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): I congratulate my friend the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) on bringing forward this important debate, which, as I said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), can be viewed from a number of different viewpoints.

I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and declare an interest as a practising solicitor. I was a criminal defence solicitor for 16 years. During the halcyon days of the Labour Government under Tony Blair, I was in court every day and in police stations every evening, representing the reoffenders we have been talking about. I am sure the hon. Member for Easington has not come here just to engage in political point scoring, and he will not want us to get into a debate about this, but I could go through a whole raft of statistics from when I was practising before the courts under the Labour Government. Reoffending was rampant.

This will be my last point, because I do not want to get into this, but I do not know how Labour or any Labour politician can actually challenge a Government Minister when their leader has such an appalling record as Director of Public Prosecutions. There was a fall in conviction rates for serious sexual offending and other sexual offending. We should come to these issues without the political preening and look at what we can do to make things better.

I can tell the Members present that we could have been having this conversation back in 2001, when I first stood up in the magistrates court. The first mitigation I did was completely by luck—I was making it up as I went along. I got there at 9 o'clock in the morning and my new employer said, "Court starts in 45 minutes—off you go." The first person I represented was a shoplifter. I did not know what to say, having had no experience of these things. It occurred to me that it would be a novel idea if the court was able to impose a sentence of a job and a home. I had no background training whatsoever, having done no criminal law during my training contract. I just had a feeling, at some point, that I would go into criminal law. I thought it sounded interesting. The feeling I had during that first mitigation has never left me: the way to tackle offending, certainly with repeat offenders, is by the state bringing as much stability to their lives as possible. That is an incredibly difficult action for the state.

Sentencing is a bespoke exercise. The idea that the Government impose sentences that are routinely put and that everybody—whether they are in Totnes, Easington or Bury—gets the same sentence in the same circumstances is utterly ridiculous.

Andy Carter: My hon. Friend knows that I sit as a magistrate. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) said that Members of this House do not necessarily sentence, but I actually do sentence. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly) is absolutely right. One of the greatest debates that benches of magistrates have is on the appropriate sentencing for the offender they see in front of them. Rehabilitation activity requirements and courses to help people understand the issues they face—on drugs, alcohol and dealing with conflict—are incredibly valuable and can form part of a sentencing package. As my hon. Friend says, it is right that magistrates have a full range of sentences available to them to ensure that the punishment fits the crime that an offender has been convicted of.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Magistrate, for the reminder that interventions should be slightly shorter than that.

James Daly: Thank you, Sir Gary. I agree with everything that my hon. Friend said. When we look at reoffending rates, we must look at what we are talking about, because we cannot talk in the generality. When I first appeared before the courts, I was representing up to 10 shoplifters a day. My hon. Friend has been on the bench for a long time, so he will know that that was the nature of repeat offending—drug-related acquisitive offending at a relatively low level.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am interested in the hon. Gentleman saying that he represented 10 shoplifters a day. When I visit shops nowadays, they tell me they are deeply frustrated that shoplifters are allowed simply to walk out of the store because nobody is interested in ensuring that they are caught and taken through the court system. Does he share that lament?

James Daly: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point. I am sure the Minister will confirm that I have that conversation with him on a regular basis. It is an important issue. The level of offending that I saw when I initially practised has vanished from the courts. I do not know where it has gone; I do not think it has disappeared into the ether. All constituency MPs know that shoplifting is still a prolific issue, but it is not appearing before the courts.

When we get down to the issue of repeat offending, perhaps the nature of the offending that appears in a sentencing exercise has changed. Where do we look for that offending? What specifically categorises it? I have to say that I do not agree with what the hon. Member for Easington says, although I understand why he said it in terms of categorising the offending as organised crime. That is a very general description of what we are talking about. Organised crime tends to be very high-level offending. When I look at reoffending rates, I look at the offences where it is a prolific problem, such as domestic violence and serious sexual offending; all of those offences, which have very specific different motivations and reasons why they are committed, are the ones that I look at. I only make the point that we cannot debate this issue in the generality. We cannot say that one sentencing option or one rehabilitative model is going to suit every single option.

We then get to the question—I raised this with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—of how to deal with repeat offenders: with a non-custodial sentence or a custodial one? I think every hon. Member would agree with the hon. Member for Easington that, in the circumstances he spoke about, the gentleman should be sent to prison. I represented people who had committed 400 offences. What do we do with them after 400 offences? Everything has been tried. Every sentence that had ever been invented had been tried by many of my clients, and had failed spectacularly. What do you do with them? They have to be sent to prison, because if it is highly unlikely for a sentence to be carried out or for an offender to take part in the requirements, that sentence cannot be imposed.

The drug rehabilitation part of non-custodial sentences is not as straightforward as people suggest. All the offenders I have represented, save those who had serious mental health issues, have understood that they should not be doing what they were doing. They know the difference between right and wrong—it is not a moral question. In many circumstances, it is a question of

[James Daly]

addressing their substance problem or opioid problem. When courts impose drug rehabilitation orders, we cannot simply take a wand out and hit somebody over the head and suddenly everything is okay. For the orders to be successful, there has to be planning, work and stability in their lives. For an offender who is living on the street, with very little money, a drug rehabilitation order may seem a sensible sentence because that is what the problem is, and that is why the offence has been committed, but we should not impose a sentence if we know it is going to fail, even if it addresses the root cause of the problem.

On non-custodial sentences, I agree with the points that were made about the probation service—I think we have got back to a better place, but we cannot simply talk about terms and conditions and how extremely important they are, and all the other things that the hon. Member for Easington referred to. This is about the interaction of the individuals, in the circumstances that they face on bail. It is those that are going to decide whether a sentence is successful or not.

In the custodial environment, there is a real debate about what we view as success in what people are offered, and that is not just about violence. Most of the reoffenders I represented were not violent individuals—they were not going into prison and that was sending them on to a different scale. It was about how the fundamental stability issues were addressed, particularly employment. I hope the Minister will comment on this point, because the Government are doing some really good work in looking at the root causes of offending. They are putting a lot of money into job creation and education, which we should not just brush aside. Some really positive steps are being taken.

Some other measures are really showing the Government's innovative approach to sentencing policy. They were not around when I was practising. Alcohol abstinence tags have a phenomenally high rate of success. Many domestic violence offences are committed by people who are drunk or who have serious alcohol problems. Alcohol abstinence tags, whether part of the sentence or the licence conditions afterwards, are showing real success and we should—"celebrate" seems the wrong word for a sentencing exercise—at least acknowledge that good policies are being put in place.

There is also GPS tagging, which is about making sure that the justice system knows where a person is after they are released. If a burglar is coming to the end of their sentence and there is a concern about what they might do next, if they are GPs-tagged and silly enough to commit an offence, they will be arrested and put back into the court system as soon as possible. There is some really good work in this area. There is integrated offender management, which brings all the services together to produce a bespoke package to help offenders who are struggling with their lives.

The picture is complex. This problem has been around for a long time. Over many years, including under the Labour party, community rehabilitation orders have sadly been spectacularly unsuccessful, but that is not a reason for us not to keep on trying to use modern technology to learn from some of the things that have happened in the past and to have a real debate about how we can affect individual lives. Not everyone is the same. Each person we rehabilitate and bring back into a life where they are not committing offences is a success.

That should not be viewed in the thousands, but in each individual success. We are all committed to doing that, while also, getting back to the original point, sending people to prison for sentences that are lengthy enough to deter reoffending behaviour.

3.25 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for a second time, Sir Gary, despite the 10 years you tell me you have been in the role. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris)—a fellow north-east England MP—on securing the debate. I believe he captured powerfully the frustrations that victims have with a criminal justice system that is crumbling on the Government's watch. Before I go on, I want to pay tribute to the police, prison officers, probation officers and all the others who work so hard under very difficult circumstances.

My hon. Friend the Member for Easington recognises that the Government are soft on crime and, as he reports from his constituency, are letting criminals off and victims down. He mentioned the ludicrously small fines that offenders are receiving in his constituency and how one offender with a hundred offences ended up with a community service order. I am sure the Minister will want to comment on whether that is appropriate.

The hon. Member for Bury North (James Daly) mentioned that many people receive sentences that simply do not work, and that many simply ignore the courts and get away with it. According to Labour's research, the number of uncollected court fines has now reached £1.2 billion in the last five years, and that includes more than £50 million of unpaid compensation due to victims directly. Can the Minister tell us what he is doing to collect some of that money? A billion pounds would be enough to pay the salaries of more than 19,000 additional police officers—not far shy of the number of officers that the Government have cut. I know that the Government plan to replace them and that some progress is being made. I welcome that, but we are in a situation where we are replacing experienced officers with inexperienced officers. Nevertheless, the Minister will be pleased to know that my nephew, Lewis Cunningham, is going to be one of those new police officers when he starts working for the Yorkshire force in the autumn.

The public rightly feel that the police are no longer visible on their streets. That is why we would try to put this right with our community police hubs. Some of those officers would also play a crucial role in our new neighbourhood prevention teams, bringing together community support officers, youth workers and council staff to tackle the causes of repeat antisocial behaviour currently blighting our communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington is right that being tough on crime and on the causes of crime is as valid now as it was during the days of the last Labour Government. It was nice to hear the hon. Member for Bury North celebrate his full employment under the last Labour Government, when we had a fully resourced and proper justice system. The policies we have announced in this Parliament show that our party is still committed to those guiding principles.

However, it is not just in the detection of repeat crime that the Government are letting victims and communities down; it is also in effective sentencing that properly acts

as a deterrent, a prison system that properly rehabilitates defenders and a probation system that properly protects the public by reducing reoffending in communities themselves.

We have heard some positive things about prisons. The hon. Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) mentioned the importance of education in the prison system and where it can work well. My own home prison in Stockton, Holme House Prison, does it best and has some fantastic facilities, yet even there prisoners are still spending far too long in their cells and are not really making full use of the facilities available to them.

What do we have? Under this Government, our prisons have become colleges of criminality. Repeat offenders, many of them on short sentences, leave prisons more addicted to drugs than they were when they entered, because prison drug abuse is up an astonishing 500% since 2010. Despite that, there has been only a fractional increase in the number of mandatory drug tests, so addiction grows. Drugs are rife in prison because the detection of contraband is so poor.

