

Thursday
30 June 2022

Volume 717
No. 27



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 30 June 2022

House of Commons

Thursday 30 June 2022

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Modernisation of the Railway

1. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the UK's railways. [900807]

8. **Caroline Ansell** (Eastbourne) (Con): What steps he is taking to modernise the UK's railways. [900816]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Government are delivering on the reforms set out in the Williams-Shapps plan for rail, making passengers' journeys easier, more reliable and more affordable.

Mark Menzies: I am very passionate about this subject. Fylde is home to a number of world-class events, bringing thousands of people into our great county, but they need good rail connections. I am delighted that the project to double the number of services on the South Fylde line remains very much on the Government's agenda, with a bid still under consideration. With similar projects progressing to the next stage of development, and some seeing shovels in the ground, what assurance can the Secretary of State give me that we will see similar progress on the South Fylde line?

Grant Shapps: I think the whole House recognises my hon. Friend's enthusiasm for the South Fylde line. We received the strategic outline business case in November 2021, we continue to review that and the next steps will be outlined in the coming months.

Caroline Ansell: It was game, set and match Eastbourne last week, at the conclusion of our pre-Wimbledon tournament. That international event puts us on the map as a visitor destination, with its global coverage, but our great potential is wrapped up with our transport links. In that light, what progress has been made with Network Rail's proposals to extend high-speed services to Eastbourne to enhance those links to the continent, London and the north?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend serves her constituents incredibly well. Again, a strategic outline business plan for high-speed services from St Pancras to Eastbourne is in, and I can confirm that the status of the project will be updated very shortly, in the rail network enhancements pipeline—RNEP.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The census figures show the east of England to be one of the fastest growing areas of the country, and Cambridge is fast within that, but in recent months the Treasury appears

to have been going cold on some of the important rail developments in the region, particularly Ely junction and the completion of the Bedford-Cambridge east-west line. What representations has the Secretary of State made to the Treasury and what has the response been?

Grant Shapps: Of course we have a record investment in the railway—nobody can argue with that; I believe the figure is £34 billion for developments. We will be publishing the RNEP shortly, and the hon. Gentleman will be able to see more in that—that is without even mentioning the £96 billion, not in his region, but for the midlands and north through the integrated rail plan. There have never been a Government more committed to rail, and the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait long to find out more.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The reality is that Wales has higher levels of rail track than it has received in investment from the UK Government. Also, commitments on electrification beyond Cardiff have been scrapped. Will the Secretary of State set out when he is going to start investing in the railway lines right across Wales? Or are the Tories simply going to keep underfunding Welsh railways?

Grant Shapps: I am passionate about rail, including in Wales. I will be announcing more in the RNEP, and the hon. Gentleman will not have to wait too long for that. I think he can see that, as I have already pointed out to the House, the Department for Transport has a lot of success in its discussions with the Treasury, which is how we have managed to invest record amounts in rail under this Government.

Mr Speaker: We love the passion, but do not forget Coppull railway station. I call the shadow Secretary of State, Louise Haigh.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last week, our part-time Transport Secretary claimed it was a stunt to suggest that he could do anything to resolve the rail disputes. At the weekend, that claim was blown apart, as it was revealed that a policy he issued means that he has direct powers over train operators to get them to follow his directions on disputes. Can he explain to the British public why on the eve of last week's strikes he found time to wine and dine Tory donors, but still cannot find a single second to resolve these disputes?

Grant Shapps: I think that I have actually just discovered the root of the hon. Lady's accusation that I am a part-time Transport Secretary. Just to correct the record—and I will give her the opportunity to withdraw her remarks—I can tell her that I was not, in fact, at the event that she mentions. I am full-time on this job. It would be rather surprising, to get to the nub of her case, if the Transport Secretary were not setting the overall mandate for a negotiation that is extremely important for the future of rail in this country.

Mr Speaker: I now call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The railway is continually being modernised, and anybody who says differently is being disingenuous. I do wonder, though, whether the Government's modernisation is just an excuse for cuts in a workforce reform programme, including compulsory redundancies.

I thank the Minister of State, Department for Transport, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) for the response I received this week on the inordinately high track access charges that ScotRail has to pay. It was not that helpful, but I thank her none the less. Can the Secretary of State explain in detail why ScotRail, running broadly similar services by distance travelled, had to fork out £340 million versus Northern Rail's £150 million?

Grant Shapps: The one thing I would say is that ScotRail has been run latterly by the Scottish Government. The amount of delays even before that was extremely high. The disputes that have taken place, despite ScotRail being taken into public hands by the SNP, have been particularly pronounced. On his detailed questions, I will leave it to my hon. Friend the Minister of State to write back to him.

Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

2. **Aaron Bell** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve electric vehicle infrastructure. [900808]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): Since 2020, the Government have committed £2.5 billion to supporting the transition to electric vehicles.

Aaron Bell: Today, Newcastle-under-Lyme submits its business case for our £23.6 million town deal, which will be granted through the towns fund. Given his answer, I know that the Secretary of State will welcome the transport projects that we have in place, including the new circular bus route and most importantly, in light of what he has just said, the 40 electric vehicle charging points in the town centre, which will support 375 journeys to work each day by electric vehicles. Will the Secretary of State welcome those measures in our town deal, and will he come up to Newcastle to see the projects for himself?

Grant Shapps: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that he has done in winning that funding. He mentions the important work that will happen with 40 new electric chargers in his patch. It is worth pointing out that this country now has more rapid chargers per mile of road than any other European country.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Government have recently cut the plug-in grant, and the UK is now the only major European country without any incentive in place to switch to electric vehicles. How will this help us end the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles by 2030 and become net zero by 2050?

Grant Shapps: Just to correct the record: that is not true. We still have the grant for vans, for taxis and for other vehicles. The reality is that when the grant, which is a direct payment to people buying their cars, was first brought in, it was envisaged that, by 2020, about 5% of cars would be electric. In fact, we have reached 20% in roughly that time, so that is clearly working. It is better to put the £2.5 billion into the investment of the infrastructure—the rapid charging—particularly given the price of electric cars and the fact that second-hand cars have started to come on to the market. This country is doing very well with electric cars. It is time that the Opposition recognised that fact, with one in five cars now electric.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): A reliable charging network is vital to give motorists the peace of mind that they will be able to charge their car wherever they are in the country. We will need up to 480,000 public charging points by 2030. However, the Government have set themselves no target on the roll-out. The electric vehicle infrastructure strategy simply contains an expectation of at least 300,000 charging points. The Government are pinning responsibility solely on local councils and providing no national co-ordination. Placing the entire burden on our already overstretched local authorities means that we will be woefully unprepared for 2030. When will the Transport Secretary finally do something useful and set a national charging points target and give motorists the confidence they need to make the transition to electric?

Grant Shapps: I do not know whether the hon. Lady has, like me, been driving an electric car for the past three years, but in that period of time I have noticed that the number of chargers available publicly has gone up a great deal. In fact, it has doubled since I have been Secretary of State. We have also said that by 2030, in just seven and a half years' time, we will increase that 10 times to 300,000 public chargers. It is also the case that the majority of people charge their vehicles on driveways or off-street parking at home—about 70% of the total. Our entire emphasis, through the levy fund on local authorities, is to enable people without off-street parking to park on the street. That fund is delivering great work. She underestimates how much progress this country is making.

Rural Bus Services

3. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the provision of bus services to rural areas that have not been successful in securing funding following the submission of a bus service improvement plan. [900809]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): We have contacted all local authorities not receiving immediate BSIP funding and are working with them to help improve their local bus services.

Chris Loder: The Dorset BSIP has returned no investment to rural Dorset. In the light of that, will the Minister consider giving Dorset Council the power to run its own services? Will she also consider enabling journeys using concessionary bus passes to attract the full commercial value of that journey to the operator?

Trudy Harrison: I thank my hon. Friend for his determination to secure better bus services in West Dorset. In our national bus strategy, we committed to reviewing the annual concession reimbursement guidance and calculator that he refers to. I reassure him that we will continue to fund the practical support to develop enhanced partnerships. I know he has frequent meetings with my noble Friend in the other place, Baroness Vere, in which he will be able to discuss his specific question further.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As the Prime Minister apparently contemplates a third term, we on Tyneside are left facing bus fare rises and reduced services. I will ask the question I have asked many times before but have still to receive an answer to:

when can we on Tyneside expect to see our bus fares levelled down to those in London, at £1.65 to cross the entire metropolitan area?

Trudy Harrison: I have written to the hon. Lady with specific information. At the October 2021 spending review, the Department announced £1.1 billion of dedicated funding for BSIPs, which is part of the £3 billion new spend on buses over the Parliament.

Mr Speaker: We now come to shadow Secretary of State, Louise Haigh.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I apologise to the Secretary of State, but what he has said raises even bigger questions about what he has been doing with his time.

From near-record delays on railways, mile-long tailbacks at Dover, disruption at airports and the first national strike in three decades, everything this Transport Secretary is responsible for is falling apart, and now so is his promise on buses. From October, when the covid funding runs out, there will be four buses across the whole of South Yorkshire after 10 pm. That is four buses for more than 1.3 million people. That is not levelling up, is it? It is managed decline.

Trudy Harrison: To date, the Government have made available more than £2 billion of support through emergency and recovery grants since March 2020 to mitigate the impact of the pandemic for bus and light rail services. Those measures are in addition to the £200 million provided annually directly to commercial operators to keep the fares down and to run an extensive network through the bus service operators grant.

Train Service Providers

4. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposals in the Williams-Shapps plan for rail on the choice of train service providers available to rail passengers. [900810]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Great British Railways will incentivise improved services for rail users through new passenger service contracts, and there will be opportunities for new and innovative open access services where spare capacity exists.

John Penrose: I share the Minister's attractive vision for more choice and variety on our railways; the trouble is that that is not what the Government's plans will introduce. They weaken competition, reduce choice and extend state central planning and control enormously. Anyone using Hull Trains, Lumo or Grand Central Rail can kiss them goodbye, because they will be the last of their kind. I could understand it if these proposals were being introduced by a Labour Government, but they are not. It is we Conservatives who are doing this, not them. I urge Ministers to take a long, hard look in the mirror before introducing any legislation based on these plans.

Wendy Morton: I am conscious of my hon. Friend's strong interest in open-access services. Where there is spare capacity on the network, we will support applications from open-access providers who promise new and innovative

services that benefit passengers without leading to significant costs for taxpayers. To be clear, I assure him that as part of the Government's reform proposals the Office of Rail and Road will maintain its role as the independent regulator for access, ensuring that applications are treated fairly, and it will be able to direct GBR to grant access should it think it appropriate.

Mr Speaker: We have been waiting for Chorley railway station for four years, but there we are; I hope it is better elsewhere. I call shadow Minister Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): This Government are presiding over complete transport chaos. We have had backlogs at the ports and backlogs at airports, even though people cannot get passports, and our railways came to a grinding halt thanks to Tory-induced rail strikes. While millions of Brits are suffering from Tory tax hikes, inflation and stagnant wages, rather than doing his job the Transport Secretary has been busy touring media studios to union-bash, pitting rail workers against the British public and washing his hands of all responsibility. Now Ministers are proposing to use agency staff to cover absences, which is both unsafe and reckless. If I can organise and attend meetings with both the Network Rail chief executive and the RMT union general secretary, why are Ministers finding it so difficult? Is it because the Tory Government are prioritising stripping workers of their rights—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. When I stand up and ask the shadow Minister to sit down, I expect him to sit down, not just carry on ranting. I do not think that is acceptable. I worked with him to get him in at this point, because he would not have got in otherwise. Please do not take advantage of the Chair or the Chamber. We expect your question to be shorter. Minister, I am sure you can answer briefly.

Wendy Morton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would like to put on record that we had a very good meeting following your request for a meeting about stations in your own constituency. [*Interruption.*] He is nothing if not enthusiastic.

Going back to the matter of industrial action, let us be absolutely clear: we are incredibly disappointed that the unions took the step to go down the route of industrial action. It should be the last resort, not the first resort. On the hon. Gentleman's specific point about meetings, he will know full well that it is the place of the employers to have the negotiations with the union, not for the Government. It seems a bit rich that the Opposition go on and on but the simple thing to prevent the strikes—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Quiet, please.

Wendy Morton: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. [*Laughter.*]

Reopening Railway Lines and Stations

5. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Con): What recent progress he has made on reopening closed railway lines and stations. [900812]

16. **Jonathan Gullis** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): What recent progress he has made on reopening closed railway lines and stations. [900827]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): Through the £500 million Restoring Your Railway fund we have already reopened the Dartmoor line, and we are supporting more than 45 other promising schemes. This month we announced £15 million to further develop nine schemes to level up areas and grow the economy.

Lee Anderson: Last year the leader of Ashfield District Council announced in the local paper that the Maid Marian line was a goer and claimed full credit. This year he has announced to the local paper that it is not going ahead and blamed the Government. Will the Minister please confirm exactly where we are with the Maid Marian line just to avoid any more embarrassment for the council leader?

Wendy Morton: I am happy to give the clarity that my hon. Friend is seeking. I know he takes a keen interest in and is a passionate supporter of the Maid Marian line. Although the bid to reopen the Maid Marian line to passenger services was unsuccessful as part of the Restoring Your Railways programme, I want to be absolutely clear that the case will now be considered under the remit of the Toton study. This is the best opportunity to get the line reopened, and I am happy to meet him to discuss it further.

Jonathan Gullis: My hon. Friend will know that it was not just Beeching who cut stations serving Stoke-on-Trent; it was also the last Labour Government. Will she confirm that this Government are determined to deliver rail improvements to Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke, and that reopening the line from Stoke to Leek via Milton, with services running on from Stoke to Longport and Kidsgrove, is a serious option for relieving transport deprivation and chronic road congestion for all?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend rightly highlights the importance and the benefits of good rail connections to levelling up. He will know that the Stoke-Leek line has successfully secured initial development funding of up to £50,000, and we will be working with the scheme's promoters to develop a full business case so that a decision can be made later this year.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that the railways have not only a large number of old stations but a lot of property. Will she take seriously making some property from the rail sector available in Huddersfield close to the George Hotel, where we desperately need the perfect site for the rugby league museum? Could she look into that, because there is a lot of property around the hotel? We desperately need her help. Will she intervene?

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific point in his constituency. I would be more than happy to look into it and respond to him.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I am pleased that the reopening of the Barrow Hill line to passenger services has reached the next stage of the review. The problem is that it will be a heavy rail service

to a reopened Sheffield Victoria, which has very poor connectivity. Will she look again at the idea of a tram train, following the successful service between Sheffield and Rotherham, which would go into the centre of Sheffield and have real connectivity there? People could then use the newly reopened Beighton station to access it. I know the Minister has offered to meet me already, but will she have a look at that in advance of our meeting?

Wendy Morton: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises the step forward with the Barrow Hill line, and I will certainly look at the issue he raises in advance of our meeting.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Re-establishing a new railway station in St Athan has been a priority for me for some time. The Minister and I have met on several occasions, but we have also discovered that the Welsh Government failed to include it in the new stations fund programme. Will the Minister therefore agree to meet me again, so that we can consider how we can best take this project forward? It is a priority not only for me but for the whole of the Vale of Glamorgan.

Wendy Morton: I am happy to meet my right hon. Friend.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that he has promised twice to come to the Rhondda to be dangled down a hole into the Rhondda tunnel. We are happy to welcome him at any time. I have had a meeting with him and one with the Minister. They keep promising that they will get this sorted, and that there will be another meeting with all the different stakeholders. We chase and chase, and just like you have seen, Mr Speaker, nothing ever gets done. Can they please sort out the Rhondda tunnel so that we can open it up? It will be a great historic reinvention.

Wendy Morton: Mr Deputy Speaker—sorry, Mr Speaker. Three strikes and I will be out. The hon. Gentleman knows that it is a matter for the Welsh Government. I have had a meeting with him, and I am more than happy to have another meeting with him, but it is time that the Welsh Government put some money forward.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister and I have met to discuss the notorious Tisbury loop arrangement before. Can she update the House on what she proposes to do about this, since for the expenditure of very little money, she could dramatically improve services between Waterloo and Exeter?

Wendy Morton: I know that my right hon. Friend has raised this matter before, and I will be happy to give him a written update on the Tisbury loop.

Legalisation of e-Scooters

6. **Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the potential risks of legalising e-scooters. [900813]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): Safety is our priority, and we continue to assess ongoing e-scooter trials, international experience and further research to inform forthcoming legislation.

Margaret Ferrier: Vehicle standards remain a reserved issue, so any changes legislated for by the UK Government will impact on Scotland. What data have the Government gathered through trials on the impact that changes would have on people with sight loss, and how will Ministers share trial data with the Scottish Government, as no trials have taken place there yet?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Member is absolutely correct. The 30 e-scooter trials have been hugely successful across England and will inform how we legislate, but let me assure her, and thank her for the opportunity to say, that we will share our data. We will publish it and the findings, and we will of course work with the Administrations across Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

A27: Shoreham to Worthing

7. **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent progress has been made on developing options for the upgrade of the A27 between Shoreham and Worthing. [900814]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): National Highways is currently finalising option proposals for the A27 upgrade scheme. We expect that the proposals will be put to public consultation later this year.

Tim Loughton: The Minister will be aware that the A27 between Worthing and Shoreham is so congested that at times it resembles the biggest car park in the south-east of England. Last week, National Highways produced a summary of all the failed suggestions it has come up with. At the same time, Transport for the South East came up with much more imaginative proposals, including tunnelling options at some pinch point junctions, which many of us have been suggesting for the past 25 years. What do we need to do to get Transport for the South East's proposals translated into action, after waiting decades for these improvements?

Robert Courts: I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful points he has made. The Department is very aware of the draft report by Transport for the South East, and I thank it for that report. The proposals are being considered carefully and looked at closely by the Department, and I know that the Roads Minister will respond in detail in due course.

Road Maintenance

9. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What support his Department is providing to local authorities for the repair of potholes and road maintenance. [900817]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): The Department is investing more than £5 billion over this Parliament in local highways maintenance, which is helping to fix potholes and other road defects.

Sarah Green: The roads in Buckinghamshire are a mess—they are some of the worst in the country—and Buckinghamshire Council blames a lack of funding from central Government when it says that it cannot invest in long-term repairs. What specifically are the

Government doing to help the worst-affected parts of the country address the backlog of potholes and road repairs?

Robert Courts: The Government are putting in approximately £950 million a year, and have committed to do so for over three years. That enables local authorities to plan over the longer term to manage their highways assets and to tackle potholes and other defects. I note that Buckinghamshire Council is putting £100 million into a four-year highway improvement programme, which is a clear sign of a Conservative council working with Conservative MPs to achieve results.

Inter-city Rail Links

10. **Jacob Young** (Redcar) (Con): What steps he is taking to expand inter-city rail links between London and the nations and regions of the UK. [900818]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): The Department is levelling up rail links and growing the economy through near-term investment in additional inter-city services and longer-term investments such as High Speed 2 and the integrated rail plan.

Jacob Young: In December, we welcomed the first direct rail connection from Middlesbrough to King's Cross for 31 years, helping to boost connectivity between Teesside and London. Will the Minister consider asking his officials to help us build a business case for extending the service through to Redcar Central, which would further unlock the potential across Teesside and connect the UK's largest freeport with our capital city?

Andrew Stephenson: Redcar is a fantastic part of the country, and my hon. Friend is a valued, consistent and doughty champion of his constituency. I understand that Redcar station is to receive a £6 million refurbishment, thanks to his hard work. As his hard work continues to prevail and Redcar continues to thrive, I am sure that LNER will consider extending its service to this vital northern town, which, as he says, is home to the UK's largest freeport.

Rockets and Satellites

11. **Cherilyn Mackrory** (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): What steps he has taken to support the launch of rockets and satellites from the UK. [900819]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): We have established the framework to enable the first launch to space from the UK, and we remain on track for it to happen later this year.

Cherilyn Mackrory: We have heard a lot about railways around the country this morning, but Cornwall is leading from the front when it comes to rockets and satellites. This year, we expect to see the first launch from UK soil, when lift-off takes place at Spaceport Cornwall in Newquay. One hundred and fifty-seven businesses across Cornwall are now linked with the space industry. I ask the Minister to ensure that the Civil Aviation Authority makes progress as soon as possible with issuing the necessary licences to ensure that the launch can take place this summer.

Trudy Harrison: I have seen for myself the beauty of Cornwall and the ingenuity at Spaceport Cornwall's integration facility. It is thanks to the championing of my hon. Friend, and that of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), that in partnership with Virgin Orbit, and with the CAA and the UK Space Agency firmly on board, we will see the first ever space launch from UK soil later this year.

Automatic Route Setting: Railways

12. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the (a) management and (b) specifications of the use of automatic route setting on railways. [900820]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): Automatic route setting is an existing system that Network Rail has used for more than 30 years to support the safe and efficient running of our railways. I am delighted to report that this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced a £1 billion investment in digital signalling on the east coast main line, which will mean faster, safer and more regular trains for millions of people.

Mary Kelly Foy: My constituent Paul Day is a recently retired signaller for Network Rail. While in his role, he provided the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail with nearly a decade's-worth of information about the safety issues posed by poor data quality, data management and information security on the nation's rail network. Despite the fact that he first raised his concerns in 2012, nothing has changed, with Network Rail's 2018 report highlighting that the issues were the same as those identified in 2015. Does the Minister agree that the lack of accountability in the rush for further automation cannot be ignored any longer? Will he meet me and my constituent to look at the issues further?

Andrew Stephenson: We will never compromise on the safety of our railways and the UK railway network will remain one of the safest in Europe. It is important to emphasise, however, that ARS is not a safety system and would never be able to override one. Interlocking is a key safety part of the signalling system and would never permit ARS to set a train into a collision. The Department has invested in early design and testing work to enhance traffic management systems, and we will continue to invest record amounts to ensure that our railways remain some of the safest in Europe.

Active Travel

13. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to encourage a shift from the use of cars to active travel. [900821]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): We are investing £2 billion in active travel over this Parliament to encourage more people to walk and cycle for short journeys.

Rachael Maskell: York should be the UK's cycling capital—it is the home of Active Travel England and it is easy cycling terrain. It was seeing sustained growth, but the growth in car journeys is now exceeding the

growth in cycling, and there are concerns about accidents, confidence and a lack of infrastructure. The active travel budget is woefully small compared with that for roads, and less than a third of what is needed to reach the 2025 target for cycling and walking, so what is the Minister doing to ensure that the funding is in place for the scale of modal shift that is needed?

Trudy Harrison: The hon. Lady shares the Prime Minister's ambition to ensure that half of all journeys are walked or cycled in towns and cities by 2030, as set out in "Gear Change". We are investing more money than ever—£2 billion—and we have established Active Travel England in York. We have now appointed Chris Boardman MBE as England's active travel commissioner and I will soon publish the second cycling and walking strategy. Mr Speaker, put simply, there has never been a better time to get on your bike.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Norman.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): The shift from cars to all modes of transport, which will benefit us in environmental and health terms, would undoubtedly be improved by a better ticketing offer for the railways. Does the Minister agree that it is the Government's job to ensure a well-functioning ticketing system, as opposed to mandating Great British Railways? We have some of the world's leading ticketing companies putting forward innovative new offers, and it would be better to ensure that shift by incentivising those companies.

Trudy Harrison: That is a bit of a stretch from the question on active travel, but I agree that it is equally important to have modal continuity between active travel and public services. I suggest that my hon. Friend meets the Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), about that specific question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Although it is important for people to move from cars to more active travel, the reality for many of us in rural communities is that we cannot, because the bus services are not there and cars are our mode of transport. One way to do it would be through a park and ride—in other words, for people to make their journey from the countryside to the town, park, then ride on a Glider. Is the Minister looking at that?

Trudy Harrison: I certainly am. We are looking at all ways to reduce congestion and enable people to be fitter and to get from A to B in the most cost-effective way. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Member to talk in more detail about all the roles of active travel, lift sharing and park and ride, and the different ways people can now get around with the modern transport revolution.

UK Supply Chains

14. **Mark Fletcher** (Bolsover) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support UK supply chains. [900825]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): We have published a future of freight plan, supporting efficient, resilient and sustainable supply chains.

Mark Fletcher: I thank the Minister for that very brief answer. I recently met Rick Bromley, who runs a road haulage business in my constituency, and he was very concerned about the impact of rising fuel prices on the industry and the uncertainty that such prices are creating. What assessment have the Minister and the Department made of the sustainability of the haulage sector given the current uncertainties?

Robert Courts: I will reply at more length now, if that is what my hon. Friend would like. We recognise that the cost of fuel, driven by global factors, means that businesses are of course facing increased operating costs, and we are taking steps to mitigate that. My hon. Friend will be aware that we cut fuel duty by 5p in the spring, and we have recently instructed the Competition and Markets Authority to conduct an urgent review of competition in the fuel retail market to ensure that customers and businesses are not getting ripped off.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I apologise for my lack of a tie earlier this morning. You know that I usually take my sartorial choices incredibly seriously, given how much the media like to comment on them.

From fashion to transport chaos. We know that the Government have allowed supply chains to deteriorate to breaking point over the past few weeks. Countless businesses are on the verge of going bust, and the knock-on impact on families has been heartbreaking given the full force of the cost of living crisis. Throughout this, the Secretary of State has been and continues to be missing in action. Time and again, he has refused to meet the Mayor of London to agree a long-term funding deal for Transport for London, jeopardising UK-wide supply chains. He did nothing—nothing—to halt last week's rail strikes, and instead just attacked the workers, who had legitimate grievances. It is clear that the Secretary of State does not care about fixing supply chains; instead, he spends his time making TikToks. So will the Minister get a grip on the transport chaos?

Robert Courts: Let me enlighten the hon. Member. There is, for example, the action we have taken on HGV drivers. We have taken 33 measures, which have been praised by Logistics UK. That is what we are doing. This Department has a very firm grip of the transport network, and that is why we are seeing results.

Shrewsbury-Black Country-Birmingham Railway

15. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of updating and improving the Shrewsbury-Black Country-Birmingham railway line on employment, training and educational opportunities for people in local communities. [900826]

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): We are expecting to receive a strategic outline business case from Midlands Connect in July, which I hope will set out the potential impacts of this scheme on employment, training and education.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. As she says, a business case is going in to her Department in July to increase the line speed between Shrewsbury and Birmingham, which could be done by

2025 if signed off quickly. Will she use her good offices to agree the funding for the outline business case, so that we can finally level up for Shropshire with connectivity and speed to our regional capital, Birmingham?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that rail projects such as this are a vital way of levelling up and growing the economy right across every part of the country. I look forward to receiving the business case next month, and I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend and stakeholders to discuss the scheme further.

Industrial Action: Railways

17. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the economic impact of the rail industrial action between 21 and 25 June 2022. [900828]

18. **Gareth Davies** (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): What assessment he has made of the economic impact of the rail industrial action between 21 and 25 June 2022. [900829]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): The Centre for Economics and Business Research has estimated the cost of the RMT's strike action to be at least £91 million due to workplace absences. However, Network Rail has estimated the direct cost of last week's strike to the rail industry to be between £100 million and £150 million.

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. The effect of the covid-19 pandemic on the rail industry has been well documented, as have been his and the Chancellor's extensive efforts in providing support for our railways during that time. Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that, after two years of taxpayers' money being spent subsidising the rail industry, the RMT chose to strike instead of accepting the pay rise it has been offered or continuing to negotiate?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is right, but it is actually even worse than that. Not only was £16 billion of taxpayers' money put in—£600 per family in this country, or £160,000 per individual railway employee—but the RMT balloted for strike action under the false pretence that there would not be a pay rise, when in fact the pay freeze had already ended. That is unjustified and unjustifiable action that the whole House should be condemning.

Gareth Davies: Given the significant cost of the strikes, what progress can we make towards the introduction of minimum service levels, like they have in many other European countries, albeit as a longer-term solution?

Grant Shapps: We are intending to progress with minimum service levels. That is in our manifesto, and we will be introducing legislation later this year. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, minimum service levels exist in civilised countries such as France, Italy and Spain, and it is about time we had them in the UK as well.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State explain why it is that when essential goods such as fuel are in short supply the price has to go up, but when essential workers are in short supply, their wages are expected to go down?

Grant Shapps: As I have explained to the House, a pay rise was already on the cards, and it is false to have called a strike on the basis that there would be a pay freeze. The pay freeze had ended. It is also untrue to say that there needed to be wide-scale compulsory redundancies. Indeed, we had a voluntary redundancy programme, where 5,500 members of staff came forward, and we only accepted 2,500 of them. This strike has been called on the false pretences that I have described. It is time to end the strike and ensure that people get back to work, and it is time for those on the Opposition Benches to condemn the strikes.

Topical Questions

T1. [900797] **Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I know the whole House will share our concerns about the potential for aviation disruption this summer. Millions of families are looking forward to getting away on holiday, which is perhaps the first one they have had since the pandemic. We appreciate that the airports are busy as they recover, but the last thing we want is a repeat of the scenes that we saw at Easter and half term. Let me stress that there is absolutely no excuse for further widespread disruption. It is more than 100 days since we announced the easing of travel restrictions; further to support the industry as it prepares for the summer, I am today announcing, with a written ministerial statement to the House, a 22-point plan to help recruit and retain staff, and improve resilience, so that disruption to passengers this summer is minimised, and if delays do unfortunately occur, so that travellers get properly compensated. Those measures are what we are doing, and we look to the aviation sector to do its part.

Martyn Day: My constituents who work at the Alexander Dennis Limited factory in Camelon, along with many others throughout the industry, suspect that the Prime Minister's green bus pledge will not be met. In the same timeframe, the Scottish Government have, per capita, ordered the equivalent of more than three times as many buses as the UK Government's figure. Will the 4,000 buses be on the roads by the end of this parliamentary term?

Grant Shapps: Yes.

T4. [900801] **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): I thank the Minister of State for her recent response regarding the much needed upgrade of Haughley junction. I am sure that those on the Front Bench will be fed up with me banging on about this, but will the Secretary of State commit, right now, to upgrading Haughley and other important connectivity junctions in the east, such as Ely, so that we do not lose out on the levelling-up agenda?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Wendy Morton): I have spoken to my hon. Friend several times, including recently, about that scheme, and he is a keen campaigner for getting faster and more reliable trains from Clacton to London. We want to provide as much certainty as possible on rail enhancements, and we will set out our plans, including our proposals on Haughley junction, in the upcoming update to the rail network enhancement pipeline.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is my great pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to oral questions today, because he was absent without leave last time, and he is missing in action when it comes to aviation. He mentioned the chaos over Easter and the jubilee weekend, but he did not hold one meeting with aviation bosses during that time. Now EasyJet, among others, has announced that it could cancel 10,000 flights in the next three months. The Secretary of State needs to step up to the plate. He needs to go to the Prime Minister, knock on the door, and clean up the mess.

Grant Shapps: I am not sure what the question was. During the last oral questions, I was taking on the UK presidency of the International Transport Forum, which is the world's most important international transport body. If the hon. Gentleman does not think that a Secretary of State should be doing that, he is very mistaken indeed.

T5. [900802] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): Leading on from my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling), is my hon. Friend aware of the growing alarm across East Anglia about whether the Government's long-term commitment to invest in Ely and Haughley junctions will be fulfilled? That improvement to the rail network will have significant levelling-up benefits across East Anglia and beyond, improve services for both freight and passengers, and help achieve our legally binding decarbonisation targets. Will she confirm that the rail network enhancements pipeline will prioritise this much needed investment?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend has previously raised the issue of Haughley and Ely junctions with me. We remain committed to publishing the RNEP update, which has been delayed by the need to take account of the impacts of the pandemic and the spending review. However, I want to be in a position where we can provide as much clarity and certainty as possible. We will set out our plans shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State will doubtless be aware of the existence of proof that Inverness airport, having proactively asked about the private jet flight to Moscow two days after the Russian invasion, was told by NATS that it had no reason to intervene and that it should expect contact from the Department for Transport on anything specific. He sought to embarrass Inverness airport and blame it publicly. Would he like to correct the record and apologise to Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd for his error?

Grant Shapps: As a pilot, I understand how NOTAMs— notices to aviation—work: they are the responsibility of either the pilot or the aviation operator, which in this case was the airport, to follow. There is simply no excuse for not following them.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): With more strike days on the tube under this Mayor than his predecessor, his wanting to slash our bus services—in particular, the 24 and the 211 in my constituency—and with the Met now in special measures, does my right hon. Friend think it is time that the Department for Transport considers putting Transport for London in special measures?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. Labour Members constantly call on me to enter into direct negotiations with the unions. They may be able to tell us whether the Mayor of London has done the same thing with the RMT strikes. If he has, it has not worked. If he has not, why are they not calling on him to do that?

To add to my hon. Friend's lengthy list of problems, I got a letter yesterday from the monitoring officer at the Greater London Authority, who says that she will be referring to the formal complaints process guidance as a result of the Mayor's releasing information about both the Elizabeth line and TfL in advance of the markets.

T2. [900798] **Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): Transport remains the UK's biggest generator of climate-wrecking carbon dioxide emissions. Road construction and the traffic that those roads support represents a large proportion of that. Does the Secretary of State agree, therefore, that rather than pursuing an outdated, destructive road project such as the Rimrose Valley Port of Liverpool access scheme in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), a complete rethink is needed and that imaginative, innovative and sustainable infrastructure is the only credible way forward in the face of a climate emergency?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Trudy Harrison): The hon. Member makes a particularly important point, which is exactly why we are investing £577 million in research and development, more than half of which is on decarbonisation of transport, including programmes such as ADEPT live labs where we look specifically at how we can reduce carbon emissions from bituminous materials and road making provisions.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Many of the roads in north Buckinghamshire are in a perilous and dangerous state because of the thousands of heavy goods vehicle movements related to the construction of High Speed 2 and East West Rail. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as a point of principle, that which those companies break, they should fix without question?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Andrew Stephenson): My hon. Friend remains a doughty champion of his constituency and the state of its roads. I continue to work with him to ensure that any damage done by HS2 or East West Rail is put right. The company has committed to that, and I will continue to work with him and his local councillors to ensure that that happens.

T3. [900800] **Ms Karen Buck** (Westminster North) (Lab): We are back in another short-term extension of the Transport for London funding deal. The Government cancelled a series of meetings to discuss it, and business leaders are pleading with them to get on and provide a long-term spending deal. There is a very simple yes or no answer to this question: will the Secretary of State meet the Mayor to sort this out?

Grant Shapps: There have been numerous meetings with the Mayor, and they have included our officials as well as me from time to time. The Mayor has failed to bring forward his plan for the reform of pensions, missing the deadline and causing us to have to, in part, create an additional extension for that purpose. On Thursday or Friday of last week, he stood up and made a speech saying that he would dodge the difficult issues set up by his own independent review of the pensions and that there was not even a cause for having a pensions review, which has cost the taxpayer hundreds of millions of pounds. The Mayor needs to start taking some responsibility for his own transport system in London.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I recently met the parents of Emily, a nine-year-old girl from the Vale of Belvoir who was killed in a tragic car accident. They want me to ask the Secretary of State what consideration he has given to graduated driving licences, which we know have saved lives around the world. Will he meet me to discuss the most dangerous roads in Rutland and Melton, particularly the A52 junction at Bottesford?

Grant Shapps: Reducing road deaths and injuries is something that I am very passionate about. We are working all the time with National Highways and the local highways authorities. I will certainly make sure that my hon. Friend gets an urgent meeting with the Roads Minister to discuss her specific issues.

T6. [900803] **Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): During recent Transport questions, Ministers agreed to meet me and campaigners for Magor rail station, but, like my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), despite chasing them, we have heard nothing. Please could we have that meeting? It would allow us to urge the UK Government to work with the Welsh Government to deliver financial investment for cross-border rail, which the Burns review, the Union connectivity review and the western gateway partnership deem essential.

Wendy Morton: I assure the hon. Lady that my office has been endeavouring to set up that meeting. I will chase them and make sure that it happens.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): The Mayor of London is consulting on cutting 18% of London's bus routes. This will badly affect my constituency, with seven routes cut completely and seven severely affected, even though the elderly, the disabled and the vulnerable are dependent on buses. Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State agree that the Mayor needs to stop these plans?

Grant Shapps: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have provided £5 billion to TfL. What the Mayor does with that money and how he spends it is his choice. As I mentioned a moment ago, rather than doing the difficult

things—for example, tackling the pension fund that his own review says requires tackling—he is cutting buses for Londoners, and that cannot be right.

T7. [900804] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman used to be a pilot. He is now the Secretary of State for Transport and therefore responsible for making sure that air transport on these islands complies with the law. Does he accept as a fact that Inverness airport specifically asked the National Air Traffic Service if it was okay to let that flight go, and that it was told that, yes, it could? Does he also accept that his Department did nothing to intervene? And does he accept that it was a weakness in the sanctions regulations that led to any dubiety at all as to whether that flight should have been grounded?

Grant Shapps: No, no and no. For clarity, I will write to the hon. Gentleman and put a copy of the letter in the Library, explaining how a notice to airmen, as it used to be called—it is now called a notice to aviation—operates. As soon as it is issued, it is the job of the aviation organisation or pilot to obey it. There are no ifs and buts—a NOTAM is a NOTAM. It does not matter what anybody else says—that is what has to be followed. I will illustrate that in a letter to the hon. Gentleman, and I hope we can put this issue to bed.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): The No. 7 bus, which connects Smallthorne, Chell, Packmoor and Kidsgrove, is sadly at risk, so could my right hon. Friend ask the Bus Minister to hold an urgent meeting with me, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and First Potteries, to make sure that this vital service is not lost?

Grant Shapps: I know that the Bus Minister will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend.

T8. [900806] Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): The measures that this Government are taking will not even touch the sides of the cost of living crisis, and transport policies are no exception. By contrast, Germany offers a pass for all regional and local public transport for just €9 a month, and the Irish Government have cut fares by 20%. Will the Transport Secretary consider such bold measures to ease the financial pressures on people and tackle the climate emergency?

Grant Shapps: I know that the hon. Lady is passionate about transport issues. I saw that she was on the picket line last week, although that, unfortunately, stopped hard-working people getting to their jobs to earn a living. I also know she will be a big fan of the recent great British rail sale, which saved the public £7 million, with lots of tickets up to half price. That was massively successful, with about 1.5 million tickets sold. I hope to repeat such exercises.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that the DfT will use the upcoming Government response to the consultation on the renewable transport fuel obligation to fine-tune the regulations and stimulate the use of hydrogen in transport?

Trudy Harrison: It is an absolute pleasure to respond to Mr Hydrogen on this issue, because we in the Department share his enthusiasm for hydrogen in the transport sector. We are looking at the RTFO to see how it could support hydrogen in transport more effectively while working with colleagues across the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to do the same.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the Rail Minister, the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), for her announcement on 18 June about more funding for the development of the line between Poulton-le-Fylde and Fleetwood. Will she reassure my constituents, who are important stakeholders in that potential reopening, that they will be consulted by Network Rail as plans develop?

Wendy Morton: I was really pleased that we were able to make that announcement. I assure the hon. Member that, as we continue with that, we will keep in touch with her and stakeholders as appropriate.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): There are media reports today that another 30 flights from Heathrow have been cancelled, with considerable disruption for many passengers. Many passengers have turned up to Heathrow not knowing that those flights were set to be cancelled, so it is disappointing that the Secretary of State has chosen not to initiate an oral statement on his response to the crisis. How many people does he think have been affected by the situation facing our airlines? And if he does not know, why not?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Robert Courts): We have made it absolutely clear that the scenes we have seen at airports are unacceptable and that we do not want a repeat of them. It is important to remember that the responsibility for ensuring the safe, efficient operation of airlines rests with the aviation sector. We have announced a 22-point plan today to make it clear what the Government are doing in support.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On Saturday, I met RMT Scotland workers on the picket line at Glasgow central station and was incredibly proud to do so. One of the things they told me is that they are sick, tired and fed up of the Secretary of State vilifying them in public. Will he take this opportunity to apologise to RMT workers, our hard-working railway staff who keep the railways safe every day, and actually get around the table with them?

Grant Shapps: I am happy to clear this up: I think that railway workers are very hard-working people who have been sold a duffer by their union bosses, who are hard-line—in many cases—Marxists who want to bring this Government down and bring the country to a standstill. It is a great shame that the hon. Member is encouraging that, rather than condemning it. Fortunately, they are paid well above the average in the country—£44,000 for the average railway worker compared with only £31,000 for a nurse.

Speaker's Statement

10.33 am

Mr Speaker: I wish to record my deep, deep disappointment at the fact that the Minister for Crime and Policing yesterday failed to follow the usual procedures and chose to share an incomplete advance version of the statement with the Chairs and others. My office has compared the two versions; around 150 words were added to a 900-word statement. I note that the Minister returned to the House last night to apologise in general terms, but I do not think that is quite good enough. It was also suggested that it was late and therefore he could not give advance notice to others, but it seemed funny that Government Back Benchers had been given briefings on the questions that were missing, so it is totally not acceptable. I have to tell the House that he has still not apologised directly or personally to me.

I also look to the Leader of the House to confirm now that all Departments will be reminded by him not to repeat such discourteous behaviour. Back Benchers are here to hold the Government to account and not just on what the Government choose to be held to account on. There was nothing wrong in what the Minister for Crime and Policing said, but everybody should know what was going to be said.

Business of the House

10.34 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mark Spencer): It will be a pleasure.

The business for the week commencing 4 July will include:

MONDAY 4 JULY—Conclusion of consideration in Committee and remaining stages of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill.

TUESDAY 5 JULY—Estimates day (1st allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Work and Pensions in so far as it relates to the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions on the cost of living measures, on the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales in so far as it relates to the spending of the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales on measures to support the Welsh economy and its consequences for funding the devolved institutions, and on the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in so far as it relates to the spending of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on action on climate change and decarbonisation, followed by a motion to approve a Ways and Means resolution relating to the energy (oil and gas) profits levy.