The Ministry of Justice is especially wasteful at times; it has thrown £140 million of taxpayers' money down the drain in the past year. That includes £6 million on prison drug scanners that are picking up on average only 12 items of contraband each month because they are used so sparingly. They are not really a waste of money; if they were being used effectively and on a daily basis, we would be in a stronger position. It is no surprise that addiction causes problems in communities after prisoners are released if they are not accessing the types of rehabilitative programmes that they need while in custody. The number of NHS alcohol and drug treatment programmes started by inmates fell dramatically between 2015 and 2020, with 7,000 fewer places taken up.

The hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) talked about rehabilitation. Rehabilitation is the answer, but it needs to be properly resourced. Reoffending in our communities can only be stopped by making prisons work. A Labour Government would do that by putting a greater focus on rehabilitation and ending the explosion in drug use, which fuels further crime when inmates re-enter society.

Anthony Mangnall: Going back to the point about the resources put into rehabilitation, the hon. Gentleman is right up to a point, but the private sector also plays a significant role in preventing reoffending. Does the hon. Gentleman see that there has to be a bit of quid pro quo from both the private and public sectors on this issue?

Alex Cunningham: I agree. I think employers should play a greater role in prisons and we should encourage more of them in. However, we need to provide the right environment for employers. Many years ago I was employed by National Grid, which had a scheme working in partnership with prisons—I think forklift truck drivers were the main output from one prison in the south. Those people did not reoffend—or very few of them did—because they worked with the employer while they were still in prison, they had day release into the workplace and then they got a job afterwards. That is the real answer: education followed by a job.

We know that community service sentences have enormous potential for reducing reoffending as an alternative to short prison sentences, which, under this Government, only entrench offending behaviours. A large body of evidence suggests that community orders are more effective in reducing reoffending than short sentences. Under this Government, community sentences are being set up to fail because the Government do not seem to care about stopping repeat offending at source.

The number of hours of community service was falling significantly even before the pandemic, but has now fallen to less than 1.5 million, from over 5 million five years ago. Public trust in community sentences is flagging because those schemes have stopped being seen to be viable. The number of offenders completing a community sentence has fallen by a quarter in the past five years because offenders are breaching the terms of their sentences, often by not turning up.

Labour has proposed a better way forward. The public need to see that justice is being done in their communities. That is precisely what Labour's community and victim payback boards would do, by providing publicly available data on the work that offenders are doing, determined by the communities and victims affected. We have put the victims of crime and the communities blighted by it at the centre of unpaid work schemes through existing safer neighbourhood boards. Another reason for the failure of community sentences, particularly where repeat offenders are concerned, is down to the fact that judges no longer trust that they will be delivered. The fault with that lies in the problems experienced by the probation service, which this Government have created with the service's disastrous privatisation in 2014.

James Daly: I would be astounded if the hon. Gentleman had any evidence to back up the claim that judges do not trust community sentences. I do not know whether he has seen the Government's work on community payback, which is extremely visible and effective. It is essentially already doing what he has just said.

Alex Cunningham: I accept that some progress has been made in this area, but we have a long way to go if we are to make it effective for many more people in the system. That is an illustration that the Government have belatedly realised their error and are starting to put things right. There are still worrying hangovers, such as recruitment and retention, from the previous system of community rehabilitation companies.

The rate at which probation officers are leaving the service has increased by a quarter since 2015. Resignations have consistently outstripped retirement and other reasons for leaving the service over the past five years: 60% of all leavers are choosing to walk away. The causes cited by some include high workloads, stress and poor pay, given the nature of the work and the rising cost of living. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington talked of some of those issues.

The workloads of existing staff have now reached unsafe levels. That is reflected in the alarming growth in certain serious further offences in recent years; that is, offences committed by repeat offenders who are the subject of probation supervision. I am sure the Minister will tell us how we are going to reconfigure the probation service, to ensure that we can put that right. SFOs for

[*Alex Cunningham*]

murder were higher in the three years to 2020 than they ever have been—surely, the most severe form of repeat offending that there is.

The public have a right to be concerned about these serious violent crimes in their communities, because this Tory Government have shown time and again they are not capable of dealing with the issue. There is no better example than repeat knife crime. The Government promised in 2015 to lock up repeat knife offenders, but almost half of repeat offenders avoided jail in 2021, and knife possession offences across England and Wales have increased by a fifth since the Conservatives came to power. The Minister and I spent a considerable length of time in Committee for the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill Act 2022. I hope the measures it introduced will have the effect that the Government hope. Of course, many of the provisions have yet to be enacted.

The root of the problem with repeat offending is the neglect of youth services and youth offending teams, which could be preventing offending by engaging young people, instead of leaving them to their own devices and the influence of others who drag them into crime. That neglect has resulted in enormous rises in the scale and cost of violent youth crime, which now stands at more than £11 billion under this Government. Being soft on repeat offending and soft on its causes blights communities and costs taxpayers. Labour has shown it will tackle reoffending and repeat offending head on, and bring security to our communities. That is what my hon. Friend the Member for Easington wants.

3.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Sir Gary. I note your background as a solicitor, albeit not a criminal one, and that you served as a Minister under our Department's predecessor in the Lord Chancellor's office.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) and congratulate him on bringing forward this important debate on a topic that, despite the turnout, creates great interest on all sides. I think there is a lot of consensus on the key points. I am aware of his letter and was waiting for the debate to respond. If I do not cover any points today, I can return to them in writing. He knows, as has been said by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (James Daly), that when it comes to specific cases, it is a constitutional fact and convention that we have an independent judiciary, and Ministers do not comment on individual sentencing decisions. That is an incredibly important point.

The hon. Member for Easington finished his speech with a few specific questions. I will start by answering those before going into the body of the speech on reoffending. He asked about prison officer and police officer numbers. Between October 2016 and December 2021, the number of prison officers rose from 17,955 to 22,156—an extra 4,201 full-time officers. That in itself is a way of improving their safety. There are also specific measures, such as rolling out pepper spray in the adult male estate, which we will be doing to protect officers, and the introduction of 6,000 body cameras across the estate.

On police officers, in response to the hon. Gentleman's question I am pleased to confirm that we are at 13,500. I was pleased to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Andy Carter) about the number of extra officers in Cheshire. My hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall) mentioned the number in South Hams. Perhaps most importantly, we heard from the Labour Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), that Lewis Cunningham has joined that number and will be serving on the frontline. We all pay tribute to him and are grateful to all those officers. I join the hon. Member for Easington in paying tribute to those who serve in our communities to bring law and order to our streets.

I want to comment on what my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North said. It probably will not be known to most hon. Members that he was my Parliamentary Private Secretary until a few days ago. The baton has now passed to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Cherilyn Mackrory), and that brings the great advantage that he is now able to speak on Ministry of Justice matters. He has great experience as a criminal solicitor, as we have heard.

The hon. Member for Easington spoke with great passion, particularly on the case that has blighted his constituency. But a fundamental fact is that the proportion of offenders released from custody who reoffended within 12 months fell significantly from 51.5% in 2010-11 to 42.2% between April 2019 and March 2020. That significant fall was seen in both adults and juveniles.

We have a strong record in tackling reoffending, but we recognise that reoffending rates are still too high across England and Wales. In 2020, 80% of offenders cautioned or convicted had at least one previous caution or conviction. That is far too high. In many cases, repeat or prolific offenders commit low-level crime, continuously revolving in and out of the criminal justice system. We also know that they often have high levels of complex and interweaving needs that drive their offending: roughly 61% of prolific offenders have coexisting needs of accommodation, employment and substance misuse. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North saw that on his very first day as a criminal solicitor, and my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South will have seen it many times in front of him on the bench.

This Government understand the concern and harm caused by repeat offending, as described by the hon. Member for Easington. As I am sure Members will appreciate, this is a complex issue. There is no easy answer. There is certainly no magic wand, as my hon. Friend for Bury North said. We are committed to action and I can reassure the House that we are pursuing an extensive package of measures to tackle it, which I will set out.

Turning first to the sentencing framework, sentencing in individual cases is wholly a matter for the independent judiciary. However, it is the responsibility of Parliament to ensure that the courts have the sentencing framework they need to sentence offenders appropriately.

Turning to the PCSC Act, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) asked how it would affect the subject of the debate. Under the Act we made several changes to legislation to deliver our manifesto commitments and ensure that the worst offenders spend longer in custody. The Act also introduces specific measures designed to

tackle repeat offending. For example, the law provides for minimum sentences for certain offences known to have a large community impact, including threat with or repeat possession of a knife, a third conviction of domestic burglary and certain class A drug trafficking offences.

We heard the concern that too many offenders were receiving sentences below the minimum term. Indeed, in 2020, at least 50% of adults convicted of a third domestic burglary received a sentence below the minimum prescribed by Parliament. I can confirm that the PCSC Act, which just received Royal Assent, changes the law to ensure that courts may depart from the minimum sentence only in exceptional circumstances. I believe the word imputed is “particular” circumstances. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South, who sits as a magistrate, knows that that sort of wording is very important and we feel it will have an impact.

We are clear that delivering public protection is not just about better use of custody. Evidently, not all offences warrant a custodial sentence. Lower-level offending is often better handled via a non-custodial sentence. To that end, our sentencing White Paper set out our plans for tougher, better monitored and more effective community sentencing options that can tackle prolific offending by providing appropriate punishment, while also addressing the underlying drivers of offending and offering support for those who want to turn their lives around.

Going further, the PCSC Act enables closer supervision of certain offenders and introduces the option for tougher and more flexible use of electronically monitored curfews to better reflect the punishment intended, better support rehabilitation and better protect victims. It also reforms criminal records disclosure to increase the number of ex-offenders able to find work, which we know plays a crucial role in reducing reoffending.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North referred to the extremely positive data that we have seen on increasing the rate of employment among those leaving prison. I think that a two-thirds increase in the number of people who left prison between April 2021 and March 2022 who were still in employment six months after release is a very positive development indeed.

The PCSC Act also introduced powers to pilot problem-solving courts, which will combine supervision and multi-agency interventions with regular court-based reviews of progress overseen by a single judge or dedicated magistrates, with clear, consistent and graduated consequences for non-compliance.

However, this process is not just about sentencing options. The PCSC Act also reforms adult out-of-court disposals, to allow the police to deal swiftly, proportionately and appropriately with low-level offending and to reduce the burden on courts. Under our new framework, cautions must have conditions attached, to enable the police to target the cause of the offending behaviour and to refer people into appropriate support services. Basically, to date there have been quite a number of out-of-court disposal options, including those that are effectively a warning. What we are moving to with the PCSC Act is two sets of out-of-court disposals, which is a much simpler system that is more unified across the jurisdiction, and—importantly—there will always have to be an action associated with a particular disposal.

I turn to our sentencing framework. This is an essential element of tackling repeat offending, but we are clear

that criminal justice agencies must also be armed with the tools they need to manage challenging offenders effectively.

The hon. Member for Stockton North asked about probation. As he is aware, in June 2021 we launched a new unified probation service across England and Wales. Unification of the probation service, underpinned by increased funding of £155 million per annum to recruit additional staff, will help to reduce overall case loads, enable robust management of offenders in the community and support better public protection. That means that we can supervise offenders with rigour and discipline, as well as enforcing the consequences of non-compliance.

Our “Beating crime plan”, launched in July 2021, announced our refreshed integrated offender management scheme, which is another crucial element in our efforts to tackle repeat offending. Under the scheme, over 9,000 persistent and problematic neighbourhood crime offenders across England and Wales are subject to intensive supervision by the probation service and the police, who work together with partner agencies to keep those offenders accountable and support them to reform.

[Another form of community order that we have heard about is unpaid work. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North spoke about this activity, which we call community payback, and the hon. Member for Stockton North, who speaks for the Opposition, spoke about his party’s plans in this regard. Just to be clear, we are investing an additional £93 million over the next three years to allow us to increase community payback delivery, up to 8 million hours a year—I repeat, up to 8 million hours—with a particular focus on delivering more outdoor projects that improve public spaces and, crucially, allow the public to see justice being done. Seeing justice done is a core, common-law principle that underpins our system, which is why the visibility of offenders who are out there clearing a canal or scrubbing graffiti off a wall is so important, and I hope that I have set out how we intend to go much further.

The hon. Member for Easington made a very good point when he cited a particular statistic. Heroin and crack cocaine addiction is linked to almost half of all acquisitive crime—he used that exact figure—including burglary, robbery and theft, and drugs are associated with almost half of all homicides. As set out in our 10-year drugs strategy, which was published in December 2021, this Government will invest £780 million over the next three years in drug treatment services, including £120 million to support offenders to engage with treatment. We are very much looking at the big picture when it comes to drugs.

Of course, we also know that alcohol is another key driver of offending. To that end, last year we introduced another innovative use of electronic monitoring, which is using alcohol tags to monitor offender compliance with alcohol bans in community sentences. In the first year of their use, we have seen over 3,500 alcohol banning orders being imposed, with over 97% of days monitored being alcohol-free. I repeat: 97%.

Building on that success, last week we completed our roll-out of alcohol monitoring on licence across England and Wales, allowing us to deploy this intervention across the criminal justice system. Over the next three years, around 12,000 offenders will wear an alcohol tag.

Andy Carter: Will the Minister talk about the changes to Friday release that have been announced? Having visited several prisons, it has always struck me that there are virtually no support services for prisoners when they are released into the community on Fridays. What was the thinking behind the changes?

James Cartledge: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and he is absolutely right about the impact of the changes. He will be aware that our hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mark Jenkinson) will introduce a private Member's Bill to tackle this very issue. As we bring that Bill forward—hopefully with support from all parties—it will address my hon. Friend's point.

On the matter of release, the hon. Member for Strangford asked a specific question: how do we notify the victim when the perpetrator is being released? I cannot comment on the arrangements in Northern Ireland, but we have a victim contact scheme in our jurisdiction. Where an offender receives one year or more in custody, bereaved close relatives and victims of serious sexual and violent offences are automatically referred to the scheme, so that they can choose to receive information on the following: first, when the offender is released or considered for release or conditional discharge; secondly, if the prisoner moves to open conditions; and thirdly, what the court sentence means for the offender's detention in prison or hospital. We recognise that the point of release is a key moment to help offenders turn their lives around, which is why the issue of Friday release is important. As such, our prison strategy White Paper outlined our ambitious plans to ensure that prison leavers have the accommodation and employment support they need on release to help them to stay away from drugs and crime.

The hon. Member for Easington asked about prison education, and I can confirm that we set out our plans in the prison strategy White Paper to deliver a prison education service within this Parliament and to raise numeracy, literacy and skills in order to secure jobs on release. I have already highlighted the real progress that we are making in securing employment for prisoners, and we will change the law to enable them to undertake apprenticeships for the first time. In combination with our commitment to support prisoners to engage with community treatment ahead of release, we are confident that the measures will help reduce reoffending.

Specifically in relation to female offenders, who are more likely to commit low-level offences, we are delivering on our commitment to pilot a residential women's centre. This will offer an intensive residential support package in the community for women at risk of receiving short custodial sentences, supporting them to address the underlying causes of their offending behaviour, including

drug, alcohol and mental health needs, and to move on to settled accommodation. Last month, we announced that the first residential women's centre will be in Swansea. The centre will now be subject to planning permission, but it will run as a pilot for five years and has received £10.6 million of spending review funding.

Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Easington for securing the debate. As I said, this is a matter that greatly concerns all our constituents. There is a lot of consensus about the measures that need to be taken, and I assure him that the Government understand the issue and are committed to tackling the harm caused by repeat offending.

3.52 pm

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister not only for what he has said, but for his tone and for being so constructive in responding to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), my good friend the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), the hon. Members for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), for Warrington South (Andy Carter) and for Bury North (James Daly), and the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who is not in his place. We have had some excellent and constructive speeches and interventions, and I am pleased that the Minister has taken them on board. I have learned a new word: recidivism. I cannot say it, but I know what it means.

The Minister is absolutely right to suggest that there is no single medicine or antidote to the problems that we are facing. We need a combined approach—a broad-spectrum antibiotic—to deal with the multifaceted issues that we face in tackling reoffending. I was heartened by what he said in relation to the additional moneys that are being channelled through the Prison Service to tackle the issue of drugs and alcohol.

I would also like to highlight that, apart from in Durham—we all know it is the centre of the universe for initiatives and policing schemes—there are some excellent police-led, out-of-court disposal and drug diversion schemes. There is Checkpoint in my area, Turning Point in the west midlands, and the drug education programme in Avon and Somerset. They have all delivered early interventions that have diverted individuals away from the criminal justice system and reoffending, and into drug education, support and treatment. I make a plea to the Minister that these schemes should be expanded.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the sentencing of repeat offenders.

3.55 pm

Sitting suspended.

Equality of Opportunity: South-East Wakefield

4 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered increasing equality of economic opportunities in south east Wakefield.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I thank the House authorities for allowing me to raise a very important matter that relates to my constituency. I am aware of a certain event in another part of Wakefield on Thursday. Members will no doubt be listening carefully to ensure I avoid mentioning such matters, and I undertake to do so. I am most concerned to raise issues affecting the part of my constituency that I have described as south-east Wakefield. It is more or less, but not entirely, coterminous with the constituency of Hemsworth, which I have represented for over 26 years now.

Prompted in part by Government rhetoric about levelling up, I want to show how areas such as the one I represent are desperately in need of a new deal. Let me first tell Members about a conversation I had the other day with a young man named Zac Gaskell, 12 years old. He came along to see me with his dad Lee. Zac is an elected member of the Youth Parliament for our area. It was a great privilege to meet him. I asked him how he had come to be elected and what was in his manifesto. He said, "Well, the most important thing is that people in power need to listen to the voices of young people. After all, we—young people—are the future." I agree with him; I am sure we all do.

The truth is that opportunities for young people in south-east Wakefield are severely limited. The situation is becoming dire. Having carefully read much of the Government's information about levelling up, I have come to the conclusion that there is something missing. If we are going to talk about levelling up, what the country needs is some kind of analytical tool to guide us and by which we can measure the success or failure of the Government in achieving greater equality of economic opportunity for areas such as south-east Wakefield.

I believe there is such an analytical tool, lying easily to hand, that the country should use. These days, we call it social mobility. It used to be assumed that the next generation—the Zacs of this world—would get a better life than our generation. I think that is probably what brought most of us into politics: the idea that we could improve the way the country and the world operate. Some people call it the British promise, and we often now call it social mobility. With an increasingly centralised Government focused around Whitehall and the Cities of Westminster and London, it is no longer the case that this British promise of a better life will be delivered for areas such as south-east Wakefield.

Areas like mine are being held back. I want to show why, and speak about how and what we might do to think about changing the life chances of people I represent. My constituency is among the least socially mobile in the whole of England. There are 533 constituencies in England and mine is the fourth worst for social mobility; we are the 529th out of 533 seats. The Government have acknowledged the wider problem. I think that is why the idea of levelling up has been developed, and why the Government have appointed a Social Mobility Commission and now a social mobility tsar.

If the Government cannot offer assistance to a constituency like mine, we know that the model they are using does not work. What is curious about the commission is that the whole lot of them resigned back in 2020, as Members may remember. The commission said that inequality in Britain is

"now entrenched from birth to work."

Certainly, that is a description of the area I represent. The new social mobility tsar, Katharine Birbalsingh, has said that working-class kids should maybe not aim so high. Indeed, last week she said that we should stop fixating on getting poor children to university—an extraordinary thing to say—and encourage them instead to celebrate "smaller steps" up the ladder. That is just not good enough. Is that the best that the Government's appointee can say to Zac and his friends? "Don't aim high, Zac. Take a few small steps. That is maybe all you can expect."

What does such advice mean in practice? It means that a child born into a certain group in my constituency or elsewhere will likely die in the same social group that they, their parents and grandparents were part of. The ability to move up the ladder is negligible in an area like mine, and the situation is getting worse. Social mobility and deprivation levels are interconnected. My area is becoming more deprived as this Tory Government have gone on, not less. For example, we are now the 111th most deprived of the English constituencies. In 2015, we were the 130th, so we have declined by 19 positions. That is probably not surprising given that deprivation is growing, and it relates to the lack of social mobility in our area.

I pay tribute to the people in my area. They work hard; they were the miners who powered and lit our country, and did all the things necessary in the worst conditions imaginable at work. They are wonderful people. I guess we all think that about our own constituents, but in my case it is the truth. There are many companies in my area, some led by ex-miners, that want to help. They are exemplary, and rooted in the local community. Many leaders of those companies have a social conscience and want to bring social mobility back to life, give local people more opportunities and reverse the trends in deprivation, but they desperately need help and support.

I hope the council will put in bids for levelling-up funds that could help locally. If we are successful, it is to be welcomed, but if we are going to give the kids in Wakefield a chance, we need the Government to address the issues that are interconnected with deprivation and a lack of social mobility. I want briefly to touch on four or five of those issues. The first is productivity. These days, we measure productivity per head by something called GVA—gross value added. In Yorkshire and the Humber, gross value added per worker is just over £21,000, whereas in London it is £48,000, so the productivity per head in Yorkshire as a whole—it is slightly worse in my constituency—is £27,000 a year less than for workers in London, and that is because of lack of investment. Without investment, work will be less productive, and if the productivity of each worker is lower, we can therefore expect wages to be lower.