WEDNESDAY 6 JULY—Estimates day (2nd allotted day). There will be a debate on estimates relating to the Department for Education, and on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in so far as it relates to the spending of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the strategy for international development. At 7 pm, the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 7 JULY—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on economic crime law enforcement resourcing, followed by a general debate on the Government's alcohol taxation considerations and alcohol duty review. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 8 JULY—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 July will include:

MONDAY 11 JULY—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Energy (Oil and Gas) Profits Levy Bill.

TUESDAY 12 JULY—Remaining stages of the Online Safety Bill (day 1), followed by debate on a motion on restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster.

WEDNESDAY 13 JULY—Consideration in Committee of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill (day 1).

THURSDAY 14 JULY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 15 JULY—The House will consider private Members' Bills.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business. I have to ask him: what is it about Tuesday afternoons and Tory MPs finding themselves anywhere but the voting Lobby to

[Thangam Debbonaire]

defend their own Government? For the fourth week in a row, Labour has successfully passed Opposition day motions in this House. From cracking down on Tory sleaze and scandal to tackling the cost of living crisis and getting a grip on backlog Britain, Labour has a plan and Tories do not even bother turning up. Picking and choosing which votes they will respect and which they will ignore is no way to run a parliamentary democracy. It is disrespectful to this House, to which I remind him his Government are accountable. How will the Government honour Labour's successful motions?

Whether it is passports, driving licences, GP and hospital appointments, queues at airports or even waiting times to start cancer treatment, backlog Britain is having a serious impact on people's lives. Where is the plan? While I am on it, the Government have no plan that I can see to end the 12 years of slow growth and high taxation that we have suffered under successive Tory Governments. Will the Leader of the House ask the Chancellor to come to this House and deliver the emergency Budget that the country so badly needs?

Last week, the Leader of the House did not answer my question about when we can expect a new Government ethics adviser in post. I know that it is a tough job, given this Government's record, but it is an important one and we need urgency. I ask the Leader of the House again: when will the vacancy be filled? Can he guarantee that investigations that were ongoing prior to Lord Geidt's resignation will be completed?

The Social Security (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill will allow people who are thought to be in the final year of their life to get fast-tracked access to various benefits. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) has long campaigned for it. We all agree with it. There really is no excuse for the hold-up of this Bill. Terminally ill people deserve the reassurance that they will have the financial support that they need. It is a short Bill and has passed all stages in the Lords. Will the Leader of the House bring forward this incredibly important yet uncontroversial legislation for Second Reading as soon as possible?

I understand that the Youth Parliament has not yet received a date for when its members will be allowed to come to the House again. Is that because the Government have nothing to say about the many important issues affecting young people, and we do? Could the Leader of the House give the Youth Parliament a date for when its members will be welcomed back to the Chamber?

On Tuesday, Nicola Sturgeon announced plans to go through the courts to try to hold an illegal referendum in Scotland. However, the First Minister gave the game away in her statement to the Scottish Parliament. It seems that it was not about a referendum; it was about the next general election. Nicola Sturgeon seems to be happy for the 700,000 people on NHS waiting lists in Scotland to take a back seat while constitutional debates take precedence for the Scottish National party. I note the striking similarities with the Conservative Westminster Government, who want to make the next election all about cultural wedge issues. The best way to protect and strengthen the UK is clearly to elect a Labour Government who will deliver for every nation and region of our country. The SNP has no greater asset in its attempt to break up the UK than the Prime

Minister. Does the Leader of the House really think that propping up this failed Prime Minister is helping the Union?

Yesterday, the International Trade Secretary pulled out of her scheduled evidence session with the International Trade Committee on the UK-Australia trade deal, following a damning report the night before on—ironically—the lack of parliamentary scrutiny of the deal. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) said yesterday, when a Secretary of State runs away from scrutiny of her own trade deal, it is worrying and, frankly, embarrassing. Will the Leader of the House remind his colleague of the importance of simply turning up for Select Committee sessions?

This Tory sense of entitlement is symbolic of a Government who have dragged their feet for more than a decade; a Government who are out of touch and out of ideas; a Government who are unable to govern, unwilling to govern, and indeed incapable of governing. As the voters said last Thursday, the Prime Minister's game is up. It is time for a Labour Government with a plan to back working families.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. Let me begin by saying that we do have a plan for the NHS: we have a plan to invest in our health service. We introduced the health and social care levy in order to invest billions in it. She complained about the backlogs that covid has caused and the challenges that it has presented to the UK. Our plan is to invest in our health service, but she chose to vote against that investment rather than supporting it.

The hon. Lady talked about a Labour Government delivering for the UK. Let us just look at the facts. Let us, for instance, compare cancer outcomes in England with those in Wales. In England, 65% of cancer patients start treatment within six weeks; in Wales, the figure is only 55%. It is because Labour runs the NHS in Wales, and does not run it as efficiently as England, that the outcomes in Wales are not as positive as those in England, and that is a great shame.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Youth Parliament. I think Mr Speaker has plans to allow it to return, but that is a matter for him.

Mr Speaker: Order. May I qualify that? It is actually for the Leader of the House to lay a motion. We have been through this. Every Youth Parliament sitting here has been arranged in that way. Rather than passing this round, let us be clear about the fact that a motion must be laid.

Mark Spencer: Thank you, Mr Speaker. When I receive a letter requesting that a motion be laid, we will of course lay that motion. I am happy to take this offline, Mr Speaker, but I do not think we have had that letter. I am fairly confident about this.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I think you just lost that one.

Mark Spencer: I am not going to battle with you at the Dispatch Box, Mr Speaker, but should you write to me, of course we will lay that motion.

The hon. Lady talked about the International Trade Committee. I understand that the Secretary of State has agreed a new date on which to go back to the Committee.

It has had that report to scrutinise for more than six months. By the time we finish the CRaG process, we will have had seven months of scrutiny on that matter and I think that is right.

The hon. Lady can spend her time here complaining and claiming that Labour has a plan, but the simple fact is that the Labour party does not have a plan for the United Kingdom. The Government are getting on with meeting the challenges and solving the problems that we face. We said that we would recruit over 20,000 more police officers, and we have already recruited 13,500. We are investing a huge amount of cash—£39 billion—in helping people with the challenges of the cost of living.¹ We are leading internationally on Ukraine and making sure that we are seen to be leading. Only the US is beating us in the amount invested in supporting Ukraine. We are fighting with a global inflation spike and succeeding in helping people through this crisis, and the hon. Lady should support the Government in what we are trying to achieve, rather than just complain from the sidelines.

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): In two weeks' time I will be hosting my first in-person event since the pandemic, which is a pensioners fair to bring together those organisations and agencies that help to support and provide opportunities for the more mature constituents of the Staffordshire Moorlands. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on those community groups that help to provide such great support to more mature people, particularly in the light of the loneliness and social isolation that many of them suffer?

Mark Spencer: Of course I would be delighted to support my right hon. Friend in that, and I pay tribute to her and the work she does in her constituency to support pensioners and give them help and advice on how to engage with the Government. I also pay tribute to members across the House who hold such events, which are a great asset to our communities.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the Scottish National party spokesperson, Pete Wishart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): We need a debate about democracy across the UK. We need to properly consider why this Government think it is okay to try to legally imprison a nation in what is supposed to be a voluntary Union of equals. We need to figure out why this Government seem to believe that democracy can somehow be put into some sort of Tory deep-freeze where people are not allowed to change their minds and their parliamentary majorities do not seem to matter. We need to debate why a nation should continually endure Governments that it did not vote for, and why these Tories think that our country is better being governed by them, rather than by the people who live and work in Scotland. We need to consider what Scotland has done to whatever Almighty is out there to end up being governed by this particular Prime Minister.

We need to debate all the broken promises that were made to Scotland last time: the untruth that only by voting to stay in the Union would we remain in the EU; and the daily attacks on our Parliament when we were promised near-federalism. We have to ask: is this broken Brexit Britain the best that Scotland can ever be and ever aspire to? In that debate, we have to look at the examples of similar-sized countries to Scotland that are

powering ahead of Scotland, unshackled as they are from that bunch over on the Government Benches. We need to challenge the Government's assumption that, with all our resources, skills and history of invention and creation, Scotland would somehow uniquely fail in the world. We need to ask them why they still believe that we are somehow too wee, poor and stupid to run our own affairs. More than that, we need to leave, and most importantly, we need to debate why any self-respecting country would want to remain in a Union that is prepared to do this to Scotland.

Mark Spencer: I think the direct answer to the hon. Gentleman's question as to why other countries of a similar size are bouncing forward quicker than Scotland is that they do not have the anchor of the SNP running their Government and holding them back. I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman: he is the master of smoke and mirrors. He wants to talk about this issue because he does not want people to focus on the disastrous education system in Scotland or the debacle of the Scottish ferries. He wants to put ideology ahead of the needs of the Scottish people. He talked about broken promises. What about the broken promises of the SNP Government, who said they would protect their children's education and futures? They have not delivered on that; they have made it far worse. And when we look at the economic performance in Scotland, we can see that it is being held back by the SNP Government. The sooner Scotland has a Conservative-controlled Administration, the better off it will be.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I strongly commend the Government's exemplary support for Ukraine, but when the head of the British Army compares today to 1937, we must listen and we must act. This is clearly not the time to be cutting our Army by 10,000 troops, because that sends a clear message to Putin that we are not in it for the long haul. We cannot sustain two battlegroups in Estonia and place pressure on the Army to conduct all its other duties to keep the nation safe. Can we have a debate, and indeed a vote, on reversing these cuts? If there were a free vote, I know how the House would act, and it would have the nation's support.

Mark Spencer: My right hon. Friend will be aware that we are increasing defence spending by more than £24 billion over the next four years. We have announced another £1 billion of military support to Ukraine, taking our total military support to £2.3 billion, which is more than any country other than the United States. Our military have a huge, proud record around the world and in the UK, and we will continue to support them.

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

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I apologise to the House for missing the last two Thursdays due to the recurrence of a slipped disc. I managed to get a physiotherapy appointment last Thursday, which I am glad to say seems to be working.

I am glad the Leader of the House has announced Backbench Business time on 14 July, when we will debate the commemoration of Srebrenica, the memorial date for which is on 11 July.

1. [Official Report, 4 July 2022, Vol. 717, c. 7MC.]

[*Ian Mearns*]

I received a letter from Her Majesty's Passport Office yesterday in response to 17 different inquiries about missing passports on behalf of my constituents. Some of these 17 answers date back to inquiries submitted in March. We are still getting inquiries, on an almost daily basis, from constituents who are worried about their missing passports. The situation does not seem to have improved since I first raised it in the House back in late February or early March. Can we have a statement from the Home Secretary on what is being done to improve the situation? Whatever has been done already is not working.

Mark Spencer: I am glad to see the hon. Gentleman back in his place, and I hope his slipped disc is now better. I know how heavy those RMT banners can be, so he should be careful when carrying them.

On the challenges for the hon. Gentleman's constituents in getting their passports, I hope he will recognise that the Home Office has recruited another 550 staff, with another 600 to come very soon.¹ We are trying to meet the challenge, and 91% of people now get their passport within six weeks. If he wants to write to me with specific cases, I will, of course, raise them directly with the Home Secretary on his behalf.

Sir Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Can we have an urgent debate about the Secretary of State for Education's mobile telephone? I have been lobbying him on behalf of Haileybury Turnford School for the past six months, as the sixth form needs a new roof. I have sent videos of water flooding into buckets through the leaking roof.

The Secretary of State says, "Send me a text, and I will see what I can do." So I sent him a text, but it cannot have arrived because nothing happened. I say that because he may have a smartphone and I have this wonderful little Nokia, and maybe the two are not compatible. May I make a serious point? I think it is not fair on him not to be receiving my texts, and we need to find a fix to make sure action happens in future.

Mark Spencer: I do not underestimate my hon. Friend's effort in typing texts on that phone. I will make sure his comments are passed to the Secretary of State for Education. The Government are investing huge amounts in our schools to make sure they are fit to educate the next generation, and I am sure the Secretary of State will continue to do that. I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments.

Mr Speaker: He should borrow the Leader of the House's phone, as it might get through quicker.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Each morning, Royal Mail delivery offices around the country are having to decide which streets to rotate and not get their letters. This is because of the wholesale restructuring in Royal Mail, by agreement, involving about 1,400 managers, but a further 900 delivery office managers are now being made redundant and the strain is showing in service delivery. Can we have an urgent statement from the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the failure of Royal Mail senior management to implement a restructuring that actually delivers a service for the people of this country?

Mark Spencer: Of course, I will pass the hon. Gentleman's comments directly to the Secretary of State. Royal Mail is an organisation that delivers, literally, for our constituents up and down the country, and people deserve to have their mail arrive on time. Lots of businesses and individuals rely on that service, and I will make sure the Secretary of State is aware of his comments directly.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): I have raised the issue of Belper mill with my right hon. Friend on previous occasions, as well as directly with the heritage Minister. The Derwent Valley mills world heritage site brings huge benefits to Derbyshire, both economically and culturally. Unfortunately, Belper mill, in the middle of the world heritage site, is in terrible disrepair, under the management of an absent, dreadful owner. Please may we have a debate in this House about the importance of cultural heritage assets to local communities, particularly the country's globally renowned UNESCO world heritage sites, so that this does not continue to happen in other places, as well as in Belper?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I pay tribute to her and the work she has done on this matter. It is important that we protect our nation's cultural heritage for everyone to enjoy for many years to come. Our 38 designated world heritage sites across the UK are some of the finest examples that are recognised at a global level by UNESCO, and I will ensure that the heritage Minister is made aware of her concerns and will write directly.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): In 2020, the Government finally admitted that the four-year freeze on local housing allowance was completely unsustainable and raised rates to the 30th percentile of local rents, but since then the freeze has been reimposed. Last year alone, rents across the UK rose by an average of 11% and in Nottingham they rose by 13%. There are simply no homes available right now in our city at LHA rates, and families, who are already facing huge energy bills, rising food prices and higher taxes, cannot fill the gap. May we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing and Communities on whether he intends to do his job and take action to protect my constituents from, at best, severe hardship and, at worst, homelessness?

Mark Spencer: I hope the hon. Lady would recognise the huge contribution that the Exchequer is making to support people with the challenges on the cost of living and what the Secretary of State is doing to help people in the circumstances that she describes. This is why we are introducing the renters reform Bill. It was announced in the Queen's Speech and is coming in this Session. That will be a huge step forward to help people in those circumstances, and I hope she will be in her place to support that Bill as it progresses through the House.

Katherine Fletcher (South Ribble) (Con): This week, I have had the honour of hosting the delegation from Mozambique for Mozambique in the UK Week. Yesterday, we were in the City to see agricultural investment opportunities in both our countries. I am fortunate to be serving on the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill Committee, where we heard evidence from the National Farmers Union this week about how it wants us to press on with this legislation to give opportunities

1. [Official Report, 4 July 2022, Vol. 717, c. 7MC.]

for increased crop yields and trade, and reduced environmental impact. Does the Leader of the House agree that Britain is a world-class agricultural leader and it is a shame that the SNP Administration in Scotland and Welsh Labour are not allowing this opportunity for us to show our scientific endeavour, on the basis of historical and unscientific fears?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her timely question. Yesterday, I had the privilege of visiting the Roslin Institute in Edinburgh, where I learnt at first hand about how world-leading genetic research is being conducted in Scotland. I met Professor Bruce Whitelaw, who explained how the fascinating research can help us to reduce the terrible impact of disease in our agricultural sector. This will bring huge opportunities to UK agriculture and promises fantastic opportunities for the whole of the UK. I sincerely hope that her prediction is wrong and that the Scottish and Welsh Governments will reconsider and give Scottish and Welsh farmers access to that brilliant technology, so that they can work alongside English farmers together.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): Since 1975, Scotland has had six referendums: in '75 on the EEC; in '79 on home rule in Scotland; in '97 on the Scottish Parliament; in 2011 on the additional vote; in 2014 on independence; and in 2016 on Brexit.

Chris Bryant: That's enough.

Dave Doogan: It is nice to see how Labour and the Conservatives ally on this issue.

Those referendums took place over 47 years. That means that a referendum happens in Scotland every 7.8 years. Our referendum on Indyref2, which will take place next year, will be comfortably within that margin. Why are the Government using time as a measure of why this is not appropriate at this time? The Leader of the House cannot say what the people of Scotland want, because we have been rejecting his party since 1955.

Mark Spencer: It is a question not of time, but of priority. The priority of the UK Government is supporting our constituents with the challenges of the cost of living, with improving our education service, and with investing in police officers. I understand why the SNP wants to distract people from its terrible record in Scotland. It wants to put ideology ahead of the needs of the Scottish people. It should be concentrating on making sure that the Scottish people get the level of service from their Government that they deserve.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): As we look forward to the UK's largest sporting event, the British Grand Prix, this weekend, by your kind permission, Mr Speaker, Parliament came alive this week to the technologies that the motor sport sector has offered us over the years—from the examples of the Formula 1 turbo-hybrid era, to all-electric Extreme E, Formula E and the bambino karts and to a classic Jaguar E-Type that ran solely on sustainable fuels at Goodwood last weekend.

Where motorsport technology leads, other sectors follow. Can we have a debate to explore the full panoply of technologies being developed by the motorsport sector to ensure that, in terms of their future use, cars,

aviation, shipping, agricultural machinery and beyond have a wide eclectic future, and not just a monotype battery electric future?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, because I think he is the chair of the all-party group on motorsport, and to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing the use of Speaker's Court for some of that amazing technology and for those amazing cars. It was a true privilege to be able to see those motor vehicles.

My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the industry, which brings forward amazing technology here in the United Kingdom that is driving world investment and benefiting the UK economy. I do not know whether he had the opportunity to raise this in Transport questions this morning, but I will make sure that his comments are passed on to the Secretary of State.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Later today, the all-party group on leasehold and commonhold reform, of which I am proud to be a co-chair, will be hosting a reception. Among other things, it will be marking the life of the late Louis Burns, who did so much to campaign on leasehold reform. We will also be marking the introduction of the Leasehold Reform (Ground Rent) Act 2022. However, the big question that we will all still be asking is: when will ground rents be banned for existing leaseholders? We have had promises now for nearly five years from successive Government Ministers. Can we have a statement, please, with a date when leasehold ground rents will be banned on all homes?

Mark Spencer: As I said to the hon. Gentleman's colleague, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), a moment ago, the lease reform Bill is coming forward, which is a huge step forward. It will be an opportunity for the House to debate those matters, but the Government are committed to help and support people across all constituencies to get access to housing. We want to see people own their own home, and also to be able to get on to the housing ladder and to access a home to build a future for themselves.

Sarah Atherton (Wrexham) (Con): Unscrupulous private parking companies are a blight to my constituents in Wrexham. Following a survey that I undertook, I highlighted concerns to Ministers, and, last February, they introduced a code of practice for parking firms. However, all has gone quiet. Can the Leader of the House please explain what is happening and how we can ensure that the Government hold these unjust private companies to task?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question; it is a very important one. I know that the Department has temporarily withdrawn the code in response to legal proceedings issued by some members of the private parking industry. We are disappointed by that setback, but we are committed to reintroducing a code that provides the best possible protection for motorists, and we will continue to work with the industry and consumer groups to introduce a new code as quickly as possible.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Can we have a debate on the teaching of geography, especially to Ministers and civil servants? Anyone passing

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

through a UK airport at the moment will see adverts—doubtless quite expensive adverts—for the GREAT campaign, which features a map of most of the country. I say “most” of the country, because that map does not include Orkney or Shetland. It does include the Isle of Man—which, last time I looked, was not part of this country. It is a bit insulting to the many businesses in Orkney and Shetland, which are at the forefront of leading technology exports, to see ourselves excluded by our own Government in this way. Will the Leader of the House fix it?

Mark Spencer: I understand the point the right hon. Gentleman makes. He is a huge advocate for Orkney and Shetland, and I know he will continue to ensure their voice is heard in this House. I will make sure that those Ministers responsible for the advertising campaign are aware of their faux pas.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I sympathise with the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, as I am suffering from the same condition; perhaps he will grant a debate on the use of NHS chiropractors for the relief of pain.

My constituents Max and Janet are the parents of Adam, who was born last year with a rare neurological condition that will require full-time care. They are just two of many parents who will be full-time carers to a disabled child. As the Leader of the House will know, disability living allowance and carer's allowance for children are there to assist with the extra costs of caring for a child, but not necessarily as a supplement for lost income. Can the Government make time for a debate on how we can better support parents who are full-time carers for disabled children and therefore unable to work full time?

Mark Spencer: Of course the Government want to do all we can to support parents such as Max and Janet. I will pass on my hon. Friend's question to the appropriate Minister. Carers on low incomes can claim income-related benefits such as universal credit and pensions credit, and millions of the most vulnerable households, including carers, will receive at least £1,200 in one-off support later this year to help with the cost of living challenges they face. The household support fund is worth, I think, £1.5 billion; that is a huge investment to try to help people such as Max and Janet.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): On 26 September 2018, in a letter to Hannah Deacon, the mum of Alfie Dingley—one of only three children in the United Kingdom with an NHS prescription for medicinal cannabis for severe epilepsy—the then Home Secretary said he was determined to do all he could to help in this area. Yesterday, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency informed parents of children who do not have an NHS prescription that it will no longer continue to allow compassionate imports from Israel of Celixir 20. Will the Leader of the House call on the then Home Secretary, now Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, to come to this House and make a statement on the urgent import of medicinal cannabis for these desperate children?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady will have an opportunity directly to question the Secretary of State for Health on 19 July at health questions. I know she is tenacious in her pursuit of the challenge those families face, but I am sure the Secretary of State will have heard her comments and that she will be in her place on 19 July to challenge him directly.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): My constituent was asleep in his bed with his pregnant wife and a small child when a drunken neighbour started kicking in his door. He went to answer the door and was attacked. He needed 10 stitches to his face and mouth. The custody sergeant in this case decided that a caution was the appropriate sanction. We believe the punishment must fit the crime. May we have a debate on the issue of cautions where there is assault occasioning actual bodily harm?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend raises a very concerning case and I will pass on her question directly to the Home Secretary. The Government have made clear our determination to cut crime and make our streets safer; that is why this financial year we will invest £130 million in tackling serious violent crime, including £64 million for violence reduction units and our commitment to recruiting 20,000 more police officers before the next general election.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): With the cost of living crisis hitting, I have been contacted by many constituents who live on houseboats, in flats or in park homes who are not eligible for the £400 discount on energy bills. Can we have a debate in Government time on ways in which we can support people who do not pay their energy bills direct?

Mark Spencer: The Government are very much aware of this issue, which was raised a number of times at Treasury questions this week. That is why the Treasury is looking at the way in which these things are calculated. It is also why we are investing £39 billion to support people with the cost of living challenge that we face.¹ We recognise that challenge and that is why we are helping and supporting people through it.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): Howard Provis from Barry recently completed his 1,000th donation of blood and blood platelets. He is an example to us all. His first donation was made at the age of 18 and he has continued to donate for almost 50 years. Can we have a debate on the importance of giving blood? That would be an opportunity to recognise people such as Howard Provis for their commitment to the NHS and to NHS patients and as a great example of how people can give back in support of their community.

Mark Spencer: Wow! Howard has clearly been a huge servant to the NHS, and thousands and thousands of people will have benefited from his donations. I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to him. Giving blood saves lives and donations are vital to our NHS. It would be a suitable topic for a Westminster Hall debate, and I encourage him to seek such a debate so that he can once again pay tribute to Howard.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this month, I met Magic Breakfast, a fantastic charity that supports young people with a nutritious, healthy breakfast. It supports five schools across my constituency.

1. [Official Report, 4 July 2022, Vol. 717, c. 8MC.]

But the cost of living crisis is hitting families so hard, with 33% of London parents saying that they have skipped a meal to save money so that their children can eat, and this is only going to get worse as we see the cost of living increasing into the autumn and winter. Children will be going to school hungry. Will the Leader of the House find time to have an urgent debate on how we can all work together to make sure that no child is going to school hungry?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the work that Magic Breakfast is doing, but the Government do understand this challenge. That is why we are bringing forward £37 billion in support this year alone. We are providing new one-off cost of living payments of £650 to more than 8 million low-income households, separate one-off payments of £300 to 8 million pensioner households, and £150 to individuals receiving disability benefits. That is a huge amount of cash that is going to go to those people who are the most vulnerable in society, and it is a recognition of the challenge we face and the level of support we want to offer them.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Does the Leader of the House agree that after years of neglect our mining towns need more than words to really level up? With that in mind, will he ask the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look favourably at Don Valley's bid in round 2 of the levelling-up funding when submitted, as evidently my constituency has been forgotten for far too long?

Mark Spencer: I declare my interest as someone who represents former mining communities that have also put in levelling-up bids to try to improve the outcomes in those communities. I wish my hon. Friend well with his bid. I know that Members across the House are putting bids forward. This is a huge investment that we are about to make in those communities, and I wish him well with his pursuit of it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Government and the rail industry are failing Hull and the Humber—and this has nothing to do with strikes. The Government left Hull and the Humber out of the 30-year integrated rail plan. TransPennine is cancelling services every day because it cannot provide drivers for the trains, and Network Rail seems to have a problem with signalling on a number of occasions each week. Can we have a debate on why this Government are not levelling up transport for Hull and the Humber?

Mark Spencer: Obviously we had Transport questions this morning. I think the right hon. Lady is a little disingenuous in what she says. The Government are investing billions of pounds in rail, with £35 billion of rail investment from 2022 to 2025, £96 billion through the integrated rail plan and £16 billion during the pandemic to keep the railways running, as well as over £24 billion of strategic road investment. We are investing in our infrastructure systems, and especially in rail. We are investing in our infrastructure systems, and especially in rail. That is because of our commitment to those rail industries. She said this has nothing to do with strikes, but I would gently say to her that those strikes are having a huge impact on people's ability to get around

the country, and I hope she would encourage her union friends to get back to the table and to talk to Network Rail.

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): This week I handed in a petition to Parliament to raise awareness of the campaign to save PRYZM nightclub in Watford. Not only is PRYZM the only town-based nightclub in Hertfordshire, but it has played a role in Watford's night-time economy for more than 40 years under various names, including Paradise Lost, Baileys and Oceana, bringing thousands of people to the high street every weekend. Will my right hon. Friend confirm how I could hold a debate on protecting PRYZM and other similar venues across the country, which play such an important role in our night-time economy and in communities, where their loss could have a devastating impact on local businesses and the taxi trade?

Mark Spencer: I recognise the huge contribution to the night-time economy that nightclubs and bars make in our towns up and down the country. My nightclubbing days are probably now behind me, but I encourage my hon. Friend to talk to my right hon. Friends the Members for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) and for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who may be able to assist him.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I remind the Leader of the House of my call for a debate last week on road air pollution, which is killing so many children and adults up and down the country in every constituency. May I inform him that I am wearing a sophisticated air quality monitor? I will keep Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House in touch about what it is picking up—it is looking pretty worrying at the moment. Could we have an early debate on what is happening in universities to the humanities and the arts? Many departments are being closed. The Government seem to be pushing universities not to have a full spread of higher education subjects. Surely we do not want to go back to renaming half the universities in the country as polytechnics. Could we have an early debate?

Mark Spencer: I recognise what the hon. Gentleman said about air quality. We are spending £900 million to tackle air pollution and improve public health, and our clean air strategy has been praised by the World Health Organisation. He also mentioned the arts and what universities are doing to promote them. That is clearly a huge industry in the UK, and a big part of the global market is owned and occupied by UK-based artists, and that will continue, and the Government will continue to support them.

Felicity Buchan (Kensington) (Con): Can we please have a debate on London? The Mayor of London has three principal priorities. One is policing, one is transport, and one is housing. The Met is in special measures, the tube is on strike, buses are being cut, and housing starts are way behind target. Frankly, he is failing my constituents, and they deserve better. Can we have a debate on London?

Mark Spencer: My hon. Friend is once again right to draw the House's attention to how the Mayor of London is letting Londoners down. In her, he has a tenacious opponent, and someone who will continue to fight for her constituents. I know she will not allow the Mayor to

[Mark Spencer]

continue unchallenged in not delivering for her constituents, and I am sure that the House would be delighted to support her in a debate of such a nature.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is more than 100 months since Putin started his invasion of Ukraine, and he must fail. I am truly worried that we are not taking this anywhere near seriously enough, even after what the Government and NATO have done in the past few days. We still have not tackled the illegal dodgy Russian money in the UK. We have not got pretty much any hardware left to send to Ukraine, and we need to ramp that up rapidly. It looks like the defence budget will be seeing a real-terms cut over the next three years. Can we have the debate that the Chair of the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) called for earlier, and a vote, because we really need—all of us—to take this issue far more urgently and seriously?

Mark Spencer: I recognise that this topic has the benefit of cross-party support. I know that the whole House wants to see Putin's invasion of Ukraine fail. We are serious about dealing with the challenge of those who support that regime. That is why we passed the sanctions Act and introduced the first economic crime Act. There will be a further Bill in this Session to continue to clamp down on this issue. The hon. Gentleman will have seen that yesterday the Prime Minister announced another £1 billion-worth of support for Ukraine. That makes us its second biggest supporter behind the US of any country in the world. The Government will continue to lead on this matter.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): May we have a debate or a statement from the Government on round 2 of the levelling-up fund? My local authority, Glasgow City Council, is putting in an ambitious bid for the regeneration of Easterhouse town centre. Such a statement or debate would allow me the opportunity to lobby the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to give that money to Easterhouse to ensure that we can make huge progress on the development, along with the Scottish Government.

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the second round of bidding is under way. People are putting forward their bids. I wish him well, as I do Members across the House. The Government are committed to making that investment across our communities, and I know that there will be much excitement when the results are announced.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The Thornberry animal sanctuary in North Anston in Rother Valley suffered a power cut early in the morning on 19 June. It was left totally without power for more than six hours, ruining valuable medical supplies, vaccines and dog food. Not only that, but the loss of refrigeration in the café meant that it had to cancel all the bookings for father's day lunches. The electricity distributor, Northern Powergrid, has refused to offer it compensation for loss of earnings or supplies, forcing the Thornberry animal sanctuary to plead for extra donations from the good people of Rother Valley to survive. Will my right hon.

Friend allow a debate on helping charities and businesses in the event of unforeseen electricity failures, and ensuring that no charity is left behind?

Mark Spencer: I am sorry to hear of the plight of that animal sanctuary. Ofgem sets the service levels that distribution network operators must meet. I understand that, due to the length of the power outage experienced by Thornberry animal sanctuary, the criteria for compensation were not met. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend who, in asking the question today, has shone a spotlight on the animal sanctuary's plight. I only hope that it results in charitable support for the animal sanctuary, and that the sanctuary recognises his work to support it as a small contribution to that.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My constituent Debra and her daughter Poppy recently attended my surgery to ask for my help in raising awareness of brittle asthma, a rare but severe condition that can easily be triggered by smoke from barbecues or bonfires, and that can quickly lead to weeks in hospital or even prove fatal. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising the campaigning work of Debra and Poppy? May we have a debate in Government time on the importance of clean air and raising awareness of the dangers of second-hand smoke?

Mark Spencer: Of course I join the hon. Lady in praising Debra and Poppy for their work to highlight this condition. In communities, it can almost be antisocial to have bonfires, given the impact on friends and neighbours. In pursuing this matter, the hon. Lady will draw that antisocial behaviour to the attention of many people across the House.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The National Institute of Economic and Social Research, which is, incidentally, the oldest non-partisan economic research institute in the UK, recommended that the UK Government insure against rate rises in quantitative easing reserves by converting them into Government bonds with longer maturity. The Government did not take that advice, with the result that the UK has an enormous bill, as well as heavy and continuing exposure to interest rate risk. That has led to the squandering of £11 billion of taxpayers' money—that is £2,000 for every man, woman and child in Scotland. Will the Leader of the House make a statement explaining the staggering level of UK Government incompetence and say who he believes should be held responsible?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Lady will be aware that Treasury questions happened this week. I am not sure whether she was in her place to ask the Chancellor about that directly. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is making sure that our economy is robust and fit for the future, so that we can continue to invest in our great public services. That is the way forward. We must continue to get more people into work to make sure that the economy is bouncing forward, so that we have the cash available to keep investing.

Jonathan Gullis (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Con): I was delighted to be at the opening of the Harper Street project in the great village of Middleport, next door to the mothertown of Burslem, where we recently hosted the UK Cabinet. The project has regenerated a row of

terraced houses: some are now businesses, one will host the Middleport Matters community trust, and another is a 1950s lodgekeeper's house that transports people back in time to life in the Potteries at their peak. Will my right hon. Friend congratulate Stoke-on-Trent City Council, Historic England, the National Lottery Heritage Fund and all the other organisations that made the £2.5 million regeneration project possible? Let us have a debate on how Stoke-on-Trent is the leading city in the country for heritage regeneration.

Mark Spencer: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to all the organisations that are supporting Stoke-on-Trent. I also pay tribute to him, because he is a true champion for Stoke-on-Trent and has brought renewed enthusiasm and vigour to that town, along with his colleagues. Stoke-on-Trent has a bright future with him as its champion.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Gujarat is one of India's greatest and fastest growing states. As part of our country's efforts to increase trade with India, one would have thought that there would be at least a small package of support for those in this country who want to teach the next generation the languages of Gujarat, in particular Gujarati, but there is not. As a result, there has been a steep decline in the number of people taking GCSE Gujarati in the last 10 years. Can the Leader of the House encourage the Secretary of State for Education to publish a statement setting out what he might do to reverse that trend?

Mark Spencer: The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to raise that important matter directly at Education questions next week. As he identifies, India is a great opportunity for UK trade, which is to the mutual benefit of India and the United Kingdom. We should invest in anything that we can do to support and encourage that trade, including the speaking of languages.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): There are undoubtedly many good people in the Home Office working hard on the Ukraine visa schemes, but we have all seen the evidence that it is just too slow. We have two cases that are now approaching 10 weeks old. The applicants are generally women and young people who are fleeing a war zone in desperately stressful circumstances. Can we have a debate about how we can get more resource into the Home Office to help out those who work there?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. As of 23 June, we had granted more than 135,000 visas through the two uncapped humanitarian routes, and more than 82,000 people have already arrived. That is a huge contribution from the United Kingdom and from people up and down the country who are taking people into their homes. We should be enormously proud of that and I am sure that we will continue to support people coming from Ukraine.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): May I press the Leader of the House on the issue of people waiting for passports, specifically children and young people? I have young people who have been waiting for passports since April. In some cases, the parents have received the renewed passports and the children have not. I am sure he

understands that that is causing significant anxiety for parents who want to take their children away in the summer holidays, which are fast approaching. Some parents are utterly perplexed by how changing a name, or going from a five-year passport to a 10-year passport, can cause such a delay. I ask him to bring forward a statement from the Home Office to explain what specific support it is providing to families to ensure that passports are issued in good time for the summer.

Mark Spencer: The whole House will recognise that we all deserve a holiday. Up and down the country, people are keen to take that opportunity and they need their passports to do that. The House has debated the matter a lot: we have had two urgent questions and an Opposition day debate. That is why the Home Office is investing in extra staff, and will continue to do so; some 650 additional staff have already been brought in and another 550 will arrive soon. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the specific case that he highlights, I will make sure that the Home Secretary looks at it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is now 462 days since the end of the consultation on the Government's proposed reform of gambling legislation. Five hundred people have taken their own lives as a direct result of problem gambling since then, and today someone else will take that tragic way out. I have heard the reasons and excuses for the delay in publishing the White Paper, but, frankly, none of those excuses stands up to any scrutiny. Can the Leader of the House give us an assurance that the White Paper will be published at the very latest before the start of the summer recess? Can I urge him to advise his Cabinet colleagues, if the cause of the delay is that they cannot agree, to bring a Bill to this House and let Parliament do its job, rather than whipping their Back Benchers to do something they may not want to do? Every day's delay costs another human life.

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and we do want to make sure that we get the right balance between respecting freedom of choice and preventing harm. In the coming weeks we will publish the White Paper, which will set out our vision for the sector, but I am sure the relevant Ministers will have heard the hon. Gentleman's comments.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am becoming increasingly concerned about the lack of response from the Home Office on urgent non-Ukraine asylum and visa applications. In fact, my team have been told that standard completion times have been suspended. One of many cases I am dealing with is that of a young man whose asylum application has been pending for five years, with no resolution in sight. Can the Leader of the House please assist me with this, and urge his colleagues to ensure that their teams have the necessary resources to action long-standing casework urgently?

Mark Spencer: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and this is of course something the Government take very seriously. We are a very generous nation when it comes to asylum seekers. We want to make sure that we continue to be a generous nation and support those who come here via legitimate routes, but we also want to break the model of those who exploit the very

[Mark Spencer]

vulnerable people crossing the channel. I am sure we will continue that support and continue to be a very generous nation in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Next week, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland hosts the 2022 freedom of religion or belief international ministerial conference. We all welcome that, and I am very pleased that the Government have taken that step. This is the largest UK Government-hosted event this year, and it will bring together Government officials, Ministers, faith and belief leaders and civil society organisations from over 60 countries to promote respect between different religious and non-religious communities around the world. During the conference, there will be more than 35 side events happening in Parliament. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, can I please use this opportunity to invite the Leader of the House and all present today to as many of those events as they are able to attend?

Mark Spencer: I was concerned for a moment that the hon. Gentleman was not bobbing, because his question reminds me of that moment when I rummage around in the Quality Street tin and find the last little green triangle at the bottom. If he could pass on the details of those events, I will do my best to attend and support him in the way he supports religious groups all around the world on a regular basis.

Post Office: Compensation for Horizon Scandal

Mr Speaker: Before the statement, I wish to make a short statement about the sub judice resolution. I have been advised that there are relevant active legal proceedings in the Court of Appeal. I am exercising the discretion given to the Chair in respect of matters sub judice to allow reference to those proceedings, as they may concern issues of national importance. However, I urge Members to exercise caution in what they say and to avoid referring in detail to cases that remain before the Court of Appeal.

11.33 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): With permission, I will make a statement on the latest steps that the Government are taking to ensure that swift and fair compensation is made available to postmasters impacted by the Horizon IT scandal.

The House is well aware of the terrible impact felt by the many postmasters affected by the issues with the Post Office's Horizon IT system that began over 20 years ago. Those distressing consequences have been widely documented in the courts—in the 2019 group litigation order judgments and in the more recent Court of Appeal judgments—as well as in the media. I have met postmasters personally to hear how their lives and the lives of their families have been affected by these events, and every time I am moved by the impact that these events have had on individual postmasters' lives and their fight for justice over a number of years. I pay tribute to colleagues on both sides of the House for the way they have supported postmasters in their efforts to expose the truth and see justice done.

Today, I will update the House on the latest steps that the Government are taking to ensure that fair compensation is paid to people impacted by the scandal. As Members will know, members of the GLO group performed a great public service by bringing the case in 2019 that exposed the scandal. That is why I was pleased when the Chancellor announced in March this year that further funding is being made available, to ensure that those people receive similar levels of compensation to that available to their non-GLO peers. The Government intend to make an interim payment of compensation to eligible members of the GLO who are not already covered by other compensation support, totalling £19.5 million. Together with the share of the December 2019 settlement, which we understand was distributed to the GLO postmasters, that brings the total level of compensation to around £30 million. Postmasters will be contacted in the coming weeks to submit an application, and we aim to distribute funds within a few weeks of receiving that application. I hope that will go some way towards helping many postmasters who have faced and still are facing hardships.

In parallel, we are continuing to work at pace on delivering the final compensation scheme for the GLO. I confirm that we will be appointing Freeths to access the data and methodology that it developed in relation to the distribution of the 2019 settlement. Freeths represented the GLO claimants, and it has vital knowledge and expertise based on its involvement in the case. That

will allow us to work at pace on the design of a scheme with the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance, and Freeths, to give those in the GLO similar compensation to their non-GLO peers. As promised in March, we will informally consult with members of the GLO about the proposed scheme's operation. I am also pleased to announce that members of the GLO group will be able to claim reasonable legal fees as part of participating in the compensation scheme. I hope that will allay any concerns they might have about meeting the costs of seeking legal advice and support when applying to the scheme.

Turning to progress on compensation for overturned criminal convictions, I am pleased to report that interim payments are progressing well. As of 29 June, there have been 75 overturned convictions, with the most recent being overturned in recent weeks. The Post Office has received 74 applications for interim payments, including several new applications recently. Sixty-seven offers have been accepted by and paid out to claimants, totalling nearly £7 million. That marks significant progress, with 10 additional interim payments made to postmasters since I updated the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee on 11 January 2022. I am pleased that those interim payments have helped to deliver an early down payment on the compensation due to affected postmasters, in advance of full and final compensation packages being agreed.

For those postmasters with an overturned conviction who have already submitted quantified claims, we are working with the Post Office to agree, wherever possible, part payments of agreed elements of claims, such as loss of earnings, and we will continue to do so with additional claims when they are submitted. That step should enable us to avoid undue delays, by awarding partial compensation while outstanding matters are resolved.

One area where it has been challenging to agree compensation is non-pecuniary damages, some of which reflect the wider impact on postmasters' lives that the wrongful convictions have had. That includes compensation for their loss of liberty, or impacts on their mental health. A number of postmasters have agreed to refer this issue to the process of early neutral evaluation, to be conducted by former Supreme Court judge Lord Dyson. It is hoped that that evaluation will facilitate the resolution of those issues. The Government stand ready to support the delivery of the early neutral evaluation process, and are keen to ensure that the outcomes of the process enable swift compensation.

I urge all postmasters with a Horizon-related conviction to continue to come forward to seek to have them overturned. Indeed, postmasters are being contacted individually by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, and other relevant bodies, to encourage them to do so.

In addition to progress on compensation for those with overturned criminal convictions, good progress has been made on delivering compensation for those in the historical shortfall scheme. As of 23 June, 65% of eligible claimants have now received an offer, meaning that £29 million has now been offered, and 444 further postmasters have been offered compensation since my last update to the House. I thank the independent panels for their diligent work in progressing those cases.

As I have said previously, I have set the Post Office the ambition to make 100% of HSS offers by the end of the calendar year, and the Government are working

closely with the Post Office to achieve that. It is important, however, that in addition to providing compensation, we learn lessons so that something similar can never happen again. That is why the Government set up the Post Office Horizon IT inquiry and put it on a statutory footing, to ensure that it has all the powers it needs to investigate what happened, establish the facts, and make recommendations for the future. We are co-operating fully with the inquiry to ensure that the facts of what happened are established and lessons are learned, and I commend this statement to the House.

11.40 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement and for keeping the House informed of progress. The Horizon scandal is perhaps the greatest miscarriage of justice in our country's history. Its victims have waited for justice for far too long. I pay tribute to the Justice for Subpostmasters Alliance for its tireless work and acknowledge the work of colleagues on both sides of the House who have gone to considerable lengths to highlight the plight of their constituents. In particular, I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), whose commitment to the cause has been unwavering, and to Lord Arbuthnot in the other place.

I also pay tribute to the Minister—and I do not say that lightly. Successive Conservative Governments have sat on the scandal, but he has made real progress in moving us to a place where we can see that justice is in sight. I acknowledge that. I also welcome the update on the March announcement that, as Labour has repeatedly called for, the 505 litigants will receive the compensation payments that they are entitled to. However, I emphasise that, as I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, it is unacceptable that it has taken so long when the right course of action was always clear. There really was no need for victims to have spent so long in limbo.

At the core of this unforgivable scandal is the belief that workers were dishonest and technology was infallible. Perhaps that is not surprising, given the Government's track record on defending the rights of working people. Decent, honest people have had their lives torn apart, been put in prison and been made to wait years for justice. For some, that wait has been too long. We must not forget those who are not with us and will not see the justice to which they were so entitled.

As I have previously done in the Chamber, I implore the Minister to act quickly and decisively to draw a line under this horrific miscarriage of justice. There can be no further delays in providing the compensation that will go at least some way in helping to right this wrong. As such, will he provide a timescale for when all compensation payments will have been made? Will he confirm that the compensation will not affect the Post Office's core funding, day-to-day operations or viability in—I stress this—any way? Given the vital role that post offices perform in our communities—we all acknowledge that—it is essential that today's communities are not made to pay for the unacceptable mistakes of the past. Labour has called for all those involved to be held accountable. Will he therefore update the House on what investigations are ongoing into the role of Fujitsu and others involved in the technology that led to the failure?

[Chi Onwurah]

The Minister spoke about learning the lessons from this horrific scandal. The Government were, and remain, the only shareholder in the Post Office. They have a financial responsibility and a moral responsibility to ensure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for her kind words, and I totally echo her thanks and congratulations to the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and Lord Arbuthnot. My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and others sitting behind me have also worked tirelessly on this for so long, as has the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on post offices.

It is not possible to listen to the stories and fail to be moved. There is always something else that comes out and brings a tear to the eye and, frankly, anger that this was ever allowed to happen. The Government have moved to do something about it, but we are all doing something, because this is about a human cost. We are humans first and politicians second.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) talked about the timing. There is an application form for the 555 to fill in. It is comparatively simple and Freeths will work with each of them and walk them through the process, because the last thing we want to do is put hurdles in their way. We want to make sure that within a few weeks the money goes out of the door to them. They need the money now. In parallel with that, the compensation scheme has started. We want informal consultation with the 555, to make sure that they are happy with the scheme and have faith and confidence that the funding will be delivered. As I have said, we want the historical shortfall scheme to be wrapped up and to at least make offers to each person by the end of the year.

I think we will be able to start moving quickly on overturning criminal convictions as soon as Lord Dyson has responded through his early neutral evaluation, but that also depends on the flow of cases via the solicitors. I have been working closely with Hudgells and other solicitors who represent the groups, to make sure that it is as speedy as possible.

I can confirm that this will not affect the Post Office's core funding. We want to make sure that the Post Office has a future, but we cannot have that future until we have rectified the mistakes of the past.

The hon. Lady also talked about Fujitsu, learning the lessons and holding people to account. The next stage of the statutory inquiry starts next week, when the Government, the Post Office, Fujitsu and others will go in front of Wyn Williams. That will start the process of making sure that we know exactly who knew what, who did what and when.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I thank the Minister for all his good work. Obviously, today is a great day because he has been able to make this statement to the House.

I remain deeply concerned about the role of Fujitsu, UK Government Investments and all those who sent Ministers to this House, even after the Justice Fraser

judgment, to say, "Nothing to see here." That was wrong. I know that Sir Wyn Williams is investigating, as the Minister has rightly said, but will my hon. Friend personally commit to ensuring that those individuals are held to account?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done. Having set up the statutory inquiry, what I cannot do at this Dispatch Box, at this moment in time, is direct Sir Wyn towards any particular area of findings. That is for him to do and I want him to remain an independent chair. But we absolutely want to make sure that lessons are learned and that people are genuinely held accountable.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister both for his statement and for prior sight of it. I also thank all members of the APPG, both former and current, because they have been the power behind this. I merely chair it. I came along quite a way into all of this, and I am grateful for the help I have had.

The Minister has been diligent in his work leading to today's announcement on interim compensation. Though that is very welcome, it has taken a long time to get here. I thank him for the thought that has gone into the administration of the scheme, and welcome the proactive action to be taken in contacting those GLO members who are yet to receive compensation.

Will the Minister—I know this is a big ask—reopen the historical shortfall scheme without a cut-off date, as the NFSP called for? Lots of sub-postmasters have still not applied for the compensation to which they are entitled. Post Office failures go a long way back under Conservative, Labour and Lib Dem Ministers, and sub-postmasters still struggle to make a decent living. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will continue to support post offices and sub-postmasters so that they thrive and do not suffer for grievous past mistakes that are now rightly being dealt with?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Lady for all her work and for her remarks. It is not practical to reopen the historical shortfall scheme in full, but cases are still coming forward and the Post Office is looking at them on an individual basis, because we want to make sure that we catch as many people as possible who have been wronged.

As for remuneration for postmasters, I talked about the fact that we have to give post offices a future. That has to be done on the back of the people—the postmasters up and down the country—who make the Post Office what it is. Remuneration remains a key topic of discussion with the Post Office, the NFSP and postmasters in general.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I have watched many Ministers do a good job at the Dispatch Box, but it takes a very special Minister to take an issue such as this to heart and really make it move, as this Minister has. The compensation that he talks about is long overdue, particularly for litigants—he knows that I represent one of them—and it will go a

good way to correcting some of the historical injustices in this sorry case. I congratulate him on that and I know that this is not the end of the tale.

There is another way in which this cannot be the end. We have heard about learning lessons and all that, but this is about more than learning lessons; there is a massive question of justice. People have covered up—let us make no bones about it—a massive injustice to their advantage and for their own profit, pay and honours. I know that the Minister cannot say certain things and that sub judice issues apply to him, but I hope that he will keep a very close eye on this issue and make sure that the people who need to be punished are punished and that justice is done.

Paul Scully: I thank my right hon. Friend for all his work and the conversations that we have had. I should not have to be here making these statements and the taxpayer should not be covering compensation for the Post Office. This is being done because people have been wronged by those in authority and they have been let down time and again over 20 years. That is why we need compensation, justice and answers and to be able to draw a line under this, so that people who have been wronged can move on with their lives.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Minister knows that I have two such cases. One person is in front of the independent panel giving advice on the historical shortfall scheme. The other person has a conviction that was overturned by the Criminal Cases Review Commission. However, the Post Office does not accept that that was a Horizon-related conviction and is therefore refusing to provide any form of compensation. Given the comprehensive nature of the failure of Horizon, how can the Post Office say that with any confidence? Will the Minister confirm that we will consider compensation for former postmasters who are in my constituent's position?

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman and I have discussed this matter and I think the interim payments are his constituent's concern. If Horizon is deemed not to have been the main driver of what happened—the Post Office contested that—his constituent would not be entitled to the interim payments, but that does not stop them applying for compensation.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), I commend the Minister for his personal dedication to this cause. It is outstanding and I am sure that a lot of postmasters around the country appreciate it. The cost of the settlement that he has announced will fall on the public purse. In due course, it should be possible to seek indemnity in whole or in part from the companies—I suggest Fujitsu, most notably—that are responsible in whole or in part for this issue. What steps is he taking to ensure that they are made aware that, in due course, such indemnity will be sought?

Paul Scully: I think that all parties who will be in front of the inquiry will know exactly that. I do not want to pre-empt anything that we may do, but as my right hon. Friend says, the taxpayer clearly should not have to foot the bill. However, we want to make sure that we get all the answers before we take further steps.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I put my thanks to him on the record, because of the numerous Ministers I have dealt with on the issue in the past 10 years or more, he is the only one who has challenged the system and compassionately realised that this wrong needs to be righted. He should be congratulated and take full credit.

The interim payments will make a difference because a lot of these individuals, such as my constituent Tom Brown, have been living in abject poverty for the past few years through no fault of their own. Proud individuals who served their community were ruined by the state. Like the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), I would like to know what the next process will be.

I accept that the compensation scheme will be put in place, and I am pleased that Freeths is involved, but what about holding people to account? My layman's view is that criminal activity was involved in some of the decisions that were made. When will the individuals involved face a day of reckoning? I accept that the Minister cannot speak about what will come out of the public inquiry, but it is very important that the Government have a strategy to ensure not only that those individuals are identified, but that there is a process for dealing with them in the criminal courts.

Paul Scully: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for all his work and for his kind words, which mean a lot from someone who has done so much in this area. I do not want to pre-empt the inquiry, but I know from looking back at the records that the Director of Public Prosecutions was interested in the findings of the Fraser judgment. That is the process for further criminal action, should it be deemed appropriate.

Duncan Baker (North Norfolk) (Con): I echo everything that has been said to the Minister; I will not go over it all again, but he really deserves the credit that has been given. As a former postmaster—I think I am the only one in the House—I absolutely believe that those responsible, including Fujitsu and senior people in the Post Office, must be held to account.

I also want to say something different to the Minister: will he please, please look at the remuneration structure for postmasters? We are losing post offices up and down our high streets and in our communities, because it is sometimes unviable to run a post office as a stand-alone unit. When communities lose post offices, we struggle to get them back. Once this horrendous scandal is dealt with, will the Minister please look at remunerating postmasters properly so that we can get these great institutions back on our high streets? My goodness, we need them.

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend, whose comments come from experience. We are not waiting until this is over. The Post Office has conversations all the time with sub-postmasters and their representatives about remuneration. It relates partly to the future of post offices. Some postmasters rely on extra services to bring in footfall so that they can then sell other products in their retail outlets; some find that too binding, including in some smaller units in Scotland—the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) is nodding—

[Paul Scully]

because they are full of parcels, which is preventing them from doing other trading. That is why we need to work together to make sure we have a viable approach for post offices, not just for economic value but for social value.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Minister for righting this wrong and for working to get more justice for postmasters. He is aware that I have a constituent who has faced hardship for many years, having been a sub-postmaster for about 10 years. May I press him slightly on his statement, in relation to the 33 postmasters who are no longer with us, four of whom took their own lives during the wait for justice? Will he ensure that their families, including husbands, wives and children, get support to receive compensation? There can never be enough compensation for those families, but that would go some way towards righting this wrong and ensuring that they get the justice that they deserve.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I ask him please to pass my condolences to the family of the postmaster to whom I know he is referring, and to others with whom he has been in contact who have a family member who has taken their life as a result of this. The compensation schemes all include the estates of the postmasters who have died, whether they died of natural causes or unfortunately took their own lives.

Sir Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): I want to add my tribute to my hon. Friend, who is working tenaciously on behalf of—as he has just said—not just the living, but those who have sadly died. I think he will agree that we can have the fullest confidence in the experience of the High Court judge Sir Wyn Williams and his independent statutory inquiry, but does he agree that the inquiry should examine in particular the way in which, before evidence that is the product of information technology—which is only going to grow as a phenomenon in the years ahead—is presented to any court, it is the subject of its own verification? That seems to me to be at the heart of the problem that was the root of what has been, in terms of its scale, the greatest miscarriage of justice in our English and Welsh legal history.

Paul Scully: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for what he has said and for the experience that he brings to the House. Sir Wyn Williams has had to learn very quickly and import considerable resources because of the technology that has been involved. It is easy to baffle people with high tech, and to say that there is nothing to see here and absolutely nothing is wrong. It is extremely complex, and I hope that Sir Wyn does get to the bottom of exactly the issue that my right hon. and learned Friend has raised.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I add my voice to those who have said that the Minister deserves full credit for getting us to this point?

The inquiry is of course about ensuring that those who have done wrong in the past are accountable. However, we already know that at the heart of this problem was the culture at the top and the centre of the

Post Office, which essentially did not trust the people at the coalface. If we are to ensure that this never happens again, we have to know that that culture has changed. Quite apart from the inquiry into the past, is the Minister satisfied that those who are currently at the top and the centre of the Post Office have genuinely received that message about a change in the culture?

Paul Scully: Yes, I definitely am. We have already talked about remuneration, but Nick Read brings with him a different type of culture—a different approach—because he does not see post offices as merely branches of a central location. He was used to dealing, in his previous occupation, with supermarkets which were part of a bigger organisation, and I believe that the culture is shifting under his leadership.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend—not just on the work that he has done in respect of this matter, but on keeping the House updated, and listening to what Back Benchers have had to say and then dealing with it. He has, for example, announced the interim payments that were requested by Members during the last statement.

Sub-postmasters are essentially running small businesses, for the benefit of the community and to provide services. The accounting systems prior to Horizon were chaotic, to put it mildly. May I urge my hon. Friend to ensure that evidence is presented relating not just to what happened during the scandal of people being charged with offences which they clearly had not committed, but to what happened previously and led to this chaos in the first place?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. Sir Wyn will be looking at the Horizon scandal in the round to see how it progressed over those 20 years, and at the history that is documented in Nick Wallace's book "The Great Post Office Scandal", which is a very comprehensive read. As for the interim payments, they will clearly never be enough for people to settle their debts, but they are a first step. This is not the end of the process, but it is a really important step.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on post offices, the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), about the scope for flexibility on the closing date for the historical shortfall scheme, I have constituents who ran a sub-post office in a nearby borough but had it shut down and the franchise taken away by the Post Office. At first glance, it looks as though Horizon issues were very much involved. They submitted an application to the historical shortfall scheme, but for a series of reasons it seems that their application was not received by the Post Office. If the Post Office is unwilling to consider their case, would the Minister be willing to meet me to see if together we might persuade it to rethink?

Paul Scully: I will gladly meet the hon. Gentleman to look at that case. It is difficult for me to make a judgment here, but I have talked about the fact that the Post Office is looking at things on an individual basis and I will gladly meet him to talk about his constituents' case.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): Can I add my name to the chorus of praise for the Minister? I also thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), for her generous words to him. The reality is that it has taken far too long to get to this point, and not just in miscarriages of justice like this. We have also seen scandals in the NHS where people have to wait too long for Governments finally to admit fault and then to compensate people. That is often because they have been badly advised along the way. Given what we have heard from so many people around the Chamber today about the people involved in these cases being old, retired and often still in poverty—and, as the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said, some of them have died—can I impress on the Minister the urgency of his continuing his good work so that we can get this fully resolved as speedily as possible and everyone can get the justice and compensation they deserve?

Paul Scully: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. Receiving this praise is great for me, but this is not about me. As he rightly says—please do carry on, by the way—it is about the people who have suffered terribly at the hands of people in authority. Some of them have taken their own lives and many of them have been stigmatised and left in debt and abject poverty, so we have to keep the pace going, not just to get that compensation for them but to get those lessons learned and hold people to account.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Among the other catastrophic and inexcusable failures, this House failed. This House was made to fail in its duty to get to the bottom of this quicker, because somewhere in the machinery of government there was a deliberate and sustained conspiracy to send Minister after Minister unwittingly to the Dispatch Box to say things that we now know are not true. This House has to look at that very seriously indeed. It cannot be acceptable in any circumstances for this House to be prevented from doing its job by conspirators, whether in Government or in outside agencies, and I hope the appropriate authorities of the House will look into that urgently.

Can the Minister tell me what further action he proposes to take in forthcoming legislation to widen the circumstances in which directors of companies can be held personally liable as well as corporately liable for serious misconduct in office? In particular, one of the things my constituents find frustrating is that directors of these companies, who at the very least should have known what was going on and did nothing to stop it, were able to walk away and become directors of other

companies. They have had 20 years of a good lifestyle that was denied to the victims and, if they are called to account, they will get a fair trial, which was denied to the victims. Will the Minister look for ways to speed up the process of preventing directors from taking up other highly paid directorships if there are serious questions to be answered about their conduct in office?

Paul Scully: I am not sure if it is the House authorities, but it is certainly the case that Wyn Williams's inquiry will see exactly where the failings were—including, if there are any, failings by Ministers or others who have stood here—without fear or favour. In terms of directors, we have already brought in a number of measures since I have been a Minister, including the disqualified directors legislation, which allows the Insolvency Service to bring companies back on the books and then to take action against their directors, but we will always look to make sure we have the most robust system to tackle rogue directors.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I would like to thank the Minister for his determination to get this issue sorted for sub-postmasters where other Ministers have failed. With post offices getting harder and harder to come by in recent years, how do the Government intend to restore confidence so that potential sub-postmasters are not put off opening these businesses that are so essential to our communities?

Paul Scully: We want to ensure that, by drawing a line under this historic miscarriage of justice and scandal, we can work on the future of the Post Office. To do that, we need to make sure we are engaging everybody—rural, coastal and city-wide post offices—on how we get the right balance between the Post Office's economic value and its social value. I will continue to work with the APPG and with Members on both sides of the House to get this right.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for grasping the core of the issue and getting the job done. The Chamber is unanimous in thanking him, and I add my thanks, too. I welcome that those who initially missed out on the scheme now have the opportunity to apply. It is good to see fairness and equity set as the standard for those who have passed away. Will their sponsors or next of kin be eligible to apply?

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. The solicitors will work with the estates of postmasters who were subject to overturned convictions or historical shortfalls, or indeed the original 555. It is important that we get the equity he seeks.

Proxy Voting and Presence of Babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall

PROCEDURE COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Karen Bradley, representing the Procedure Committee, will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Karen Bradley to respond to these in turn. I remind the House that questions should be directed to Karen Bradley, as the Chairman of the Committee, and not to the relevant Minister. Interventions should be questions and should be brief. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

12.11 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): This morning, the Procedure Committee published its first report of the new Session, concluding two inquiries: the first on extending eligibility for proxy voting to those with long-term medical conditions; and the second on the presence of babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for this opportunity to make a short statement to the House.

Our predecessor Committee did not consider the case for non-parental proxies in detail. When it came to our review at the beginning of this Parliament, we said we would consider the matter when pandemic proxies ended, if there was interest to justify a closer look. Pandemic proxies ended in July 2021 and we launched this inquiry on 23 September, to consider whether eligibility for proxy voting should be broadened.

To cut to the chase, I will quote directly from our report:

“the overwhelming balance of evidence that we heard was in favour of proxy voting being extended to include Members suffering from serious long-term illness or injury.”

The House will be aware that there have been several cases in the recent past of Members feeling compelled or being required to vote in person while seriously unwell, which risks bringing the House into disrepute. These events have led to increasing calls for proxy votes to be offered to Members suffering serious long-term illness, which would allow them to recover in their own home while still being able to exercise their vote.

However, discussions on a possible extension to the proxy voting system provoked concerns, principally on a Member's right to privacy. I make it clear that Members who do not wish to use the proxy voting system can use pairing or, if appropriate, nodding through. We do not propose any changes to the mechanisms that are not procedural. Were the House to vote to extend the proxy voting scheme, it is essential that Members who favour a more private mechanism are able to access one.

It is also important to note that access to a proxy vote is not appropriate for every occurrence of ill health or injury. For this reason, we believe that any extension to the proxy voting scheme should not include provisions for short-term, non-serious medical

conditions. In the case of non-serious illness that causes a short-term absence, Members should use existing informal mechanisms.

If the House were to endorse the principle of extending the scheme, it would be for the Government to bring forward changes to the Standing Orders. We believe that any extension should, in the first instance, take place as a pilot, the success of which the Committee would review.

The broad terms of a scheme issued under Mr Speaker's authority should, in our view, include the following aspects. It should be available to Members who, as a result of serious long-term personal illness or injury, wish to vote by proxy. It should require medical evidence from a medical professional stating that the Member is physically unable to attend Divisions in the House. It should be recorded in the same way as a parental proxy, through a Speaker's certificate recorded in *Votes and Proceedings*, stating that the Member has exercised their right under the Standing Order and giving the date and name of the nominated proxy, but not details of the medical condition. It should allow proxy voting cover for a finite time while giving Members the ability to renew if necessary. And it should decouple the issue of taking part in proceedings from the proxy vote. We understood and recognised the need for staying-in-touch days, and that some Members would wish to participate in proceedings while not being physically able to stay for the vote.

Now the Committee has published its conclusions and recommendations, it is for the House to decide whether the proxy voting system should be extended. We recommended that the Government schedule a debate before the summer recess to allow the House to debate and express a view on this issue, with a view to introducing a pilot in the autumn.

The question of whether Members should be able to bring babies into the Chamber and Westminster Hall was referred to the Committee by Mr Speaker in November 2021. The guidance to Members on this issue says:

“You may take babies or toddlers with you into the division lobby, and—if necessary to get to the division lobby—take them through the Chamber... You should not take your seat in the Chamber when accompanied by your child, nor stand at either end of the Chamber, between divisions.”

This guidance restates long-standing practice recognising that the Chamber, Westminster Hall and Standing Committees are not suitable environments for very young children.

Since 2018 there have been several occasions on which Members have, with the discretion of the Chair, with prior notice and without disruption to proceedings, brought babies into the Chamber and Westminster Hall, so that the Members can either attend or participate. This has contributed to some confusion and a gap between the House's practice and the guidance intended to shape it. We found a general lack of awareness of the guidance among Members.

In general, we detected support for greater flexibility for new parents. We heard evidence expressing concern that the usual resources afforded to Members are not extended to nominated members of staff covering Members who are exercising a proxy vote. This should not be repeated, and we have called for meetings, calls and briefings available to Members of Parliament to be made available to nominated members of staff covering for Members exercising a proxy vote.

The long-standing practice of the House is that babies should not be present in the Chamber or Westminster Hall. We believe that Members should not bring babies into the Chamber, Westminster Hall or General Committees as they observe, initiate, speak or intervene in proceedings, and we believe this should remain the guidance. Chairs will and should retain a degree of de facto discretion, which should be exercised sparingly. The firm expectation should remain that Members do not participate in proceedings while caring for a baby, and that where it is required, in exceptional circumstances, to bring a baby into proceedings, it should be agreed in advance.

The Liaison Committee should consider how far Select Committee practice should mirror other settings and, if necessary, agree guidance covering both Members and witnesses.

Finally, the Procedure Committee is grateful to all hon. and right hon. Members, and others, who shared their views with us on both inquiries. I hope our report will be welcomed by the House, and that the House will soon have a chance to vote on these issues.

I commend this statement to the House.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady and the Procedure Committee for their excellent work. I welcome their recommendations and the clarity and sensitivity with which they handled these inquiries. It is particularly helpful to have clarity on proxy votes for Members with long-term illness, without a presumption that they will have to use a proxy vote, even if they do not wish to do so. Respect for privacy and good working conditions is important.

Has the right hon. Lady had an indication from the Leader of the House, who might spring to his feet shortly to give us the answer, on the possible timetable? She mentioned having a debate and a vote before the summer recess, and she mentioned the Liaison Committee considering Select Committee practice. Has she had any indication on the timetable, and would she like to say more on what she thinks is ideal?

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and her warm welcome for the report. The Committee considered these matters carefully; they are extremely sensitive. Members were not always willing to speak in public about these issues, because a lot of issues on social media and elsewhere made it difficult for them. This report reflects the views of the Committee and the views of the House that were expressed to us. As I have said, I would hope that we could have a debate and a vote on this before the summer recess, so that we could bring in a pilot scheme for proxy voting before the autumn, which we could start running in the autumn to see how it works. I do not think it would affect many Members; a very small number would wish to avail themselves of it. However, for those who would, it is important that they have it in place. The Leader of the House did indicate in his evidence that he was considering the options.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend on the eminently sensible and proportionate recommendations she is making. On the issue of bringing children to the Chamber, we are trying to make ourselves more in contact with the working practices of our constituents and having a “bring your child to work day” in a 365 day a year

phenomenon does not seem to be a sensible thing to do. On proxy voting, I very much welcome what is proposed. We have made slow progress, at last getting there for female Members on maternity leave. Are there any measures to look at whether Members with a serious illness preventing them from coming to this place should be allowed to contribute to debates by a television link, as happened during the pandemic? I raise the example of our late colleague Dame Cheryl Gillan, who was able to participate in parliamentary proceedings within weeks of her last day, not physically but by video link, with that being of great value to her and to this Chamber. Could we not, in special circumstances, make that available, so as not to disenfranchise those Members from being able to participate in the debate as well as vote?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. The issue of whether this was an appropriate workplace to bring children into was raised time and again. Overwhelmingly, the evidence and the views were that people did not think this was a place suitable for children. It is a very confrontational place at times and it can be noisy, although not at the moment, and it was felt that it was not suitable. I must make the point that proxy votes are available to fathers as well as to mothers, and that we recommended in previous reports that there should be equality for male Members who are fathers and eligible for the scheme, in line with the Women and Equalities Committee report and recommendations. We also recommend a decoupling of attendance in the Chamber from the proxy vote. At the moment, if one is on a proxy vote, one is not able to attend the Chamber. We think that that needs to be removed, but we do not want anybody to feel under any pressure to attend the Chamber if they are spending time with their newborn or having treatment for sickness. On his point about virtual participation, there is not, so far as I can tell at the moment, an appetite in this place to reintroduce any form of hybrid proceedings. If and when there is, I am sure the House would want to have its say on that matter.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): I welcome the report and what the right hon. Lady has said. The key point is that politics and democracy belong to everyone, so we have an obligation to make things as open as we can. I point to all the work that my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) has done in trying to make sure that people understand the challenges of representation when someone has a long-term medical condition. Of course, nobody should find that they are disenfranchised because their Member of Parliament has a long-term medical condition or indeed has a baby. I hear what the right hon. Lady says about babies perhaps being a disturbance—I am paraphrasing her—in the Chamber, but I have to say that, having sat here for a number of years, an awful lot of hon. Members disturb us all significantly more than a baby or a small number of babies would. I make that point sincerely. So I hope that this place will come back to this matter, because if we are to be open to Members from diverse backgrounds—younger Members and Members who are parents—we need to examine all of these processes carefully so that we are not excluding people, as I fear this could. Although I appreciate all the work the Committee has done, and I note that there is a nod to the Chair having some discretion, is the right

[Kirsten Oswald]

hon. Lady minded to look again at what the Scottish Parliament does in terms of babies? I would also be keen to hear whether she is confident that we will have a debate before the summer.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The evidence from the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire was some of the most powerful we heard in favour of extending proxy voting to those with long-term medical conditions. The hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Kirsten Oswald) is right to say that, through no fault of her own, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire is not able to attend as much as she would like and she feels disenfranchised as a result. Her example and evidence was some of the most persuasive we heard. I am not suggesting that a baby is necessarily going to be disruptive; rather, this would be an unpleasant place for a baby to be in at times, and it would certainly be noisy and uncomfortable for a small child. It is worth making the point that children are welcome in this place. I recall that when I was first elected and had young children they came to watch me in debates and joined me for their tea, with beans on toast from the Tea Room being one of their favourite foods I could provide in the Family Room. I never, at any point, felt that my children were not welcome in the environment and in the Palace, but in this place of work I would not have wanted to have had my child with me at that time. There was a real fear that people would feel obliged to do this, and in those precious few weeks of having a new child and a new person in one's life Members wanted to be able to spend time with that new person, adjusting to being a new parent. They did not want to feel under any obligation to come here with a child because that was becoming the norm. As I say, there are plenty of opportunities for children to be in this place, and in my experience they are very much welcomed by all the staff in this building.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend and the Committee on a balanced report. I was required not to be in this place for three months because of long-term sickness and I would have welcomed the opportunity to exercise my view via a proxy. Will she give us a flavour of what she would want to see in terms of not only medical evidence, but a possible renewal of medical evidence for someone to continue proxy voting?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. As a long-serving member of the predecessor Procedure Committee, I know he will have looked at these issues when it considered the issue of proxy voting for parental leave. The evidence we heard was clear that where someone is away for a short time, be it because of injury or illness, a constituency requirement, a Select Committee visit or any of the other reasons why we are not always in this place, that would not affect our constituents in terms of being enfranchised by our exercising our vote, but this changes once the time gets to somewhere around three months. We have not set a time limit, although I note that the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is considering giving additional staffing support for people who are on long-term sickness for three months or more, and that seems to me to be about the

right amount of time for medical evidence to be provided to the Speaker. We are not setting out what that medical evidence should be. It will be for a private conversation between the Member and the Speaker to demonstrate that they are not able to attend this place as fully as they would like because of their medical condition, and for the Speaker to exercise discretion.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Chair of our Committee. She knows that I am a long-serving, or perhaps long-suffering, member of the Procedure Committee. I welcome the recommendations on ill health proxies, as they show progress from where we were with the baby and adoption proxies a number of years ago. On decoupling from the estate, and being able to attend the Chamber and then leave, does she agree that this is simply about having a keeping in touch day and allowing this House to follow modern working practices for mothers and indeed fathers; they may wish to access this for slightly longer if they are sharing their maternity and paternity leave? This simply brings the House towards some modern practice.

Finally, on babies in the Chamber, as the father of a 17-month-old, I wholeheartedly back the Committee's report. I would not want to bring my son into the Chamber, although he has benefited from being in for a Division. This is not just about new mothers in this place; there are also lots of new fathers who care deeply about what happens to their children, and we should have a voice in this process as well.

Karen Bradley: I thank my friend, the Vice-Chair of the Committee, for his comments. He is right: we did want to decouple the requirement not to be in the Chamber from the proxy vote. We heard significant evidence about keep-in-touch days for new parents.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), who said that when she was recovering following her breast cancer diagnosis, she was able to avail herself of the proxy vote because we still had pandemic proxies, but that she was also able to come into this place and make contributions. For her, that was good for getting her back into working practices and good for her recovery, but it would have been very detrimental to her recovery had she had to stay to vote later in the day.

We reflected that in the report. We wanted to make sure that there was a decoupling of the requirement not to attend the Chamber from the proxy vote, because it would give Members the opportunity to do that kind of keep-in-touch day.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): May I praise both my right hon. Friend for her chairmanship of the Committee and the Clerks for their hard work on this report?

As a member of the Committee, I support all the recommendations; it was a unanimous report. I also support what my right hon. Friend and the shadow Leader of the House called for: a chance for the House to have a say on this—ultimately, it is for the House to decide how we proceed. I am sure the Leader of the House will be addressing that in due course.

May I invite my right hon. Friend to praise all our colleagues who gave evidence, particularly oral evidence, to our Committee? Seven Back Benchers gave evidence

on the proxy vote part, many of whom, such as the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Amy Callaghan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), shared very personal stories of illness.

We had two oral evidence sessions on the issue of babies in the Chamber: one with my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who is in her place, and one with the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). The environment was quite toxic, because there was a lot of misogyny around the issue on social media. Giving evidence to us from both sides of the argument showed courage, and I wondered whether my right hon. Friend could reflect that.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend is right: the Clerks of the Committee have been, and always are, absolutely exemplary, and we could not do the work that we do without them. He is also right that the atmosphere around some of the evidence was toxic. We need to be able to have this debate in a reasonable fashion. We need to discuss the issues and reflect the views of the House overall. That is why it is important that we do now have time for that debate and a vote, so that the House can make its decision as to how it wants to proceed.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome any progress in modernising this House, and the report is very welcome. I personally believe that we should be more open to the public about our pairing arrangements, which would help with some of this. It is not acceptable for constituents to have to rely on reading Twitter to know whether, in a vote, their MP had just abstained or was paired. I am unusual in that once I abstained by walking through both the Aye and No Lobbies, because I wanted my constituents to know that I was abstaining and not just being paired.

I do welcome the step forward, but part of the problem relates not just to the issue of privacy, but to the fact that some MPs on short-term sick want a recorded system, to be able to show that they are either paired or they are proxied. That is still the gap, and I wondered whether the Committee would consider that.

On children, I have a slightly different view, but I respect the outcome of the Committee. I do wonder, however, about the outcome with regard to viewing and observing in Westminster Hall debates. A Member could quite easily bring in a child to view in the Public Gallery. It seems slightly farcical to me that they could be behind a rope, but not on the other side of it if they were viewing. I wonder whether we can review some of those intricacies and challenges in the future, because Westminster Hall debates are a very different beast from those in this Chamber.

Karen Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. As Chair of the Procedure Committee, I should make the point that positive abstentions are not really the done thing in this place, but I do understand why he felt the need to do so.

We did look at the issue around the informal arrangements and whether they could be more formalised, but we must accept that there will always be informal arrangements in a place that involves 650 of us who are, effectively, sole traders. It is up to each individual

Member to decide how they let their constituents know about their votes. We have great transparency around voting, as lists are published, which simply was not the case previously. There is nothing to stop any Member from being clear about their view on whether they abstain positively, or whether it was a pairing arrangement.

On babies, I make the point that there is discretion. The Chair, with advance notice, can, if it is deemed appropriate, say that on a certain occasion it is okay to bring a small child into the Chamber. There may be circumstances in which that is simply the only option and the Chair is happy to accept that; it is not that this is precluded. The practice of the House allows for it to happen, but it has to be with advance notice and at the discretion of the Chair. It also has to reflect, I think, whatever the debate may be. There will be some debates where the presence of a baby may be more appropriate. I would not wish to pre-judge that, but it will be for the discretion of the Chair, and it is available.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend and all the members of the Committee, who showed such sensitivity in their discussion of this topic and their questioning of us. I also wish to pay tribute to Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers, who, throughout my time as a young mother—I have a 17-month-old who is very good friends with the hon. Member for Ogmire (Chris Elmore); they play together very nicely—have shown complete support of new mothers, whether it be leaving the Chamber to breastfeed or needing any support at all. I would also like to recognise the new Chief Whip, who has made real efforts to support those of us on the Government Benches who are pregnant or have these sorts of concerns and needs.

I have this to say to my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Procedure Committee: we must be very careful with the public discourse about this place, because it is like no other workplace. Mistaken comparisons are made with our constituents who work in shops at tills, because they cannot bring their babies with them. The same applies to lawyers who are fighting domestic abuse cases, which are among the topics that we discuss, who would not be allowed to bring their babies with them. I also have some concerns over the use of the discretion of the Chair—in Westminster Hall, for example—and that being abused. The pressure that I have come under during this period has been quite strong, and I fear that Chairs of Committees might feel that they have been forced to allow babies in.

Will my right hon. Friend clarify two things? First, as she touched on earlier, we are not banning babies from the entire building; we are banning them from this Chamber. My babies are in the House with me every single day, as many colleagues have said, and I do not even know that they are here. My second question relates to babies who are in a neonatal care unit. Did the Committee consider whether fathers should receive a far extended parental leave period, so that they can support their babies through that really sensitive time?

Karen Bradley: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I also pay tribute to her and to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for giving their oral evidence on what is a contentious issue. I agree that Mr Speaker, the Deputy Speakers and the Chairs have always shown incredible sensitivity and compassion.

[Karen Bradley]

We have conventions in the House around attending the opening and closing of debates, and being there for the speeches before and afterwards. I know that the Chairs have often used their discretion to recognise that the timing of a speech may not coincide with the time that a baby needs feeding, so they have allowed for the Member to have that discretion. I pay tribute to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for all you have done on this issue. As somebody who was a trailblazer as a mother in this place, you know only too well what it is like.

My hon. Friend is also right that babies and children are not banned from the precinct. In fact, if we go outside the Chamber any day, we will see Members with their children enjoying the facilities. It was very important to me as a mother, when I first came to this place, that my young children understood the job that I was doing and could feel that they were part of it. On fathers, we have said that the recommendations around having equality for fathers and mothers in the Women and Equalities Committee report should be adopted.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Chairperson's statement and I thank her for all she has done. I absolutely support young mothers' being able to sub for a Member in a proxy vote; I also value the importance of breastfeeding for those able to do so and believe we should facilitate that as much as possible. Proxy voting allows that too, so those are some good points. Behind every MP are an incredible staff who do marvellous work, including many ladies. Is there help

also available for MPs' female staff members when it comes to breastfeeding and child facilities, so that they are able to access similar consideration?

Karen Bradley: I never thought I would be in a debate discussing breastfeeding with the hon. Gentleman, but there we go; there is a first time for everything. I assure him that all the facilities and support available to Members, including the physical and crèche facilities, are available to staff of this place. That is an important point, because he is right that it is our staff who ensure we can turn up here every day and get the job done—I notice that my Clerks have now turned up in the Chamber, so I pay extra tribute to them once again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I particularly thank the right hon. Lady and everybody who put so much time and effort into compiling this important report, which affects every Member of this place and takes us a step forward in our modernity.

BILL PRESENTED

RECOGNITION OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Loughton, supported by Sir Iain Duncan Smith, John Spellar, Chris Law, Christine Jardine, James Gray, Jim Shannon, Andrew Rosindell, Dr Rupa Huq, Wera Hobhouse, Alan Brown and Chris Stephens, presented a Bill to require Her Majesty's Government formally to recognise the Armenian genocide of 1915-23; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2023, and to be printed (Bill 133).

Backbench Business

Iran's Nuclear Programme

12.41 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House expresses grave concern at the imminent prospect of a nuclear armed Iran; calls on the Government in its ongoing negotiations in respect of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement to seek to extend the sunset clauses, enact a stricter monitoring regime, retain terrorist proscriptions, and expand its scope to include Iran's other destabilising activities in the region.

There are significant concerns, as set out in the motion, at the negotiated deal that is apparently about to be signed. I have been actively seeking an opportunity to raise those concerns over Iran's destabilising activities for a number of months. I give thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time in the main Chamber, and to my many cross-party colleagues who supported the application.

This debate could not come at a more important time. On 9 June, the UK, Germany and France released a joint statement saying that they are ready to conclude a deal with Iran that would restore the joint comprehensive plan of action, and urging Iran to seize the diplomatic opportunity it presented. On Monday, indirect talks between the United States and Iran resumed in Doha.

This is by no means the first time that we have debated Iran in this place, and I dare say it will not be the last, but today's debate could perhaps be the last opportunity to evaluate the merits or otherwise of a return to the JCPOA nuclear agreement. I firmly believe that, whatever one's view—we will hear a range of them today, no doubt—it is vital that, before any deal is signed, our Government hear the opinions of Members of this House.

Anxieties over Iran are felt acutely by many across the House, as I am sure we will hear. I am on the record as having been very sceptical of the original 2015 deal, believing it to be too limited in scope to prevent Iran's malign activities and far too weak in enforcement to prevent a nuclear Iran, should Iran choose that path. That view was shared at the time by many—including, we have subsequently learned, a number of those who were close to the negotiations. I think, for example, of the noble Lord Hammond and the former Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon, who have both subsequently expressed their concerns at the limited nature of the deal that was ultimately signed.

Whatever one's thoughts about the JCPOA, the fundamentally different circumstances we face today must be confronted. It is always easy to stick with what one has been involved in for a long time; of course there is pride among those who have negotiated relentlessly on this issue, both here in the UK, in the Foreign Office, and particularly in the Biden Administration, among those officials who were previously in the Obama Administration. However, it is time to appreciate what has happened in the seven years since the deal was signed.

Iran's nuclear programme has continued apace. While the terms of the JCPOA restricted Iran's enrichment of uranium to 3.67% fissile purity and a stockpile of only 300 kg of uranium, as of last month the International

Atomic Energy Agency confirmed that Iran has been enriching uranium up to a purity of 60%—a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con) *rose*—

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con) *rose*—

Robert Jenrick: I am spoilt for choice, but I will give way first to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers).

Theresa Villiers: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that, far from the JCPOA-minus that seems to be in prospect, we need a tougher deal with Iran that reflects its transgressions in compliance with the current agreement? We must reflect those transgressions in a deal that is actually powerful in preventing Iran from developing its nuclear programme.

Robert Jenrick: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend, who has been interested and engaged in this issue for a long time. The point she makes, which I hope I will make over the course of my remarks, is that we do want a negotiated settlement and agreement, but it must be one that is robust and has the effect of preventing both Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons and its wider malign activities in the region that are harming our key partners, our friends and ourselves.

Gareth Davies: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way. He mentions that Iran has developed uranium to 60% purity. Is he aware of any country on Earth that has enriched to that level for peaceful purposes?

Robert Jenrick: No, and I do not think anyone would believe that that is Iran's ultimate intent. The latest intelligence, for example, showing that bunkers have been constructed underground in which to hold some of that material, makes clear what the ultimate intent of Iran is on this issue.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con) *rose*—

Robert Jenrick: I will give way one last time, and then I shall make some progress.

Dr Offord: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend. Many people have focused on transgressions against the JCPOA, but because of the infamous sunset provisions in the 2015 deal, Iran will be able to legitimately undertake a full nuclear programme. That means that we could be facing a nuclear Iran as early as 2025. Without doing anything, we are already in a very difficult and dangerous scenario.

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is correct. I will make this point in a moment, but there is no harm in restating it now: the original deal contained a number of sunset provisions, and the proposed deal, as reported, merely keeps those sunset provisions in exactly the same form. Even if we were to sign the deal tomorrow, it would begin to fade away in 2023. One really has to question the point of signing up to the proposed deal.