Average pay in Hemsworth is £495 a week. In the Prime Minister's constituency, it is £728 a week. On average, the workers in Hemsworth in my constituency are paid £12,000 a year less than those in the Prime Minister's constituency. What is worse is that earnings in Hemsworth have grown by 6% since 2010. In the UK,

[Jon Trickett]

that growth in wages was 22%—almost four times more. I relate that back to the lack of investment in productivity. We are falling further behind. We can see the problems in our area, both chronic and acute, and we desperately need investment.

That brings me to my third point: the need to be mobile in an area where the place of work is no longer the local village. I represent 23 former colliery villages, and the work used to be located in each village. Now that work has gone, people have to travel some distance to get to decent employment, but the problem is that a quarter of people in my constituency do not have access to a car, and public transport—including rail and bus routes—is being cut back. I deliberately placed my office in a station, so people who do not have a car can get there, but the train service is being cut to that very station. From May this year, Northern Rail has cut services, including the links to Sheffield and Leeds, where there are jobs.

The same has happened with buses. I guess all of us who represent rural areas know that the bus services are in decline—in my area, severe decline. Seven routes with weekend timetables have been cut and 29 routes with weekday timetables have been affected. On top of that—perhaps because of it—transport spending in Yorkshire is a third of that spent per head in London. If we compare the £906 per head spent in London to the £300-odd in Yorkshire, that means we need £86 billion overall to be on par with London. How will we get geographic mobility, and the connected social mobility, if so many people do not have cars and public transport is reduced as I have described?

The Minister may have something about High Speed 2 in her briefing notes, but the eastern leg—through Yorkshire, up to Leeds—has been cut, although I think £100 million has been left to see whether we can build an inter-urban link between Sheffield and Leeds. The fact is that HS2 would drive a corridor as wide as two motorways through my constituency, but provide no stations or halts there. We would have all the pain, but none of the gain. HS2 is not a solution. We need proper interconnectivity, and I am sure many other Members would say the same about their constituencies. In areas with declining social mobility and increasing deprivation, public transport is imperative.

That brings me to a further point about the cuts as a result of austerity. Since 2015, Wakefield Council has suffered cuts of £57 million in real terms. The Minister may say, “Well, there is £20 million in levelling-up funds,” but that £20 million, which would be welcome, is being funded by the very cuts suffered by the public services in our area. It is not as though this is new money; it is money that has been recycled from cuts.

The cuts to school funding in our area are particularly painful. My constituency has lost almost £400 per pupil. When the social mobility tsar says to kids in my area, “Just take a few steps, but don’t dream of going to university,” the truth is that only small steps are possible because of cuts to schools. I take exception and offence to the advice given to people like Zac.

My final point is about digital exclusion. We all know that the economy is changing before our eyes and a new industrial revolution is well on its way, with more to come with artificial intelligence and all the other prospects

available to us, but connectivity to the internet, which is so important to building a lively cultural and economic life in a constituency, is restricted in the south-east of Wakefield. The broadband speeds are among the worst in the whole country. Three quarters of communities in my area are in the worst 30% of areas for broadband connectivity.

The average download speed in Hemsworth is 52 Mbps, but in the Prime Minister’s constituency it is twice as high at 107 Mbps. It is not acceptable that communities should be left behind in this way by public transport, cuts and the other things I have described. Wherever we look, we are being held back. We need an active Government who will: secure investment; increase productivity; address the problems of geographic mobility as a result of the cuts to public transport; restore the service cuts, particularly in schools, which I feel passionate about; and invest in broadband. We need a Government who will offer real opportunities to local business leaders who want to root themselves back in the community, who recognise the value of a loyal and hard-working workforce, and who want to give people a chance to restore the kind of life they had before the mines were closed all those years ago. All those steps could and would improve opportunity in our area. I just hope the Government are listening, although sometimes I doubt they are.

Let me finish on a bigger question. South-east Wakefield has issues that require active government, not the small government that the Chancellor is always rabbiting on about. That is also the case in many other communities across the country, especially in the wake of the covid pandemic, but the issues I have described show how chronic and acute the problems are in south-east Wakefield. That ought to lead us to pose a bigger question: can the current neoliberal economic model and the ossified, over-centralised state frameworks really deliver social justice? I do not believe they can.

Levels of inequality are now verging on the obscene in parts of our country. The richest people in society have increased their wealth by £700 billion since the crash, yet for people in my constituency, wages and salaries are declining or stagnating. The cost of living is skyrocketing and public services are becoming overstretched. Within this national context, it is perhaps unsurprising that areas like mine have been held back for so long. Although the idea of levelling-up money is to be welcomed—we will bid for it and I will engage with it—we need to recognise that nothing less than a full-scale economic system change and proper devolution of power will do, so that people who make decisions can understand their impact on local people. That does not happen now.

Long ago, I came to the conclusion that the economic, cultural, political and social distances between decision makers here in the capital and areas such as south-east Wakefield are so vast as to ensure that there will be no progress towards social justice in our area without radical change. That is because the decision makers are so remote from life as it is lived by the people I represent. I represent middle England, right in the middle of the country—people who work hard, play by the rules, pay their taxes, and yet are being left behind. I leave this final thought with the Minister: can she convincingly say to the young people of my area, like Zac, that the status quo, with all its structural problems, can really offer the change that south-east Wakefield requires? I do not believe so.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Local Government, Faith and Communities (Kemi Badenoch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hemsworth (Jon Trickett) on securing this debate and thank him for raising this important subject. His passion for securing the best possible future for his constituency is shared by the Government. I was interested to hear what he had to say about his constituents Zac and Lee. In answer to the question that he just asked, I would say yes; not just the status quo, but our levelling-up agenda will deliver for his constituents and across the country. I will go on to explain that in a moment.

I want to address the hon. Gentleman's point about the social mobility commissioner. I am going to hazard a guess that the hon. Member did not listen to her speech. I did, and I am afraid to say that his quotation was a misrepresentation of her remarks. I am not sure in which outlet he read it, but what she actually said was that we need to stop obsessing about getting people into Oxford and Cambridge; that there is a rags to riches version of social mobility that assumes people have to go right from the bottom straight to the top, like Dick Whittington, instead of taking steps up the ladder; and that that attitude denigrates lots of good jobs such as teaching and skilled professions. I think that is something that the hon. Gentleman would probably agree with. I am very supportive of the social mobility commissioner and I think he would find her speech interesting. She is a very clever woman, who understands social mobility more than most. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to read her state of the nation report when it is released—I think, by the end of this month.

To answer some of the points raised, it is best to go back to the beginning and why we are having these debates. Levelling up is at the heart of the Government's agenda. We set out a clear commitment to unlock economic prosperity across all areas of the country, including Wakefield and Hemsworth. It is about providing momentum to address long-standing regional inequalities, which the hon. Gentleman clearly articulated, to enable people to pursue life chances that have previously been out of reach. To quote the White Paper, "Stay local, go far." His point that work in previous times was in the village—so that people did not have to commute—and that that does not work for today's society was well made. That is something we recognise. Those structural inequalities will not be addressed by simply spending more money. We need to do better.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned issues for rural constituencies. I represent a rural constituency, and I know that the Government have been funding a lot of schemes to provide mobility for those people who are cut off. I asked for information and was told that there is a fund that is devolved to the Mayor of West Yorkshire. She has £1.4 billion for transport improvements across West Yorkshire. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to speak to her to address some of these issues. As he said, not everything can be done in Whitehall, and I hope he can work with her.

Some £370 million has been provided to West Yorkshire Combined Authority for projects aimed at improving and investing in public and sustainable transport, and that covers Wakefield as well. I know that not all of Wakefield is in the hon. Gentleman's patch, but that is

something he should speak to the Mayor about. I do not know the specifics—I suspect these are in the city—but projects include cycle routes from Wakefield Kirkgate rail station and improved access to Wakefield bus station. As he said, where those buses come and go is not just about the stations, but the communities that they pass in between.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned local government funding cuts. As Minister for local government, that is something I hear from Opposition Members again and again, and I will repeat what I always say: nobody likes cuts, certainly not this Government. We had to make them because we were compelled to by the financial situation we found when we came into government, which was left by the previous Labour Government. We are fixing many of the problems, which we have not been able to fix for a very long time. I hope the hon. Gentleman will see that when I talk about the funding we are providing to his area.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned broadband, and I recognise some of the points he made. I want to let him and his constituents know that the Government have invested heavily over a number of years through the Building Digital UK programme and other funding streams. Some 99% of West Yorkshire will have access to superfast broadband by October of this year. The vast majority of the region, including Wakefield, already has access to superfast broadband, with speeds of at least 30 megabits per second. If he does not find that in Hemsworth, he should write to my colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, so that they can pick that up specifically. I do not know enough about that programme to provide more information, beyond what I have just said.

Levelling up is about enabling local places to determine and support their own economic priorities. It is not just about the Government handing out money and telling areas what to do. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was a devolution deal with West Yorkshire, and I talked about the funding that has gone to the metro Mayor, Tracy Brabin, who was elected last year. But in addition to that investment fund, the devolution deal includes a range of powers and funding streams, which are now transferred to the mayoral combined authority, including for the adult education budget and transport, as well as responsibility for the police and crime commissioner. We are handing powers closer to the people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Since Mayor Brabin's election the Government have awarded £830 million of additional funding for sustainable transport schemes across West Yorkshire, demonstrating the difference that clear and visible leadership can make to local economies. Building on local priorities, we are also providing West Yorkshire with £217 million from the towns fund, £50 million of which is in Wakefield, and more than £72 million through the first round of the levelling-up fund, which I know the hon. Gentleman is aware of—he referred to the £20 million for Wakefield. The previous local growth funding, which amounts to £695 million for West Yorkshire, has also enabled the Wakefield South East Gateway, which will deliver 2,500 new homes on the City Fields development, as well as the completion of the Wakefield waterfront. I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees that this funding demonstrates the scale of the Government's commitment to working with Mayors, local MPs and other local leaders to deliver

[*Kemi Badenoch*]

for their cities, towns and villages. I encourage him to work with Tracy Brabin to ensure that this large investment programme really benefits all parts of Wakefield, including south-east Wakefield.

The hon. Gentleman said that his constituency would need £86 billion to level up to London, but it is not a fair comparison. He mentioned that his is a rural constituency. What we need to do is make sure that areas are able to develop as much as they should within the parameters around them. Not everywhere can have 8 million to 14 million people, tube networks and so on, and I do not think that his constituents would necessarily want that.

I mention the levelling-up fund specifically because I have been told that there has been additional funding from the getting building fund, which has supported two enterprise zones, at Langthwaite and South Kirkby business parks—both in the hon. Gentleman's constituency—to stimulate business growth and create local employment opportunities. I am sure he welcomes the multimillion-pound cross-Government investment to expand the unique Production Park—the live events campus in his constituency—which is supporting local people into good-quality apprenticeships and jobs in this growing creative industry. On the same site sits the new Backstage Academy, which will provide the next generation of live industry and media professionals. It is delivering degree-level education to over 200 students, with an industry focus so that more than 90% of students have secured employment before they complete the course.

The £4.8 billion we are investing through the levelling-up fund is providing the tools for local areas across the country to invest in their infrastructure, improve everyday life by regenerating their town centres and high streets, and invest in cultural and heritage assets. As the hon. Gentleman said, Wakefield was successful in securing £20 million through the first round of the fund, to

support the expansion of the Tileyard North development and to transform a derelict site with a new cultural offer celebrating Wakefield's heritage. This will bolster Wakefield's position as a growing hub for the creative industries and bring with it good-quality jobs.

In the levelling-up fund prospectus, we recognise the crucial role of MPs in championing the interests of their communities and understanding local priorities. That is why we expect bidding authorities to consult local MPs fully as part of their bid development, with MPs able to officially endorse in writing one priority bid for their local area. That ensures that MPs have a hugely positive role in shaping bids, perhaps helping to broker a local consensus on what their area really needs. I note the work the hon. Gentleman is undertaking with Wakefield Council in shaping a local bid for his constituency, to be submitted in July, and I wish him luck. I am sure that he and colleagues across the House will make the most of this opportunity to represent their constituencies.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the opportunities presented through the two town deals awarded to Wakefield, providing combined Government investment of over £50 million. I recognise that these are not directly targeted on the hon. Gentleman's constituency, but the benefits will flow—they do not stop at local government boundaries or town boundaries. I hope that these investments, particularly in Wakefield's urban centre, will lead to a stronger and more resilient local economy across the wider area.

Given that the hon. Member for Hemsworth and I are on different sides of the House, we will disagree on many things, but I want him to know that this is an agenda that we in the Government care very much about. We will reflect on the points he has raised and continue to pursue this agenda. We will engage with our West Yorkshire partners to inform our decision making, because we believe that all parts of the UK should have the means to shape their future positively.

Question put and agreed to.

Community Pharmacies

4.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of community pharmacies.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Gary. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, I am pleased to introduce the debate and glad to see so much support from Members who obviously, like me, recognise the huge value that our pharmacies bring to the NHS, patients and the public generally. I hope everyone here agrees that England's 11,200 pharmacies play a crucial role in providing important healthcare, life-saving medicines and an increasingly wide range of clinical services to their local communities. Not only that, but as the most accessible providers of healthcare, pharmacies are key to reducing health inequalities: 89% of the population are less than a 20-minute walk from their nearest pharmacy, increasing to 99.8% in the most deprived areas, such as mine. It is fair to say that pharmacies understand their communities to a significant extent—sometimes more than the traditional health services—and as such are ideally placed to engage with the most marginalised and vulnerable groups in our communities.

The wider public appreciate the easy accessibility of pharmacies, which by their very nature are located at the heart of every community throughout the country. Throughout the pandemic, not only did community pharmacies remain open and continue to offer their full range of services, but they played a huge role in the vaccination programme, delivering an astonishing 24 million jabs. They also distributed some 27.6 million covid lateral flow tests and initiated a pandemic delivery service that ensured that 6 million vulnerable patients could access their medicine.

I think I am correct in saying that all Members present today would like to put on record their thanks and express their appreciation for all pharmacists, pharmacy dispensers, pharmacy technicians, medicines counter assistants, delivery drivers and administrative teams, who worked so hard during that difficult time to maintain the public's access to the pharmaceutical services that they relied on. We, and the whole country, owe them a debt of gratitude. But we must also recognise that it is not just about thanking staff; it is also about recognising that the conditions they work in are crucial to the maintenance of a good service, whether a member of staff works in a larger or a smaller pharmacy provider.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. The point he is making appears to be twofold: first, as well as responding to need, pharmacies can have a role in preventive medicine; and secondly, we now need to shout louder about that. Pharmacies did a heroic job during the pandemic and they continue to do so, but I am not sure that everyone knows as much as he clearly does about what we can do with and at a community pharmacy, and this debate serves the purpose of telling them.

Peter Dowd: The right hon. Gentleman makes a really valid point, and I will talk about some of that later. We have to recognise that, despite pharmacists trying to help people, they sometimes got dreadful abuse. We

have to help them and protect them from abuse. That is part of addressing their working conditions. Vacancies in the sector are not caused simply by a shortage of pharmacists. It is also about which part of the space pharmacists work in. In other words, if I were a pharmacist, I would ask, "Do I like the conditions, pay and terms of my work?" If the answer is no, people move on.

Pharmacies are not just a shop; they are a healthcare setting and should be treated as such. They are a crucial part of the NHS ecosystem. I suspect that that is why a pharmacist needs to be on site all the time—this is not just a shop operating within a transactional context. Aside from covid, pharmacies are doing an incredible amount of work for their local communities every single day. In the most recent flu season, in 2021, pharmacies mobilised to deliver the biggest flu vaccination campaign on record, administering 4.85 million doses—over 2 million doses more than in the previous flu season, representing a 75% year-on-year increase.

The recently commissioned NHS blood pressure check service has already meant that 100,000 people have had their blood pressure checked in a pharmacy. Anecdotally, pharmacy representatives say they are already hearing that these checks have picked up cases of extremely high blood pressure in patients, who have then been referred on for treatment. This is a very highly valued healthcare intervention, which will save the NHS money in the long run, because it is cheaper to prevent disease than it is to treat it. More than that, however, I am convinced that these interventions will save lives.

Those two services on their own demonstrate pharmacy at its best. PwC estimates that the sector contributes around £3 billion in net value to society as a whole, and it works every day to improve the health and wellbeing of our local communities and our constituents. That is surely why we have the NHS in the first place.

What is the current financial health of the sector? It is no exaggeration to say that the community pharmacy network is under huge strain and that pharmacy staff and businesses are coming under increasing and, indeed, unsustainable pressure. Pharmacy funding is currently flat, with the total available funding envelope fixed at £2.592 billion. In practice, the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee reports that this means that real-terms funding is decreasing year on year, as inflationary pressures, rising business costs and increasing workload are not taken into account in that funding deal. Despite all that, many pharmacies have remained open, albeit under extremely difficult economic conditions.

However, the PSNC says that some businesses are reaching the limits of what is possible in terms of remaining viable, and that is already having an impact on patients. A recent survey on pharmacy pressures, conducted by the PSNC, found that 90% of pharmacy businesses are now unable to spend as much time with patients as they did before. Perhaps more worryingly, 92% of respondents said that patients were beginning to be negatively affected by the current pressures on their pharmacy. Despite pharmacies being a significant part of the NHS family—on average, at least 90% of their income comes from the NHS—pharmacy funding has not received the annual funding growth of 3.4% per annum that the rest of the NHS has been afforded.

Those in the sector feel that it is time to put things right. Indeed, the PSNC recently submitted a funding bid to the Department, making the case for extraordinary

[Peter Dowd]

economic circumstances to be taken into account. When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope she will update Members on whether a funding increase will be granted to the sector.

The PSNC also estimates that the sector has had to make efficiency savings of between 37% and 50% in order to manage the funding squeeze and to keep providing the services it is contracted to deliver, but how much more pressure should we expect it to operate under? Do we want a bare-bones network that delivers only the very basics for patients, or do we want a vibrant, innovative sector that is constantly looking to the future to find new ways of working and providing a personalised and consistently high-quality service for patients, and that is fully integrated with other areas of healthcare and able to be consistently relied on in the future, as millions of people relied on it during the pandemic? Members can certainly guess what my preference is.

One thing is for certain: maintaining the status quo is not an option. So what does the future of community pharmacy look like? I would like to see pharmacies evolve into the go-to healthcare settings for help with minor ailments. There is no need for otherwise healthy patients with minor conditions to continue to see their GP. The truth is that they can get the same expert advice from their local pharmacist, who can exercise their clinical judgment and sometimes even prescribe medicines or offer an over-the-counter treatment at half the cost to the NHS. Indeed, the PSNC estimates that if this policy was rolled out nationwide, the NHS could save a staggering £640 million.

What is more, there would perhaps be no need for people to queue in a waiting room or to visit multiple locations. Pharmacies could be a single go-to place for diagnosing, advising on and supplying medicines for the treatment of minor ailments. As we all know from when we go abroad, that system works in Europe and much of the developed world, so why not here? It would be potentially game-changing for the future of pharmacy and more widely for primary care. I hope the Minister will comment on what plans, if any, the Government have to commission a service of that nature.

Aside from minor ailments, pharmacies are well placed to deliver much of the prevention agenda set out in the NHS long-term plan. They could and should be at the forefront of promoting and supporting self-care. Future services could include a national emergency contraception service, or even the treatment of minor injuries. Pharmacies could also offer help and support to manage long-term conditions. For instance, they could offer a whole host of valuable services for supporting patients with asthma, such as an inhaler technique service or annual asthma reviews. Community pharmacies could do even more than they already do to review patients' medication and ensure that it is being taken appropriately. That is all extremely important, from a patient perspective.

For the population that is otherwise healthy, pharmacies could play an increased role in promoting health and wellbeing, and in preventing and reducing further healthcare demand in the first place. After all, healthy people do not often visit hospitals or GPs, but they probably pass by pharmacies on the high street regularly. I certainly do. Pharmacies could conduct NHS health checks with enhanced patient follow-up, and they could use personalised

wellbeing plans to help people to make healthy lifestyle choices. Pharmacies could also replicate their success with the flu and covid vaccination programmes by expanding into the provision of others such as the shingles and pneumococcal vaccine and NHS travel vaccinations.