[Robert Jenrick]

Iran stands on the verge of possessing a nuclear bomb. In fact, intelligence suggests it has sufficient enriched uranium today for at least two nuclear weapons. It has progressed far beyond the parameters of the JCPOA, so restoring Iran to the old deal has none of the benefits we once thought it would. The JCPOA's time has been and gone; the Rubicon has been crossed.

After earlier talk of a longer and stronger deal, more recent rounds of the nuclear talks have seen US negotiators make concession after painful concession in an attempt to bring Iran back to the deal. We now see before us the contours of a shorter and weaker agreement—one that many have taken to dismissing as JCPOA-minus. In that agreement the Iranian regime will be reintegrated into the international community and afforded huge economic benefits that, crucially, will be channelled not into education, healthcare or infrastructure projects but into supporting and promoting terrorist activities, for instance through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Iran's web of proxies across the region, and the restrictions on its nuclear programme will last for a fraction of the time. It is unclear whether this stands to strengthen efforts for non-proliferation.

I believe that a new framework is required. Proponents of the JCPOA spoke of its ability to restrict Iran's break-out time to one year. In view of the reduction of this to as little as a few weeks, we need the Government to recognise that this is simply not going to work, and that any agreement that could obtain the consent of this House—certainly of Members who take my view—will need to have very significantly longer sunset clauses.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in everything he has said. However, it is not only the potential for Iran to acquire nuclear weapons that is a concern, but its ability then to deliver those weapons through ballistic missiles. Clearly Iran has enhanced its capability in that regard and could, if it has nuclear weapons, deliver them now. What would he say about how we need to restrict Iran's capability to develop such weapons?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The JCPOA contains the word “comprehensive”, but it was anything but comprehensive. It certainly did not speak to the malign activities of Iran throughout the region, but nor did it address the seeking of enriched uranium, the weapons that would be able to deliver the nuclear weapons or the other infrastructure and equipment that is required in the process. Any deal that we now sign needs to address all those matters. In fact, as I said, on the pursuit of enriched uranium, the ship has already sailed because Iran already has it.

The agreement as reported in the media seems set to include the same structural problems as we saw in the 2015 deal. Unless the new nuclear terms are expanded in scope to allow a more rigorous inspection regime, I fear we will repeat the same mistakes. Iran has reached the nuclear threshold under the watchful eye of what was supposed to be the most intrusive inspection regime ever. By its own admission, the UN's nuclear watchdog is “flying blind”—the IAEA chief said as much in June 2021. One year on, Iran has taken a series of steps to further restrict IAEA access to its nuclear sites, including

the deliberate removal of cameras from its most sensitive facilities. Years of tolerating Iran's flagrant breaches out of fear of the talks collapsing has led us down this path.

A glaring weakness of the JCPOA was that it did nothing to address Iran's wider activities throughout the world. Our failure to address Iran's support for its network of proxies continues to reverberate to this day. Iran was and remains the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism—a point I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary acknowledge in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee on Tuesday. The regime's commitment to exporting the Islamic revolution has been underwritten by an active embrace of violence since it first came to power in 1979. In recent weeks, Istanbul has been the setting for an extraordinary Iranian terror plot. Thanks to the close co-operation between the Israeli and the Turkish security services, an Iranian terror cell attempting to kidnap and kill Israeli tourists—innocent civilians—was thwarted. In one incident, several Israeli tourists visiting a market had to be intercepted before they returned to their hotel room, where their would-be assassins were reportedly waiting for their return.

The Iranian threat is very clear and present here at home. In 2019, it was revealed that British intelligence services had identified a Hezbollah cell stockpiling 3 tonnes of highly explosive ammonium nitrate in residential north-west London for use in a terror attack—the very same chemical that was recently inflicting such terrible damage in Beirut. The misplaced notion that the JCPOA would moderate the Iranian regime was dispelled when its Intelligence Ministry sought to bomb an opposition rally in Paris in 2018 with the help of an Iranian diplomat.

Behind all these examples—and there are many others I could cite—sits the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's premier agent for terrorism. The organisation funds, trains and provides the ideological underpinning for many of the world's terror organisations, from Hamas to Hezbollah to the Houthis. Reports from the previous round of negotiation that the Biden Administration was considering delisting the IRGC from its foreign terror list have been worrying, to say the least. Quite simply, it would be a grave miscalculation and a great dishonour if our Government were to support any such action. It would make a mockery of the efforts that we have made in recent years to proscribe Hamas and Hezbollah if we signed up to a deal that legitimises the very organisation that funds Hamas and Hezbollah. That really would be a perverse and absurd outcome.

The negotiations in Doha cannot be detached from the broader geopolitical landscape. A dangerous new dynamic is at play in the latest round of nuclear talks. As the EU desperately tries to wean itself off Russian hydrocarbons, we see an ill-advised pivot towards Iran for energy supplies. In a visit to Iran over the weekend, Josep Borrell openly called for Europe to seek new sources of oil and gas following its move away from Russia and spoke of the high potential economic benefits awaiting Iran. At the G7 summit in Germany, Macron pointedly called for more Iranian oil to enter the market. The west can ill afford to end its dependency on one rogue regime merely by pivoting towards the religious fundamentalists in Tehran. How ridiculous would it be for us to invest so much time, effort and energy in

defeating Vladimir Putin merely to make an advance—an opening—towards Tehran, Venezuela or other authoritarian regimes? It is troubling enough that the talks have been mediated by Russia, the world's only nuclear-armed state currently threatening to actually use those weapons. If restrictions are lifted, Russia will receive a financial boost from sales of military equipment as well as the construction of nuclear power plants in Iran.

Iran's list of nuclear transgressions is as long as it is troubling and has long necessitated an urgent response. The UK Government were right to say in March:

"Iran's nuclear programme has never before been this advanced, and is exposing the international community to unprecedented levels of risk."

At this critical juncture, the west urgently needs to change its strategy. We valiantly pursued diplomatic avenues to their limit, and beyond. Dedicated officials here in the Foreign Office, and in the Obama and Biden Administrations, have invested immense time and resources in negotiating the JCPOA, but that is not a reason to sign a bad deal. As Iran continues to stall negotiations, it is time for a more robust approach reimposing snapback sanctions on Iran and tightening the economic screw until it is willing to countenance the serious proposals that I have shared here today.

This position is no longer that of ultra-hawkish Republicans. In March, despite a polarised political climate in the United States, 70 Democrats and Republicans in Congress wrote to the National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan, to demand that the new deal signed with Iran must include an extension of the sunset clauses that we discussed earlier, retention of the IRGC proscription—I would like the UK Government to proscribe it as well—and a toughening of the monitoring regime, with an extension in scope to include Iran's other destabilising activities such as its ballistic missile programme. President Obama can press ahead with a weak deal, but if he does, there is a strong likelihood that the Senate and the House of Representatives will do everything in their power to frustrate it, and were there to be an incoming Republican President, which seems quite likely, it would be their day-one act to end the agreement. Why would we do something that is of such a short-term benefit, if any? In doing so, we weaken our relationships with some of our oldest friends and key partners, whether that be the state of Israel, the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia or others, all of whom publicly or privately are pleading with our Government to listen to their concerns and not to proceed with this agreement.

Those countries in the middle east already fear that the west is retrenching and is an unreliable ally, particularly having seen the events of our messy and embarrassing retreat from Kabul a year ago. To impose this agreement in addition, against their best wishes, merely pushes them further away from us and towards new friends and relationships, whether that be Russia or China. That would be a very sad outcome.

To conclude, the Iranian regime brutally represses, persecutes and tortures its own people. It wastes the Iranian people's resources on terrorism, foreign aggression, missiles and nuclear-weapon capabilities. I hope to see the day when we and our partners have no need for sanctions on Iran or the proscription of its affiliates. I hope to see the day when the UK and Iran can enjoy normalised relations and when the people of Iran have a Government who respect human dignity and exist in

peace with their neighbours, but that day will not come if we provide sanctions relief to fuel the regime's corruption, incompetence and terrorism. Nor will the day come through weak and naive responses to the pursuit of and now the establishment of nuclear-weapon capabilities. I humbly urge the UK Government to change course, to learn from the first JCPOA's failures, to listen to the concerns of many across the House and our partners in the region, and to work with us and them to impose maximum pressure on Iran.

1.1 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I compliment the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on obtaining this debate and I particularly endorse the last point he made about looking forward to the ultimate day when there will be no sanctions against Iran, because that surely is the place we would want to be.

We should have a slight passing interest in the past British relationship with Iran, which is not much discussed in this country, but is discussed a great deal in Iran. There are memories of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, later BP, and the promotion of the coup in 1953 by Britain and the CIA together to get rid of the secular progressive Government in place at that time. It might seem a long time ago, but it is very real to people in Iran, and the arguments about it are rehearsed many times over.

The 1979 revolution in Iran was obviously a massive event in every respect. It was a total revolution. A very authoritarian regime was installed. There was a massive killing rate by that regime and universal and total abuse of human rights. Many people from Iran came and sought asylum in this country and many others—indeed, a considerable number came to live in my constituency. In anything I say, I am well aware of the systematic abuse of human rights in Iran for many years. Any discussion with Iran must include a discussion of human rights. Obviously, that includes the dramatic horrors of executions and public executions, but the restriction on rights of assembly and freedom of speech are to me equally important.

It is also worth remembering that the Iranian people have lost relatives and thousands and thousands of soldiers in conflict since 1979. The appalling and disastrous Iran-Iraq war, which ended up achieving hardly anything for either side, cost hundreds of thousands of lives on both sides, wrecked both economies and has led to a continued economic problem for both sides. In discussing the nuclear issues, one should have regard for the longer-term history of Iran and the relationship of this country with Iran.

We are coming up to the non-proliferation treaty review conference this August in New York. Iran was a member of the non-proliferation treaty. Successive meetings that I have been to on the non-proliferation treaty have always concluded with the hope that there would be the declaration of a middle east weapons of mass destruction-free zone, which would give the opportunity for Israel and Iran to be included in the negotiations for a non-nuclear future for the middle east. While I fully appreciate that Iran clearly has developed centrifuges and enriched uranium almost to weapons-grade, two other countries in the region either have nuclear weapons or could. One is Israel, which clearly does have nuclear weapons, and

[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

the other is Saudi Arabia, which could quickly develop nuclear weapons if it wanted. The urgency of having a negotiation and a revamped version of the 2015 agreement, or something like it, is important if we are to try to preserve the peace of the region.

I was part of a delegation from the all-party group on Iran in 2014, and it was a fascinating experience, because the members of the delegation were Lord Lamont, a former Conservative Minister and Chancellor, Jack Straw, a former Labour Home Secretary, the current Defence Secretary, and me. The four of us divided up our roles in the delegation very clearly early on. Lord Lamont talked about economic issues, Jack Straw talked about global issues and trade, and I relentlessly and endlessly raised a lot of concerns about individual and collective human rights cases with the people we met in Iran. We were quite well received at universities and so forth, and we had serious negotiations. It was clear to me not only that such negotiations are tough, but that, if the Iran nuclear agreement was to succeed—this was pre the agreement, by the way; that is why we were there—it had to be accompanied by two things: the lifting of sanctions, which were very severe, particularly the medical sanctions being imposed at that time; and a human rights dialogue. The Iranians made it clear that they were prepared to have a human rights dialogue with the EU, or with other parties.

We have to strive for the lifting of sanctions, and that means there has to be a renewed effort to bring about an agreement with Iran to end the enrichment of uranium to anywhere near weapons-grade. I am not a great fan of nuclear power, but the Iranians are legally entitled to develop nuclear power if that is what they want to do. Personally, I do not think it is a great direction to go down, but obviously they can legally choose to do that. We should be well aware that, if we do not succeed in rejigging the 2015 agreement, we have problems ahead.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman seriously believe that a country with a secret nuclear programme that is hidden from the IAEA inspectors and a country that is obstructing those inspectors is serious about negotiations? Is that his genuine belief?

Jeremy Corbyn: Iran has to be serious about negotiations and we have to be serious about negotiations. That is the whole point of this debate and the whole point of the joint agreement. If my friend has a better alternative, I would be interested to hear it. We should be aware that the agreement with Iran was made with the support of the United States under President Obama and of this country and many others. It is an international agreement. It was Donald Trump who said it was a bilateral agreement and the US should walk away from it. That is essentially the situation we have reached at the present time.

I hope that there will be strong negotiations with Iran. They will obviously be led by the US, the EU and other countries, including this one. That is an important way forward. Perhaps the non-proliferation treaty review conference is an opportunity to start to explore that way forward, because what is the alternative? The alternative is we increase the number of nuclear weapons within the region. I hope to goodness that Iran never develops

nuclear weapons, as I wish other countries did not. We have to remember, though, that this country has nuclear weapons and this Government have just announced an increase in the number of our nuclear warheads, so it is not as if we are on the moral high ground when saying that nobody should ever develop nuclear weapons.

There is added urgency because of the situation in Palestine, the occupation of the west bank and the siege of Gaza. There is also the war in Yemen, where thankfully there is now a ceasefire. I hope the ceasefire becomes permanent and that the people of Yemen are able to live in peace, but our supplying weapons to Saudi Arabia has made the situation much worse.

We have to look towards a future in which there can be relations with Iran and a serious programme of improvement in respect of the human rights abuses in Iran, so that sanctions can gradually be lifted. That would allow the Iranian economy to develop and living standards to improve. Many people in Iran lead very poor lives, partly because of the sanctions and partly because of the level of resources taken up by the military, as was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Newark.

In his intervention, my friend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked whether we were serious about negotiations. We were very serious about negotiations when we were trying to get Nazanin Ratcliffe released from her appalling detention in Iran. Eventually, she was released and the parallel agreement was made about the repayment of money by this country to Iran. However, other people were not released. I would be grateful if the Minister let me know, either when she responds or later in writing, about the situation facing Anoosheh Ashoori and Morad Tahbaz, both of whom should have been released with Nazanin but were not. They are still there and apparently the British Government are supporting their release. Those negotiations that were brought about for one person—a very special and wonderful person—had a good outcome, but there are other detainees who should be released.

This debate takes place at a time of peril, with the appalling war between Russia and Ukraine, and the resulting loss of life, and the increase in arms expenditure, with NATO proposing a huge increase. If we succeed in re-engaging with Iran and have a good outcome, good work will have been done and we will have helped to bring about a more peaceful middle east. If we do not, the pressure of the militarist hawks will become even more enormous and even more resources will go into nuclear and other weapons technology, with obvious dangers for everybody in the region. Surely our whole focus should be on nuclear disarmament and peace through negotiation to bring about a better standard of living for the people of Iran and, indeed, of all other countries in the region.

1.12 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on securing the debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating it. It is, for all the reasons set out by my right hon. Friend, a timely debate. It is also timely because it comes after the report of the board of governors of the

IAEA on 30 May and the subsequent resolution of 8 June, which censures Iran for non-co-operation with the agency's inquiry into nuclear traces found at three non-declared sites. That action on the part of the agency is certainly a step forward, but it goes nowhere near far enough.

Iran's nuclear programme has been known about since 2002, when the existence of the facilities at Natanz and Arak were revealed by the Iranian democratic Opposition, the National Council of Resistance of Iran. The Iranian regime has always asserted that its programme is for civilian purposes only and has always denied that it is attempting to produce nuclear weapons. That simply defies belief. As we have heard, despite the terms of the JCPOA, Iran started enriching uranium to 20% in 2010, and later the same year it moved to 60% enrichment. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, that is considerably beyond anything that is needed for civilian purposes.

In its report of 1 June, the Institute for Science and International Security concluded:

"Iran's breakout timeline is now at zero. It has enough 60 percent enriched uranium or highly enriched uranium (HEU) to be assured it could fashion a nuclear explosive. If Iran wanted to further enrich its 60 percent HEU up to weapon-grade HEU, or 90 percent, it could do so within a few weeks with only a few of its advanced centrifuge cascades."

Clearly the time pressure is enormous. The report went on to note:

"Whether or not Iran enriches its HEU up to 90 percent, it can have enough HEU for two nuclear weapons within one month after starting breakout."

That is, by any standards, a very worrying state of affairs.

It is made all the more worrying by Iran's increasingly erratic and aggressive stance in the region and, indeed, the wider world. As my right hon. Friend rightly pointed out, Iran is an active state sponsor of terrorism—probably the world's leading state sponsor. Its proxies are engaged in fomenting conflict in Yemen, Syria and Lebanon. My right hon. Friend mentioned the Istanbul incident; I would like to mention the incident in June 2018, when a bomb plot targeting a gathering of Iranian pro-democracy supporters in Paris was disrupted by the French and Belgian authorities. An Iranian diplomat accredited to the embassy in Vienna was subsequently convicted for leading the conspiracy and was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. Three accomplices were convicted, and their sentences were upheld, with two years added, by the court of appeal in Antwerp in May. Iran is certainly exporting terrorism not just throughout the region, but across the world.

Dr Offord: I feel the need to correct my right hon. Friend on that point. It was not just Iranian politicians and Opposition members who were targeted; five of us from the British Parliament were at risk of being blown up in that terrorist incident.

Mr Jones: My hon. Friend is entirely right: it was a gathering of supporters of the NCRI, which takes place every year in Paris and attracts supporters from all round the world. As he points out, had that conspiracy been successful, its consequences would have been catastrophic.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newark mentioned Iran's revolutionary guard corps. That is, in effect, a state within a state. It directs, leads and executes the

terrorist activities of Iran. As he pointed out, it is a proscribed organisation in the United States, and many will wonder why it is not proscribed in this country. I believe that it should be. Iran is already a global danger, but a nuclear-armed Iran is an appalling and unacceptable prospect.

The IAEA report makes it clear that the Iranian regime has, effectively, been playing games with the agency for many years. At three locations that the agency requested to visit, the regime razed buildings to the ground and removed structural material and soil, clearly in an effort to disguise what was happening there. Nevertheless, the agency discovered traces of anthropogenic nuclear material. The report states that the regime has

"not provided explanations that are technically credible"

for the presence of nuclear material in those locations. The Tehran regime has clearly shown by its actions that it has no intent whatever to co-operate in good faith with the IAEA. Not only is the regime taking steps to advance its enrichment programme by installing more advanced centrifuges; it is doing all it can to restrict the ability of IAEA inspectors to monitor its nuclear sites. It has turned off two devices that the agency relied on to monitor the enrichment of uranium gas at Natanz and initiated plans to remove 27 surveillance cameras from other nuclear facilities.

On 20 June, Reuters cited a confidential IAEA report, which revealed that:

"Iran is escalating its uranium enrichment further by preparing to use advanced IR-6 centrifuges at its underground Fordow site that can more easily switch between enrichment levels".

In a joint statement to the board of governors of the IAEA on 27 June, the UK, France and Germany expressed their concern about the continued nuclear activities in breach of the JCPOA. They pointed out that the alarming accumulation of enriched material is cause for great concern and is further reducing the time that it would take Iran to break out towards its first nuclear weapon.

The position, therefore, is that it is clearly known that Iran is taking active steps to produce highly enriched uranium, the only credible purpose of which can be to produce nuclear weapons. The question must be whether there is any purpose in continuing to urge Iran to fulfil its obligations under the JCPOA when it is perfectly clear that it has no intention whatever to do so. The continued efforts to engage with Iran and go the extra mile may be laudable, but, frankly, seem increasingly futile. Iran clearly regards the west as weak and is almost openly laughing at us.

A new course is called for. Consideration should be given to whether seeking to adhere to the JCPOA as the basis for our future dealings with Iran is realistic or sensible. Rather than clinging to vain hopes that Iran is capable of mending its ways and responding to the IAEA's censure, the UK should work with the United States and other international partners to refer Iran to the UN Security Council with a view to reinstating the six sanctions-imposing resolutions that were suspended with the JCPOA's initial implementation.

Iran must learn that flouting the JCPOA has real consequences, and the west should unite to apply the most intense pressure possible on Iran to wind up its nuclear programme, since it is now abundantly clear that it is not for any peaceful purpose, but is aggressive.

[Mr David Jones]

Quite simply, Iran is a rogue state, and a rogue state in possession of nuclear weapons is not a prospect that the west can happily contemplate or, indeed, tolerate.

1.22 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for securing the debate and congratulate him on an excellent speech. In the interest of transparency, I am the chair of Labour Friends of Israel and a member of the British Committee for Iran Freedom.

I suspect that the outcome of the talks in Vienna will be crucial in shaping the future of the international community's relations with Iran. Whatever that outcome, however, we must develop a clear-sighted and comprehensive strategy to tackle the challenges we face, including the many that the current talks are unlikely to resolve. As we have heard, the malign activities of those who control the Iranian regime extend far beyond its nuclear ambitions and include: its ballistic missile programme; support for terrorist proxies across the middle east; the dangerous influence and activities of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps; Tehran's insidious disinformation campaigns; its policy of state hostage taking; and the suffering of the Iranian people over four decades.

In the face of those challenges, the JCPOA, which was negotiated in 2015, looks pretty limited. Despite the name, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, it is clearly not comprehensive and, as we heard, it actually exacerbated certain problems by freeing up extra resources for the mullahs. The Trump Administration's unilateral withdrawal in 2018 dealt a severe blow to the deal, but Iran's record of systematically violating the agreement had already highlighted its inadequacy.

Those violations include, as we have heard, the decision to enrich uranium beyond the agreed cap and the deliberate obstruction of the IAEA inspectors. Iran had already made clear its contempt for the agreement by turning off some of the inspectors' monitoring equipment. Officials said a couple of weeks ago that they expect to lose any continuity of knowledge regarding the progress of Iran's activity because of the obstruction they are facing from it. Even if we had a deal up and running, the inspectors would not be able to do their job.

Some believe that a new agreement might provide a measure of medium-term restraint on Iran's nuclear programme; others have their doubts. As we have heard, the Institute for Science and International Security has concluded that it is on the verge of obtaining the bomb. The appointment of Mohammad Eslami, the main liaison with Pakistani freelance nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, as the new head of Tehran's Atomic Energy Organisation is the clearest signal we could have of Iran's real intentions. That is why I am sceptical of the idea that those people will negotiate in good faith and keep their word.

As the LFI argues in its recent pamphlet on the subject, the UK needs to develop realistic strategies to address the nuclear threat and the other Iranian issues. Iran's ballistic missile programme is the biggest in the middle east and makes it the first country to develop a missile with a 2,000 km range without having first developed nuclear capability. It is also the only country

that routinely threatens to wipe another nation off the face of the map—the destruction of the state of Israel is the official policy of Iran's leaders.

As we have heard, as well as threatening Israel's existence, Iran is responsible for waging war, terrorism and violence—mostly through its proxies—in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and the Palestinian territories. The UK has rightly banned some of those proxies, but not all their front organisations. The Government should do more and look at proscribing Hezbollah and Hamas.

As we have also heard, Iran's terrorist activities are supported by the regime's ideological army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which not only leads on meddling in the region but brutally represses ordinary Iranians. Its influence has expanded rapidly in recent years, including over a variety of operations across Europe. I believe, as others do, that the UK should join our allies the United States and proscribe the IRGC for the dangerous terrorist group it is.

Iranian disinformation efforts, run by the IRGC, have significantly expanded since 2015. There is mounting evidence of interference in UK domestic politics, including last year's Scottish Parliament elections. The UK Government should urgently draw up proposals for how they intend to combat and disrupt that interference.

Iran's policy of arbitrarily detaining foreign nationals, most prominently Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, demands co-ordinated international action. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office must be bold enough to call this activity what it is—state hostage taking. We should use the UK's position at the UN to lead and develop a proper response from the international community.

We should also never forget that the Iranian regime's most long-standing and long-suffering victims are the Iranian people themselves. We can and should do more to support the victims of some of the most unimaginable human rights abuses. I think it is both curious and shocking that, nearly two years since it was established, the Magnitsky Act is yet to be applied to a single Iranian individual or entity. There are many Iranian politicians and officials guilty of human rights abuses, including prison governors, military personnel, regional governors and others. Ebrahim Raisi himself stands accused of being responsible for a programme of mass killings in Iran.

Whatever the outcome of the nuclear talks in Vienna, the threats posed by this regime to the Iranian people, the peoples of the middle east, our own country and democracies around the world will not go away. UK foreign policy should reflect the reality of the situation. Any revived JCPOA that only deals with the nuclear programme is probably not worth the paper it is written on. The desire of those who wish to resurrect the JCPOA should not detract from the urgent need to recognise and develop a smart, proportionate and comprehensive strategy to resist Iran's terrorist activity around the globe.

Should it prove impossible to secure a satisfactory deal, which I think is pretty inevitable, I concur with the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) that the UK and other western participants should refer the regime's nuclear activities to the UN Security Council, and we should immediately seek to reinstate the six resolutions that were suspended in good faith because of the JCPOA.

1.31 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on giving us this opportunity. I listened carefully to everything he said, and I agree with all of it.

In June 2019, I went to Tehran as Middle East Minister while Tehran was sinking shipping throughout the Gulf. I went there to remonstrate at its malign regional activities and to insist that it meet its JCPOA commitments, including the limits imposed on its enriched uranium stockpile. In hindsight, it was probably not the best use of my time; the truth is that the deal had been moribund since President Trump withdrew in 2018. Attempts to revive it have failed, and now it is comatose.

I suppose we should not turn off the life support entirely, but in my view we have no need to bust a gut trying to revive the plan. What we need is a stronger, longer deal. Indeed, with every day that passes, the JCPOA becomes less attractive: while Iran's technical capabilities advance, the original terms become redundant and sunset clauses loom large. Some of those clauses have lapsed or shortly will—the UN arms embargo from October 2020; restrictions on ballistic missile-related goods next year; and, the year after, restrictions relating to Iran's advanced centrifuge R&D. In 2031, the ban on weapons-grade uranium ends.

That said, we should not be seen to be a guilty party or a co-author of the plan's coup de grâce. We have to stick with it, I suppose, to the bitter end. Iran too—at least, the potentially reconcilable part of it—wants to be perceived as keen to talk, but, with artful duplicity, says one thing and does another. The reported tenor of ongoing discussions is very much true to form. On Sunday, Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited poor Josep Borrell of the European Commission to Tehran. His plaintive line following the meeting was that “the more supply of oil, the better for the energy prices.”

How pathetic is that? It looks as though the European External Action Service, in its quest for purpose and relevance, has been all too eager to swallow a pro-Iran line that conveniently gets its members out of a tight temporary fix. Not for the first time, it is grossly misreading the Iranians in a disappointing display of naivety and self-service.

Borrell's line suggests that the EU is prepared to swap Russian for Iranian energy, so the Doha talks go on with the Americans and the Iranians, bizarrely, in separate rooms. The reality is that Iran's demands for compensation and guarantees are intractable. Those who believe Iran will settle for a deal in order to trade with the west misread the ideological basis of the regime and its President. They seek nothing less than the complete Islamisation of society and the elimination of western influence. Tehran has no desire to be our partner, even less our friend. Let us be quite clear in separating the good and great people of Iran from the regime: the two are plainly different things, as recent shows of unrest have demonstrated, and we should encourage the one and not the other.

Meanwhile, Iran ratchets up its pressure on the international community through the expulsion of IAEA officials. The day after Borrell's meeting in Tehran, it showcased a missile launch, and we contemplate a

uranium breakout time probably in weeks, certainly not months. The Iran of 2022 is very different from the Iran of 2015. Hardliners and the IRGC have tightened their stranglehold over the state and the economy. President Raisi has populated Ministries with Guards commanders responsible for atrocious acts of terrorism. We recall, as has been recalled already today—correctly so—his participation in the 1988 death committee, and in the extrajudicial murder of some 4,000 political prisoners.

Sanctions work. Tony Blair's Institute for Global Change has revealed that, following the first wave of sanctions relief in 2014, Iran's terrorist and military activity increased significantly. Kasra Aarabi writes:

“The number of militias created by the IRGC surged after this period, and the Guard's presence abroad peaked, with the Quds Force expanding its operations in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.”

If that occurred under the previous relatively benign regime, what effect will sanctions relief—estimated to mean an immediate \$90 billion windfall, and as much as \$800 billion over five years—have on the zealots now in control? I suggest that sanctions relief at this time would not be a good move at all.

US special envoy Rob Malley called for a “stronger and longer” deal shortly after his appointment, and he is right. Alternatively, we could offer less for less, but we cannot offer more for less. The integrated review points the way. It says:

“Alongside our allies, the UK will hold Iran to account for its nuclear activity, remaining open to talks on a more comprehensive nuclear and regional deal.”

There is no specific mention of the JCPOA, which is very sensible. If we managed to reheat the JCPOA in its current form, we would have a stop-gap agreement at best, but the prospects of definitive talks and a long-term solution led by Washington will evaporate. Iran expert Professor Ali Ansari suggests we play it cool, and I agree.

Although we should not be complacent, we should not be worried about a no-deal scenario. The Iranian regime is struggling to rid itself of Israeli infiltration, which is preventing it from advancing its nuclear apparatus and security state. We all remember the killing of Mohsen Fakhrazadeh last year. Most recently Hossein Taeb, IRGC head of intelligence, has been dismissed, and on 22 May IRGC colonel Sayyad Khodaei was shot dead outside his home.

Nobody goes to Iran without being lectured about Britain being the source of all the country's woes; the grievance culture stoked by the regime makes the SNP look rather like rank amateurs. It is mildly flattering to think that Iran's rulers believe we are still so influential, albeit in their minds entirely malignly. Historically, however, the villain has been seen to lie elsewhere. This debate takes place amid Putin's imperial war. He invokes Peter the Great, by reclaiming lost territory and advancing autocracy. There is no doubt that revanchist Russia and Iran have grown closer under Putin's leadership. It has developed from a transactional, military relationship to one of shared ideological outlook, in so far as both countries despise the western world order and its culture, have a theological sense of mission for their countries, and talk in Anglophobic terms of grievance and resistance. Their shared paranoia about democracy has grown collaboration and suppression at home—and also abroad, notably in Syria.

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

However, it has not always been so. Professor Ansari points out that

“the greatest sleight of hand achieved by the Russian state with respect to Iran has been to reinvent its relationship from that of imperial predator to a fully fledged member of an axis of resistance against the west.”

Indeed, there is a strong argument that Russia—certainly not Britain—has been the chief cause of historic Iranian humiliation, imposing capitulatory treaties in 1808 and 1828, which lasted until 1921. Nascent Iranian democracy was stamped out by Colonel Liakhov of the Cossack Brigade in the early 20th century, as he shelled the Majlis in Tehran and executed constitutionalists. The parallels with the present day are pretty clear.

Lord Curzon described “avowedly hostile” Russian activities in Iran, and pointed out that

“piece by piece, partly by open war and partly by furtive nibbling, Russia has appropriated more and more of Persian soil.”

There are historic continuities in the Iran-Russia relationship, namely in Iran’s junior status, and Iranian popular sentiment against Russia. The 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay ensured that Iran became a de facto vassal state, with strictures outlining Russia’s preference for the Qajar succession. Now, as then, Iran’s presidential candidates and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leaders court Putin for his approval. In line with that junior status, we learn from Minister Javad Zarif’s leaked audio tape on the war in Syria that Russia

“entered the war by air force, but dragged Iran’s ground force to war too. We didn’t have ground forces in Syria by then.”

It is a candid assessment of Putin’s disregard for Iranian life, and reluctance to spill blood when he can use those he sees as inferiors. We see that, too, in Putin’s feeding the Ukrainian meat grinder preferentially with troops from east of the Urals.

But if the regime wants that kind of partnership, the Iranian people do not. The popular mood in Iran is antithetical to the Russians; we have seen that most recently in protests against Russia’s invasion. Meanwhile, the regime blunders on, blaming NATO and the west, and defending Russia and the UN. Again, that bifurcation has precedent. An Iranian member of the Majlis once wrote of the

“dislike of the Persian people for the Russians,”

which was based on

“wars...cruelty and aggression...encouragement given by them to the extravagancies of the Persian court...the ascendancy they had gained by promising to maintain the succession...the many concessions they had obtained from the Persian Government...the undue influence exerted by them.”

He concludes that Russia is

“the home and centre of autocracy and ancient foe of all liberal ideas.”

That was more than 100 years ago, but it resonates with us today. That is why it is so important—so imperative—for us to call this partnership out, reveal its weak foundations, learn from the past, and support the good and great people of Iran in their struggle against a wicked regime.

1.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), and I thank him for his contribution. I

also thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for setting the scene so very well, and other hon. Members for their contributions. It is good to see the House united, by and large, in the statements we try to make.

I have spoken about the complexities of the Iranian nuclear question on a number of occasions, and it is clear that we are fast coming to the stage at which we will need to do more than simply discuss or debate it in this House. We must register our concerns, but we need to act, and act urgently. I said the same thing six months ago, and I reiterate it today. Let me put it on the record that I am unashamedly a friend of Israel. I was a member of the Northern Ireland Friends of Israel group when I served in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am a member of the Friends of Israel here in this great House. I also have a close working relationship with the Iranian Government in exile, to which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) referred earlier. That is a good working relationship, and an opportunity to hear about human rights abuses and deprivations, which I will mention later.

There are many in the world who despair at the actions of Iran. On 8 June, the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors voted overwhelmingly to adopt a resolution introduced by the United States, Britain, France, and Germany, censuring the regime in Tehran for non co-operation with the agency’s inquiry into nuclear traces found at three undeclared sites. Iran has a blatant disregard for democracy, freedom, and liberty, and for truth and honesty—it is as simple as that. They will tell lies ‘til the cows come home, as we often say. Indeed, the authorities in Tehran rejected the draft of that resolution, even before it was adopted. The May 2022 IAEA report, perhaps the most detailed and damning since its November 2011 report, made it clear that the regime had not been entirely open and honourable—what a surprise. I have heard it characterised as playing games with the agency. It did, and it must be made accountable for that.

Other Members have referred to the three locations that the IAEA had requested to visit. The regime razed the buildings, and removed structure and soil, yet the IAEA still found traces of nuclear material. The regime did not do the job terribly well, and that badly executed cover-up left an evidential base, which tells us as much as any sample could ever have told us. Action is needed as soon as possible. There are actions that have taken place that the regime does not want us to know about, and in light of the IAEA’s report stating that it has not provided explanations that are technically credible in relation to the agency’s findings at those locations, the only conclusion is that actions have been carried out contrary to the agreement. Again, that must be addressed.

I am pleased to see the Minister and the shadow Minister in their place, and I ask this: is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action dead, as the regime continues its nuclear provocations and breaches? Perhaps the Minister will answer that when he winds up the debate. Although the IAEA’s position had already come to be regarded as a potentially insurmountable obstacle to the JCPOA’s revival, each of the participants in that agreement remained unwilling to abandon the negotiations.

That situation did not immediately change in the wake of the IAEA board of governors resolution. Tehran even appeared to test that reaction before the censure

was formally adopted, turning off two monitoring devices that the IAEA relied on for monitoring the enrichment of uranium gas at the Natanz nuclear facility. The measure was accompanied by a statement from the spokesperson for the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, urging western nations to “come to their senses”—perhaps it is time for Iran to come to its senses and see that it is time for decency, honesty and truth, and for it to drop the censure.

When that did not happen, the AEOI initiated plans to remove 27 surveillance cameras from several nuclear facilities. Many commentators described Tehran's reactions as a final or fatal blow to the JCPOA. Those changes come at a time when Iran is already planning to install two new cascades of advanced enrichment centrifuges at Natanz, which could substantially speed up the rate at which uranium is enriched to Iran's current high level of 60% purity, and potentially beyond that, even to 90%, or to weapons-grade. That should reiterate to all Members of the House that time is of the essence, time is short, and we cannot wait to take action.

On Monday 20 June, Reuters news agency, citing a confidential IAEA report that it had seen, reported:

“Iran is escalating its uranium enrichment further by preparing to use advanced IR-6 centrifuges at its underground Fordow site that can more easily switch between enrichment levels.”

Again, that is a very worrying development that we must be aware of and concerned about. According to Reuters:

“IAEA inspectors verified on Saturday that Iran was ready to feed uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) gas, the material centrifuges enrich, into the second of two cascades, or clusters, of IR-6 centrifuges installed at Fordow, a site dug into mountain, the confidential IAEA report to member states said.”

The work was done on a mountain, in easily hidden places and under darkness.

On 7 June, in a joint statement to the IAEA board of governors addressing the regime's implementation of its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA, the United Kingdom, France and Germany said:

“We are deeply concerned about the continued nuclear advances that the Director General documents in his report. As a result of Iran's nuclear activities in violation of the JCPOA for more than three years, its nuclear programme is now more advanced than at any point in the past. This is threatening international security and risks undermining the global nonproliferation regime.”

The risk is at its highest ever. The axis of evil of Russia, China, North Korea and Iran threaten the very stability of the world. It is time, as others have said, to refer the matter to the UN, which is the body responsible, and it is time for a collective response. The world must unite against Iran. It is, as has been said, a rogue state that must be controlled. It cannot be allowed to roam free. Iran has disregard for human decency, as we all know.

In Iran, we witness some of the worst human rights abuses in any part of the world—I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, which I have a particular interest in—with the persecution of Christians and of Baha'is. It is also about the rights of women to be women and to have freedom and liberty, but in Iran they face acid attacks on a daily basis. It has high rates of poverty and deprivation, yet it seems to find immense amounts of money to spend on its defence and nuclear programmes. Iran sponsors terrorism across the world

and is involved in terrorism in the middle east, in the far east and elsewhere. It is time to bring it to book for what it does.

The dire situation could not be clearer, so our corresponding action must be just as clear, firm and immediate. I respectfully ask the Minister and her Department to act appropriately. I am keen to hear what more action we can take. Strongly worded statements are not enough. It is vital for the future of the planet and this world that nuclear arms are kept away from unstable nations and Governments such as those in Iran who have proven themselves not to be honest and open when it comes to their aims. Iran seeks the wanton destruction of Israel and other parts of the western world. We need to be vigilant, prepared and ready. We look to our Minister for a satisfactory response.

Jeremy Corbyn: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to correct a name that I gave wrongly in my speech. I said that Anoosheh Ashoori was in detention, but I was wrong to do so. The names that I wanted on the record were Mehran Raoof and Morad Tahbaz, who are in detention, and I obviously support a campaign for their release.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his point of order and for having taken steps to correct the record immediately he realised there had been a mistake. The record now stands corrected.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I inform Members that if they were to take between seven and eight minutes—or less—for their speeches, we would not need a time limit and this reasonable, balanced and informative debate would conclude at about 3 o'clock, or just before then, which is about the right time. The hon. Gentlemen who seek to catch my eye are all experienced enough to make their remarks fit that seven-to-eight-minute limit.

1.54 pm

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me quickly congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on an excellent speech and on securing the debate. It is important that we have the debate at this time.

If we look around the world today, we see that we live in extraordinarily dangerous times. We see the threat of terrorism at home and abroad and democracies being invaded. We have an increasingly emboldened China on the rise, and ever sophisticated cyber-threats from highly trained state operatives. But of all the threats that we face, a nuclear weapon in the wrong hands represents one of the gravest. As US President Obama once said, our scientific advances have enabled us

“to communicate across the seas and fly above the clouds,”

but they have also unleashed some of the most destructive and deadly weaponry imaginable. We must understand that threat and face it rather than shy away from the difficult decisions needed to keep us safe.

[Gareth Davies]

Close observers of the recent talks will tell us that negotiations have not exactly been going smoothly, but, as my right hon. Friend said, it is important that we have the opportunity to talk in this House about the threats that we feel Iran poses and why some of us are cautious about a deal, and to offer a view on what terms such a deal should take, if indeed we are to have one. Let me do that.

A nuclear Iran is a clear threat to peace and the world order. Iran has made clear its views on Israel's mere existence and, obviously, a direct nuclear attack on Israel would become a real possibility. A nuclear-armed Iran would also be emboldened to increase its support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Regardless of how Iran may behave as a nuclear power, it could spur other regional rivals to seek out a bomb in response. The Government are right, therefore, always to be looking to prevent further development of Iran's nuclear capability. However, there is clearly concern that, compared with 2015, Iran's programme is more advanced and its leadership and priorities are different.

Sanctions do work, and they do hurt—Iran has about 40% inflation and millions live below the poverty line—but, as my right hon. Friend pointed out, Iran has done tremendously well out of oil sales. The Iranian central bank estimates that those were worth \$18 billion in just the first half of the Persian year. Its economic motivations are therefore perhaps not as strong as they were previously, and that is why we should proceed cautiously with new talks.

For any agreement, you need trust, and lately Iran's actions seem to demonstrate a lack of interest in building trust. It says that its nuclear ambitions and intentions are entirely for civilian purposes, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) said in his excellent speech. So why has it enriched to 60%? Why has it turned off 27 surveillance cameras? Why has it developed uranium metal, which has no civilian use but lots of use in developing nuclear weapons? All the while, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) said, it has developed a significant ballistic missile programme, and it has had the gall to call for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard to be declassified as a terrorist organisation. Those are not the actions of a state willing to engage in peace talks or one that seeks to build trust with anyone.

Of course, I understand the motivations to engage with Iran, and we should try everything that we can to limit its ambitions. Put simply, we need greater restrictions if we are to have an agreement. We need a commitment from it to cease the production and installation of advanced centrifuges and the removal of enriched uranium as well as non-nuclear commitments that the so-called comprehensive agreement did not cover to end its ballistic missile programme and to cease funding terrorist organisations. Otherwise, we face bolstering Iran at a time when we should be restricting it.

Let it be said that I have put my views and concerns on the record. I genuinely wish the Government and the ministerial team well in tackling this great issue.

Let me conclude philosophically by saying that it is a great pleasure to be talking about this and Britain's role in it at a time when people question Britain's place in

the world. We should never forget that this country represents just 0.8% of the global population, yet we have a seat at all the major international, multinational and security tables, including the G7, the International Monetary Fund, the JCPOA and the United Nations Security Council. We are one of the few nuclear powers in the world. So let it be said that we have a role to play in ensuring the security of our world and our people. I hope that the Government will take that responsibility as it relates to Iran very seriously.

2 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) for this debate—it has certainly been a long time coming—on an issue of concern to many of us in this House. I pay tribute to him for his efforts in securing it. The contributions of all Members have been not only well reasoned but very constructive. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) raised issues that perhaps we do not all agree with, but it is important for us to consider them as part of today's discussion.

The spectre of a nuclear-armed Iran has been looming for several years, and it presents a profound threat to our collective way of life. Only last night I gave a speech to the National Jewish Assembly, where I was asked at what point the United Kingdom would step in to stop the emergence of a nuclear Iran. I have to say that, if we fail to take action now, our later options will be a lot more extreme. The moment to take the appropriate action, under the JCPOA, is now.

It is almost unthinkable that the world's greatest sponsor of state terrorism could be on the nuclear threshold, but that is the reality. Two of today's speakers have mentioned Ahmadinejad saying that he would like to wipe Israel off the map, which could be taken in two ways. I think he was being provocative while at the same time speaking politically. The issue of the JCPOA and a nuclear Iran is not about Israel and Iran. It is not even about Sunni and Shi'a Muslims. It is about the Twelver Muslims, who have a different ideology and view of the world, which they would like to see adopted by other Muslim countries, and they would certainly like to see it in the western hemisphere as well.

This fundamentalist regime is responsible for the most heinous human rights abuses, both at home in Iran and, indeed, abroad. It is a regime that is committed to exporting violent ideology across the world, that has reneged on repeated commitments to the international community, and that has been found guilty in European courts of orchestrating terrorist events. I have mentioned previously that those terrorist events included the possibility of five parliamentarians—two of us are sitting here today—being subject to the violence and destruction orchestrated and founded by Tehran.

The entire integrity of the JCPOA and its ability to curtail Iran's nuclear ambitions have been called into question by several of us for many years. Originally, we were concerned that there were no clauses in the JCPOA requiring Iran to stop transferring funds to terrorist proxies. It certainly did not seek an end to domestic human rights abuses in the country, or to end the testing of the ballistic missile programme. Those were all structural weaknesses of the JCPOA and we were very concerned about that.

It is not just centre-right politicians in the United Kingdom and the United States who are concerned about this issue. Senator Robert Menendez, the Democrat chair of the Foreign Relations Committee, recently questioned why his own Administration were trying to return to the JCPOA when it was

“not sufficient in the first place—and still doesn’t address some of the most serious national security concerns we have.”

He is by no means alone in reaching such a conclusion.

It is an inescapable reality that Iran’s systematic non-compliance with the JCPOA nuclear deal has rendered it dead, despite the efforts of the US and the E3 to resuscitate it. Yet all the available evidence suggests that the E3 and the US remain committed, albeit perhaps forlornly, to desperately resuscitating the 2015 framework. There seems to be no plan B under consideration.

The reported terms of the renewed nuclear agreement make for alarming reading. Not only will it leave much of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure intact; it will also receive enormous sanctions relief. It is clear that this will again fail to provide a long-term, sustainable answer to Iran’s belligerent nuclear actions.

The great risk is that, in the absence of an ambitious, broad and punitive nuclear framework, Iran will become a nuclear-armed state in a matter of years—perhaps just three. Buying time is not a viable strategy for the UK Government. At some point, the international community is likely to be faced with an Iranian regime arming itself with a nuclear weapon. We will have far fewer options in tackling that scenario than we do today.

The lesson that we learned from Iraq is that we do not invade sovereign states without a plan, so our plan must be formed now. If we are to avoid military action of any kind, we must seek an assurance from the Iranians that they will abide with an agreement.

One of the other great weaknesses of the JCPOA was its failure to address Iran’s blatant arming and funding of its terrorist proxies. That led directly to the conflicts in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and other parts of the world. That was hard to stomach at the time and we need to address it again today.

We cannot allow funds, resources, men, manpower and money to go into furthering conflicts around the world. That would not only provoke greater incivility but provide more impetus for migration and create evermore refugees in the international community. We would be assisting in that objective, and we must stop it. These terror groups are primed to unleash, at any second, horrific violence against civilian targets across the world, all at the behest of their Iranian paymasters.

In her summing up, will the Minister provide justification for why we appear to be compounding the great mistakes of the previous agreement in 2015? Will she assure us that she is making it a priority to tackle this issue? I join colleagues in asking her to consider proscribing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. At the very least, we owe that to the British victims of that organisation.

I have previously welcomed the Foreign Secretary’s commitment to

“work night and day to prevent the Iranian regime from ever becoming a nuclear power.”

I hope that she will keep up that commitment, but does the Minister believe that the deal under consideration is truly capable of preventing Iran from getting its hands on the most devastating weapons known to man? In the

event of a new JCPOA, can the Minister outline what further steps will be taken to build on what has clearly become a limited and ineffective mechanism?

Time is upon us, and history will judge us for the decisions we make today and on any future agreement. For the safety and security of not only the middle east but the wider world, we must do the right thing. That may be a hard decision, and it may be a difficult process, but failure to do so could ultimately lead to greater conflict.

2.8 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I add my congratulations to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and, indeed, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) on sponsoring this debate and allowing us to have our say as Back Benchers.

It is clear that we are seeking to challenge Iran’s capability to develop nuclear weapons. Given that the current President of the United States was Vice President during President Obama’s regime, which led to the JCPOA in the first place, it is no surprise that he will seek to resuscitate the deal struck at that time. However, we have to face up to facts, and the first fact is that, even if Iran has not acquired nuclear weapons, it is closer than ever before to achieving that aim. The UK and other participants in the JCPOA must insist on dealing with this new dangerous threshold, with many experts predicting that Iran could have a nuclear weapon within weeks. At the same time, the regime is announcing further steps to decrease co-operation with the IAEA and continuing its nuclear provocations in breach of the JCPOA. None of those activities has any credible civilian justification, according to the UK, France and Germany.

The regime’s nuclear advances are dangerous and illegal. The existing nuclear deal has proven to be totally and utterly inadequate and it has done nothing to end the regime’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. On the contrary, the UK’s softline approach has only emboldened the regime to continue its illegal nuclear provocations with impunity. It is therefore time for the UK and the rest of the west to adopt a firm policy towards the regime in Iran that holds Tehran accountable for its nuclear provocations rather than rewarding it with more sanctions relief, as has been suggested.

The UK and other western participants in the JCPOA must abandon their flawed approach to the nuclear deal and, as colleagues have mentioned, refer the regime’s nuclear dossier to the UN Security Council and reinstate previous UN Security Council resolutions that were suspended by the JCPOA. In fact, at the time that the sanctions were starting to bite and have an impact, we removed them.

Given the time restrictions, I will not go through my dossier of JCPOA violations that Iran has committed. I declare up front my interest as chairman of the all-party Britain-Israel parliamentary group, as an officer of Conservative Friends of Israel and as a very strong supporter of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, the resistance movement in Iran, which seeks to democratise Iran and restore freedom and democracy to it, as should be the case. I will concentrate my remarks not only on preventing Iran from achieving nuclear weapon status, but on Iran’s key motivation of providing strategic protection for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[Bob Blackman]

Any debate on ending Iranian aggression must include provisions for combating the IRGC. If we do not proscribe that organisation now, its threat will become only greater if Iran becomes a nuclear state. The reality is that, if Iran becomes a nuclear state, it will have the shield to use the IRGC to spread terrorism not just around the region, but around the world, and it will do so with impunity.

Iran is the world's premier supporter of terror. The IRGC was rightfully proscribed by the United States in 2019 and I, like others, have been worried that the US is considering delisting it at Iran's request. Far from delisting it, the United Kingdom should proscribe the IRGC, as should the rest of the west. However, despite the fact that one of our closest allies proscribed the revolutionary guard corps, we continue to drag our heels while Iran's spider web of terror stretches across the middle east and beyond and begins to grasp at Europe, on our doorstep.

For those who are unfamiliar with the revolutionary guard corps, I will set out its pattern of supporting terror and spreading instability and its authoritarian grip over the people of Iran. The revolutionary guard corps openly supports Hezbollah by providing financial assistance, weapons, ammunition and military training. Hezbollah has reportedly acquired 150,000 missiles—I repeat: 150,000 missiles, targeted at Israel alone—and Iran continues to attempt deliveries of weaponry to the proxy to threaten others in the region.

The al-Ashtar Brigades is another IRGC-directed terror group. It has claimed responsibility for—rather, admitted to—several terror attacks in Bahrain and often calls for attacks against the British Government on social media. That brings this home: not only is this about other states in the middle east, but the British Government and the British people are under direct threat from the IRGC.

These terror groups are rightfully already proscribed by Britain, but we do not hold the organisation that funds and directs them to the same account. In 2009, it was reported that the IRGC was linked to the kidnapping of five Britons in Iraq, three of whom were murdered. One of the surviving hostages, Peter Moore, was kidnapped due to his work installing a system that would allow the Iraqi Government to understand how much international aid was being funnelled to Iran's terror groups in Iraq.

More recently, although Britain stands steadfast with the people of Ukraine, reports indicate that the IRGC-controlled airline Qeshm Fars Air has made a minimum of seven flights to Moscow since April. According to retired US Admiral Craig Faller, it is likely that the airline is used by Iran to transport military aid and personnel. Given US reports in March that Russia was attempting to bolster its forces with Syrian mercenaries, is it not conceivable that the revolutionary guard corps is aiding the Russian invasion by transporting those troops and undermining British efforts to protect Ukrainian sovereignty?

The revolutionary guard corps has grown to have a powerful grasp over almost every aspect of Iranian life. It is holding the people of Iran hostage in their country. The decent people of Iran wish to see the country return to a positive role in the international community. I note the remarks of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), whom I rarely agree with, but

the fact is that the decent people of Iran want a return to the norm in the international community and not to be a country that acts as a terror-supporting pariah state.

We must show the Iranian people that we are willing to hold the IRGC accountable for its nefarious activities in ways that the moderates of Iran cannot for fear of death and destruction. I simply ask the Minister: how many more terrorists must the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fund, how many more innocents must die, and how many more must it kidnap before we finally proscribe it as a terror organisation?

Over the past few weeks, I have been inundated by emails from constituents calling on the Home Office to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety and to sequester its assets. I say to people listening out there: please bombard the Home Office with emails requesting that action to be taken—[*Interruption.*] No, the Home Office, because it does the proscription—that is key. We can therefore build the campaign to ensure—[*Interruption.*] I completely accept that the Minister cannot respond to this now, but my message, clearly, to the Home Secretary and colleagues is this: let us proscribe the IRGC in its entirety. Let us build the campaign across the United Kingdom to make that happen, so that the people of Britain can speak up for the moderate people of Iran and free them from that terrorist regime.

2.17 pm

James Sunderland (Bracknell) (Con): Time is short and we need to progress to the end of this debate, so I will be brief and offer a pragmatic view. I have listened with great interest to Members on both sides of the House and I broadly support the direction of travel. Of course, we are yet to hear from the Minister.

Of most concern to me is that the time needed to produce uranium for one nuclear weapon in Iran is now three weeks. That is called the break-out time and it has fallen from one year. Clearly, the nuclear aspirations, technologies and advancements have progressed significantly in Iran. I want to pose this question: how might the UK and other allied states in the middle east put Iran back on the road to peace and prosperity as part of the international community? However, this is also about working with Iran and doing what we can to help that regime.

The big question is about the restoration of Iran's 2015 nuclear deal, the JCPOA, which has been mentioned. That was agreed with world powers, including China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK and the USA. As we know, the accord was unilaterally abandoned by the US in 2018 under Trump, who then imposed heavy sanctions on Iran. Those have been eased since Biden came into office, but this perhaps put Iran closer than ever to achieving nuclear power. Since 2020, talks have been revived, but only intermittently, so we need the US fully engaged again. Thankfully, indirect talks between Iran and the US began on 29 June in Qatar, with the EU mediating. All sides are agreed that a restored deal is the best outcome, but such a deal could still legitimise Iran's nuclear transgressions. I am also told by some sources that a successful deal may bring Iranian oil back to the market, but, for the reasons outlined so eloquently by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), I do not subscribe to that view, although I recognise the counter-arguments.

So where are we? Earlier this month, in response to a resolution introduced by the US, France, the UK and Germany censuring Iran, it took down 27 IAEA cameras, making tracking activity at its nuclear sites much harder. Iran has never been closer to a nuclear weapon. The stockpile today is 18 times the limit agreed in 2015. Iran has a missile capability—we know that—and in March 2022 the IRGC adopted a new independent branch called the Command for the Protection and Security of Nuclear Centres, so developments are worrying.

My first question to the Minister is whether we think that sanctions work—I think they probably do, for reasons outlined this afternoon—or whether they are redundant. Is a restored deal the best option for now, noting that Iran is doing this anyway? We know that Iran has committed nuclear transgressions since the 2015 deal. What assessment has been made of the viability of a renewed JCPOA in preventing Iran from achieving a nuclear weapons capability—again, noting that it is happening anyway?

We know that the sunset provisions of the 2015 deal are coming up to their expiration date. We also know that the international community could face either having to accept Iran as a nuclear power or, potentially, undertaking military action. That is a very stark choice. How much would we have to compromise to renew a deal that would prevent Iran from getting a weapon, noting that Iran is very close to getting that weapon?

For what it is worth, my take is that Iran should come back into the international community, as we do not want it to progress its activities alongside rogue states. But at what price? We need to better understand the relationship between Iran and its neighbours in the middle east; we also need to better understand the position of our allies in the middle east, to ensure that their needs are best met.

I suspect that it is pragmatic at this stage to call on the Government to extend the sunset clauses, enact a stricter monitoring regime, retain terrorist proscriptions, reinforce existing friendships and relationships with allies in the middle east and press against Iran's destabilising impacts in the region, but I would want to see a way forward in which Iran is at the table as part of a solution. But, of course, nothing should be off the table.

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

2.23 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) on bringing this debate to the House, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that it could happen. There has been an awful lot of accord across the House today; it seems that we are all raising similar concerns and we are all keen to find a way forward. It is not quite a matter of semantics, but perhaps there is just a slight disagreement about the way forward and the best way to tackle the issue.

The joint comprehensive plan of action was never ideal, but it was better than no deal and we need to recognise that it was a major diplomatic achievement. The SNP joins Members across the House who have called for Iran to halt its activities that are in violation of the JCPOA. We hope to see detailed, precise and

deep talks this week. There is an urgent need for a diplomatic solution and an urgent need to end Iran's nuclear escalation.

We agree with the concerns that have been raised about Iran's stated intention to end all JCPOA-related transparency measures and about the action that it has already taken in that regard. Transparency is incredibly important, and any future deal needs to put that at the heart of the agreements made.

There are other risks that have not been mentioned in the Chamber today. Bilateral work on tackling climate change and on tackling the Afghan refugee crisis is currently on ice because of the present situation. Regardless of escalation and nuclear uranium enrichment, the climate crisis and the Afghan refugee crisis are not going away. We must work to tackle them. As several hon. Members have said, we must ensure that we put people at the heart of our approach and that we work to improve human rights in the region, as well as ensuring that the people of Iran are decoupled from the action of their Government and given the opportunity to flourish.

We agree with the calls for the UK to use our place to press the regime—and to press all regimes that have issues with human rights or are committing human rights abuses, whether that is Iran, Saudi, Russia or any of the countries committing human rights abuses against their citizens or citizens of other countries.

I criticise the unilateral actions that Donald Trump took, on the basis that taking unilateral action on this is not the way forward. The way forward is for everybody to work together as international partners to get a settlement. The reality is that the situation is potentially worse than it could have been if those unilateral actions had not been taken. It is better to act in concert.

We welcome President Biden's commitment not just to returning to the deal, but to strengthen the areas in which it is defective and extend the JCPOA. I have not much mentioned wider regional security, but we need to ensure that action is taken and that there is international co-operation with respect to Iran's issues, its causing of regional instability and the actions that it is taking to destabilise countries around the world, as several contributors to the debate have mentioned. That needs to be a matter of priority.

As somebody who believes that we should not have nuclear weapons anywhere in the world, I am massively concerned to see the upscaling of Iran's potential nuclear capabilities. We need to ensure that talks happen, whether that is around the table this week or in some future round of talks. We need to ensure that the UK's international power is used to put pressure on, and to de-escalate the situation as quickly and as properly as we possibly can.

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

2.28 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing this excellent and important debate, and hon. Members across the House who have contributed to it.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

The JCPOA was a landmark agreement. Labour fully supported the Vienna negotiations aimed at restoring it. We remain hopeful that a way forward can be found, including in the latest rounds of talks in Doha, co-ordinated by the European Union. It is absolutely right that the UK Government engage with those negotiations. We continue to believe that the JCPOA framework remains the best option to limit Iran's nuclear programme, based on restoring Iranian compliance in exchange for sanctions relief. A pragmatic approach should be pursued, as the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) said, and it is important that the US engages with Iran as part of the diplomatic process to restore the JCPOA.

In the short term, pressure must be applied on Tehran to reverse its enrichment programme so that it is within the limits of the initial agreement. Iran must also refrain from further steps that would reduce the possibility of a return to that agreement. In the longer term, however, the UK Government must show leadership. Our aims should be not just to restore the JCPOA, but to address the long-standing issues and other aspects of the Iranian Government's actions that cause serious concern. These include much more than restricting and monitoring the country's nuclear capability, important though that is. I note that the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) has called for a "stronger, longer deal". Indeed, we are greatly worried about the destabilising influence of Iran, which poses a serious threat to security in the region. That is why I believe we must do more to hold the Iranian regime to account.

In 2018, as we know, the Trump Administration withdrew the US from the JCPOA. It was completely wrong for the US to walk away from the agreement and reimpose sanctions. That decision was taken without support from the other signatories to the deal, including the UK, and the reckless action of the US Government at the time has been deeply damaging. Since the American withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has flagrantly violated the agreement's terms. It has pursued a dangerous path of non-compliance. It has increased the quality and quantity of its enriched uranium production far beyond the JCPOA limits.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) have pointed out today, Tehran's persistent refusal to co-operate with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the global nuclear watchdog, in matters including its inquiry into prior nuclear activities, signals Iran's lack of transparency while it continues to increase its nuclear capability. For example, the IAEA has reported that Iran is enriching uranium up to 60% to produce highly enriched uranium, and in August 2021 the IAEA verified that it had begun producing uranium metal, which has little civilian purpose and is applicable to nuclear weapons development. As we heard from the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Gareth Davies), nuclear weapons in the wrong hands are the gravest of all threats.

Earlier this month, the IAEA announced that Iran was removing 27 surveillance cameras from nuclear sites in what has been described as a "fatal blow" to the JCPOA and the monitoring of Iran's nuclear programme. As Iran continues to escalate its nuclear activities, we believe that the IAEA's inspection ability must be strengthened, and I would be keen to hear more from

the Minister about the steps that the UK Government are taking to support the strengthening of the IAEA as a matter of urgency.

More widely, we know that the Vienna talks have stalled since March, not least owing to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. I would like to hear the Minister's view on the consequences of the invasion for the future viability of the E3+3 format, which has been the basis for negotiations with Iran for more than 15 years. We also know that Iran is currently holding up conclusion of the agreement, which would return it to its JCPOA commitments and restore US involvement in the deal. As has been noted, a new round of talks is under way in Qatar, and we welcome that, but we cannot underestimate the challenges and the importance of securing an agreement.

There has been increasing frustration with the Iranian intransigence that has been seen in these negotiations, and concerns remain that the regime is attempting to gain leverage for future negotiations while advancing its nuclear knowledge as talks are stalled. As was pointed out by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), this may mean that at some point on its current trajectory, Iran will soon make irreversible nuclear progress, rendering the benefits of returning it to its JCPOA commitments meaningless. That is incredibly concerning. It remains our steadfast hope that a compromise can be found that will allow for the restoration of the nuclear agreement, which could then serve as a basis for addressing many other concerns.

We cannot talk about Iran without discussing wider issues, many of which have been rightly raised by other Members today. Although the JCPOA is a critical agreement to limit Iran's nuclear capability, it does not address Tehran's ballistic missiles programme, which is designed to deliver nuclear weapons, or its support for terrorist groups and militias throughout the middle east, including Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen. That was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord).

These issues need to be addressed, and the Labour Party believes it is imperative to move them up the international agenda. We are seriously concerned about the threats that Iran has made against Israel. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak referred to Iran's stated desire to see Israel's destruction. Moreover, the JCPOA does not hold Iran to account for its human rights violations against its own people, or for its continued engagement in state hostage-taking—an issue of which we in the House are acutely aware.

As was pointed out by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), Mehran Raoof and Morad Tahbaz remain in Iran despite the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori earlier this year. It is shameful that the Iranian regime continues to use the two remaining hostages as political pawns, and the UK Government must do everything possible to ensure their safe return home to the UK, as their families were promised.

As for the wider nuclear issues, we believe there is an opportunity for the UK to take a leadership role at the upcoming nuclear non-proliferation treaty review conference. The outlook at present is not good. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has closed the space for dialogue on critical issues involving arms control, transparency and confidence-building. The flagrant violations of the Budapest memorandum send a dangerous message. Proliferation risks are very significant. There are also

many crucial new issues that need to be addressed, including threats of emerging technology, especially in the domains of cyber and space. I urge the Minister to update the House on the UK's priorities for the conference in August, and on how the UK can lead from the front on these matters internationally.

If diplomacy and efforts to restore the JCPOA fail, the consequences may be severe. The return of sanctions, a rapid expansion of Iranian nuclear activity, and a heightened risk of military tension in the region are likely outcomes. As we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House today, there is broad agreement that the restoration of the JCPOA would be an important step, and I therefore ask the Government to continue to pursue every possible avenue diplomatically to help to promote and restore the nuclear deal with Iran. However, it is not the only step, and it should not be the only aim. We must continue to support our international partners, including Israel, by holding the regime to account, and we must ensure that the wider issues that I, and many others, have mentioned today are not left unaddressed by the UK and our international allies.

2.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Vicky Ford): I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for securing this important debate. I share their grave concerns, and those of many Members, about the potential for a nuclear armed Iran.

In his opening remarks, my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark said that it was important for the Government to listen to what Members say about this subject. We are listening, and it is my pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government. I am also grateful for the contributions of the other Members who have spoken, and I will try to respond to many of the points that have been raised.

Time after time, we have seen Iran take actions that directly undermine global security, freedom and democracy, and challenge the international order. The UK is taking a tough stance: Iran must end its threatening behaviour and destabilising regional activity, and must also return to its JCPOA commitments.

Iran's nuclear programme has never been more advanced than it is today, and our objective remains to ensure that the country never acquires a nuclear weapon. The escalation of its nuclear activities is threatening regional and international peace and security, and undermining the global non-proliferation system. Along with our partners, the United Kingdom has worked intensively to find a diplomatic solution. Over the last year we have worked alongside Germany, France, the United States and others to find a solution that would return Iran to compliance with its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA.

In March 2022, we left Vienna after reaching the end of talks. At that point there was a viable deal on the table that would return Iran to compliance with its commitments and return the US to the deal, reversing Iran's nuclear escalation and lifting US sanctions related to the JCPOA. Iran has not accepted the deal, and time is running out. Iran should urgently take the offer on the table; there will not be a better one.

I agree that the JCPOA is not perfect, but it does represent a pathway for constraining Iran's nuclear programme. A restored JCPOA would provide a foundation for international diplomatic efforts to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme remained peaceful in the long-term. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, there are some issues regarding sunset provisions. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak also mentioned the switching off of the cameras, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland).

I want to make it clear that if Iran returns to the JCPOA, our priority is the extension of the sunset clauses and enabling a stricter monitoring regime. Should the JCPOA collapse, however, we will consider all options in partnership with our allies. Let me repeat that: if a deal is not struck soon the JCPOA will collapse, and in that scenario we will carefully consider all our options in partnership with our allies. Those options may include new sanctions. I accept that the JCPOA does not address wider regional security issues, but a return to the deal would contribute positively to regional prosperity and security in the middle east and could pave the way for further discussions on regional and security concerns.

Iran must stop its destabilising behaviour. We believe it is important to encourage Iran to take a more constructive approach to its relationship with its neighbours. The UK has long made clear our concern about Iran's reckless destabilising activity in the region, including the political, financial and military support that it gives to militants and proscribed terrorist groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, to militias in Iraq and to the Houthis in Yemen.

Iran's support for these groups and activities risks the security and prosperity in the region. They pose a direct threat to the UK and to our interests as well as to the safety of our allies. Regional security and that of our allies remains one of our top concerns, and we are working with allies to constrain Iran's ability to conduct destabilising activities in the region. We will continue to do so, whether or not a deal is signed.

We will continue our work with allies and partners to hold Iran to account for breaches of UN security resolutions. That includes supporting enforcement of UN prohibitions on the proliferation of weapons to non-state actors in the region, including to Hezbollah and to the Houthis in Yemen. We continue to build on the existing co-operation between the UK and our partners to counter the activities of Iran and its proxies in the region, including in our work to support stability in Iraq and to end the conflicts in Yemen and Syria.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon mentioned the Paris bomb plot and his experiences at that time. The UK Government always strongly condemn the targeting of civilians and we welcome the fact that those responsible for that plot in Paris in 2018 have been held to account. We also welcome the work by the Belgian courts in convicting four individuals last year, including Asadollah Asadi, who received a 20-year sentence.

The integrated review outlines our contribution to maritime security, upholding the principle of freedom of navigation. The UK is working to ensure the safety of shipping in the middle east, including in the Strait of Hormuz. We deter Iran from disrupting maritime

[Vicky Ford]

security through our contributions to the international maritime security construct and the combined maritime forces.

A number of Members mentioned sanctions. The UK continues to maintain a range of sanctions aimed at addressing Iran's destabilising behaviour. We have over 200 sanctions designations in place. Those include the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and sanctions related to human rights, proliferation and terrorism.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and others spoke in detail about the IRGC. We have made clear our concerns about its continuing destabilising activity throughout the region, and we maintain a range of sanctions that are working to constrain that activity. The list of proscribed organisations is kept under constant review, but we do not routinely comment on whether an organisation is under consideration for proscription so I cannot comment on that; I know that my hon. Friend understands the reasons why.

A number of Members spoke about those who have been detained, and in particular about Morad Tahbaz. The Iranian Government committed to releasing Morad from prison on indefinite furlough but they failed to honour that commitment. His continuing horrendous ordeal sends a clear message to the international community that Iran does not honour its commitments. We continue to urge the Iranian authorities at every opportunity to release him immediately. He must be allowed to return to his family's home in Tehran without further delay. Morad is a tri-national, and we are working closely with the United States to release him.

Let me conclude by saying that it is in no one's interest to see a nuclear-armed Iran. The UK is firm in its commitment to the security and prosperity of our allies in the region, and to working with the international community to hold Iran to account for its destabilising activity. We urge, and will continue to urge, Iran to cease its nuclear escalation and to conclude the deal currently on the table to restore the JCPOA while that is still possible. If that does not happen, we will work with our international partners to consider all options.

2.47 pm

Robert Jenrick: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for her response, and to all my hon. and right hon. Friends and colleagues across the House for contributing to a thoughtful and informed debate this afternoon. I

am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for supporting the debate, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for contributing and for his role on the Backbench Business Committee that made today possible.

We heard a range of views from across the Chamber today, but I think it was clear that no one spoke in favour of a return to the JCPOA as is. Numerous colleagues spoke in favour of a negotiated settlement with Iran, but all expressed concern at the terms of the JCPOA itself. I therefore ask the Minister to reflect on the contributions she has heard today, because I think there would be grave concern if she and the Government were to enter into an agreement that did not have, for example, extended sunset provisions or greater enforcement provisions or that permitted the de-proscribing of terrorist-supporting organisations such as the IRGC. That does not seem to me, in the light of today's debate, to be the will of this House. It would be unwise of the Government to sign an important international agreement for which there is little, if any, support in this House.

I ask the Minister to reflect on one further point. My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and many others eloquently said that it seems to be the will of this House, and of many outside, that the IRGC is proscribed. We have made great steps in recent years in proscribing both Hamas and Hezbollah following cross-party campaigns, and I think now is the time to take the next logical step and proscribe the IRGC. I ask her, on our behalf, to take that message to the Foreign Secretary and the Home Secretary, who have joint responsibility, and to ask them to take all steps to proscribe that organisation as soon as possible.

On behalf of all hon. and right hon. Members here today, I ask the Minister to pass on our thanks to her officials in the Foreign Office for their hard work in the talks thus far, and to ask them to take action to reflect the views of this House as they continue those negotiations on the country's behalf.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House expresses grave concern at the imminent prospect of a nuclear armed Iran; calls on the Government in its ongoing negotiations in respect of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement to seek to extend the sunset clauses, enact a stricter monitoring regime, retain terrorist proscriptions, and expand its scope to include Iran's other destabilising activities in the region.

50 Years of Pride in the UK

2.50 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered 50 years of Pride in the UK.

It is a huge privilege to lead today's debate, which commemorates the UK's first Pride march in London on 1 July 1972 and all the Pride events that have taken place in the 50 years that followed. I sincerely thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate, and especially for ensuring that we have this important debate in the Chamber during Pride Month. More widely, I thank everyone who has organised, supported and taken part in the many Pride events over the years. It is thanks to the many who protested, marched and fought that we have many of the rights that I enjoy today.

I also thank all the Members of this House who have bravely spoken out over the years about their sexuality, their gender and even their HIV status. It is more important than ever that this House reflects the society we have the privilege to represent. I thank them for representing their LGBT constituents and for raising LGBT issues on the Floor of the House, in Committee and in legislation. It is essential that we continue to strive for greater equality, not just during Pride Month but whenever we can in this Chamber and in this House.

The first London Pride event was a demand for progress, and it was organised by the Gay Liberation Front, the UK's first direct-action human rights movement of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. The 1972 Pride march was attended by an estimated 2,000 people, who marched from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park with the intention of combating the invisibility, denigration and constant shame in which most LGBT people were forced to live at the time. Those marchers were inspired by the Gay Liberation Front's list of demands, many of which are thankfully now enacted in law.

The progress on LGBT equality in the 50 years since has been drastic and significant. We have seen milestones such as: equal marriage; the abolition of section 28; the recent work of Time for Inclusive Education in Scotland; and the diversity of families as we celebrate the increased routes to parenthood that now exist for LGBT families.

LGBT people are protected in the workplace by equality legislation and hate crime laws, which serve to protect against harassment and attacks, but these still occur all too often. I urge the Minister to add a full legislative ban on conversion therapy to the list of milestones.

I will let Members decide for themselves to what extent the Gay Liberation Front's manifesto for gay members of society has been realised in the past 50 years. However, it is clear that many members of the trans community and many LGBT people of colour have been left behind. UK Black Pride's 2021 report, "We Will Be Heard," spoke of a general feeling of unsafety in public and increasing racism towards LGBTQI+ people of colour, with nearly half of respondents having been insulted, pestered, intimidated or harassed in the previous year, compared with 27% of white respondents. The report also spoke of hostile media coverage of trans identities, with 70% of trans and 62% of non-binary

respondents saying they would feel uncomfortable using a public toilet. The majority of trans respondents said they would avoid using a gym or sports ground for fear of discrimination or harassment.

The reality, sadly, is that we have seen an alarming rise in hate crimes against LGBTQI people, and a report found that 64% of the LGBT community, including people like me, have experienced violence and abuse based on their gender or sexuality, with only one in five being able to access support. Given these worrying statistics, what is the Minister doing to tackle hate crime against the LGBT community, especially those with intersectional identities? Trans people in 2022 are facing the same hate crime and discrimination that many of the LGBTI community faced in the 1980s. What will he do to ensure the UK is the safest place to grow up for trans, gay, lesbian and non-binary people? What actions will he take to counter transphobia in the media and in society, especially with the onslaught of concerns that have been raised about sports and other areas?

I know that many people wish to speak, but in the time available I wish to say that as a country that has held Pride parades for 50 years, we should be taking a leading role in promoting equality at home and abroad. Yet, sadly, the direction that this Government are taking is worrying for the LGBT community. There are uncertainties around the Rwanda scheme. In answers to questions on the scheme, the Government have been vague as to whether LGBTI asylum seekers will be exempt from deportation to a country that was found in the Home Office's own report to pose a threat to LGBTI people. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us an answer on that. We should be extending the hand of friendship and ensuring that the UK is the safest place. We should keep in mind the difficulties faced by those who may have to admit their sexuality for the first time as part of an asylum application. Will the Minister use this debate to announce that no LGBTI asylum seeker will be subject to deportation to Rwanda?

As we come to the end of Pride Month, with events across the UK and the world, and look forward to London Pride this weekend, we can reflect on the massive legal and social changes that have made the UK a safer, more welcoming and inclusive place for LGBT people. We can reflect on the people who paved the way for current and future generations such as me: those of us who have made radical decisions; those who have marched and campaigned for gay rights; and those who still bear the scars of discriminatory policies, which many of us in this House can only barely recall, but which some will recall only too well from first-hand experience. The SNP will continue always to strive for progress, equality and human rights, but we must push to fully promote LGBT equality.

I challenge the Minister to tackle hate crime; to do all he can to promote safe and legal routes to asylum in the UK; to ensure that for all the LGBT community facing oppression in their home states the UK will be a safe place and that they will not simply be returned to a place where their life may be in danger; and to champion LGBT equality at home and abroad. I want to know that my son will grow up in a world that in 50 years' time is much more secure than the one I have grown up in.

2.57 pm

Elliot Colburn (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): As one of the co-chairs of the all-party group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) rights, let me begin by wishing my constituents and everyone across the UK a very happy Pride as we approach London Pride this weekend. It is important to recognise how far we have come over the past 50 years, and it is a pleasure to follow the excellent opening remarks from the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley). It is poignant that this debate follows the one on Iran's nuclear weapons programme, because this shines a light on how far we have come as a country; when there are still countries around the world today where being LGBT+ is punishable by death, we are lucky to live in a country such as the UK that protects our rights in law. Of course that does not mean that there is not still progress to be made and things that need to be done.

I have been incredibly lucky as a young openly gay man growing up in the UK. I was very supported by my family and my school was miles ahead of its time; Carshalton Boys Sports College had a fantastic, inclusive, relationship and sex education curriculum before it was mandatory. I have had nothing but excellent experiences in every workplace I have been in, so I have been one of the lucky ones, but that is not the case for every young person growing up who is LGBT+ in the UK today. That is why Pride still matters to this day and why it is so important to continue shining a light on those issues, because there are still people who think that they may be better off dead than being openly who they are. As long as that is the case, we must continue to celebrate, to be visible and to raise these issues.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): On people who still struggle with their sexual orientation, did the hon. Gentleman happen to see the documentary *Dame Kelly Holmes* has just broadcast, where she demonstrates with great heartache the problems that were caused in her life by the ban on gay people serving in the military, the misery that that has caused her, despite all her fantastic achievements, and how she is now striving to overcome it? Will he join me in wishing her all the best as she is now out and proud?

Elliot Colburn: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention and I will absolutely join her in congratulating Dame Kelly Holmes on her bravery. Indeed, sport is one of the areas where we continue to see struggle for the LGBT community. We still see homophobia, biphobia and transphobia; they are very pertinent in sport, which is why it is important to continue to raise those issues.

My first Pride was back in 2012, which coincided with this place deciding on whether two people of the same sex could get married. It was a new experience for me. I did not know anyone else who was going, so I went along on my own, which I do not think I would have had the confidence to do now. The experience of my first Pride really struck me and stayed with me. What it highlighted to me was that I have been lucky but only because of the brave people who came before me and gave up so much to fight for the rights that I enjoy today. I am lucky enough to come to this place and say, "I am an openly gay man and I have had a pretty decent life so far." I thank everyone who came before us.

There is always more to do. That was touched on by the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East, particularly in relation to conversion practices. I do not want to go over too much of the ground that I know has already been covered. The Minister was present in the debate that we led in Westminster Hall just a few weeks ago. I do not want to repeat all the arguments that were made there. I will just stress that conversion practices are still taking place in the UK today. The need to ban conversion practices is not symbolic; it is needed to protect people from undergoing harmful practices simply because of who they are. That surely cannot be acceptable in 21st century Britain, which is why it is so important to do so and, indeed, to make sure that such a ban is inclusive of gender identity as well.

I pay tribute to colleagues who, sadly, could not make it to today's debate, but I know would have wanted to if their diaries had allowed. I am thinking in particular of my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Jacob Young), for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), for Darlington (Peter Gibson), my right hon. Friends the Members for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), and for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), my hon. Friends the Members for Southport (Damien Moore), for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) and many others. I am sorry if I have not mentioned all of them. I particularly pay tribute to the bravery of my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Dr Wallis), the first ever openly trans Member of Parliament. I do not want to steal their story away from them; that is for them to tell. But I just wanted to put that on the record.

That leads me very neatly into my next point, which is on the current public discourse on trans issues. Again, the Minister was present in Westminster Hall when we had a debate on the reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. I do not intend to go over the specifics of that again, but I completely agree with the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East about the current public discourse and the toxicity of the debate that has arisen around trans issues in the UK and, indeed, in much of the world at the moment. We have a responsibility to try to take the heat out of that discussion and try to calm things down and actually talk about the real issues—what is actually needed.

Much of the public discourse at the moment is completely nonsensical. It is driven in the most awful way. Again, the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East—I am embarrassing her by referencing her far too often—hit the nail on the head. Much of what is said about the trans community today could almost be copied and pasted from the text books of history: things that were said about openly gay men, lesbians and bisexual people in the past, particularly around the threat they posed to the safety of women, to the safety of children, and to the rights to practise religion freely. Much of that is completely nonsensical. I really hope that, in this place, we can start setting a better example for the public discourse that we need to have and really take the heat out of it. I think the debate we had in Westminster Hall on reforming the Gender Recognition Act was a good one and got to the heart of some of the issues. Serving with colleagues on the Women and Equalities Committee during our inquiry into the GRA, I was struck, when we were taking evidence both from those in favour of reform and from those opposed to it, by how much agreement there was between the two sides.

Both sides agreed that there needed to be much better healthcare support for trans people in the UK, ranging from mental health support all the way through to more physical interventions. It was agreed that many of the structures that exist in both legislation and institutions do not currently work for the trans community or for anyone else. They agreed that there was a lot of confusion, and that implementation of exemptions within the Equality Act 2012 and the GRA, for example, was confusing.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is setting out perfectly some of the challenges, but does he agree that there is a more sinister and deep-rooted issue with misinformation and disinformation that has been funded by the religious right and is seeping into our society, part of which plays into what is happening in the USA on abortion rights and reproductive healthcare? Does he agree that we must do something about that and we must work together cross-party to challenge that misinformation and protect our trans and nonbinary siblings?

Elliot Colburn: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady; that could not be more true. One of the most bizarre things that seems to be invading the debate at the moment is the idea that a person will wake up on a Monday and suddenly decide that they are trans, and that by Friday they will have had invasive surgery that cannot be reversed. Of course that simply does not happen. There is so much misinformation going on about what is happening in the UK today, and we must not allow that to permeate the debate. I hope that parliamentarians can take that much-needed lead in calming that debate down and having a discussion based on fact and on what is needed to progress our country and make it an even better place to grow up LGBT+.

Coming back to that point, it is important that, when the Government bring forward the conversion practices Bill later on this year—I hope it will be later this year—it is trans inclusive. I hope the Government will make the decision to do that themselves, because there is no doubt that there will be an amendment tabled in the House, and I must warn my own Whips in advance that there is absolutely no way that I could fail to support such an amendment. It is much more desirable to come forward with that from the beginning. I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) for her fantastic campaigning on this issue. She has been quite superb.

I hope we will not allow this issue to become a wedge issue. Politicising the trans debate to gain electoral capital from it is not something that any political party should think is desirable. To any politician in this place from any political party who is thinking of doing that, I would point out that we already have an example of where it has not worked, in Australia. The Australian federal election was heavily fought on that issue, and it did not work. I would really advise against doing it.

I will wrap up my remarks, as I realise I have been talking for quite some time, but for me the reason Pride is still important and must still be celebrated today goes back to the point I made earlier. Some people believe they would be better off dead than being who they truly are. Pride is all about celebrating the fact that people can be who they are without living in fear, and that is pertinent given the current toxic debate going on in the country.

Of course we will find people who preach and say things that we find abominable or crazy, but overall Pride for me is about everyone just getting to live their lives in peace the way they want to—not bothering anyone else, not trying to impinge on anyone else or to tear down the foundation of society as we understand it, but just wanting to live their lives. Pride is so important to this day because some people still do not feel they can just live their lives. For as long as that is the case, I will continue to come here and celebrate my LGBT+ family and make sure that we in this House never forget how far we have come or how far there is to go.

3.9 pm

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), my co-chair on the all-party parliamentary group on global LGBT+ rights. I look forward to working with him over the coming period to try to ensure that a lot of the legal protections and acceptance that we have seen develop in our own country can be exported to other places around the world so that our LGBT+ friends across the globe can enjoy the same kinds of rights that we are here celebrating today.

We are here to celebrate an incredible journey towards the legal recognition and equal treatment for LGBT+ people that has been achieved in the UK in the past 50 years. This change is progressive and life-affirming, but it did not just happen. It did not just descend as an inevitability because time and history were moving on. It was campaigned for and won in the teeth of the most intense bigotry, ridicule, hostility, violence and intimidation. It has made our society better, safer, stronger and more respectful as a place to live and thrive than it was before. That is a tremendous achievement and it is what, essentially, we are here to celebrate on this 50th anniversary. It was won because LGBT+ people and their allies fought for it because they did not accept the status quo that they were born into and grew up in. They realised it was wrong, they wanted it to change, they had a vision of how it could change, and they went out and campaigned for that change.