When it comes to what pharmacies can do to improve patient outcomes, the possibilities are endless. I know at first hand that, given the capacity and a good working environment, pharmacists and their teams are ready and willing to take on and promote all those new services, but that has to be put into the context of wider deliverability. Let me use one example. Amanda Pritchard, the NHS chief executive, recently announced funding for high street pharmacies to identify signs of early cancer, and for subsequent referrals and follow-up by clinical radiologists. That is a good initiative. Nonetheless, as Anne Brontë wrote,

“there is always a ‘but’ in this imperfect world”.

Workforce and equipment issues are obstacles to a successful roll-out, given that the radiology system is already under pressure. What about an audit and a replacement programme for our increasingly outdated and, in some cases, obsolete imaging equipment? There are no plans to tackle the annual 7% increase in complex imaging demand and no plan to meet the workforce demand, with a 30% shortfall in clinical consultant radiologists. That figure is going up, and there are backlog issues.

The only question is whether the Government will now enable the community pharmacy sector to fulfil its potential by supporting the range of possible services, and by providing it with appropriate support and funding. I sincerely hope that the answer will be yes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Order. The Front-Bench spokespersons are due to begin at 5.10 pm. There are four other Members who wish to speak, so you each have six minutes.

4.43 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I will be mercifully brief, given the overture you have just offered the whole gathering, Sir Gary.

I want to do three things. The first is to endorse the comments of the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) about the significance of community pharmacies. As I said in my brief intervention, that was drawn into sharp focus during the covid pandemic, when people began to realise quite the extent to which pharmacies and pharmacists are among the unsung heroes of the NHS. They provide services that are both proactive, in preventive medicine, and also reactive. They are often the first port of call when people seek medical advice.

The second point I want to make is that we should be saying much more about pharmacies. Indeed, it is important that we do, so that people know they can access those services. The point about celebrating the role of community pharmacists is not just to congratulate them on all they do, although that is worthy in and of itself, but to spread the word and evangelise about what they do to people who are not taking advantage of those services. I think particularly of the preventive services that the

hon. Gentleman highlighted, which deal with things such as diabetes and blood pressure. We must ensure that there is early detection and diagnosis of conditions, so that people can be referred to other elements of the NHS and dealt with promptly. These are all aspects of the role of pharmacies, which deserve to be better known for the good that they can do.

My third and final point is informed by my visit to Holbeach community pharmacy, where I met staff in anticipation of the consideration of these matters, which I know the House takes seriously. Last week, I also met a pharmacist to discuss what more can be done. As the Government's long-term health plan says, NHS England and the Government need to work together to see how the advantages of community pharmacies can be cemented and expanded. In saying that, I offer a word of warning: we should not see pharmacies as an alternative to GP services. We are having a debate in the main Chamber—almost as we speak—on those pressures, and I do not think that any of us would want to say that pharmacies should replace GP services. There is an overlap, but they are distinct aspects of healthcare. I know the Minister will want to reflect on that, and perhaps she could comment on it today. That is my caveat, but it is none the less important that the Government and NHS England look at how the services provided by community pharmacies can be cemented and built on.

The secret of this debate, if I may put it that way, can be expressed in two words: “pharmacies” and “community”. These pharmacies must be sufficiently accessible and plentiful—particularly in areas such as the ones that you and I represent, Sir Gary—so that people can gain all the benefits I have described, as close to home as is reasonable. There has been a trend in public services during my lifetime, including my political lifetime, towards centralisation and obliging people to travel further for the things they need to service their wellbeing. It needs to be reversed by the Government, who need to think much harder and more clearly about this issue. We need public services to be accessible to those who need them. That is particularly salient for the most vulnerable of our constituents, who find travelling more challenging.

Let us have more community pharmacies, more distributed services and more cottage hospitals—more things happening within communities. Community is the second part of what the hon. Gentleman has drawn to our attention today. It is the lifeblood of a healthy society that services the wellbeing of all, thereby adding to the common good.

4.48 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this important debate. He gave a detailed opening speech, so I will aim not to repeat the points that he has made.

I thank all pharmacists, pharmacy technicians and assistants for their hard work and dedication, and for their contribution to delivering first-class patient care in the community. As right hon. and hon. Members have said, community pharmacists are not just an integral part of our healthcare system; they are at the heart of our communities. After all, 1.6 million people visit around 11,400 pharmacies in England every day.

I would like to take the time to make two brief points on the future of community pharmacists. Before being elected as the Member of Parliament for Coventry North West, I worked in the NHS as a full-time cancer pharmacist, and I still regularly volunteer locally at University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire as a pharmacist in cancer care. In my role, I have seen and experienced at first hand the vital role that pharmacists play in their communities.

Community pharmacists can dispense medication, deliver vaccinations, write prescriptions and consult on medication, to name just a few responsibilities. Above all, they are dependable and dedicated individuals who are excellent at providing medical knowledge and support for the communities that they work in. It is therefore deeply frustrating to hear about the steady erosion in the availability of community pharmacies.

Data from the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, which will be providing constituency-based information at a drop-in event in Parliament on Tuesday 5 July, paints a very grim picture. Since 2016, 639 pharmacies have closed across England, and nine of them were lost in my city of Coventry. All the while, communities have needed quick medical support more than ever. We have heard in today's Opposition day debate, and time and again from our constituents, about the crippling difficulties facing GP services.

The Government claim that they are doing all they can about the rising crisis in accessing GP appointments. However, that cannot be the case, as they have been ignoring the roles that community pharmacists can play in combatting this escalating crisis. Those were evident throughout the covid-19 pandemic, when pharmacists played a substantial role in the vaccine roll-out and in providing advice and support to patients during the three lockdowns. The pharmacy sector boasts a highly trained and clinically skilled workforce, who, according to the PSNC, could free up up to 40 million GP appointments each year. The Government need to make full use of that potential. Ministers should take another look at the role that pharmacists can play in supporting our GP services, rather than simply allowing pharmacies across the country to close for good. Smarter thinking here has the potential to make a massive difference; it could help to reduce waiting times, clear backlogs in the NHS and improve the availability of GPs. It would certainly make a big difference in my constituency of Coventry North West.

My second point, which has been raised briefly, is that we must put in place stronger protections for pharmacists in the workplace. Community pharmacists have reported that they do not feel safe in their workplace because of increasing levels of violence and abuse. A survey conducted by the Pharmacists' Defence Association demonstrated the scale of the problem, with only two in 10 pharmacists reporting that they feel safe all the time at work. A follow-up survey in April showed that 44% of responding pharmacists have experienced physical or violent abuse in the past month, and that 85% have experienced verbal or racial abuse in the past month. That is disgraceful. Nobody should face that level of abuse in their place of work. Pharmacists and pharmacy teams need to feel safe. The Government must do all they can to ensure that adequate risk assessments and preventative safety measures are put in place, as well as taking a zero-tolerance approach when incidents occur.

[*Taiwo Owatemi*]

I hope that the Minister takes into consideration the points I have raised today. The maintenance of community pharmacies and the wellbeing of pharmacists and their staff must be top priorities for this Government. Pharmacists play a crucial role in keeping their communities healthy, and the Government must do everything they can to ensure that they are protected and supported. I therefore hope that the Minister will look at how to better utilise community pharmacists to address the wider problems facing the NHS, and take immediate steps to protect pharmacists who are facing unacceptable abuse in the workplace.

4.54 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Gary. Community pharmacists have long been one of the unsung heroes of our NHS. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that they are a keystone species of the NHS, serving as a minor injuries unit and providing a vital prescribing service and essential healthcare out of hours for so many people around the country. They are also our most accessible form of healthcare. Their contribution throughout covid-19 was perhaps the best example of their heroic and accessible work. Community pharmacies were the first to step forward during our world-beating vaccine roll-out programme. Millions of people, just like me, had both their first and second jab from their local community pharmacy. Many of us regularly visit our pharmacies for covid tests, travel jabs, flu vaccines and a plethora of other essential healthcare services.

One of the less well known but most inspirational initiatives that community pharmacies have been involved in during the covid pandemic is their support for women experiencing domestic abuse. The Government-backed, pharmacy-led Ask for ANI scheme was a lifeline for many abused women. They could go into a pharmacy and ask for “ANI”, which was the codeword for getting a safe space to raise this important and personal issue.

It is their community nature that makes those pharmacies so valuable. Being on every high street, and having a smaller number of patients than a GP or medical centre, means they can be truly local and embedded in the area. In my constituency of Southend West, we have 18 brilliant pharmacies, each serving an average of 5,162 people. They thus serve a whopping 93,000 people a year. I am delighted that the Government have already recognised the important role that pharmacies play. Earlier this month, the NHS chief executive announced that community pharmacies will be funded to spot early signs of cancer and trained to refer people directly for scans and checks without seeing their GP. That is so welcome and important. Every Member of Parliament will be receiving a welter of emails complaining about access to GP appointments. The Valkyrie surgery, in my constituency, is clearly struggling to cope with the demand for appointments, and it is certainly not the only one struggling in Southend West.

Enabling people to access specialist services without going through a GP will massively ease pressure on GP services. It will also ease the pressure on our beleaguered accident and emergency services, which are crumbling under the pressure. Southend Hospital is safe for around 50 people going through A&E every day, but it is,

on occasion, having to cope with 150 people. The obvious solution to those twin problems is to upskill our community pharmacies and ensure they have the funding and training they need to take the burden off our GPs, ambulances and hospitals.

Pharmacies already save 619,000 GP appointments every week; that is 32 million every year. The services they provide also save around 3.5 million people every year from visiting A&E and walk-in centres. We must go further to transform our pharmacies into an even more vital community resource. In Southend West we have the brilliant Belfairs pharmacy, run by an inspirational pharmacist called Mr Mohamed Fayyaz Haji—known locally as Fizz. Fizz provides a great range of services, including cholesterol and blood pressure checks, health advice and prescribing. He has recently acquired further premises so that he can expand into even greater levels of primary and community care, from ear syringing through to community phlebotomy, and to earlier diagnosis measures such as measuring prostate-specific antigen levels for prostate cancer, as well as electrocardiograms and ultrasound screening for sports injuries and pregnant women. That is exactly the sort of care that we want to be championing and supporting to ease the pressure on our other services. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister would like to join me in applauding Fizz’s efforts in Belfairs. That is a model for community pharmacy care around the country.

That sort of expansion is obviously not free. I applaud the fact that the Government are already investing in this area. I welcome the community pharmacy contractual framework, which will provide £2.5 billion annually. It is providing clarity and certainty about funding for the first time. I also welcome the new commitment for an additional £15.9 million to support the expansion of frontline pharmacy staff, providing people like Fizz with the training that they need to develop the skills of their staff for the benefit of everybody in the local community. I want to see this continue and for our pharmacies to be able to offer routine medical check-ups and routine injections and to be able to spot the early signs of serious illnesses and refer patients straight on to specialist departments in our local hospital.