But we know that LGBT+ rights are fragile and progress towards equality must never, ever be taken for granted. Look at the horrific attacks on Pride celebrations in Oslo just a few days ago if you think that Pride and LGBT+ people are accepted and respected as we would like to see across the developed world, let alone the rest of the world. Listen to the homophobic rantings of President Putin in Russia or Viktor Orbán in Hungary, scapegoating LGBT+ people for their own political advantage. Consider the Trump-enabler Steve Bannon's comments as he celebrated Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He said that he supported that attack because the Russians were not "woke" and knew "which bathroom to use". When one thinks about those phrases and how they are weaponised across different countries, it is possible to discern that there are connections between people who are campaigning to get us back in the closet, to get women back in the kitchen, to get us to know our place, and to turn our society backwards. We have to beware of those connections.

Women in the USA are now experiencing the shocking reality of a bonfire of the rights that they thought were established and permanent with the reversal of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court. In the USA, some of those fundamentalist justices now have their eyes fixed firmly

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

on same-sex marriage, the legality—for goodness’ sake—of same-sex relations, and even the use of contraception. This means that all the progress that we have been celebrating, and perhaps in our more complacent moments thinking could never be reversed, has just been reversed in front of the eyes of half the population of America. We must never forget that those same reactionary forces are lurking here in the UK working to achieve the same goal, often with generous fundamentalist funding from various nefarious organisations.

Before I warn more about backlash and the dangers that progress will be reversed, I want to take this opportunity to celebrate just how far LGBT+ people have come since that first Pride march wended its way from Trafalgar Square to Hyde Park 50 years ago. Unlike most of the people in the Chamber today, I was alive when that was happening, although I was not on the march. That would have been slightly too precocious of me, given that I was born in 1961—you do the maths.

The first Pride was organised by the Gay Liberation Front and attended by 2,000 people, as the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) said in her opening remarks. They were spat at, and they faced abuse on the streets for daring not to be ashamed of who they were, because repression and dissemination work best when people internalise the shame that those who want to keep them repressed try to put upon them. That is why the concept of Pride—of being proud and open and out about who you are—is such a powerful one. Again, it is the 50th anniversary of Pride in this country that this debate is celebrating.

That first Pride was a very different occasion from the carnival attended by 1.5 million people when we last had a Pride in London, pre-covid in 2019. I sincerely hope that this weekend’s 50th anniversary will resemble the 2019 carnival, rather than the first one. LGBT+ people have come a long way together with our allies, and we should all be proud of the progress we have achieved. Male homosexuality was only decriminalised by that pioneering Wilson Labour Government in 1967. Until then, jail awaited anyone who tried to be open about their sexual orientation. Many police forces carried out campaigns of entrapment, and gay men were regularly blackmailed, beaten up and prosecuted for being gay. Lesbians were not even mentioned in the law, and though their status was unclear, they too felt that they had to hide away.

When young people today hear about this oppressive history, they can scarcely believe it, so much have we managed to change by working together. That is the nature of the progress that we have achieved. Indeed, I watched Dame Kelly Holmes’s documentary yesterday. She went to see some LGBT Olympian boxers training together, and they did not even realise that when Dame Kelly joined the Army, she could have been dismissed in disgrace for her sexual orientation. They were astonished. This is massive change within only a few generations, and we should all be proud of achieving that.

The march to legal equality had many setbacks, not least the arrival of the odious section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which put back the cause of equality for years and caused untold misery for many of the most vulnerable people in our society at the most

vulnerable time in their lives. Even now, it leaves a legacy of unaddressed bullying in our schools, which some teachers worry about confronting. The decision of the Thatcher Government to write into the law of the land the ridicule of LGBT+ relationships as “pretended”, and to ban what they called the “promotion of homosexuality”, led directly to the formation of Stonewall in 1988. It was the beginning of a more focused attempt to push for basic human rights to apply to LGBT+ people. Meanwhile, trade unions organised to support LGBT+ people facing discrimination at work and incorporated the fight for equality into their workplace bargaining.

Today is the first day of the TUC LGBT conference, and I wish them luck from this Chamber and send greetings for the work they are doing, but the TUC published a poll of HR professionals today, which demonstrated that one in five of UK workplaces does not have any policies in place to support LGBT staff at work, and only half of managers said they had a policy prohibiting discrimination, bullying and harassment against their LGBT workers in their workplace. Although we have changed the law, we still have much to do to ensure that all employers treat their LGBT+ employees with the respect they deserve and that employees are properly protected from bullying at work.

There are fantastically good examples of great progress, but there are also some places where there has been no progress. We ought to support the TUC and the LGBT TUC, who are doing their best to change this reality in the workplace.

All the work I have mentioned helped drive real change and increased understanding of issues that had remained hidden for too long. The increasing willingness of LGBT+ people to come out brought these matters into the open, and there was a softening attitude to LGBT people among the public. As someone who became a Minister in the 1997 to 2010 Labour Governments, it was clear to me that public opinion on this issue had moved faster than the previous Government’s attitudes.

Throughout the 1980s, hostility to LGBT+ people was used explicitly by the Government in their political propaganda to portray the Labour party as loony lefties—that is the phrase that was always thrown at us. That effort was enthusiastically supported and highlighted by the Tory-supporting red-top tabloids in lurid and bullying headlines, which are still imprinted on my brain today. You know, it worked, Mr Deputy Speaker. I remember vividly canvassing in Battersea for the now Lord Dubs in the 1987 general election, only to have doors shut in my face after being told that Labour only stood for—the House will have to excuse me for using this language, but I think it is important in the context—the blacks and the queers. That is how well the weaponisation of this stuff, which all centred around section 28, worked.

For some of us, the so-called war on woke began at least 40 years ago. It has been waged, often unrelentingly and always irresponsibly, ever since. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) talked about wedge issues. He was absolutely right to call that out, because it is an example of the weaponisation of people’s vulnerabilities and personal characteristics to bully them, to other them and to make them feel that they do not belong in our society. It is that which we have to confront.

The fact that public opinion had moved beyond the ossified attitudes of many in the Thatcher and Major Governments created an opportunity for rapid legal reform to drive social progress when we returned to Government. We took that opportunity because we had a huge progressive majority in the House of Commons and public opinion was further ahead than even us in deciding that this change needed to be made. We lifted the ban on LGBT+ people serving in the armed forces—only after a court case, but that was how it was thought best to achieve it; we equalised the age of consent; we repealed section 28; we allowed unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to adopt; we removed discrimination against LGBT+ people from the sexual offences statutes; and we legislated for civil partnerships, finally allowing same-sex couples to marry and to enjoy the same legal protections that were available in heterosexual marriage.

The House of Lords was then—it is not now—an implacable opponent of this crucial reform agenda. It delayed and opposed progress. It was especially stubborn in its refusal to contemplate the repeal of section 28 and the equalisation of the age of consent. We tried for three years to repeal section 28 and nearly lost three local government Bills in the confrontations we had with the Lords before we succeeded. We managed to achieve the equalisation of the age of consent only by using the Parliament Acts, as the House of Lords simply would not pass it.

All of this was done in the face of huge hostility in the tabloid press, which ran banner headlines about gay mafias running the country and Labour obsessing about gay rights. All we wished to do, as a Government, was to accord equal rights and freedom from discrimination in law to LGBT+ people, whom we wished to see treated as human beings in our society—equal and equally respected. The battle was hard and difficult, but it was worth it because we won.

When I first came into this House, I certainly never imagined that 30 years later, I would be sitting in one of the gayest Parliaments in the world. [HON. MEMBERS: “The gayest.”] It is the gayest Parliament in the world. I often think that, particularly late at night when we are waiting for the votes that never seem to come. The fact that we are here in numbers, and across parties, means that we can work together to preserve the gains made and improve the situation for LGBT+ people in our country and internationally.

I end my contribution to this celebration of 50 years of Pride with a warning. LGBT communities are facing a backlash in the UK. Hate crime against the community is rising disproportionately. According to Galop, the LGBT+ anti-abuse charity, two thirds of us experienced violence or abuse last year, with nearly a third of that consisting of physical violence, and four in 10 trans people have suffered a hate crime this year. Much of that goes unreported in official crime statistics, but it all has a detrimental psychological effect on the individual victims.

The Government started with a positive agenda for LGBT+ rights, but that has now stalled. We look to the Minister to get it going again and ensure that it ends up at the destination that we all hope for, and I know he intends. Perhaps some in the Government are falling victim to that same temptation to pursue a divisive war on woke with a special focus on trans people. I know

that he is not in that group of people, and I wish him all power in making his arguments. I hope that he can prevent that happening or getting any worse, because it singles out people who are already marginalised by portraying them as a threat or holding them up to ridicule.

All this official bullying has a familiar ring to it for those who were around in the 1980s, as I was. It is as reprehensible and destructive now as it was then, and it has to be defeated. We learned that the much-delayed yet long-promised ban on conversion therapy will now exclude trans people, and will contain a consent loophole that means it is not a ban at all. I have been a Minister, so I know how pragmatic the Minister will have to be to get the legislation on the statute book. Again, we will work cross-party to make that ban as effective, thorough and applicable across the board as we can. I hope that the Government will relent on the fact that there is currently no place in that ban for trans people. With that battle going on, it is no wonder that the UK has fallen from 1st place to 14th place in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe’s ranking of gay friendly European countries. I want to see us back in first place.

Sadly, it seems that the Government have chosen to use LGBT people as a useful wedge issue as the general election approaches. I hope that whoever makes those decisions will step back from doing that and think about the damage it does. Those of us who support LGBT people will do everything in our power to make certain that it does not work and does not succeed.

Despite those setbacks, working towards true equality and full human dignity for LGBT people remains an important priority cross-party for all those who wish to live in a fairer and more inclusive society. That is what I will be marching for at the 50th anniversary of Pride, and I expect to see Mr Deputy Speaker—in some T-shirt no doubt—and all other hon. Members present along the way. We hope the weather holds out. We will be marching with pride for what we have achieved, with confidence that there is more to do, and with determination that we will do it.

3.28 pm

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) and for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), who delivered a tour de force on the history of the struggle for equal rights. I really do feel humbled to stand in this place and think of the change that has come since those 2,000 brave activists took to the streets 50 years ago. They laid the groundwork for me and for others, as others have said, to have a happy life as an LGBT+ community.

On Saturday, as the LGBT+ community begins its march through the nation’s capital to mark the 50th anniversary of Pride, a group of veterans will, with quiet dignity, have their moment of inclusion when they join and march with uniformed armed forces serving personnel for the first time. I am delighted that this invitation has been extended, because these veterans will wear their medals with pride, knowing that in their ships, squadrons and regiments they met every challenge the rigours of service life placed in their path side by side with their colleagues.

However, this group of veterans met so many other challenges, because they served in the shameful years of the ban on homosexuality in the armed forces. Twenty-two years ago, the ban on homosexuality and LGBT personnel serving in the armed forces was lifted, but while it was in place it inflicted staggering cruelty on many men and some women who had stepped forward to serve their country.

Between the mid-1950s and 1996, the men of our armed forces who were thought to be gay were arrested, searched and questioned by officers trained for wartime interrogation. That was despite homosexuality having been decriminalised in 1967. This interrogation could run on for days, and then they would be charged, often without legal counsel or support, and on many occasions an arrest was based on little or no evidence. Heterosexual men were falsely accused by service police officers, losing careers and in some cases homes and families.

After harrowing investigations, these men were taken to military hospitals, where they were subjected to degrading and shameful medical inspections conducted in accordance with the confidential Defence Council instructions held by every unit of the armed forces. At court martial, in the moments before those convicted were sent down, operational medals and good conduct badges would be stripped from their uniforms. As they walked from prison, they were dismissed in disgrace, with criminal records as sex offenders.

These men typically served six months in prison for the military criminal offence of being homosexual. That continued until 1996, and administrative dismissal of LGBT+ personnel continued for a further four years, until January 2000. They were cast out of the armed forces family, outed to their own family and friends, and many lost their homes and livelihoods. Their service record cards had the top corner clipped and were marked in red pen with the annotation “Dismissed in disgrace”, causing a lifetime of employment issues. In the past, in their moment of need, they were shunned by military charities—something that I am grateful has now changed.

Despite a six-month delay in his appointment, I would like to welcome the right hon. Lord Etherton QC as the chair of the Government’s LGBT veterans independent review, who I gather will be meeting veterans in London this weekend at Pride. The independent review will, for the first time, assess the number of people affected by the historical ban. Lord Etherton’s report will give Government an opportunity to finally recognise the service of LGBT veterans. The report must make reparations for the appalling cruelty those veterans faced, and the consequences that they have endured for a lifetime. If we are to take real pride in their service, and if we are as a nation truly sorry for their treatment, it must deliver restorative justice.

The men and women who will march in the capital on Saturday should feel no shame whatever. It is the inhumane, cruel historical ban on homosexuality that shames our nation, and I know today that so many others, like me, are immensely proud of their courage, both in their service, and in their struggle to be who they are. They can hold their heads high on Saturday, and despite the rigours they have endured in their lives they can be as proud of themselves as we are of them. I hope the serving communities of our armed forces and our service chiefs show their pride in them too.

Today’s armed forces are inclusive and welcoming of LGBT+ personnel. They make our armed forces more effective in combat, and they reflect the values of our nation today. The Royal Navy, Royal Marines, Army and Royal Air Force need not own responsibility for the history of the ban, but for this 50th Pride, they can and have welcomed LGBT+ veterans back to the military family from which they were forcibly removed. I ask that the Chief of the Defence Staff and service chiefs do everything they can in the years ahead to ensure that they are stakeholders in a better future for LGBT+ veterans. The process now in place must deliver proper reparations, including restoring pensions and financial compensation. Until that happens, this will remain a matter of national disgrace. Those terms are the absolute minimum of what is owed to those long-suffering veterans, who deserve to live their lives with the same pride, honour and comfort as all other veterans.

As our LGBT veterans march through the capital, they will be supported every step of the way by the amazing team at Fighting With Pride—an organisation I am proud to support as an ambassador, together with Conservative and SNP colleagues. Our shared support for the work of that small charity is a reflection of the incredible tenacity that it has shown in bringing to our attention the plight of gay, bisexual, transgender and other veterans. Finally, I pay tribute to the joint chief executive officers of Fighting With Pride, Caroline Paige and Craig Jones MBE, for their service in the armed forces, and for their service today for the LGBT community.

3.38 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): As a queer woman and an openly proud lesbian, it is a huge privilege to speak in this debate in the House. I warmly welcome and congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on her persistence, and on being an icon in the LGBT community—I am sure many young people in our movement and across the political spectrum look up to her. We have had some brilliant contributions so far and as we mark 50 years of Pride, it is important to reflect, as many have, on how far we have come, and to look at where we are and at the challenges we face in future.

I want to acknowledge a member of my staff, Amy Cowan, who helped me to prepare for today’s debate. I also pay tribute to my dear friend Michelle Rodger, who passed away last August from triple negative breast cancer. She was the most wonderful ally, who supported me through many dark times after I came out, and helped me to write and prepare for the many LGBTQ-themed speeches and events to which I was invited after I came out. I miss her dearly: there is a gap in my life and my team that will simply never be filled.

I also want to recognise some of my dear friends—a wedge of lesbians we could call them—some of whom are here to watch today’s proceedings. They are sisters who know who they are; women who have blazed a trail in all aspects of life, and worked so hard in their many fields to further LGBTQ equality. They include our chief lesbian, Linda Riley, who has helped me personally so much since I came out, and who does incredible work through *DIVA Magazine* and her tireless charitable work. Many LGBTQ people have a queer family, and they are just some of mine. Among them is also Jacquie Lawrence, who this week was awarded the Iris prize

fellowship for her work and contributions to the LGBTQ+ community in the media, particularly representing queer and lesbian women, who are so often under-represented.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) referred to the experience of our LGBTQ friends in the military, who have faced serious and deep discrimination. Jacquie was the commissioning editor at Channel 4 who commissioned “The Investigator”, the programme with Helen Baxendale that told the true story of some lesbians’ experience in the military. She has done pioneering work in her time, and she recently commissioned, produced and directed “Gateways Grind” with her Jackdaw Media partner Fizz Milton. Presented by Sandi Toksvig, it is a crucial, funny and brilliant piece of film making about the Gateways lesbian club in London. I implore hon. Members and those watching the debate to watch it.

I have my own family, and I am very grateful that they love and accept me. I am proud that my fiancée Emma and I are able to be open, live our lives freely and be accepted by our families. Many both home and abroad cannot do that. That is why we need Pride 50 years on, and that is why Pride continues to be a protest.

For many, Pride is personal. Local Prides have been something of a phenomenon across Scotland and the UK, and beyond. In my constituency, West Lothian Pride is a fantastic event that has brought the community together locally. We should pay tribute to those Prides and the people who run them, support them and fund them. Some will be able to choose to go out and join a march, a celebration or a parade, but some, be they here or abroad, may not be able to celebrate publicly because it is illegal in their country, because they are not quite there yet or because they cannot come out.

I have vivid memories of my first Pride march after I came out here in London: the love, the celebration and the sense of freedom. We have come a long way since the first Pride in London in 1972, when 2,000 brave activists marched. It now attracts an estimated 1.5 million people. But Pride is, and still should be, a protest. Although, as some have observed, there is a creep of commercialisation into Pride, I cannot help but feel a superficial glow when I walk down Oxford Street and see every shop window clad in rainbows during June. We see big corporate firms talking about their Pride networks and think, “How wonderful that so many corporations are embracing us, the LGBTQ+ community.”

However, when we scratch the surface and look up how many of those big companies actively support, embrace, employ and promote LGBTQ+ people, we realise that perhaps it is not such a rainbow-tinted picture after all and a fair amount of rainbow-washing is going on. Do not get me wrong: clearly many great companies are doing great things, but when we consider that there are still only eight female chief executive officers of FTSE 100 companies and zero openly LGBTQ+ ones, that does beg the question of genuine diversity and inclusion.

It is also legitimate to ask how those companies who sell rainbow tat, or indeed rainbow-branded stuff, are actually supporting Pride and LGBT people. My favourite one recently was the M&S Pride sandwich—that, Mr Deputy Speaker was lettuce, guacamole, bacon and tomato. To be fair, M&S was genuinely donating profits to the Terrence Higgins Trust, which is fantastic, but that does beg the question of whether some companies gloss over Pride with rainbow-themed mimics and benefit

financially from our oppression while not really genuinely supporting our community. That is why, 50 years on, Pride is still a protest.

Pride is still a protest because, in 71 countries across the world, it is illegal to be LGBTQ—I am illegal in 71 countries. In 11 of those countries, the death penalty still exists for consensual same-sex activities.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Crewe and Nantwich) (Con): The hon. Member is making a powerful case for the need for Pride and highlighting the extreme circumstances that people go through in other countries. One of the tests that I think we often ask ourselves is: would every gay person in this country on a late night out surrounded by drunk crowds feel confident to hold their partner’s hand? I am not sure that they would. Even in this country, there is a lot that we can still do on those issues.

Hannah Bardell: I thank the hon. Gentleman and absolutely agree with him. I have had experiences that I have had to report to the police, including being abused simply for holding hands with a partner, and that was in Scotland. That is a reality that many of us have faced, and we have seen in the press recently reports of members of the LGBTQ+ community being attacked and targeted simply for holding hands with their same-sex partner.

Some of those countries have been awarded international sporting awards, such as the Olympics and the World cup, and that is hugely problematic. People in those countries cannot enjoy the most basic of human rights or freedoms that many of us have. To be able to love and be loved and be yourself is truly and surely the most fundamental of human rights. It goes absolutely to the heart of who we are and how we express ourselves.

The truth is that, while in the UK we have the right to love who we want, to marry or be in a civil partnership with them and to have a family, there are still gaps in those rights and there is still huge prejudice. As we stand and sit here today, our trans and non-binary siblings are being subjected to a grotesque attack on their rights just to exist, to access healthcare, to participate in sport and wider society, and to be fairly represented in an increasingly hostile media.

I want to put it on the record here and now that I stand with my trans and non-binary siblings. I will fight for them, as they have fought for my rights against the tide of misinformation in the ’70s and ’80s—as well as before and since, against gay men and lesbians, as many Members have said—and against a hostile media and a hostile UK Government and Prime Minister, who seem intent on rolling back on promises to ban conversion practices against trans people and to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004. I am delighted to hear Conservative Members being so genuine and speaking out and supporting trans people, but I know that they have challenges in their own party. We all have challenges. We all have members of our own party with whom we disagree, with whom we need to engage and whom we need to try to bring on board. But there is a threat to members of our community and our community in general.

I hope that in not too short a time I will be able to stand here and tell Members about the legislation that we will have passed in the Scottish Parliament to protect and promote the lives of trans and non-binary people so that they can live their lives happily, healthily and without fear of discrimination. We have made significant

[Hannah Bardell]

progress in Scotland. I am not saying that it is perfect, as I have outlined, but one of the most important things that we have done is embed LGBT inclusive education in our curriculum. Years of work and campaigning from organisations such as Stonewall and, of course, the radical work of Jordan and Liam at TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—have meant that little boys and girls, like my nieces and nephews, and like all our children, will grow up understanding that it is perfectly normal for their friends to have two daddies or two mummies, or be brought up by carers, in care, in a blended family or, like me, in a single-parent family. Inclusive education, despite the efforts of many, does not mean that we are indoctrinating or brainwashing children—quite the opposite. We are simply explaining to them that families come in all shapes and sizes, and they are all beautiful.

Let me illustrate the point. I was born the year that section 28 came into force. I also grew up in a single-mother family, at a time when Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister and was not just fond of spouting anti-LGBT rhetoric but of saying that women like my mum should be locked up in asylums. The lack of representation of LGBT people and the hyper-normalised heteronormativity pushed at us through the media and Government were enough to make me feel so much an outcast that I turned away from my own sexuality and suppressed it, until I was elected and was 32. I am willing to openly admit the profound impact that that has had on my mental health and relationships over the years. I read an article earlier in which Sir Ian McKellen talked about coming out in the '80s and the liberation that he felt. He said:

“It changes your life utterly. I discovered myself and everything was better.”

Those words are so true. That is exactly how I felt when I first came out.

At the age of 39, as an openly queer woman, I am in a much better place, but that was not always the case. No child should grow up feeling like they do not belong. No child should grow up feeling like they are wrong or that who they love or the life that they seek is illegal. No child or young person should grow up feeling like they do not have the right to be themselves, to marry or to have children because of who they are or who they love. But that is how I felt, and it is, quite frankly, how we are making trans and non-binary people feel today. I have no doubt that we will look back on this period of political history and feel deep, deep shame—as we should—at the way we have treated and are treating trans and non-binary people, just as we look back at the appalling way that we treated lesbian, gay and bisexual people in decades gone by. Let us not repeat history.

I pay tribute to two friends of mine who are true icons, Jake and Hannah Graf, who are both trans and who recently welcomed their second child. I hope that the whole House will join me in congratulating them. I have loved watching their journey and seeing people in the media, such as the brilliant Lorraine Kelly, welcome and embrace them and their family. That will give hope to so many.

Pride is still a protest because: the 2020 LGBT health and wellbeing survey suggests that 71% of LGBT young people experience bullying in school on the grounds of

being LGBT; reports of sexual orientation hate crimes recorded by UK police forces rose from an average of 1,400 a month from January to April 2021 to 2,200 on average from May to August 2021; two thirds of LGBTQ+ people have experienced violence or abuse, according to Galop; two in five trans people have experienced a hate crime or incident because of their gender identity; and LGBTQ+ people of colour or with a disability are increasingly much more likely to be discriminated against or abused. Those statistics should shame us all.

After Brexit, homophobic hate crime rose by 147%. Never let anyone tell you that Brexit brought people together. The narrow-minded bigotry that fuelled that campaign has dragged the UK down a dark ditch of homophobia, racism and bigotry. Those who have pursued that and who are implementing certain policies continue to threaten our rights, freedoms and democracy.

Pride is a protest 50 years on because we still face so many challenges, discrimination and marginalisation in the LGBTQ+ community, so let us never stop marching, never stop protesting and never stop speaking out for the rights of everyone in our community to love and live freely.

3.51 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing this debate, which is fittingly taking place on the final day of Pride month. When I think about the history of Pride in the UK, I think of not only the beauty and strength that diversity brings to our communities, but the struggle and discrimination that many LGBT+ people continue to face, with a staggering four out of five anti-LGBT+ hate crimes going unreported.

The Stonewall riots happened 53 years ago on Tuesday. It was a pivotal moment in LGBT+ history, sparking the flames of Pride. I pay tribute to every activist who has fought so hard for LGBT+ rights; their impact has been immeasurable. Fifty years ago, the first Pride protest happened in London. It has grown from just over 2,000 people attending back in 1972 to more than 1.5 million in 2019. If the House wants to know what solidarity looks like, it is more than 1 million people standing with their fellow humans saying that they are loved, welcomed and valued.

Since 2014, Durham Pride has brought together people from across the north-east. It has been nurtured by the inspirational Mel Metcalf and the entire Pride committee, who work tirelessly to ensure that the celebration gets bigger, better, more inclusive and more accessible every year. I was thrilled to address the crowd again this year. The sea of rainbows, glitter, sequins and solidarity that fills the event field is a sight to behold. Mel's infectious enthusiasm for bringing people together to celebrate the freedom to love without discrimination is like nothing I have ever witnessed. Next year will see the 10th Durham Pride. I hope the whole House will join me in commending Mel's fantastic work.

For 50 years, seeing the humanity and joy in people celebrating who they are at Pride has been vital. It is important because celebration is protest. When some parts of society would rather hide people away, that celebration is an act of defiance, and we must match that defiance with solidarity. At this year's Durham Pride, the fabulous MC Tess Tickle described how, after

past refusals from some politicians had left her feeling as though she was not accepted, her town's new Labour mayor Carole Atkinson decided to proudly fly the Pride flag from Spennymoor town hall. For once, she said, she felt accepted by people in power. That shows the impact that the words and actions of elected representatives can have.

In this place, we have the power to make an impact. Shamefully, this place's impact was felt for the 15 painful years when section 28 was enforced—15 years of shame. In a 1988 debate on the implementation of clause 28, Tony Benn said:

"The day will come when people will look back on this debate and be glad that there were hon. Members on both sides of the House who stood against what is an incitement to harass decent people".—[*Official Report*, 9 March 1988; Vol. 129, c. 385.]

I would like to think that Mr Benn would have been rather pleased with the contributions in the House today by hon. Members speaking up for decent people around the country celebrating who they are.

I wonder how many of the first Pride marchers in 1972 thought that same-sex marriage would be legalised. It took until 2013, but the impact of our legislation has been felt. There is still so much to do on LGBT+ rights—too much. In 2018, the Government set out more than 75 actions to improve the lives of LGBT+ people in the UK by May 2022. It is now the last day of June 2022, but since 2019 two thirds of those actions have not been implemented. That is simply not good enough. Will the Minister tell me whether those actions are still Government policy? This Government promised to ban trans conversion practices, but they continue to drag their heels. They would rather light up buildings with rainbows than make any meaningful change.

Fifty years on from the first Pride event, let me be clear: Pride is a valued part of life in Britain, and we must do all we can to ensure that our country is progressive, welcoming and inclusive. I reiterate my pride in the hundreds of people who lined the streets of Durham on 29 May for this year's Pride march to show their love, their understanding and their solidarity with our LGBT+ friends. It was a celebratory protest—a protest against fear, against hate, against being someone you are not, against the idea that only some of us are worthy. Most of all, it was a protest against anything that does not lift up love. It reaffirmed Rev. David Rushton's words of support to the LGBT+ community that day: "Know you are loved."

3.58 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real privilege to follow such brilliant speakers on both sides of the House. It is probably the only thing that we all share in common and agree about in this place, so it is a shame that those who disagree are not here to hear such brilliant speeches, the solidarity across the parties or the love, kindness, support, hope and optimism embodied in every single speech and intervention that I have heard so far.

Pride matters to me. My first Pride was not in Plymouth; it was Brighton Pride. I was young. I had brown hair in those days. I had an amazing time—and that is where I will put a full stop against it. It was fabulous. We all remember our first Pride: it is liberating, it is freeing and you get a real sense of knowing who you are. We need to ensure that 50 years of Pride are celebrated, we

need to mark what has happened, and we need to celebrate the local Prides. Plymouth Pride on 13 and 14 August this year will be brilliant; I will be there. London Pride on Saturday will be brilliant, and I will be there as well.

Pride Month reminds us of the extraordinary progress that we have made in the past 50 years. Since the first Pride protest in 1972, we have achieved huge milestones in this country: equal marriage; gay adoption; gay and bisexual men being able to donate blood; the end of section 28; the equalisation of the age of consent; LGBT personnel serving in our armed forces, and so much more. But the LGBT community has never been a homogeneous blob of people; we have always been different, and it is that celebration of individualism, and our collective bonds, that has defined the past 50 years. To put it another way, we are all different, and we are all equal. However, the achievements of the past 50 years have created a belief among many that equality is a one-way street—that things only ever get better. There is a sense of the inevitability of progress. That is welcome—I am an optimist, and I want things to only ever get better—but we need to challenge the belief that while we must accept some bumps in the road, a challenge here or there, perhaps an obstacle to climb over, things will always get better, because it has led to a political consequence, the consequence of comfortable complacency.

I speak on the basis of my own experience as a cisgender gay man when I say that many of the members of the community with whom I associate most frequently have fallen into that trap of comfortable complacency. It is often affluent cisgender gay men who dominate the LGBT+ debates, taking the lion's share of comment and the lion's share of the voice. They sometimes complain about there being politics in Pride. I am sure that every Member in the House has heard this at some point: "Why is there politics in Pride? We shouldn't have that; it is about rainbows." We have politics in Pride because without the politics, there would be no Pride.

Dr Mullan: The hon. Gentleman has touched on an issue that concerns me sometimes. In the cisgender gay community, there can be what is almost a bit of distaste towards the more overt displays of sexuality and other such changes. I like to remind people that men in drag were at the forefront of the Stonewall riots, fighting for the rights from which more heteronormative-appearing gay people benefit. They should think carefully before wanting to distance themselves from people who are more overt in their displays of sexuality and orientation.

Luke Pollard: I have to say that I get camper by the year. I look back on my first speech in the House after my election in 2017, when I spoke about being gay, and about being Plymouth's first ever "out" MP. I was cautious: I was careful with my words, because I was very conscious that the words I used could inspire some people but offend others. Since then, however, I have been on a diet of rainbows and glitter. It is so much better being honest about who you are, because when you are honest and authentically you, not only do you live a better life, but you allow others around you to live a better life. I think that no matter who we are, we should be encouraging everyone to be authentically themselves.

[Luke Pollard]

Part of that means challenging that culture of comfortable complacency and the idea that it only ever gets better. What we are seeing now, in America and, sadly, in the UK, are deliberate attempts to take us backwards—attempts to rewrite LGBT rights and to roll them back. Many of those who are comfortably complacent and are not active in this fight have not experienced that rollback, but we do not need to look far to find people who are experiencing it right now. They are members of a group within our big LGBT+ family: trans and non-binary people. The level of hate crime, the level of abuse, the marginalisation, the cutting and pasting of 1980s headlines that were applied to gay people then and are now being applied to trans and non-binary people—we can see the rollback of rights that is directly in front of us, but only if we open our eyes to it.

Our history is littered with examples of the policy that to conquer, it is necessary to divide. That is what we are seeing here, and that is why all of us, whether we are trans or not, need to stand with our trans and non-binary friends in the fight that lies ahead. This means ensuring that we have a fully trans and non-binary inclusive ban on conversion practices, and it means making a stand when attacks are made on their presence, their identity, their visibility, their legitimacy to exist. That is why we need to ensure that there is no rollback of rights, here or abroad. We need to ensure that there is no growing exceptionalism, with people saying, “LGB rights are fine, but those trans folk—well, they are different.” We have all heard that in our communities, and it is something we must challenge because being LGBTQ+ is not a single identity. It is a liberation of authenticity. It is a community where everyone is different, but it is those common bonds that make that community worth while. We must stand together, and if we do not address that comfortable complacency, hate will spread and breed more division.

Elliot Colburn: The hon. Member speaks powerfully about the need not to be complacent. Does he share my disappointment that at the same time as we are having this very collegiate cross-party debate in this Chamber today, there is a very reactionary debate going on right now in Westminster Hall? Does this not demonstrate the very point he is trying to make?

Luke Pollard: I have been watching the notifications on the Annunciator about who is speaking in that debate, and I really hope that that Chamber is experiencing the same uplifting warmth and generosity that we are in here, but I suspect that it is not. That is why we need to make sure we keep challenging.

Equality campaigns are not a military confrontation. We do not defeat the opposing side through their utter destruction and annihilation. We win an equality campaign by turning the people who oppose us so that they share our beliefs. We do that not with a big stick but with kindness, understanding and listening—but, my word, we will need a lot of kindness, understanding and listening if we are to win those fights. But win them we must, and that is why the culture of comfortable complacency must be challenged.

It is not for young LGBT people in our country to say that they are lucky to be here. It is not that they have been born by accident in a place: they are here and able

to be themselves because of the work that was done in the past and that is being done today. This is not just something in our history books. The struggle is not something that is only in the past tense. That is something we must communicate to others as well. Telling our story means explaining where we are now, how we got here and where we are going—and that it matters. We need to recognise that, if we do not tackle that comfortable complacency, the attention will move to another group. It is targeting trans and non-binary people now, but who will be next? Which group will be targeted next?

There has always been hate against LGBTQ+ communities, and not just from those wearing fascist emblems and insignia. We need to recognise that hate turns up now wearing different clothes. It turns up wearing common sense, it is plain English, it is something about chipping away, not taking everyone on at the same time. Those forces on the right and far right of politics, and sometimes those with a perverted sense of religious values, have seen an Achilles heel in our democracy. They have seen the way in which they can roll back our rights by creating division within our alliances, our coalitions and our big families. Hate dressed up as common sense, fearful spectres, stereotypes and division must not pollute those big families, because at the heart of that big LGBT family are love, value and understanding. We must not lose sight of that.

This is not just about those who have a plan to divide us. It is also about those useful idiots who are content with breaking consensus, dividing communities and turning a blind eye to the violence that their actions encourage in order to get one step forward, a tactical gain, a partisan advantage or a few extra votes here or there by creating a wedge issue on which they can squeeze people and headlines that will bash a group so that they can avoid attention elsewhere. In Britain we know these people as those behind the culture wars. Every party has individuals like that within their movements, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) said.

We must each of us commit to engage and discuss this. It is hard sometimes, but we must do so to make sure that we are getting there, because as we have seen in America, we should be in no doubt that those who want to take us back have a plan. It is a long-term plan and will take many years for them to achieve it, but there is a plan and a direction of travel. The assumption that things only get better and that those who campaigned do not need to go as hard any more is part of their plan. That comfortable complacency is something they rely on.

We are seeing trans people being attacked in America, and the proponents of those arguments are now coming for a woman's right to choose what happens to her body. Although we have a different set-up here in the UK, the US Supreme Court's ruling on *Roe v. Wade* has the same consequences on this side of the pond: an attack on women's rights, on bodily autonomy and on an individual's choice of what happens to them. So totemic is that decision, it is not just American women who will feel the ruling's consequences. When they come after a woman's right to choose what happens to her body, who is next? We are already seeing it in Florida with “Don't Say Gay,” with rainbows being painted over, with the status of LGBT-safe classrooms being removed and with LGBT young people being marginalised by their allies being afraid to say something.

It is the return of section 28, and we need to be very conscious of that. Once it happens there, next it will be equal marriage and the other rights that LGBT citizens currently enjoy.

There are songs by Katy Perry and One Direction that are older than my right to marry my boyfriend. Hell, we all probably have spices in our kitchen cabinets that are older than the right to equal marriage in this country. This is a young right, a new right, and we know that young and new rights can sometimes be the easiest to sweep away. Let us commit ourselves not only to clearing out our kitchen cabinets every now and then—

Dame Angela Eagle: Get your spice cupboard sorted out.

Luke Pollard: Indeed, let us sort out our spice cupboards. We must make sure that we embed these rights, protect them, talk about them, value them and defend them.

I have spoken about the villains, so I will briefly talk about the heroes. These heroes do not wear capes. They are the allies and supporters of the LGBT community who create safe spaces for young gay kids to come out, they are the guys down the pub who have quiet words with their mates when their language gets too tasty, and they are the teachers who create spaces where LGBT bullying is not acceptable and is called out, but who also explain why so that it never happens again. They are not only politicians and celebrities; they are the army of ordinary citizens who know that love is love, that being different is not a crime and that our society is better and stronger when we can all be our authentic selves.

If we are to win and if equality is to triumph, it needs to be visible. Those in the public eye, like me and every Member who has spoken in this debate, need to shake ourselves of any notion of comfortable complacency. We need to amplify the voices of LGBT communities because, for all the pitfalls and perils we currently face, equality should be a one-way street. Things should only get better, but that will happen only if we have the determination to say “no U-turns ahead.” That requires constant campaigning, which is why visibility matters.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am sure you were watching Glastonbury at the weekend when Olly Alexander, the undefeated king of queer pop, said

“any attack on any human being’s bodily autonomy is literally an attack on all of us. It doesn’t matter who you are, this affects us all.”

Olly is right. Trans, straight, gay, bi, male, female, queer and non-binary—they are all different and all equal. It affects us all. That is why we have to spread the positive message that progressive rights are hard fought for and can be easily lost. Solidarity in fighting for other people’s rights is a key part of protecting our own.

A few weeks ago I spoke in the Westminster Hall debate on the case for banning trans conversion practices, in which I spoke about my love of “Heartstopper.” Since then, I have been inundated with messages from young people telling me their story and what the series means to them. We need to recognise that this “Heartstopper” generation of young people is not just a cultural phenomenon. It is a political force, too.

Hannah Bardell: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that representation in the media is important? I grew up at a time when there was so little to watch. I watched “The L Word” for the first time when I was 32 years old, and

it was so important to me. The fact young people now have so many programmes and such a range of content that represents their life and in which they can see themselves reflected back is absolutely crucial. The “Heartstopper” generation needs so much more of that content, and so do we.

Luke Pollard: I absolutely agree. I remember watching “Queer as Folk” on Channel 4 with the volume turned down as far as I could, in case someone heard. I also watched “Gladiators,” which was camp as hell. We must recognise that, too. Visibility does matter, and the generation of young people who were born into a world in which equality, authenticity and solidarity are not rights to be won but the inalienable possession of each and every one of them means they have taken political power. Those who have spoken in this debate stand on the shoulders of giants, those incredible campaigners who came before us. We need to recognise that there is an army of allies out there for whom this fight is real, because when they come for one of them, they come for all of us. That “Heartstopper” generation does not make a distinction between who is “L”, who is “G”, who is “B”, who is “T” and who is the “+”; they recognise that there is protection in the community in every single one of them. They each have a voice, their potential activism and a vote.

Finally, I wish to put on record my thanks to everyone who has spoken. The words from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) about LGBT personnel serving in our armed forces were especially powerful, and I hope that that report delivers real justice for those people, who have stepped up to serve our country and deserve proper justice. If Parliament is to have a 100th anniversary debate on celebrating Pride—and, my word, who knows how camp I will be by that point—we first need to defend it today. We need to make sure that there is no roll-back abroad or at home. That means the active participation of each and every one of us, not just those people who identify as LGBT+, our allies, but all those people within our wider community for whom things are all right at the moment. They feel that they do not need to step up, but we need to wake our LGBT family up from that comfortable complacency and get everyone fighting, because our rights are not inalienable unless we fight for them. We need to make sure that we keep fighting for equality so that every young person can grow up being authentically themselves.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I hope that medical research can advance sufficiently that I will be around for the 100th anniversary—I live in hope, too. We now come to the wind-ups and Kirsten Oswald.

4.16 pm

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow such a powerful speech from the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. It is an honour to sum up in this debate for my party, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) on securing the debate and on her incredibly powerful speech. The speeches we have heard today have been absolutely worth listening to in full, every single one of them. The points made by the hon.

[Kirsten Oswald]

Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) about why this matters and why nothing should be taken for granted are ones we ought particularly to reflect upon.

Clearly, lot of the speakers today have spoken from the perspective of personal experience, and I cannot say that I do. But it is important that I stand up and speak today, and reflect on what I have heard, all the same. It is good to be speaking on the 50th anniversary of Pride. As we have heard, it is a time for people to come together in unity and celebration. We have heard eloquently today about why this movement has been born out of protest, and why both the celebration and the protest remain very relevant, because we have made so much progress but we are absolutely not there yet. It is brilliant that we have so many visible and powerful role models, a number of whom are in the Chamber today, and it is fantastic that Pride parades take place so widely. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke warmly about the local Pride parades, which are so important to communities. It is important that local authorities fly the flag—my local council in East Renfrewshire raised its Pride flag recently, which is fantastic—and that corporates wear their Pride colours with, well, pride. My hon. Friend spoke insightfully about what lies beneath that. Despite all those positives, clearly challenges remain and part of the way we continue to deal with those is by speaking out and trying to empower others to do the same.

For that to be possible, we need, for instance, to have an unshakeable commitment to proper, open education for young people. That is absolutely vital to making sure that we continue on a positive, inclusive road, and that we make these critical school years so much better than they were for my peers in the 1980s. For that to happen, work that groups such as the TIE—Time for Inclusive Education—campaign in Scotland do in making sure that inclusive education is delivered is hugely important, and I want to put on record my admiration for what they do. Our young people deserve to have inclusive, open and clear education, to have that confidence that goes all the way through their schooling that they are perfect and valued just exactly as they are.

I also thank LGBT Youth Scotland for what it does and for the really positive influence that it brings to the table. Obviously, here in this place, we often disagree, and that is healthy and vital for democracy. I wish to note the tireless work of Out for Independence, which is the SNP's LGBT group, but I also applaud its counterparts in other political parties. That focus that political parties have on equalities issues, driven by the volunteers within these groups, is incredibly important for all of us here.

That broad input matters. The progress that we have made, and the progress that would be really easy to take for granted, is not guaranteed and is not worldwide. As we can see from the very depressing recent events in the USA, progressive policies can be reversed and rights can be removed. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston and the hon. Member for Wallasey spoke very powerfully about the vested interests and the misinformation that lie beneath some of these regressive and discriminatory moves that we can see.