In conclusion, pharmacies already provide a huge range of local services and they deserve greater recognition for the essential work that they do. The Government are already doing great work. I would like to see the Government go further with upskilling pharmacists, easing the pressure on our NHS and creating a healthier society all round. Pharmacies, especially in Southend West, are keen to be part of this mission and offer more to their local communities. I welcome every step to empower them to do just that.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): Last but not least—Jim Shannon.

5.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Sir Gary. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on setting the scene so very well. This subject is something that I am sold on. It is something that I fully endorse, as others have done. We all see the real benefits of it. I have a great interest in the topic. I believe that community pharmacies are an untapped resource that we need to

unlock with clever funding and foresight. Over the years, I have worked closely with a number of pharmacies in my constituency of Strangford and have been impressed by the expertise and the potential that is ready to be unlocked.

Pharmacies were involved in covid-19 jabs. They do flu jabs, blood pressure tests and asthma checks, as the hon. Member for Bootle mentioned. Staff can look out for signs of illness and can, if necessary, refer people on—because they know the limitations of the service as well—and that is a good thing. I got the girl from the office to send through details of some of the things that they can do right there and then; people do not have to go to A&E to get these things done. Pharmacies can deal with athlete's foot, diarrhoea, haemorrhoids, head lice, groin infections, threadworms, thrush, earwax, mouth ulcers, scabies and verrucas. Staff can deal with all those things, at the initial stage, in pharmacies. Although some of those things are probably fairly personal, pharmacies do have the ability to deal with them.

During my time in the Northern Ireland Assembly, I was a strong advocate for what was then called the minor ailment scheme. Although that may still be in operation to a small degree, the potential for more is at our fingertips. The enthusiasm and energy that local pharmacies have really excites me. I get extremely excited about the potential, about what could happen, when I speak to owners such as James McKay of McKay Pharmacy in Newtownards to hear of the schemes that he has ready to go—making space for community physio and nutritionist provision in tandem with the local GP surgery that has premises abutting the pharmacy. There is scope for a real community facility—with much more provision than perhaps pharmacies, with their space, can provide—and that needs to be progressed and replicated.

I was not surprised to read that, on average, pharmacies undertake more than 58 million informal consultations per year. I had to get malaria tablets for a trip to Nigeria just a few months ago. In the past that would have meant a trip to a Belfast private doctor to get a private script, at a large cost. But this was a matter of popping down to my local pharmacy, answering some questions and getting the malaria tablets. Last week, I had a bit of toothache. Again, I went down and spoke to the lady. She gave me the tablets; she gave me the gum rub, and there and then seemed to have solved the problem. Similarly, I believe that those informal consultations prevent an additional 70,000 people from needlessly attending A&E or an NHS walk-in centre every week. Yet community pharmacies receive no specific funding for holding such consultations. That needs to change. I look to the Minister, as I always do. She understands these issues extremely well and, more often than not, she has the answers to the questions we ask.

Delivering minor ailment care through community pharmacies rather than GPs could result in a 53% total cost reduction to the NHS. The cost of providing 40 million minor ailments GP appointments per year is £1.2 billion; it would cost just £560 million to transfer those appointments to pharmacies as a community pharmacy consultation service. Those significant savings cannot be ignored. In this day and age, when finances are important, it is important we look at these issues. It is not simple, straightforward maths and is more than just a number exercise.

We must understand that community pharmacies are ready and willing, and local GP practices are calling out for pressure on surgeries and treatment rooms to be relieved, as well as that on accident and emergency departments. This change makes sense. It has been shown to work in the past and will work again in the future. Let us make the most of the expertise we have and take the pressure off our GP practices where it is possible to do so. We need to get treatment and training in place and get the right people doing the right things.

The future of community pharmacies is intrinsically linked with that of the NHS. We need to work smart as well as expecting them to work hard, and get the minor ailments scheme in a funded and good position. This is a tremendous opportunity to do something good with our health service, in a way that we save money and also deliver better care across the whole community. Everyone of us here today is excited at the possibility of what could happen. I am sure when she responds the Minister will give us some encouragement. I know one thing: if this happens, we all gain.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): We move to our Front-Bench speakers. I call Steven Bonnar.

5.7 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for leading this debate, on a topic that is vitally important to every community across the four nations of the UK.

Local pharmacies are a lifeline for their communities and a vital part of our primary healthcare system. They are our most accessible point of contact with our NHS and are invaluable in keeping our constituents and our communities healthy and happy. In Scotland, community pharmacies are playing a commendable role in ensuring that millions of people can and do have their minor ailment needs addressed quickly without needing to go to their GP or a hospital.

The Scottish Government know that good quality healthcare is the cornerstone of a decent society and we will always strive to provide that for the people of Scotland. That is proven by the fact that every single prescription in Scotland is free, unlike here in England where charges apply. Currently, the charge is £9.35 per item—not per prescription, but per item. I know the Minister has said before that prescriptions are free to those who need them, but if she thinks people are not choosing how sick they can become, because of their finances, she is mistaken. The UK Government should follow the lead of the Scottish Government and abolish prescription charges in England. I will continue to ask for that for as long as I am here.

The cost of living crisis is hurting working families more and more each day, and it is only right that the first step to a future of fairer, more equitable healthcare practices in our pharmacies is for the UK Government to remove the charge that is associated with entering a pharmacy in the first place. The SNP appreciate the huge effort that the pharmacy profession has shown in response to the covid-19 pandemic and recognise that it further emphasised the role of all pharmacy team members as a key part of the health and social care workforce.

[Steven Bonnar]

In July 2020, the Scottish Government introduced the NHS Pharmacy First service. I know the Minister is a massive fan. It is part of our NHS recovery plan to look to expand the range of common clinical conditions that can be treated by community pharmacists, avoiding unnecessary GP appointments and backlogs. That removes huge pressures from our GPs and our accident and emergency services and allows the public, from rural areas to inner cities, to access treatments more easily.

I am proud to note that across my constituency of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill a number of pharmacies have gone over and above to enhance their practices and strengthen their clinical workforce to meet the demands of local people. Mackie's pharmacy in Moodiesburn recently won the pharmacy of the year award for its dedication and revolutionary contributions to the technological advancement of pharmacy services throughout the covid-19 pandemic. Stepps Pharmacy has implemented a fantastic robot dispensing tool, making it more convenient for my constituents to obtain their prescriptions at any time of the day, to suit their busy schedules. Robertson's Pharmacy in Coatbridge has been serving the community for generations. The North Road pharmacy in Bellshill has created

“vital relationships with local GP practices to reduce the pressures on the appointment system, and ensure that small ailments are seen to quickly and easily with a walk-in service. This includes late-night and weekend openings, ensuring local people are able to access services at their convenience.”

I place on the record my sincere thanks to all of them, and to every pharmacy across the constituency, for their ongoing work in our communities.

The development of pharmacists as independent prescribers, for example, demonstrates their evolving role and how they can be better utilised in the future. We heard from the hon. Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and for Bootle (Peter Dowd) about the difficult circumstances, including violence, that pharmacy staff often face. That is an important point, and it is why I am so proud of the Scottish Government's Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021. So far, this Government have resisted action in this area. I urge the Minister to think again about that, and to discuss it with the Justice team.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) and the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who outlined the array of services on offer from pharmacies, such as treatments for asthma, diabetes and allergies, assistance with medication, and medical advice on minor injuries. I thank all Members for their excellent contributions to this valuable debate.

Empowering pharmacists to utilise their clinical skills benefits both patients and the overall health service, and it must always be encouraged. Community pharmacists have the skills and the desire to play a much bigger role in primary care delivery, and they need the support to be able to do so. Eight years of real-terms decreases in funding, coupled with the increasing demands of the last few years, have meant that instead of taking on more clinical services to relieve pressure on GPs and accident and emergency departments, many pharmacies have had to limit or even reduce their offerings. In some cases, pharmacies are closing down.

To ensure that our community pharmacies have a bright future, I ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to take forward the recommendations of the all-party parliamentary pharmacy group, provide future-proofed funding against inflationary pressures and ensure that the level of support given to our pharmacies is always sustained. I also ask that the Pharmacy First approach is rolled out in England and Wales, and that the example of the Scottish Government in placing importance on primary care facilities is implemented here too.

Finally, to ensure the future of our community pharmaceutical practices, I ask that our healthcare professionals are given the pay increases that they deserve as recognition of their outstanding work during the pandemic and in the light of ever-increasing backlogs. The Scottish Government have been able to achieve much with less and less funding guaranteed through Barnett consequential, so there is no excuse for the UK Government not to ensure the same for patients here in England. The future of our community pharmacies lies in the practices of responsible Governments. It is increasingly obvious that this UK Government need only look north to Scotland if they require inspiration.

5.13 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on securing the debate, and I congratulate him and Members across the House on putting forward a compelling argument for supporting our community pharmacy sector and increasing its role in the provision of localised community healthcare.

We have heard from Members from across the House that community pharmacies are the cornerstone of our local areas. For many people, community pharmacists are the most accessible healthcare professionals in the NHS, and their work is invaluable. We have heard that more than 89% of the population is estimated to have access to a community pharmacy within a 20-minute walk, but, as my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, access is significantly higher, at 99%, in areas of the highest deprivation.

We have always known that community pharmacies are important, but it was felt acutely during the pandemic. Community pharmacies helped to administer 24 million covid vaccines and were at the forefront of our response to the virus. In 2020-21, they delivered more than 4 million flu vaccinations—an increase of 75% on the year before. Indeed, as the hon. Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) pointed, community pharmacies carried us through the pandemic and reacted with extraordinary speed to a virus that shut down the rest of the country. It is therefore essential that we not only protect this vital community resource but equip it for the future.

As has been noted throughout the debate, there are two broad areas of concern within the sector, and I would appreciate the Minister's assessment of them. The first relates to resources. Despite the additional demand for services, there has been no increase in funding for the pharmacy network since 2014, and there have been cuts of around £200 million since 2016. The current framework, agreed in 2019, has not been adjusted, despite the covid-19 pandemic, and we have

seen central Government's failure to adapt. This has resulted in pharmacies being unable to meaningfully invest in staff and has been detrimental to infrastructure development as well as innovation.