We need in this place to be ready to call out issues when they arise. We need to keep pressing for equality. That means that we have to speak out and that we have

to decry the terrible plan to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda, not just for the very obvious straightforward reasons, but because the UK Government know full well the peril that that puts LGBT asylum seekers in. It means pointing out that that inclusive education that I just spoke about, and that the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) powerfully explained, really does matter. It means calling out dog whistle language and calling out those who would happily engage in what they would probably term “culture wars”.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lanark and Hamilton East was very powerful when she talked about hate crime statistics, particularly in regard to trans people. She very correctly reflected the similarity of some of that narrative to the period around section 28. I can remember that; it was all going on when I was at school. I am really glad that we have moved on from that particular issue, but we have heard here today, and we need to be frank about this, that the narrative around trans issues now is just as toxic—the othering, the misdirection and the hostility that we hear is disgraceful.

For the avoidance of doubt—I have said this before and I will no doubt say it again—I consider myself to be a feminist. That is in no way in conflict with my support for LGBT rights, or for trans people in particular. My rights are not threatened by other people having their rights respected.

As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport said so effectively, our rights—the rights of all of us—are better protected and far more secure when we do not permit the rights of any one group to be eroded.

The UK Government, the Prime Minister in fact, behaved very shamefully around the issue of conversion therapy—so-called therapy—when he U-turned and said that the support previously expressed for a ban on conversion therapy was no longer in place. That was swiftly followed by a partial U-turn on that U-turn—how confusing! None the less I do take my hat off to those members of the Conservative party who were absolutely scathing in their views about this. I am sure that some of that heat was responsible for the partial change of heart, and I applaud them for that.

The situation remains that, as things stand, the UK Government plan to ban conversion therapy in a limited way. There are very large holes in the provisions as far as I understand them. It is absolutely unjustifiable to exclude trans conversion practice from the plans being put forward. The suggestion that trans people would be excluded because it is too complex is both nonsense and shameful.

Elliot Colburn: The hon. Lady is making a very powerful case. Does she agree that the concern that has been raised by many charitable organisations rings very true? It is that, by excluding trans people, there is the potential to allow the conversion practice of LGB people to continue through the backdoor, by dressing it up as if it is conversion therapy on gender identity rather than sexual orientation?

Kirsten Oswald: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. He is absolutely right, and that is one of the many holes within the plans, as I understand them, that need to be filled in. That really must be dealt with. That is why we must keep pushing for progress,

including on that matter. Nobody's identity should ever be up for debate. Nobody should ever need to fear being converted away from being themselves.

As I often have, I want to put on record my admiration for our Equalities Minister, Christina McKelvie, who is unstinting in her commitment to ensuring that that point is clearly made as Scotland moves towards a ban on all conversion practices. That is welcome progress, and progress continues in other places too, such as the Church of Scotland, whose general assembly voted this year to permit the marriage of same-sex couples—well done to them, I say—and the world's oldest Methodist church, which I believe is in Bristol, which has started to marry same-sex couples to coincide with Pride month.

There is much to be positive about. We can see positive progress, but while we keep moving forward, we need to reflect. For me, the unstinting focus of Nicola Sturgeon on fairness and equality is very welcome in that context. We heard from the First Minister this week about our route to independence, and in her speech she once again made the point that the opportunity to build a better future was in a fairer, more inclusive country. The reason I support independence for Scotland is that I know it is a chance to improve the lives and circumstances of all the people who live in Scotland, and maybe to show that positive, fair, inclusive face to other countries around the world.

It is a real privilege to have heard the speeches in this debate and to be able to reflect on the points made. I know we still have work to do, but as I move forward with my work and look at how Scotland is moving forward, there is much for us to be proud of and much that we can build on in this Chamber. I know we can do that, and I look forward to a commitment both here and in Scotland to focusing on the principles that led to that first Pride march, 50 years ago.

4.26 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for opening it. I also thank every single speaker in the debate. I think I speak for everyone here when I say that we have seen one of the best examples of this Chamber in operation this afternoon: we have seen passion, commitment and the personal history that is so important for Members to bring to bear on issues such as this one.

There is so much to celebrate in the 50th year since the first Pride march took place in London on 1 July 1972. Half a century on, life has changed for the better for LGBT+ people in our country in many ways, and we should be proud of that, as hon. Members have said. We should be proud also of the contribution of so many trailblazers from this place as well: Chris Smith, Maureen Colquhoun, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) and so many others. This was memorably described earlier as being now the gayest of Parliaments. It has taken us far too long to get here, of course, and there will be no Parliament in the world that does not have gay people in it; it is just that those people will far too often not be able to be publicly who they genuinely are.

It can be very easy today to look back and wonder whether that progress was inevitable, but, as speaker after speaker has said, it was not inevitable. That progress

was won in the face of bigotry, ridicule, hostility, violence and intimidation. In the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), it has most definitely not been a one-way street towards progress. There is politics in Pride, because these are issues about power over individuals and their right to autonomy.

When my party, Labour, voted for a resolution committing to lesbian and gay rights in 1985, it was during a period of extreme hostility towards LGBT+ people. Just two years later, of course, our opponents proactively campaigned against that position on LGBT+ rights at the general election and then, as many speakers have said, followed Margaret Thatcher's section 28, banning councils and schools from the promotion of homosexuality as, in those bigoted words, "a pretended family relationship". It was, of course, the last Labour Government who removed that terrible law from the statute book in 2003; who introduced the unmarried partners concession that committed the UK to ending discrimination against gay and lesbian couples for immigration purposes; who lifted the ban on lesbians, gay men and bi people serving in the armed forces; who introduced civil partnerships, in the face of strong opposition; and who introduced laws to allow unmarried couples, including same-sex couples, to apply for joint adoption, again in the face of hostility.

As so many speakers have said, today some of that hostility is less overt, but LGBT+ people are still being let down. We in this Chamber know that the Minister had ambitious plans to mark the 50 years of Pride through the flagship Safe To Be Me global equality conference, which was supposed to open this very day. Instead the Minister is here and there is not going to be that conference, for the simple reason that there would not have been anyone there for Government Ministers to confer with—not even their LGBT+ adviser, Iain Anderson. That is because his resignation and the withdrawal of over 100 LGBT+ organisations and charities from Safe To Be Me last April was a consequence of Government policy—the Government's decision to reverse their plans to ban trans conversion therapy.

This is an international embarrassment. It shows that the Government need to rethink their approach on this issue, but so far we have not seen that. As has been mentioned, even the proposals to ban conversion therapy on the basis of sexual orientation still include the consent loophole that risks letting some of the worst practitioners off the hook.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn), in a very illuminating and thoughtful speech, rightly referred to the Westminster Hall debate that recently took place on the subject of conversion therapy. I do not want to repeat the arguments from that debate, but it really is extremely disappointing that instead of coming together to talk about the fact that almost a dozen countries still have the death penalty for homosexuality and that in dozens of countries it is still illegal to be who you are, we are lacking that conference.

Dr Mullan: The hon. Lady is talking about the global nature of these issues. Sometimes we see what is going on in other countries as being separate from us. One of the things I have noticed in the media with regard to big-budget global movies is that in the west we have now started to see more and more progress with gay characters in some of them. However, when some of the

[Dr Mullan]

big film studios put out films in China, such as a recent “Harry Potter” film that has a really high-profile gay character, they dampen it down because they are worried about how it will be perceived there. What goes on in other countries can have an impact in this country with regard to gay representation.

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful for that important intervention, which links with some of the contributions from SNP speakers on the role and responsibilities of companies in this space. I pay tribute to the British Council, because the work it has done with the British Film Institute has been very important in making sure that some of the marginalised, discriminated-against voices of LGBT+ people are heard right across the world, including where they know that films they have produced have been viewed in some of the countries where homosexuality is illegal by Government fiat. That is incredibly important work.

We would argue that we really do need to see a change in approach on these issues from the current Government. We had hoped that the conference would be used to launch a new LGBT+ strategy, which it was suggested might cover, for example, IVF, trans healthcare and homelessness, but we are yet to see it. The previous strategy was abandoned but we are yet to see the new one. It does seem that there has been over-promising but under-delivery in this regard, with the LGBT+ action plan having been killed off, the LGBT+ advisory panel having been disbanded, and with promises to reform the Gender Recognition Act having been dropped.

We are also concerned about something referred to by many speakers—attempts to pit different groups of people against each other instead of standing up for LGBT+ people and bringing them together. Of course, that is taking place in a context where hate crimes against LGBT+ people in our country have doubled over the past five years. I extend my solidarity to the hon. Members for Lanark and Hamilton East and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) and others who have been subject to homophobic and transphobic abuse—those who are in the Chamber now and those beyond it. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey provided some horrendous examples of the international nature of some of this hatred, especially that coming from actors from the far right and authoritarian right.

We need a different approach. The next Labour Government would not seek to divide people; instead, we would seek to bring them together. We would continue to protect and uphold the Equality Act 2010, including its protections for LGBT+ people. We would require employers to create and maintain workplaces free from LGBT+ harassment, including by third parties. As was mentioned in this debate, while some businesses are moving ahead, others are far behind in this regard; I associate myself with the remarks made about the importance of the TUC LGBT+ conference in that connection.

We will strengthen and equalise the law so that LGBT+ hate crimes attract the tougher sentences they deserve; they are not currently treated on a level playing field. We will ban all forms of conversion therapy outright, including trans conversion therapy, and we will modernise

the outdated Gender Recognition Act 2004 while maintaining the Equality Act 2010 protections for single-sex spaces.

The inquiry has finally now begun on the case of LGBT veterans. We will never rest until we see that compensation, which is so needed, and things being set right for those veterans who were treated so appallingly. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) for all his work and the work of those campaigners in Fighting With Pride. I heard directly from some of them recently, and their words were incredibly powerful about the disgraceful treatment meted out to some of those who did so much defending our country, and who frankly we should be proud of indeed, despite the shameful way in which they sadly have been treated by Governments and our society.

My party, the Labour party, is and always will be the party of equality. We stand up for LGBT+ rights, not because that is always easy, but because it is always right. To conclude, this week is about far more than celebrating the wonderful diversity of this country and the achievements of the past 50 years. As important as that is, it is about recommitting to ensure genuine equality for LGBT+ people, and that is not just important for LGBT+ people—as my hon. Friend for Wallasey said, it is important for all of society. As my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) said, equality adds beauty and strength to our society. I would say that it also adds health, happiness, prosperity and decency.

4.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mike Freer): I do not want to make this debate a political ding-dong, because these are usually very collegiate debates, but I am happy to have a private conversation with the shadow Minister about the actions of the Finchley Labour party and how it has used my sexuality against me in previous elections.

Moving on, I thank colleagues for their honest, wide-ranging and often very moving personal reflections as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first official UK Pride march. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley) for securing the debate. I pay tribute to those who have gone before me and the rest of us in this Chamber, whose campaigning over many years has allowed me to be an openly gay, married Minister. If I may indulge myself, Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank my husband for his unswerving support. None of us could do our jobs without the support of our partners and families.

Before putting some more official comments on the record, I will cover some points that were raised and specifically asked of me. On the issue of transphobia, particularly in the media: I will always call it out. I have called it out repeatedly; I often contact the media to say, “Why are you not coming to me for comment, because what you’re printing is simply factually incorrect?” Yet when I ask the Government Equalities Office whether a comment has been sought from the relevant Minister, the answer is no, it has not. That is shameful. I am all in favour of a free press, but I do expect a free press to be balanced and factual.

On Rwanda, I am very conscious of the concerns, and they are concerns that I share. However, I have had fruitful conversations with the relevant Ministers and

officials, who assure me that they are equally conscious of the issue and that every individual case—whatever the case—is dealt with on its merits before a decision is made. I can only say that I am keeping a close eye on how the policy develops.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Elliot Colburn) and the hon. Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) for their work on the APPG on global LGBT+ rights. The ability of those two powerful individuals to co-operate and lead the APPG makes it a force for good in this place and beyond. The hon. Member for Wallasey pointed to the recent murders in Norway, but it was not that long ago that a bomb went off in the Admiral Duncan pub. Sometimes we think these events only happen overseas, but they happen here in the UK as well.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden) and the shadow Minister paid tribute to Fighting With Pride. I joined it after it marched for the first time on Remembrance Sunday last year. Many ex-servicemen were in emotional tatters at that event, because for the first time they had been able to march with pride as service people. Their service had been recognised and they were able to wear their medals. Those of us who have not served have no idea: we cannot understand the power for service people of being able to march alongside their comrades.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) was right to point out the pernicious rainbow-washing that goes on. In my other portfolio, I spend a lot of time talking to international companies, and I take some comfort from what many of them are doing, especially in countries that are way behind us—although we have our challenges too—on equalities. It is wrong to pick out one company, because there are so many of them, but Diageo sticks out. In many countries where homosexuality is not legal or where there are gender pay gaps and gender discrimination, Diageo has been at the forefront. What struck me was that it was, I think, the first global company to provide full medical healthcare—not just time off; it paid for trans treatment—for trans people who were transitioning. It was at the forefront. To be honest, in those countries, such companies will have far more influence than a visiting UK Government Minister having a polite conversation with their opposite number. Although rainbow-washing is disappointing, many companies do very good work.

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point about companies. A lot of corporate firms do now seem to be offering their trans and non-binary staff surgery or financing for surgery, including in the UK. That does beg the question of how good the healthcare is here. I have spoken to a lot of practitioners who are scared, who have turned down jobs or who do not want to go into this area of healthcare because of the hostile environment in the media, the misinformation and the way that they are targeted. That is something we can all work together to challenge.

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I was going to touch in my more formal remarks on the work that Dr Hilary Cass is doing and on the wider work of the Department of Health and Social Care to reform trans healthcare. I think we can all agree that it is not fit for purpose currently.

To comment on the reflections of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), I wish I were going to be here in 50 years' time to see how camp he becomes. If I am still alive, perhaps I will tune in.

It is absolutely true that politics has a role to play. I probably embarrass Peter Tatchell on a regular basis by saying that he is one of my political heroes. He did things that I would not have had the courage to do. There are many people who have fought our battles in ways that we would not have had the guts to go about them. Unfortunately, bigotry does not rest in any one political party, and I remember the terrible election campaign that the Lib Dems ran against him, which was really quite shameful.

On the politics, I just led an LGBT trade delegation to Texas and San Francisco. While I was there, I did not pull my punches—I was half expecting a telling off when I got back. I said that I simply did not understand the Florida and Texas approach on LGBT rights of “Don’t Say Gay”. I was quite blunt that my party made that mistake 30 years ago and it did not work. The whole point of “Don’t Say Gay” did not work then and it will not work today. I deliberately called it out at every opportunity when I was in the States.

I want to get some particular points on the record. The idea that LGBT issues are a modern phenomenon that is being driven by social media is complete nonsense. LGBT people have existed since life began. If people take the trouble to do the research on trans issues, they will find that in native American society, the two-spirit movement recognises what we would call trans, and it has been there since those people walked the earth. In India, there is a 1,000, 2,000, 3,000-year history—if we can go that far back—of trans people, who were revered in the Hindu faith for achieving perfect balance, like the two spirits. The idea that LGBT rights are a sudden modern phenomenon, fad or phase that we will all grow out of is simply nonsense.

As we reflect on the last 50 years and the progress that we have made, I am conscious that we need to double down to protect those rights. Many hon. Members in the Chamber, including me, are in a privileged position. I am white, middle-class and a Government Minister—I am insulated from many of the issues that our community faces—yet I feel the forces that appear to be gathering to try to roll back our rights. That is why, although we can have debates about policies, one of my primary objectives while I have this portfolio is to make a positive change to the day-to-day lives of those in our LGBT community.

Hannah Bardell: The Minister is being generous with his time. Perhaps I can offer him some advice: not long after coming out, I went to an event and was told a story about the late, great Robin Cook. Were it not for his passing, I might not be here. He stood against the tide, I think in his party and other parties, to decriminalise homosexuality in Scotland, which did not happen until 1980, even though I am advised that he was told by many people around him, “Don’t do it. Don’t touch it. Don’t get involved.” Perhaps the Minister can channel the spirit of Robin Cook and try to push the issue forward. He is making an incredible speech and I am glad that he is on the Front Bench, but perhaps he can try to persuade some of his colleagues to do the things

[*Hannah Bardell*]

that we all want to see to make sure that particularly our trans and non-binary siblings have the rights they need.

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady makes a powerful point. I reassure her that I am having constant conversations with colleagues across Government to ensure that we get to a place where we can find consensus. Interestingly, I started off by coming out in Scotland, and it was only when I looked back that I realised that I had broken the law, because the decriminalisation in Scotland happened after I had started my gay life as a student there—perhaps I should not be admitting to breaking the law as a young gay man in Scotland.

I will turn to some more formal points before I get myself into even more trouble. We have talked about healthcare, but we are also looking across Government at education, policing, public services and the armed forces to try to ensure that the day-to-day lives of LGBT people are improved. This is about reviewing LGBT issues, including the HIV action plan, which seeks to eradicate all new infections. The ability to have PEP and PrEP on the NHS are major breakthroughs. Equally, my colleagues in Health are aware of the need to look at the efficacy of sexual health clinics to ensure that getting access to testing is as rapid as possible to minimise the opportunity for someone to reinfect someone else if they have an infection. Equally, working with Professor Fenton, we are looking at the practicalities of how to make that happen, not just have a policy statement.

On homelessness, I am talking to my colleagues in the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to look at how we can address LGBT homelessness, which can sometimes lead to sex work in all its forms, and that is not being resisted. Across Government, all of my colleagues are on board to try to make practical improvements.

Again, I am speaking to colleagues in the Home Office about ensuring not just that we get hate crime accurately reported, but, working with our partner Galop, that we understand the nuances of hate crime. It is not quite as black and white as some people believe. This is about understanding what is really happening to see what more we can do either to amend the law or, possibly more importantly, to ensure that police forces react positively.

If I may, I will now turn to the conversion practices ban. I am very conscious that, with colleagues in the Chamber, we have had this conversation several times now. There is work on the Bill, and I hope to see the Bill come in in the autumn—September or October, I hope. It is currently not yet trans-inclusive, and we are doing a piece of work on the complex issues people have. I do not think it is right that we should always shout down people who have different views if those views are based, as they sometimes are, on a lack of knowledge. I think an open and engaging conversation with colleagues who have different views is the right thing to do. As I said in Westminster Hall, if we take some more time on that particular thorny issue, which is causing perhaps more heat than light, to build some consensus, that would not in itself be a bad thing and I am hoping that we can get to a better place.

Dame Angela Eagle: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point and for his contribution to this debate in general. Given that trans-inclusivity is likely to be carried either in this House or in the House of Lords when the Bill comes in, would the Government consider drafting such a clause so that, if such a decision is made, we can make certain that parliamentary draftspeople have done the appropriate job in what is a difficult drafting area? That would be a very positive thing that the Minister might be able to commit to today.

Mike Freer: The hon. Lady is tempting me down a path that I cannot go down. I am sure colleagues are well aware of how amendments get drafted, but the Minister for Women and Equalities and I have made recommendations on how we believe we can get to a more inclusive conversion practices ban, while addressing the concerns that have been raised elsewhere.

On hate crime and policing, we are also working with the Minister for Crime and Policing to ensure that police services are fully aware of all the complexities of addressing the issues of drug and alcohol abuse, and how that may present itself in crime, so that our police forces are entirely sensitive to all the factors that might lead to certain behaviour. We have talked about the issues of survival sex, and I would again link that to the work we will be doing on LGBT homelessness.

The shadow Minister was a little bit harsh about the action plan—that is the name of the game—but I am not going to be bothered about whether I have this document or that box ticked. I am focusing on practical steps to make genuine changes to people's lives.

On education, £4 million has gone into boosting the anti-bullying campaign, whether that is homophobic bullying, biphobic bullying or transphobic bullying. The whole bullying piece has been funded to a better degree to ensure that schools are well equipped to deal with all the issues that our teachers may have to deal with. We will also ensure that our sex education programme is fully inclusive, and that guidance has been issued.

One problem we face when dealing with these issues is a lack of data. We have made a call for evidence, and we are encouraging partners and the private sector to do more work to get accurate data about the make-up of their workforces, client banks and customers, so that we can base our decisions on real data, rather than assumptions. That is the right thing to do.

We spoke about the armed forces. Many years ago it is true that the Ministry of Defence did not cover itself in glory—that is being polite—but the MOD of today is transformed in terms of the work it is doing to address those historical injustices, by restoring medals, expunging dismissals, and with the work currently being done to consider the wider implications of such treatment. That is a welcome step, and I pay tribute to my colleagues in the MOD. We must also mention the work on looking at historical convictions in civil society. The disregards and pardon schemes are still there, but we must do more to ensure people are aware of that. Too few people are coming forward to look at their previous convictions and see whether we can get them expunged.

I know we were disappointed that we had to cancel the conference, Mr Deputy Speaker, but that does not mean that the work we are doing on the international stage is abated. We continue to spend money, and funds are available to help NGOs to challenge legal discrimination

in many countries, especially in the Commonwealth. That is often a powerful way of changing the law. Lord Herbert is leading that work overseas with the full backing of the Foreign Secretary, and both domestically and internationally the Government are working on practical steps to improve the lives of LGBT+ people.

4.56 pm

Angela Crawley: I thank all Members who have contributed to today's debate. It has been an informative and, as always, passionate debate, but as we heard from Members across the House, we cannot underestimate the potential for a backlash. We must guard against that in this House and everywhere possible, to ensure that in the future, the rights that we fundamentally take for granted are not taken back. These are fundamental human rights. Above all, I wish everyone celebrating this weekend a very happy Pride.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Sometimes I think I am a poor gay. I do not like the Eurovision song contest, and I have never been to a Eurovision song contest party in my life—unlike, I suspect, everybody else here. “Heartstopper”, however—well, we did not have a programme like that when I was a kid. It would probably have been illegal. What an incredible production that is. Not only is it there, but it is now going into its second series. Sometimes when people ask me why gay people make a big song and dance when they come out as gay, I tell them, “It's because of people like you asking questions like that, because you don't understand the trauma that so many people go through to come out as gay, or indeed why so many people in this country do not come out as gay.”

As we have said, in 71 countries it is still illegal to be gay. I remember being chair of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, and battling with MPs from other countries even to discuss gay items. Let me say from the Chair, that I will continue to fight for gay rights throughout the world. We may have won lots of battles here, and we still have battles to do, but I, and I am sure everybody in the Chamber, will continue to fight. We will not forget the pressure that many gay people live under.

The last Pride I went to was in New York. I went to Stonewall and wore a t-shirt to say that I was a Member of Parliament, and that we had more openly gay MPs than any other country in the world. That made me proud. What do we do? We get gay MPs elected to the British Parliament. We have gay Ministers, we fly the Gay Pride flag from Government Departments, and we will fly it from Parliament as well. When we came to elect a Deputy Speaker, MPs here—both gay and non-gay—voted for an openly gay man to be a Deputy Speaker. That makes me proud. So, to everybody, have a great Gay Pride on Saturday in London and a great Gay Pride wherever you happen to be.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered 50 years of Pride in the UK.

Child Sexual Exploitation and Safeguarding in Oldham

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Rebecca Harris.)

5 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): May I say how moving I thought the closing of that debate was, and your contribution in particular, Mr Deputy Speaker?

I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the Opposition Chief Whip for granting me permission to bring this important debate to the House of Commons Chamber. As those in the House will be aware, it is rare for a Front-Bench spokesperson to take to the Back Benches to lead an Adjournment debate. It reflects the issue of safeguarding and child sexual exploitation in Oldham, and allowing this debate to be had highlights just how important that is. The debate builds on the joint statement issued by me, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner). I intend to use this time to focus on victims and the report's findings; focus on safeguarding challenges during the period covered by the review; and touch on the disinformation campaign surrounding that.

Child sexual exploitation is a painful reality that both sides of this House recognise. It is in every community and we must fight it together. The report of the national independent inquiry into child sexual abuse chaired by Professor Alexis Jay was published in February. Its stark conclusions demonstrate that children are sexually exploited by organised networks in all parts of the country, in the most degrading and destructive ways.

Last week, the independent assurance review into historic child sexual exploitation in Oldham was published. It is important the House has an opportunity to debate it. I place on record my thanks to those who led the independent review team, notably, Malcolm Newsam, who I am sure the Minister will know from his work with the Home Office, and former senior police officer Gary Ridgway.

On the report's release, Mr Newsam said:

“We found that throughout this period, especially services tackling child sexual exploitation provided by Oldham Council and Greater Manchester police were strategically ahead of those available in many of the local authorities at the time. However, these did not always translate at an operational level into the effective safeguarding of children experiencing sexual exploitation.”

He went on:

“Our own review of a sample of children has exposed significant failings in the protection provided by the statutory authorities to those children. We understand that Oldham Council and Greater Manchester police have agreed to review the management of these cases to consider whether any further action can now be taken in respect to the man who exploited these children.”

In that context, it was right for Greater Manchester police and the council to accept the findings in full and to give a full and unqualified apology to those who were let down.

In response, the council leader, Amanda Chadderton, told the press conference on the day:

“The vast majority of those children received the support they needed and were kept safe. The report references some of the commendable work of our social workers in children's homes, but what is clear is that that was not true for all children, and one

[Jim McMahon]

child let down is one child too many. It is absolutely imperative that our residents have confidence in those people who work to protect our children.”

The report included the case of Sophie, whose abuse began in 2006 when she was just 12 years old. There were a further 10 sample cases, which were later referred to the Messenger project, but they were not adequately followed up by Greater Manchester police or by social services. The council has confirmed that, during the review period, 11,000 safeguarding referrals were made to the authority and that the vast majority would have received appropriate support and safeguarding. But let us be absolutely clear: that is of no comfort to survivors who did not get that support.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I know that my hon. Friend feels grief, as I do, at what too many of our young people have been through. I want to commend, as I think he will as well, the victims for coming forward. They have shown courage in retelling their story, and that must have caused them pain. We also condemn the horrific crimes against them. Is he as concerned as I am about the failings in our institutions, including the council and Greater Manchester police, and among certain individuals? Does he, like me, want a reassurance that, if they have been negligent in their responsibility to protect these vulnerable children, they will go through a disciplinary process?

I apologise for this long intervention, Mr Deputy Speaker, but may I also ask my hon. Friend whether he has confidence that what is being proposed under Operation Sherwood will deliver by enabling victims to come forward and ensuring that offenders receive the full force of the law and are punished for the crimes that they have committed?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes very powerful points. It is clear that victims have been let down. When they went to the people who were there to protect them—social workers and police officers—they were left standing alone. Even with the passage of time, we need to make sure that the perpetrators, who carried out those disgraceful acts of abuse over a long period, feel the full weight of the law. Frankly, as leaders we put our trust and confidence in the professionals, the police service and social workers to do the right thing and to always step up to make sure that nobody falls through the gap. If there is any evidence that any professional reviewing those cases did not take the action that we would all demand and expect, that absolutely has to be reviewed and revisited, whether they are currently in post or have left. Also, if people have any evidence that has not yet been provided to the authorities that involves criminal allegations or failure, that needs to be brought forward to the appropriate authorities so that it can be properly investigated. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on all those points.

I know that Members across the House have dedicated themselves to supporting survivors of abuse in overcoming the hurdles in accessing justice. As MPs, we do that on a regular basis. In the cases outlined, the courage shown by victims who came forward absolutely stands out.

The report can be broadly separated into two areas of focus: the operational approach to keep young people safe, and political leadership and allegations being levelled

online over the past three years that abuse by organised gangs was being covered up for political gain. It is important, therefore, that we do not shy away from the organised disinformation campaign that has sought from the outset to undermine the report and its independence, and that is now going so far as to claim that the investigators themselves are part of an elaborate cover-up. The report does not hold back from highlighting poor practice where it was found. They told uncomfortable truths in Manchester and Oldham, and they will do the same in the next stage as the review moves on to Rochdale. Will the Minister join me and others, such as the Mayor of Greater Manchester, in condemning the abuse that the authors have received, and underline the integrity and independent nature of this report?

For my part, the independent report is clear that, during the period from 2011, when I became leader of Oldham Council, I did absolutely everything possible to publicise the threat of child sexual exploitation and

“sought to tackle the issue head on.”

That was a hard and drawn-out battle to improve safeguarding support, and the battle continues today.

It is important to set out the journey. In the year before Labour gained control of the council, children’s safeguarding had been hit by a budget cut of £720,000, including £100,000 cut from the specialist CSE Messenger programme and £100,000 cut from the CSE residential home, removing dedicated police security that was in place to protect highly vulnerable girls from the abusers who sought continued access. The recruitment and retention of social workers was under significant pressure, with almost half of all posts covered by agency staff, with a high turnover of vacancies. The long-promised IT system was late in being implemented and demand for the service increased year on year.

The change in administration took place two months after the Rochdale grooming gang was charged, with Shabir Ahmed—an Oldham resident and former council employee—as its ringleader. Oldham immediately put safeguarding at the top of the priorities for the council and the police. His association with the council was reported in national newspapers as the case progressed through the trial. The council believed strongly—this was reflected in its actions—that it had to use all that was available and take whatever option was needed to tackle CSE and learn from the experiences elsewhere to raise public awareness.

When concerns were raised about the risks associated with the growing number of shisha bars, the council did all that it could to close them down and ultimately succeeded, publicly sharing concerns about high-risk venues in the *Manchester Evening News* and in an in-depth feature on BBC Radio 5 Live. Crucially, that also involved giving professionals in schools and colleges and others working with children updated guidance through the Project Phoenix practitioners’ handbook on CSE, which identified shisha bars as high-risk venues. The report highlights that the disruption activity was ahead of its time.

When the report into abuse in Rotherham was made public, Oldham Council carried out a full review of taxi licensing. The increasingly robust approach was challenged, including through successful appeals in the magistrates court, but in the end, we had the toughest regime in the region, addressing head on licences that were issued to

people we believed posed a risk to the public. Although the report concluded that there was no widespread grooming in taxis or shisha bars, it demonstrated that Oldham's concerns were legitimate and, although progress was made, at times the situation, frankly, was frustrating. The determination to reduce the risk of harm was absolutely clear. Oldham never shied away from either the scale or complexity of CSE or, for that matter, of forced marriage, female genital mutilation, online harms, radicalisation and extremism. The risks were fast-moving and evolving all the time, and they still are today.

By 2014, all social workers were employed by the council, except a single member of staff who was covering maternity leave on agency contracts. The new IT system had been brought in, ending gaps in records on complex cases. Oldham was one of the first councils in the country to establish a multi-agency safeguarding hub and to grant access to the police national computer to boost intelligence sharing. Oldham had developed a public campaign, including holding educational plays in schools that resulted in 70 victims and witnesses coming forward to tell their stories. It held stalls in the market hall and article after article set out the full scale and nature of abuse that was taking place in the community, often in plain sight.

The council also actively debated CSE in full council and was open about the scale, nature and risk that it presented in Oldham. By 2014, the Project Phoenix programme was rolled out across Greater Manchester, with ongoing campaigns under the "It's not okay" banner, supported by dedicated local charities, including KOGS, which stands for Keeping Our Girls Safe. That is important because, ultimately, creating the space for victims to come forward is vital to securing justice. Ofsted inspections, peer reviews and internal reviews all pointed to Oldham leading the way in CSE. That was reflected in feedback from the Home Office, too. The fact that the report now points to significant gaps in support has been met with dismay and quite frankly with frustration, and I am deeply sorry to all those young people who were let down by the services that should have been there to protect them.

The report shows that there is much that political leadership can achieve, but it also lays bare its limitations. The political environment, then and today, is important. While I am supportive of the review and believe strongly that it needed to take place, my deep frustration is that the continued undermining of the independence of the report diverts focus away from justice for CSE victims and is in danger of eroding confidence even further. My town has seen that before, with far-right protests taking to the streets, smearing whole communities and setting out to divide.

That has increased significantly with the rise of social media and conspiracy theorists' platforms such as Recusant Nine, led by Raja Miah, who seeks to make financial and political gain by spreading hate, racism and disinformation. We need to be clear with the people of Oldham about the motivations that sit behind that. They have little to do with being a victims' champion. Why am I being so direct in this debate? Because as chief executive of the Collective Spirit Free School, he presided over a catalogue of serious safeguarding incidents, ranging from violence against pupils to child abuse in school. Not only that, but—unbelievably—he responded

to the catalogue of abuse at the Collective Spirit Free School and referred to it as all lies, dismissing the experience of the victims who were abused.

In one of the most serious cases, which was confirmed by a serious case review by the Manchester Safeguarding Partnership, failings at the school prolonged the sexual abuse of a victim. To add to that, there are allegations that teachers were sexualising children, that basic measures such as background checks were not being carried out and, even worse—if it could get worse—that the safeguarding register was falsified during an inspection to cover up the failings at the school. To preside over that is one thing, but to deny it—those are not the actions of somebody who puts victims first. I am proud that as a Member of Parliament, I stood up to give a voice to pupils, parents and staff, expose the corruption that took place and, eventually, see the closure of those schools that were a risk to our children. That was what sparked the current campaign of targeted abuse, harassment and division in Oldham as he set out on a self-declared campaign of revenge. It is no accident that his campaign began within a week of being named by the Department for Education's investigation.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is making such a powerful speech. I pay tribute to him for having the strength and determination to call out what has been quite disgraceful behaviour. The malicious statements that have been made by this person and the misinformation that has been spread have contributed to division and hatred in our town, which we have both received.

This is not something that is confined to Oldham. I put that important message to the Minister, and I would welcome her response. If these malicious statements that have taken hold are not tackled, this will spread beyond Oldham. They must be tackled.

Jim McMahon: I agree. After three years of this cloud hanging over our town, I can see the damage that it has caused, not only to the individuals who have been targeted by abuse, but to the families having their homes targeted, with death threats being levelled and all that brings—the anxiety, the stress and the strain. It is very difficult even to talk about that in a conversation like this, when we are reflecting on such a damning report. Victims have been through far, far worse and they need to be our focus, but the context is important.

It is important that this is called out, because I can see and feel that my town of Oldham is not just being divided; it is hurting. That was evident at the special meeting of the council that took place on Monday. It is true that some who are central to the campaign are driven by hatred and by politics, and that some have links to the far right. It is also true that some have been central to the spreading of lies and smears and the constant harassment of those whom they oppose. However, we need to be clear about the fact that not everyone who shows concern, who expresses disagreement, who attended that meeting and who make references online is part of that. There are many people with legitimate concerns, and it is important that we address those concerns head-on.

It is clear from that meeting that there are victims who have been let down and who, when they came for support, were turned away. It is clear that some people have loved ones who have been victims, and that others

[Jim McMahon]

are horrified at the reality of the abuse that takes place in our country. However, I fear that if we do not build trust and a common ground in the mainstream of politics, the conditions for such a sensitive issue to be used to divide a town are set. Hope Not Hate, journalists and others have exposed this, but without action, we face a real risk of returning to the ashes of a town divided, and, furthermore, the risk that the disinformation and hatred will destroy the confidence that allows victims to come forward to seek justice through the proper channels.

For those of us who are genuinely determined to move forward and repair the hurt in our town and the hurt for the victims, the question is this: what are we going to do differently to create an environment where people can come together to work towards fighting against the evil of child abuse? The Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, has said:

“Public confidence comes from a willingness to be unflinching in facing up to these claims. And being honest about the past. However difficult that may be. And it comes also from a readiness to bring perpetrators to justice, regardless of the passage of time.”

I can say to the people of Oldham that we, their MPs, will fully play our part.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne has said:

“As operation Sherwood commits to reopening investigations we will be pushing for action, and in the end that will be the only test to deliver justice for the victims both identified in the report and beyond. There must be a readiness to reopen cases and secure prosecutions”.

I hope that the Home Office will give its full support to that mission, in Oldham and across the country, and that it will join us in encouraging victims to come forward, knowing that they will be given the support that they deserve.

I will leave the final word to the Greater Manchester chief constable, Stephen Watson, who has said:

“My message to those offenders is a simple one. If you think you have got away with it, you are wrong. And we are coming for you.”

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Rachel Maclean): I think we can all agree that we have heard an incredibly powerful speech, and a very thoughtful one, from the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) on an extremely difficult subject. I have no doubt that victims of these abhorrent and atrocious events will commend him, and his hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for setting out their strong commitment to securing justice for those victims, which is what we all want to see. In that, he will have the full support of Conservative Members and the full force of the Home Office—the Home Secretary, and every single Home Office Minister.

Before I begin my formal response, let me join the hon. Gentleman wholeheartedly in condemning what he has alluded to. I have no personal knowledge of the issues to which he has referred, so I cannot give a substantive response in that regard, but I can say from my position as a Home Office Minister that to call into

question the integrity of the law enforcement professionals who dedicate their lives and careers to investigating these incredibly disgusting and abhorrent crimes is outrageous. It is completely wrong, and anyone who thinks that there is any question about their professionalism needs to take a good, long, hard look at themselves.

Debbie Abrahams: I apologise; this may seem a bit trite after what the Minister has said, but we need to recognise that there were failings at operational level in the council and in Greater Manchester police. The majority of police officers and council workers will be doing their best, but there were failings from some individuals and that needs to be acknowledged, because those children suffered as a result.

Rachel Maclean: I am going to come on to say exactly that. I hope that the hon. Lady is not conflating the two points I am seeking to make. Absolutely, there were failings by professionals who were supposed to be safeguarding vulnerable children, as the hon. Members have set out, but what I am talking about is the work of the reporting bodies: the ICSA report led by Professor Alexis Jay and the other reports that have been taking place. They have the knowledge of what has gone on in an incredible level of detail and they have set that out.

Children in Oldham were failed time and again by those who should have protected them, as is shockingly demonstrated in the ICSA report. The vast majority of safeguarding professionals and those working in law enforcement are good people doing a difficult job. There are bad people in any walk of life and where they exist, we should do everything we can to call it out. Those failings are shameful. The report that the hon. Members have alluded to has made six recommendations and we will publish the Government response shortly. I was appalled when reading of the experiences endured by children who were not yet teenagers in Oldham, and it is in no small part due to the ongoing tenacity of those children—now adult victims and survivors—that those awful failures have been uncovered. To make a personal comment, I really do find having to read those reports and stories the worst part of my job. Some of that information is not in the public domain. I cannot sleep at night when I have read them. I am sure that all Members will join me in paying tribute to those victims, survivors and their families who have courageously shared their experiences in the pursuit of change.

What happened in Oldham has happened in too many places right across the UK, but there have been significant changes in how local authorities and the police safeguard children. I agree with the hon. Members that victims should come forward and report abuse wherever it is taking place because they can have confidence that the police and other frontline services will take them seriously. The best tribute we can make is to ensure that others do not have to endure the same ordeal. I will set out in the time I have left what we are doing.

We are supporting the police to make improvements. Home Office investment underpins strengthened law enforcement capability to tackle these crimes. We welcome the work of Operation Sherwood to bring prosecutions against sexual abusers of children. We are funding specialist training in the vulnerability, knowledge and practice programme, which identifies best practice and

shares it with all forces, and I want to thank the College of Policing for what it is doing on this. I want to be clear that political and cultural sensitivity should never hinder these investigations or the delivery of justice for these victims.

We have made it clear to the police that the protection of vulnerable children must be a priority, and to this end the Home Secretary has shown real leadership. She has raised the issue through the primary forum that exists for her, which is the National Policing Board, and we are ensuring that performance is rigorously scrutinised. She has commissioned Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services to investigate how police across England and Wales handle group-based child sexual exploitation. It is right to say that we have been on the front foot on this. Unlike the historical inquiries, this will give an up-to-date picture of the quality and effectiveness of forces' support for victims and how they are bringing offenders to justice now. We expect findings from the inspection by the end of this year, and I trust that it will give us some much-needed

assurance that the policing of these crimes has improved, but make no mistake, should deficiencies be uncovered, we will do what it takes to address them.

As the hon. Members know, our approach is underpinned by the tackling child sexual abuse strategy, which was published in January last year. ICSA will publish its final report very shortly, and we will come forward with a full response to that and set out our actions. More widely, our beating crime plan reaffirms our strong commitment to ensuring that more of these complex crimes end in prosecutions and convictions. We have relaunched our victims and survivors of child sexual abuse fund to support voluntary sector organisations delivering a range of vital services. I want to finish by thanking the hon. Members. I am determined to ensure that we confront these crimes wherever and whenever they occur and leave no stone unturned in our mission to keep children safe.

Question put and agreed to.

5.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 30 June 2022

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

Police Conduct and Complaints

1.30 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham)
(Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Sixth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, Session 2021-22, Police Conduct and Complaints, HC 140, and the Government response, HC 1264.

It is a rare pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ghani, in this packed Chamber here today. I have the honour—as someone who is not Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—to present our report and findings, largely because I am the only one who has been on the Committee long enough to remember the report's origins and who sat through all of the sessions. I am delighted to pick up that baton and take the challenge.

The Home Affairs Committee started its investigation in 2015. We had wanted to have a proper inquiry and report for some time, which we eventually did under the esteemed chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who chairs the Committee now and will speak later.

The Independent Office for Police Conduct was created in January 2018 to handle complaints against police officers and forces in England and Wales. It replaced various predecessors that had failed to keep public trust in the idea that police officers who fall below the high standards required of them are properly punished for breaches of codes of behaviour and conduct. The IOPC has a really important role, as we would all agree and as I am sure the Minister would emphasise, in maintaining public confidence in the police service in this country, where we police by consent. I will touch on some of the recommendations of the inquiry, what we found and why we did the inquiry, and also on an update from the head of the IOPC. I am largely going to leave the Government's response to the Minister.

One thing that the Minister can now take credit for is that the Government have at last responded to our Macpherson inquiry report, which we produced a very long time ago. One of our recommendations was to get on with producing the Government's response to our Macpherson inquiry report, and that happened a few weeks ago, but it was not a good exercise in responding speedily to a Select Committee report. I will leave that there, but the Minister might care to comment later.