What is perhaps most worrying, however, is that an EY study in 2020 found that 40% of the large pharmacy chains sampled were operating at a loss. That is not sustainable, and unless action is taken, we could see pharmacies shut and that vital point of access for people close. I think there is consensus across all parties, including from the Minister, that we want to avoid that, so I would be grateful if she could outline what steps the Government are taking to better support community pharmacies and what assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of fiscal pressures on the sector. Furthermore, has the Department of Health and Social Care made any assessment of the additional pressures that the pandemic has placed on pharmacies? Will that inform the next community pharmacy contractual framework?

The second issue I would like to focus on is strategy and workforce. That will not come as a surprise to the Minister, given the Opposition day debate in the main Chamber earlier. There has been a distinct lack of overarching Government strategy when it comes to workforce planning over the past decade, including in relation to community pharmacies. The community pharmacy model that the NHS needs has drastically changed, as have the needs of patients. As far as I am aware, there has not been any strategy outlining the Government's ambitions for the sector. Instead, we have seen short-term thinking, a real-terms funding decline and radio silence on the future of this vital resource. That needs to change, and I impress on the Minister the urgency of working with her DHSC colleagues to develop a strategy for community pharmacies that is fit for the future. Crucially, it needs to address the workforce issues that have been reported by parts of the sector, particularly in rural areas, where the increase in patient demand is putting pharmacies under more pressure.

I understand that the Government will argue that extra resource is going into the NHS, but we must not get into the trap of taking community pharmacies for granted, and we need to build a resilient, innovative and adaptive service for the future. We must utilise community pharmacies to tackle the key issues of our time. For example, many pharmacies already offer a range of services geared towards tackling health inequalities, but the local commissioning structures mean that access is not equal throughout the country. There is a real opportunity for central Government to step in and to ensure that no matter where people live, they can access weight-management services, emergency contraception, smoking-cessation services and much more.

Community pharmacies are already embedded in communities. They are trusted by local people. We need, therefore, to ensure that the Government give full support to the sector. Every Member who has spoken would wholeheartedly support the Minister to make sure that happens.

Sir Gary Streeter (in the Chair): I kindly ask the Minister to leave 30 seconds for Mr Dowd to speak at the end.

5.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Gary. I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for securing this debate. He is pushing at an open door, as I am a huge supporter of community pharmacists.

The evangelising of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is definitely working. Community pharmacies are front and centre of the changes we want when developing primary care. Of course, they are already a central part of the NHS, delivering vital primary care services at the heart of every community throughout the country and ensuring that patients have timely access to medicine. That is one of the lesser elements of the services we have talked about, but it is an important element that keeps patients well and out of hospital, enables them to get discharged safely and prevents readmission.

Community pharmacies are offering more services and they are accessible to all. They are key in providing self-care support, thereby allowing individuals to manage their own healthcare needs and, in turn, increasing capacity for the NHS overall. Community pharmacists are an easily accessible and trusted part of the NHS: a team of highly skilled, qualified, experienced healthcare professionals. There are more than 11,000 community pharmacies across England, 80% of which are around a 20-minute walk from most people's homes. I am committed to making the best possible use of their resources and talent.

As many Members said, we saw the clear difference that community pharmacies made during the covid pandemic. They stepped up to implement a medicines delivery service for shielding and isolating patients. They implemented Pharmacy Collect, making lateral flow tests widely available to the public. At the height of the vaccination programme there were more than 1,500 community pharmacy-led covid vaccination centres. There is no doubt that they stepped up to the mark and showcased what they could offer.

We have a clear vision for community pharmacy. In 2019, we agreed the landmark five-year deal, the community pharmacy contractual framework, which commits to £2.592 billion of funding for the sector. It also sets out a joint vision for the Government, NHS England and the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for how pharmacy services will support the delivery of the NHS long-term plan. We are in negotiations for year 4 of that deal, so I am limited in what I can say about the funding, but I can reassure Members that the PSNC is negotiating hard and we want to work with it to expand services. Obviously, it is keen for funding to be attached.

Sir John Hayes: It is vital that, as the Minister described, the service is integrated. GPs must continue to offer out-of-hours services, weekend services and, most salient of all, face-to-face encounters with their patients. Services do a great job but that does not mean that GPs should not do all those things.

Maria Caulfield: Absolutely—it is not an either/or situation. We have enough capacity and patients to expand community pharmacy services, but that does not mean that we do not also need to support GPs and other primary care providers.

[*Maria Caulfield*]

I thank the team at the Department of Health and Social Care; often, their work is not recognised, but they are working hard to develop some of the services that we have talked about. The community pharmacy consultation service went live in November. Patients can dial 111 and be directed to a community pharmacist for help with minor ailments or medication. We have extended that to GP surgeries, so now a receptionist can make an appointment at the local pharmacist for minor illness consultations.

It has been estimated that 20 million appointments in general practice alone do not require a GP—that does not mean we do not need GPs—and pharmacists can look after those conditions. The introduction of the scheme has been slightly slower than we would have liked, so there is work being done to help to overcome some of the barriers to referrals, because once they see their community pharmacists, patients have a positive experience.

In addition, the discharge medicines service enables hospitals to refer discharge patients to community pharmacists for support with their medicine. The evaluation of this service indicates that for every 23 consultations, one readmission is prevented. Where patients are readmitted, their stays are reduced by six days on average, which I think we can all agree is of huge value. We also have the blood pressure check service, which enables people with high blood pressure to be managed by their local community pharmacist, offering blood pressure checks.

We also have the stop smoking service to enable patients who started their stop smoking journey in hospital to continue with a community pharmacist, and we are looking at developing the role of community pharmacy teams, because it is not just the pharmacist who has clinical knowledge and skills. We are working in a number of areas to upskill the whole community pharmacy team so that they can deliver more and use their skills in a better way.

As has been mentioned, we now have NHS Direct cancer referrals, which community pharmacists will be able to take. Just to reassure the hon. Member for Bootle, we have 160 community diagnostic centres, which will be increasing the capacity to do some of those diagnostic tests, and we have already had 1 million visits to those centres. We are not just expecting pharmacists to refer into existing services; we are expanding the routes for diagnosis as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) beautifully told the story of Ask for ANI. It is so vital that a woman can go into a pharmacist, just say those few words and get help—they might not be able to go to a GP practice, because sometimes the help they are asking for might be more obvious.

We also have the minor ailments service, which is being rolled out throughout the country, so pharmacies are delivering more and more. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) knows that I am a pharmacy first supporter. I hate to

admit it, but Scotland has taken the lead in that, although we are not afraid to learn lessons if that means learning from what Scotland has done.

On the Fuller stocktake and the future of primary care, just to reassure colleagues, we are not just looking at how general practice looks in the future; community pharmacy will also play a key part in that model. With the integrated care system set to go live on 1 July, we are working with those who will be making commissioning decisions in local communities to set out how that future will look.

We are considering all options for community pharmacy and how we build on the progress we have already made. It is important to say that although we have made progress, there is a lot more that can be done. We are developing new standards for the initial education and training of pharmacists, which are set to be implemented shortly, so that from 2026 all newly qualified pharmacists will be able to be independent prescribers—an essential skill that will help to deliver and develop the service further. For those who are not currently prescribers but would like to be, Health Education England is supporting the existing pharmacy workforce to undertake the required training and upskilling, and £15.9 million of funding support has been made available.

We are also looking at the use of patient group directions, because pharmacists have specifically asked for that, so there are a number of measures in place. We are listening to the community pharmacy community, and where we can make changes quickly and easily, we will.

Just to touch on the issue of violence, I want to be really clear that there is zero tolerance for abuse and violence against community pharmacists—and, indeed, against all primary care staff, whether receptionists, GPs or community pharmacists themselves. I also want to put on the record our thanks to the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for her work in the NHS as a pharmacist and the experience she has brought to this debate. I reassure hon. Members that we are on a clear journey and we will be supporting community pharmacy going forward.

5.29 pm

Peter Dowd: I thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), and the hon. Members for Southend West (Anna Firth), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar).

I think we have reached a degree of consensus. I hope we can move forward with that consensus and that if we revisit this issue in six or 12 months, we will have made significant progress. I also thank the Minister for certain of the reassurances she gave. When we come back, let us review this and see how it is moving on, because that is our job, and I know that the Minister recognises that.

5.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned with Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statement

Tuesday 21 June 2022

DEFENCE

MOD Climate Change and Sustainability Strategic Approach: One Year On

The Minister for Defence Procurement (Jeremy Quin):

Defence is already being impacted by climate change. We must face the reality of operating in a changing world and adapt accordingly. In doing so, we will need to preserve our capabilities and operational advantage.

Against this backdrop, I launched the Ministry of Defence's climate change and sustainability strategic approach (CC&S), in March 2021, to build on existing work and to form the basis of our response. Defence has made substantial progress in delivering the approach's initial action plan. In the last year we have:

Commenced the process of expanding our force development scenarios to capture the dynamic nature of the environment in which we will operate in the future to ensure maintenance of our operational capability.

Engaged with allies and partners to build a shared understanding, exchanged methods and approaches to response to how climate change is reshaping the global security landscape.

Developed a sustainable support strategy to reduce the vulnerability of UK Defence while maintaining or improving our capability, productivity and efficiency. This includes six

specific initiatives on: operational self-sustainment, resilience of the supply chain, reducing the lifetime impact of defence commodities and an operational energy and fuel strategy on how we power our ships, aircraft and vehicles in the future.

Established a Defence Suppliers Forum CC&S Steering Group to build a common understanding with industry partners of the scale and approach to our collective decarbonisation challenge.

Updated our built estate policy and standards for new builds to a higher standard of energy efficiency mitigating future energy cost and resulting in lower carbon emissions.

Commenced the next phase of the development of a natural capital asset register for the rural estate, development of a woodland masterplan and work with our tenant farmers through the DEFRA Environmental Land Management Scheme.

Appointed a director of climate change and sustainability to co-ordinate activity and, drawing on expertise across the services, to drive delivery across defence and a non-executive director for sustainability to the Defence Safety and Environment Committee to provide an external challenge on the delivery of our approach.

Established a growing network within Defence of over 1,000 members to help identify opportunities and embed our sustainable ambitions.

Expanded the living lab concept exemplified at RAF Leeming to test and prioritise de-carbonisation and wider sustainability interventions as well as looking at the skills need.

This work now needs to be expanded to fully adapt how Defence operates and if needs be, fights in the changing environment and supports its capabilities. We have made a start on what needs to be a systemic and ongoing campaign.

[HCWS121]

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