It should be clear that a police officer accused of, for example, mistreating a member of the public or bullying colleagues or subordinates should be subject, like any other person working in the public service, to investigation and sanctions if proven to have done so. Public confidence is undermined if misconduct is not appropriately recognised, dealt with and punished. The Committee inquiry looked at whether the new IOPC was fulfilling its remit: bringing officers more quickly and successfully to book for conduct unbecoming and restoring public confidence in the police complaints and discipline system.

During the inquiry numerous examples of questionable policing conduct occurred—and far worse. Sadly, we are all too familiar with the high profile and appalling cases that have hit the headlines in recent months and years. The murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer who used his office to trap her is probably by far the most egregious example. Other prominent cases include the photographing of the bodies of Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman by two officers who were supposed to be guarding a crime scene. In both cases, officer behaviour was criminal and substantial jail sentences have rightly followed, including a whole-life sentence for the killer of Sarah Everard.

Criminal activity goes beyond the bounds of the police conduct and complaints process, but there is behaviour below the criminal threshold that goes well beyond the bounds of acceptable professional conduct. At Charing Cross police station in London, the IOPC revealed a series of revolting sexist, misogynist and racist messages between serving police officers as well as a culture of bullying and racism. Three officers lost their jobs and others received internal disciplinary action, from retraining to official reprimand. The IOPC has recently ordered a fully independent investigation into the behaviour of six officers who stopped and searched a car belonging to the athlete Bianca Williams and Ricardo dos Santos, who were stopped in Maida Vale in 2020. It was able to do that under new powers that have just come in to allow the IOPC to investigate without referral and for it to present its own case at police misconduct hearings.

I want to spend a little time now on Operation Midland. Indeed, the genesis of this report was some hearings that the Home Affairs Committee undertook back in 2015 regarding Operation Midland, which hon. Members will remember was a high-profile case of a completely incompetent, bungled and wasteful investigation over a long time of some high-profile figures in politics and the military. We investigated and interviewed some of the senior officers involved in that case. High-profile figures such as Lord Brittan, Field Marshall Bramall—sadly, both are now dead—and Harvey Proctor were the subject of long-running police investigations. At the inquiry, we heard from Lady Brittan, Lord Brittan's widow.

We heard about the appalling miscarriage of justice; key figures had been hounded by an incompetent police operation and an appalling waste of resources on the basis of flimsy evidence produced by the now-revealed and now-jailed fantasist Carl Beech. That was despite repeated warnings from officers and others, who have also been badly treated by the Metropolitan police, that the long-running and costly investigation was never going to go anywhere and the evidence was not there. However, it resulted in no penalties and no punishment against the main senior officers involved. Indeed, several were promoted and some remain in lucrative and senior positions within the police service.

The Home Affairs Committee has a long-standing interest in the case and since we took testimony from some of those officers back in 2015, those testimonies have been completely and utterly discredited. Operation Midland was succeeded by Operation Vincente, and then Operation Kentia, commissioned by the IOPC, looked into the way the Met had handled the whole process. We had a further damning report by Her Majesty's inspectorate

[*Tim Loughton*]

of constabulary and fire and rescue services in 2020. The judge, Sir Richard Henriques, was commissioned to investigate the Met, but he also made very severe criticism of the way the IOPC had investigated the case. He said:

“The operation was conducted in a completely disordered and chaotic manner and was littered with mistakes, all of which could and should have been avoided by officers who were subsequently promoted.”

The force did little to improve practices for nearly three years. As Sir Richard says,

“So far as I know not one of my recommendations has either been accepted or rejected by the Metropolitan Police.”

A district judge was knowingly misled into issuing search warrants against the Brittans and there are reasonable grounds to believe that criminal acts have been committed, not by those being investigated but by the investigators, as Sir Richard Henriques found. It took almost three years for the IOPC to publish its findings in the Operation Midland affair. The lead investigator contacted Sir Richard 20 months into the investigation and readily conceded her lack of knowledge, training or education in relevant criminal proceedings. In Sir Richard’s review of Operation Midland he said he had called for a rigorous investigation and indicated that there were many questions to be asked. The IOPC failed in both respects.

HMICFRS’s report found that senior officers were preoccupied with restricting access to the Henriques report and that the Met had no plan to enact the reforms, took

“an underwhelming approach to learning the lessons”

and did almost nothing for three years. I emphasise again that no officers have been penalised as a result of Operation Midland and the subsequent unravelling of the appalling circumstances that allowed it to take place and ruin the lives of certain individuals and their families over many years.

We use that as an example because the IOPC should have been on that. It should have taken a high-profile case of clear deficiencies in police processes and accountability, looked at it properly and found that certain individuals were sorely lacking in the carrying out of their duties—but it failed to do that. Sir Richard Henriques claimed that it was a complete whitewash of the actual circumstances. That is why it is so important that we have a police complaints body that can be relied on and inspire confidence in the public. If high-profile figures, who have a recourse to parliamentary and other platforms, can be dragged down by an incompetent police operation that was not apprehended by the IOPC, what hope have our constituents with legitimate complaints about the way that they have been dealt with by the police that the IOPC will investigate fairly and thoroughly?

Our inquiry found that trust in the police was particularly low among young people, as well as among black and other minority ethnic members of our society. There is a particular problem in London. We heard in the last few days that the Met is being put in special measures. There are issues that we flag in our report that need to be considered as part of the rehabilitation of the image of the Metropolitan police and how it regains the trust of the public.

There is an old argument that such cases arise from the actions of a few bad apples spoiling the entire barrel. The volume of high-profile and successful complaints against police officers tests that argument to destruction. The police themselves no longer hold to the bad apple theory. Earlier this year, the acting Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir Stephen House, told the Home Affairs Committee,

“It is not a few bad apples. You cannot simply say that Wayne Couzens and a couple of other people have done something wrong. I would suggest that that has been the spearhead of the problem, but

there is a wider issue within the organisation, which we acknowledge and we are dealing with.”

I hope that is the case.

A robust independent regulator, able to quickly resolve complaints and impose sanctions that fit the misconduct of officers, is essential to public trust. Since its foundation, the IOPC has gone some way to restoring that trust—we acknowledge that in our report. The time taken to resolve complaints has reduced significantly, with the majority now dealt with in less than a year. However, the Committee’s inquiry, while recognising that success, identified a number of areas for further improvement. Just this week, we have had further information from the head of the IOPC, Michael Lockwood, about the continued progress it is making. The Home Office will be publishing its annual report with more detail in due course; the Minister may wish to comment on that.

Michael Lockwood pointed out in that letter that 90% of all independent investigations that it started were completed with 12 months. That compares favourably to the 68% of investigations completed within 12 months in the final year of the Independent Police Complaints Commission. However, while the target was 50 days for completion of the inquiry, the actual result—78 working days for completion—fell well short. In addition to that, Michael Lockwood said that the IOPC made 171 learning recommendations, which were shared with all the forces in England and Wales or directed to national organisations such as the National Police Chiefs’ Council and the College of Policing. Where a learning recommendation is issued under that power, the recipient is required to provide a response. Out of the 96 recommendations issued where a response has been received, 94% were accepted. That is a high level and is to be welcomed.

The issue of police officers’ co-operation with investigations was raised by the Committee. The guidance sets out what the IOPC considers co-operation should look like in general terms, and what police witnesses can expect. In its response to the Committee’s report, the IOPC reported progress on the number of cases awaiting a decision for more than 12 months. I think we can take that as a win for the Committee and, indeed, for the way Select Committees do their work, because Michael Lockwood goes on to say:

“Your letter to the Director of Public Prosecutions regarding these issues has helpfully brought about a greater focus and collaborative effort between our respective organisations to better understand the root causes of possible delays. We are clear there is a shared responsibility to work towards improved timeliness in decision making post investigation. To this end we are collating additional information on our cases with the CPS and agreeing how we might put in place better systems for sharing information and escalating cases.”

The IOPC made further recommendations to the England and Wales police forces about working together to develop guidelines and commissioning research into the trauma caused—predominantly to people from black, Asian and other minority ethnic backgrounds, including children and young people—by the use of stop and search, which is a topical issue that has come up in the House recently. As a result of the report, the IOPC has undertaken widespread consultation. It is clear from Michael Lockwood's words that our report has served a positive purpose and hit home, and the IOPC has picked up many of our recommendations. So far, so good, but there is still a lot more of the job to be done.

It is an inevitable part of any complaints system that those whose complaints are not upheld will be discontent. There is none the less a perception that complaints against police officers are unlikely to succeed and that investigations are over-complex, take too long and frequently result in limited action, even against officers who have been found guilty of misconduct. It should be clear that a police officer accused of mistreating a member of the public, or of bullying colleagues or subordinates, should be subject to investigation and—if proven to have done so—sanctioned, just like any other person working in a public service. Public confidence is undermined if misconduct is not appropriately punished, and the Home Office and the Home Secretary need to ensure that that message is received and acted on at the highest level of our 43 police forces, particularly as a new commissioner is chosen for the Metropolitan police.

During our inquiry, the question arose as to whether the IOPC should be staffed by investigators who are not former police officers. Opinion was divided on whether those who had previously served in the police should be excluded because they would potentially be marking their own homework or that of their colleagues. On the other side of the argument, we acknowledge that ex-police officers bring skills learned on the job and an understanding of police culture that is beneficial in investigations. It seems that an appropriate balance of former serving officers and investigators with other backgrounds is the right one to strike, but it may be that the IOPC should seek to widen its pool of potential candidates to include those with investigative experience from other spheres, including former military personnel.

At a more technical level, the IOPC has been headed since its creation by a director general without the support and oversight of an independent chair of the board, with Michael Lockwood effectively acting in both roles. He has held that post and been responsible for driving some of the improvements in the speed of investigations, as I have already mentioned. Mr Lockwood was relaxed when he gave us evidence on whether the time had come for more normal arrangements to be made for the organisation's governance, as we would typically find in any business. It is now very rare, and often frowned upon, to find the same person occupying the roles of chair and chief executive of a board of a company. The Committee therefore recommended that the Government consider appointing a chair to the IOPC. We are glad to see from its response that the question will be considered in an upcoming review, and we hope that a fully accountable governance structure can now be put in place.

Perhaps the most worrying evidence we heard was of obstruction and delay in dealing with complaints, with the IOPC blaming officers for delays, and policing

organisations blaming the IOPC. We recommend the creation of a culture, led from the top, that requires rapid, open and non-defensive responses to complaints about conduct. Quick and fair decisions are essential both to satisfy members of the public who complain about conduct and to clear the names of police officers who may be falsely accused of breaching standards, whose reputations can only suffer from long, dragged-out cases, and whose careers may be in limbo while an investigation is ongoing.

The IOPC could do more to use its powers actively to call to account officers who appear not to co-operate with investigations, and chief constables should also do all in their power to ensure that officers do not treat complaints as an inconvenience or a triviality. IOPC reports on cases below the level of the egregious examples I gave earlier in my speech now result in learning recommendations for forces, and a strong focus is needed to ensure that the learning available is adopted and embedded within the police.

On the delay issue, I would cite an example from my own experience. Some years ago, I was the subject of a police investigation as a result of a wholly vexatious complaint from a constituent. That later became the subject of an inquiry by the Standards Committee that found that the chief constable of Sussex had been in breach of parliamentary protocols and of privilege. I subsequently lodged a complaint with the forerunner of the IOPC, which took well over three years to investigate. During that process, the possibility of criminal behaviour by one of the investigating officers was raised, because he had frustrated the investigation process to play for time.

When the complaint body reported, it upheld four of my five complaints, casting a good deal of blame on the officers involved, right up to the chief constable of Sussex. The problem was that when the report eventually came out, every single senior officer who was a subject of the report had retired and no action could be taken against them. It is that sort of frustration that people feel, and there is no excuse for such long, drawn-out investigations. Such investigations are not in anybody's interest, be they the complainant or the target of the investigations. I am glad that measures, which the Minister may want to mention, have been put in place to allow retrospective action to be taken if it so happens that police officers are no longer employed directly in the police force.

I will touch briefly on the Committee's other main conclusions. I mentioned that we recommended that the role of chair and chief executive should be split, and the Government have responded to that. We urge the Government to consider police complaints as part of the review of the police and crime commissioner model that is currently under way, and to make an early assessment of PCC involvement in the police complaints system.

PCCs are an under-utilised resource. They exist to be democratic bodies that are accountable to local residents and taxpayers, and have developed a good deal of knowledge. My own PCC, Katy Bourne, is one of the most experienced and respected of the PCCs, and has undertaken a lot of helpful initiatives and is very public facing. We should involve PCCs more in how we deal with complaints, because they do not want to have lots of complaints against their own police constabulary. It

[*Tim Loughton*]

would inform their work better if they were more integrated with the complaints that come in, as he or she could see whether there is a problem that they need to do something about at a senior level. That is an important Committee recommendation for the Home Office on the work it is currently undertaking.

It may be too soon to understand whether PCC involvement in the police complaints system is realising the benefits that the Government hope for, but we are concerned that the Government are not doing enough to monitor the implementation of the new PCC complaints model or to encourage uptake. We note that there are enhanced opportunities for PCCs to play a greater role in the local complaints process following the reforms in 2020. The three models present a unique opportunity for PCCs as part of their complaint handling responsibilities proactively and systematically to support more effective complaint systems within their forces, although what they do should not delay complaint handling processes any further.

We urge the Government to fund PCCs adequately, so they are able to take on those models as a minimum requirement in their complaint handling roles. This will provide PCCs the opportunity to work more closely with their forces, for example, to record and systematically monitor the root causes of complaints and recurrent issues that affect their communities disproportionately and how their forces resolve those issues. The input of PCCs and their commitment to do something about the issue within their local constabularies should be a win-win situation for PCCs and for the complaints process.

The Government's recent changes to the police complaints and discipline system were intended to simplify and speed up the process. None the less, the language used to explain systems to members of the public who wish to make complaints remains too complex and technical, which contributes to public disengagement and lack of confidence in the system.

The Committee recommended that the police discipline system needs to be simpler and more transparent. All key stakeholders in the policing sphere—the IOPC, the National Police Chiefs' Council, the forces, the College of Policing and the Crown Prosecution Service—should be required to publish plain language versions of the systems available in different languages and accessible formats, which should be made available online and in print.

I mentioned earlier that there is a clear absence of urgency and a culture of non-co-operation from some police forces involved in investigations. Appropriate sanctions must therefore follow for any officer with disciplinary proceedings, whether serving or retired. Specific reforms were made to the discipline system under the implementation of the 2020 reforms, including the possibility for former officers to face disciplinary proceedings if allegations came to light within 12 months of their leaving the force, but that still may not be thorough enough.

The example of the IOPC taking seven years to clear one police officer of misconduct is an exceptional case, but demonstrates why the IOPC must focus its efforts on concluding investigations as quickly as possible. Quite aside from the effect on an individual's morale, the removal of officers under investigation from frontline duties for lengthy periods may add to the strain on

police resources generally, as well as blighting that officer's career. The IOPC must also take care that its power to reinvestigate cases already concluded locally is used sparingly and when there is a clear public interest in undertaking further inquiry.

We recommended that a culture needs to be created within police forces—established by and led from the top—that requires rapid, open and non-defensive response to complaints about conduct, both to deal with misconduct where it arises, and to clear the names and reputations of officers who have not transgressed. This should not just be a finger-pointing exercise. It must be a learning exercise as well.

From my experience—such as on the child safeguarding programme or with the work of the former Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), on accidents at work and patients who have suffered severe consequences—this is not just a question of whether it was an incompetent police officer, or surgeon in the health case, or child protection officer; it is about asking how the system allowed it to happen. That is the so-called black box approach, and we need to see far more of it in policing to encourage people to come forward when there are problems, so that we can make the problems right without those people being scared doing so because somebody will point a finger at them and everybody will automatically be blamed. It can be down to the system that stands in the way of people doing their jobs as best they can.

The IOPC must use its powers effectively to minimise delays to investigations at an early stage of the process. It should proactively call to account those responsible for delays or who refuse to co-operate with investigations. Police forces, individual officers and their representative organisations must take more responsibility for rooting out bad behaviour and lifting the cloud of complaint against officers who have done their exceptionally difficult job properly.

We welcome the super-complaints process and are encouraged by the Home Office's pledge to review the designated bodies that can submit super-complaints on systemic issues in policing in order to include a broader range of organisations, including disability organisations. We urge the Home Office to highlight on its super-complaints website that the 16 designated bodies should collaborate with non-designated bodies as appropriate to make a complaint on matters raised by non-designated bodies.

We recommend that the Government monitor and review biannually how effectively local policing bodies are holding their chief constables accountable for implementing IOPC recommendations in their forces, and report the outcomes to the Select Committee. We urge the Government to review how the IOPC, the HMICFRS and coroners' learning recommendations are reported to the public in a more joined-up and meaningful way, and we recommend that data be published centrally in order to simplify and streamline access to this important information.

There are a lot of sensible and proportionate recommendations there. In many cases, the Government and the Home Office have responded favourably.

Our report and the evidence we published alongside it contains many examples of what police misconduct feels like to members of the public who experience it.

Aside from the high-profile examples I have given, most cases are more routine, more local and more capable of quick resolution. Typical complaints may be about how the police have treated a person—rudeness, use of excessive force, abuse of rights or wrongful arrest, for example. There is no excuse for those complaints not to be turned around much more rapidly.

As I said at the outset, our society is policed by consent. We give police officers considerable powers to do a job that is often difficult, dangerous and always essential to our safety and security, and the vast majority of officers perform that duty in an exemplary manner. The granting of those powers comes, however, with a duty to the public, who the police serve—that the police will conduct themselves according to the highest possible standards of professional behaviour.

Officers who commit crimes are subject to the full force of the law. Steps have been taken to ensure that those who fall below those standards are identified, and that sanctions are taken, ranging from retraining to dismissal from the force. The IOPC deserves credit for those steps. It also requires our exhortation to go further and faster to re-establish full trust in our constabularies. Part of the job is done, but there is more to go.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Before I call other colleagues, I must put it on record that I was also once a member of the Home Affairs Select Committee, so I look forward to the Minister's response. I can confirm the long-standing membership of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton)—maybe we should refer to him as the “Father of the Committee”.

2.1 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you this afternoon, Ms Ghani. I think it is an excellent idea to recognise the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and his long-standing membership of the Home Affairs Committee. His institutional memory of what has happened on that Committee has certainly been important not only in putting together this report, but in our work on policing.

The hon. Member has set out clearly and effectively the findings and recommendations of our report. It is quite clear that the Home Affairs Committee inquiry looked at the role and remit of the IOPC in relation to the police complaints and discipline system, and explored the continuing disquiet at the way in which police forces in England and Wales investigate and deal with complaints about the conduct of forces and individual officers. Importantly, we sought to consider what changes might be required to improve public confidence in the police complaints and discipline system.

We thought it was important to undertake parliamentary scrutiny of that important role, given, as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham said, the establishment of the newly created IOPC in January 2018, and because the Committee had not looked at the topic for nine years, since the publication of its last report on the matter—I do not think the hon. Gentleman was a member of the Committee at that point. Our report has covered several different areas, which were set out effectively. I will focus my contribution on a couple of areas that we looked at in the Committee that

will hopefully complement what the hon. Gentleman said in his opening remarks. First, I will focus on the treatment of vulnerable adults, specifically people with autism, and how they interact in the police complaints process.

A well-functioning conduct and complaints system is essential to maintaining the trust in the balance created by the founding Peel principles between the police and public. Despite the welcome reforms and improvements, some submissions to our inquiry demonstrate that there is continuing dissatisfaction with the handling of police complaints, and that much more work is needed to address both complainants' and officers' concerns. In our report, we noted that the IOPC impact report 2020-21 stated that 43% of people surveyed were confident that the IOPC did a good job, compared with 44% in 2019-20. Obviously, there is still a lot of work to do.

In the evidence heard and received during the course of our inquiry, individuals with autism and parents of children with autism outlined systemic issues in their treatment in the police complaints and criminal justice process. Many felt they had been badly let down by the IOPC and the police, and that that had caused distress to families and friends.

Fiona Laskaris, whose autistic son Christopher was unlawfully killed by a drug addict in 2016, told us:

“the IOPC urgently needs to start engaging in a meaningful way in cases involving people with disabilities, and particularly... with autism”.

Fiona argued that cases involving people with autism

“warrant an enhanced level of independent scrutiny”

and suggested the existing statutory safeguarding duties to protect vulnerable adults who come into contact with the police were not working.

We received anonymous evidence that one autistic person, who had experienced frequent contact with the police, including being arrested for alleged attacks, was not treated as a vulnerable adult, even though they informed the police they were autistic and had requested an appropriate adult for assistance. The anonymous submission claimed that the police “never acknowledge or check” their autism awareness card, even when their wallet is being searched, which always happens when the police seize personal items.

The Home Secretary wrote to the Committee on 9 December 2021 and said,

“Many police forces have developed additional training programmes”

and

“various autism alert card schemes, apps, and the creation of easy-read ‘widget-based’ sheets (using icons or pictographs) to aid communication in custody suites.”

She highlighted the IOPC statutory guidance for forces on complaint handling, which outlines the

“importance of accessibility as well as the duty under the Equality Act 2010 to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that a disabled person does not suffer any substantial disadvantage when accessing a service.”

The Home Secretary said it was

“important that those dealing with complaints recognise the particular vulnerabilities of individuals with autism”.

In spite of these welcome statements by the Home Secretary, some evidence to our Committee suggests that autistic people are still not always been treated fairly by the police.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

I want to say a little more about super-complaints, which the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham commented on. In her evidence to the Committee, Fiona Laskaris, who I mentioned earlier, proposed that the super-complaints process could be used to investigate system failures in the treatment of vulnerable adults, specifically people with autism. Since November 2018, the super-complaints process has enabled designated public and charitable organisations to ask HMICFRS, the IOPC and the College of Policing to consider investigating what they think are systemic issues affecting policing in England and Wales.

Our report expressed concern that of the 16 organisations designated by the Home Office that can raise such issues or concerns on behalf of the public, no specialist organisation represents complainants with disabilities, including autism. The Home Secretary wrote to the Committee in December 2021 and pledged to review the designated bodies that can submit super-complaints on systemic issues in policing to include a broader range of organisations, including disability organisations. We welcome that commitment, but nearly two years on, I hope the Minister can confirm when the Government will review the super-complaints system. As we have heard, the Home Secretary confirmed to the Committee that a designated body should collaborate with non-designated organisations and, where appropriate, make a complaint on the basis of the matters raised.

Our recommendation was that the Home Office should highlight on its super-complaints website that the 16 designated bodies should collaborate with non-designated bodies as appropriate to make a complaint on matters raised by those non-designated bodies. We are pleased that the Government have made that change on their super-complaints website, but we urge them, the IOPC and other relevant policing bodies to make the public aware that the super-complaints process is accessible to all groups and interests.

I thank everybody who assisted the Home Affairs Committee in our inquiry. We will be watching what happens on our recommendations in this area, and following progress over the months and years to come on this important issue, as we know police misconduct and complaints have been in the news a lot in recent times, and it is very much an issue that the public care about.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Before I call the shadow Minister, I can see that Sir Peter Bottomley has joined us—do you wish to contribute, Sir Peter?

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con) *indicated dissent.*

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Thank you. I call the shadow Minister, Naz Shah.

2.9 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Thank you, Ms Ghani; it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I was on the Home Affairs Committee at the same time as you, and I agree with you that we should perhaps call the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) the Father of the Committee.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Now we have a proposer and a seconder.

Naz Shah: Absolutely. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson), who chairs the Committee, and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for securing this important debate, and I thank the wider Committee for its important and timely scrutiny of this issue. Like both Members have said, it is very much in the news at the moment—it is top of the agenda, and rightly so.

It is also right that we thank those who submitted evidence, written or oral, to the inquiry to help shine a light on this issue. In particular, my right hon. Friend referred to the anonymous submissions, which are very significant. I thank her for highlighting the issue of autism and disability. Will the Minister say where we are with the super-complaints and the 16 designated bodies? We do not have anybody representing those with disabilities; will the Government be making any recommendations to get an organisation that does? What will they do to strengthen that process?

I thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for highlighting his personal experience, of which I was unaware, with respect to Operation Midland. As he said, we are in privileged positions, so the fact that it took him three years to get a resolution, with doors closed on him and the closing of ranks right up to the chief constable of Sussex, is deeply worrying. That was the situation despite our being in positions of power and privilege—even more reason for us to ensure that the Government respond appropriately to this debate and take on the Committee's recommendations.

The official Opposition believe that the Committee's report is a timely and thorough examination of the police complaints process, and that the Government must properly heed its recommendations. All Members—Government and Opposition—support the long-standing principle of policing by consent in this country. That principle is fundamental to maintaining public support in our criminal justice system, and law and order more widely.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham referred to the horrible murders of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry. The fact that the police officers took those horrific pictures of the bodies was used by the defence team during the trial. This is not just about the complaints; it is about the impact of those complaints and what that can lead to with respect to justice for victims of crime.

The principle of policing by consent separates our policing system from many of those around the world. It is a principle that must be protected and strengthened. But the process must be underpinned by robust and well-functioning systems of complaint and redress for members of the public who believe that proper procedures have not been followed, whether on purpose or inadvertently. That is vital in maintaining public trust in our police, and in ensuring that the hard work of the great majority of police officers is not undermined and that, when mistakes arise, they are learned from.

It has been said during the debate—no doubt the Minister will reiterate it—that police officers regularly go above and beyond, in some instances risking their lives, to keep the public safe and fight crime. We have

experienced that here in Westminster, and we continue to experience it across the country. However, as the Committee's report notes, appalling examples of misconduct, such as the one that occurred with the murder of Sarah Everard, and the disgraceful, misogynistic, racist and bullying behaviour of a substantial number of officers at London's Charing Cross police station, add to a long list of serious breaches of public trust. That is why we, the official Opposition, agree with the Committee that there is a strong need for cultural change right from, to ensure that lessons are learned from past mistakes, that proper action is taken to address poor or unprofessional behaviour, and that police forces up and down the country demonstrate that they understand that public trust in policing needs to be earned and constantly maintained.

I am pleased that the Committee has highlighted the advances that the IOPC has made since it replaced the Independent Police Complaints Commission. However, serious concerns remain about the transparency of the IOPC's operations. I note that the Committee has particularly highlighted the poor communication with regard to its inquiries, including with Lady Brittan over the false allegations made against her late husband, Lord Brittan. It is vital that the IOPC, as well as the Government, takes note of this cross-party Committee's recommendations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) is sorry that she cannot be here, but during yesterday's ministerial statement in the main Chamber on the Metropolitan police, she was clear that the Home Office must not stand back from this issue. It needs real leadership to drive reforms through. The Home Secretary and her Department must engage seriously with police reform to stop appalling scandals of the kind we have seen in recent years.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the shadow Home Secretary, has also been pushing for reform, having been the Chair of the Committee when this inquiry was initiated. Sadly, we have heard yet more examples today that show why it is important to shine a light on these issues.

Labour has consistently called for an overhaul of police standards. We want to see: much stronger vetting processes, better training, including on issues such as misogyny and racism, quicker and more robust misconduct proceedings, and better guidance on the use of social media, including WhatsApp, by police officers and staff. In the wake of the Child Q case, we also called for updated national guidance—which we are yet to see—on the strip-searching of children. When the Minister gets to his feet, I would be grateful if he could confirm what steps his Department is taking in each of these areas.

We know that there are several ongoing inquiries and reviews into policing, including the Casey and Angiolini inquiries, and the HMICFRS review of vetting. These are important pieces of work, and the Opposition look forward to reading their conclusions and recommendations. However, we could be waiting months for these inquiries to conclude, with the implementation of any recommendations taking even longer. As has been said in this debate, that is not okay. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central emphasised yesterday, we must have action now to address these issues. We cannot afford to wait.

Can the Minister also outline what progress the Home Office has made in implementing the Committee's recommendations? In particular, could he provide an update on the steps taken in response to recommendation 9, which relates to the speeding up of complaints, investigation and disciplinary processes? In far too many cases, police officers who are disciplined for misconduct remain in their posts for months, if not years, while misconduct proceedings are set up. That was certainly true in the recent Charing Cross case, and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned that his case took three years and that the officers involved had actually retired by that point. That does not give us confidence. Wherever standards in policing fall short, they should be dealt with as quickly and efficiently as possible. Can the Minister outline what steps are being taken in this specific area?

Police officers up and down this country do incredibly important work, including in my area of Bradford, which is covered by West Yorkshire police. Members from across the House will have countless stories of police officers and staff going above and beyond, running towards danger and serving their communities. I want to put on record my thanks to West Yorkshire police, because we had the loss of Jo Cox, but the police step up and protect us as MPs, so that we can do our job, including in this place. It is in the interests of us all—politicians, police and the public—to ensure the highest possible standards for our police service. Serious work is needed, which includes reforming the police complaints system.

Again, I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North, who is the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham for securing this debate and for keeping up the pressure on this very important issue.

2.19 pm

The Minister for Crime and Policing (Kit Malthouse):

It is a great pleasure, Ms Ghani, to appear before you for the first time and also to appear for the first time before someone who was elected to the Commons on the same day that I was. That happy day in 2015 seems an awful long time ago. [*Laughter.*] I am very grateful—

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Order. I hope the Minister is not trying to sway the Chairperson. I note for the record that it will have no relevance to the rest of the debate.

Kit Malthouse: I am also grateful to the assembled members—current and former—of the Home Affairs Committee for contributing to this debate. I am particularly grateful to the current members, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), for securing it. It is an immensely important topic. We have had some interesting contributions, which I will take away and digest.

As a number of Members have said, the police perform a unique and critical role in our society. The public look to them for protection and reassurance and, in certain circumstances, through us, authorise them to sometimes use lethal force against our fellow citizens. The public rightly expect all who serve to uphold high standards of conduct and professionalism. As I have said on many

[*Kit Malthouse*]

occasions—pretty much since I was appointed deputy Mayor for policing more than a decade ago—public confidence and trust are integral to the long-standing model of policing by consent. It is fundamental to the very essence of policing in the United Kingdom. I have worked hard during my career in fighting crime to ensure that we cleave to that model and do not drift towards the warrior model of policing that we see in other jurisdictions.

A range of elements come together to form the full picture when it comes to securing and maintaining public confidence. One of those is an effective conduct and complaints system. As Members have said, the vast majority of police officers already act with the highest standards of professionalism. It is therefore all the more disappointing and, in some instances, completely shocking when the behaviour and actions of a few undermine the hard work of their dedicated colleagues. When things do go wrong it is vital that the systems in place are robust and fair, and stand up to scrutiny.

I note the positive comments in the Committee's report on the February 2020 reforms made to the police conduct and complaints systems and the significant improvement in the IOPC since 2018. Of course, we accept that there is more to do. With policing—indeed, with any major public service—complacency is something we must fight against with all our might and energy. We must strive constantly for improvement; the public deserve nothing less.

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned, the Independent Office for Police Conduct was launched in 2018 following reforms to the IPCC, which scrapped the old commission structure in favour of a single head of the organisation. The new structure resulted in the director general having a combined role that includes chairing the unitary board. The aim of having a single role was to both streamline and demonstrate the independence of decision making to enhance public and police confidence. Scrutiny of and support for the director general is provided by the unitary board, on which the non-executive directors must be in a majority. There is a senior independent non-executive director.

Since its launch in January 2018 and under Michael Lockwood's leadership, the IOPC has completed more than 91% of the core independent investigations started since then within 12 months. The average length of all investigations has fallen from more than 11 months in 2018 to less than nine months now. I understand that the backlog that was inherited on the conversion to the IOPC has been eliminated. That is huge progress, which, I am happy to say, was also highlighted in the Committee's report. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham asked about the number of former police officers on the staff: it is 28%. That is a number that we need to keep an eye on, as he said, in terms of their expertise.

Last year, the Home Secretary announced that she was bringing forward the first periodic review of the IOPC, in response to pressure from my hon. Friend and others. Such reviews of the Government's arm's length bodies typically consider the effectiveness of an organisation and its fitness for purpose. We agree that the existing governance structure, along with the Home Affairs

Committee's specific recommendation on the director general's role, should be looked at as part of that review. The review has not started; however, we are currently working on the arrangements, including identifying an independent reviewer. We will update the Committee when we are able to confirm further details.

The Government are clear in our determination to listen and act on issues important to the general public and their confidence in policing—including accountability, which is crucial to public trust. As colleagues will recall from the Committee's report, the IOPC is already making a concerted effort to uphold confidence in the police complaints system, which includes greater transparency in the publication of investigation outcomes, actively listening to policing bodies and communities about their concerns, improved investigation timeliness and thematic reviews.

The legislative reforms in 2020 to overhaul the police complaints and disciplinary system were wide ranging, and were designed to simplify processes while increasing transparency and independence. The reforms have significantly reduced the bureaucracy in handling low-level customer service matters, which account for the majority of complaints. The most serious cases continue to be dealt with under robust processes, including independent investigations by the IOPC.

We continue to engage with policing stakeholders across the piece, including the National Police Chiefs' Council, and we welcome the ongoing engagement of the Police Federation and other staff associations. We have agreed to review the impact of the reforms, including considering the role of police and crime commissioners in policing complaints. As part of that wider review, we will look at the issues raised by the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North about super-complaints.

Recent high-profile cases of misconduct have shone a light on the culture that exists in some areas of policing. Aside from examples of appalling behaviour that has no place anywhere, let alone within an institution entrusted to protect the public, there is a wider impact on how policing is perceived. When standards are not met, it not only undermines the excellent work done by thousands of officers, staff and volunteers day in, day out, but risks damaging the legitimacy of policing in the eyes of the public. It is therefore crucial that there are effective systems and safeguards in place to ensure that all officers adhere to the high standards expected of them and that breaches of those standards are identified quickly and dealt with appropriately.

Although the Government have overseen significant progress in the police complaints system in recent years, we do agree that forces, individuals and their representative organisations must take further responsibility for rooting out bad behaviour. The College of Policing is currently undertaking a review of the code of ethics. The review will provide clear expectations that everyone in policing has a duty to challenge and report behaviour that undermines the profession and damages public confidence, and to be open and accountable and learn from mistakes at an organisational and individual level.

As part of the 2020 integrity reforms, the Home Office introduced a duty of co-operation for police officers. The duty provides clarity on the level of co-operation required by an officer where they are a witness in an investigation, inquiry, or other formal

proceedings. Failure to co-operate is a breach of the professional standards and can be dealt with by police forces accordingly.

The Government will respond in due course to Bishop James Jones's report on the experiences of the Hillsborough families and the report of the Daniel Morgan independent panel. The Government will also consider calls for a broader duty of candour for public bodies and authorities—an issue raised by various Members.

Colleagues may also recall that the Home Secretary has announced the Angiolini inquiry, which a couple of Members referred to, part two of which is expected to consider wider policing matters, such as barriers to whistleblowing, vetting practices, and professional standards and discipline, including workplace cultures. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham pointed out, since 2017 it has been the case that retired police officers can be brought back to face gross misconduct proceedings.

I again thank members of the Committee for securing this debate. I am grateful for the opportunity that it has provided me to underscore just how seriously we take this issue. This is not an end point in our work on police integrity and the complaints system. As I said in my opening remarks, the maintenance of trust and the model of consent require constant attention and adjustment as we face different circumstances and incidents. The Committee has my undertaking that we will report to it on our progress on this issue. We will take seriously its report and weave it into the work that we do. We will continue with the work programme to reinforce the fundamental foundation of policing in this country, which is the trust and confidence that the British public have and the consent that they give to the policing model.

Ms Nusrat Ghani (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister—not an end point. I call Mr Tim Loughton to respond and wind up.

2.28 pm

Tim Loughton: Thank you, Ms Ghani. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in this debate, which has felt more like a Home Affairs Committee alumni reunion at times, given that you, Ms Ghani, and the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), and the two Back-Bench speakers are all former or current members of the Committee. Only the Minister and his Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), have never added to the greatness of that Committee or benefited from

being members of it in the past. But who knows? Those days might lie ahead, as many of us have found out.

This is a good report from the Select Committee. I think that the Government response to it was better than many others and made some helpful observations. It is clear from the Minister's words that the considerations that we have raised are very much forming part of further research, reviews and reforms that the Home Office is looking at in relation to various other aspects of policing. That is very much to be welcomed. We also very much welcome his commitment to continuing to keep the Committee informed on that progress, because it is germane to much of the work that the Home Office and Home Affairs Committee do in relation to so many aspects of policing.

As I said earlier, it has probably never been more important that we do much more to restore public confidence in the police, which has suffered some quite severe blows from bad apples, and more, in recent months and years. It is in everybody's interests if we can do that. I hope this report has put the IOPC's work and the importance of an effective and efficient complaints body firmly on the radar, particularly for the Home Office. We absolutely need a complaints system that has urgency, speed, thoroughness and credibility at its heart, and that absolutely acknowledges that it needs to be able to do its job with the confidence of the public, whom the police are there to protect. Therefore this is not an end point. I am glad that the Minister has realised that there is more work to be done. It is a subject for constant attention and adjustment.

In closing the debate, I thank all the police for the extraordinary bravery and the importance of the work that they take for granted and do day in, day out, and that we should not take for granted. The vast majority of police officers, who serve to protect us, do an outstanding job. It is in their interests, perhaps more than most, that they are scrutinised by a complaints system that is robust and respected and inspires confidence in the public whom they police, if we are to continue with the greatly valued system of policing by consent, which we have had in this country since Peel and which we very much hope will continue. The IOPC plays an important part in that, so getting it right is absolutely vital. I am pleased that we have had the opportunity to put all those comments on the record today. Thank you, Ms Ghani.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Sixth Report of the Home Affairs Committee, Session 2021-22, Police Conduct and Complaints, HC 140, and the Government response, HC 1264.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Relationship and Sex Education Materials in Schools

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered relationship and sex education materials in schools.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) who have co-sponsored this debate, and the Backbench Business Committee, which has been so generous with the time allowed—we will try not to take it all up.

Let me start with a health warning: my speech is not suitable for children. That is sadly ironic, given that all of the extreme and inappropriate material I am about to share has already been shared with children in our schools. As a former biology teacher, I have delivered my fair share of sex education. Teaching the facts of life often comes with more than a little embarrassment for teachers and pupils alike. I remember teaching about reproduction when I was about 30 weeks pregnant with my first baby. One child asked me if my husband knew I was pregnant. Another, having watched a video on labour and birth, commented, “Miss, that’s really gonna hurt, you know.”

Just as children do not know about photosynthesis or the digestive system without being taught, neither do they know the facts of reproduction. Thus, it is important that children are taught clearly and truthfully about sex. Of course, there is a lot more to sexual relationships than just anatomy. Many people believe that parents should take the leading role in teaching children about relationships, since one of the main duties of parenting is to pass on wisdom and values to children. Nevertheless, in some families parents cannot or do not teach children about relationships, and it is also sadly the case that the internet now presents children with a vast array of false and damaging information about sex.

There is widespread consensus that schools do have a role to play in relationships and sex education. That is why the Government chose to make the teaching of relationships and sex education compulsory in all secondary schools from September 2020. According to the guidance, the aim was to help children

“manage their academic, personal and social lives in a positive way.”

Less than two years later, my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary has written to the Children’s Commissioner asking her for help in supporting schools to teach RSE because we know that the quality of RSE is inconsistent.

The Education Secretary is right that the teaching of sex education is inconsistent. Unlike maths, science or history, there are no widely adopted schemes of work or examinations, so the subject matter and materials vary widely between schools. However, inconsistency should be the least of the Education Secretary’s concerns when we look at the reality of what is being taught. Despite its good intentions, the new RSE framework has opened

the floodgates to a whole host of external providers who offer sex education materials to schools. Now, children across the country are being exposed to a plethora of deeply inappropriate, wildly inaccurate, sexually explicit and damaging materials in the name of sex education. That is extremely concerning for a number of reasons.

First, if we fail to teach children clearly and factually about relationships, sex and the law they will be exposed to all sorts of risks. For example, if sex is defined as, “anything that makes you horny or aroused”—the definition offered by the sex education provider, School of Sexuality Education—how does a child understand the link between sex and pregnancy? Sex Education Forum tells children they fall into one of two groups: menstruators or non-menstruators. If a teenage girl’s periods do not start, what will she think? How does she know that is not normal? How does she know to consult a doctor? How will she know she is not pregnant? Will she just assume she is one of the non-menstruators?

The book for teachers, “Great Relationships and Sex Education”, suggests an activity for 15-year-olds in which children are given prompt cards and have to say whether they think certain types of sexual acts are good or bad. How do the children know what acts come with health risks, or the risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections? If we tell children that, “love has no age”—the slogan used in a Diversity Role Models resource—do we undermine their understanding of the legal age of consent? Sex education provider Bish Training informs children that:

“Most people would say that they had a penis and testicles or a clitoris and vagina, however many people are in the middle of this spectrum with how their bodies are configured.”

As a former biology teacher, I do not even know where to start with that one.

As adults, we often fail to remember what it is like to be a child and we make the mistake of assuming that children know more than they do. Children have all sorts of misconceptions. That is why it is our responsibility to teach them factually, truthfully and in age-appropriate ways, so that they can make informed decisions.

Another concern relates to the teaching of consent. Of course it is vital to teach about consent. The Everyone’s Invited revelations make that abundantly clear. But we must remember that, under the law, children cannot consent to sex. Sex education classes conducted by the group It Happens Education told boys of 13 and 14 that the law

“is not there to...punish young people for having consensual sex” and said:

“It’s just two 14 year olds who want to have sex with each other who are consensually having sex.”

It is not hard to see the risks of this approach, which normalises and legitimises under-age sex. Not only are children legally not able to consent; they also do not have the developmental maturity or capacity to consent to sexual activity—that is the point of the age of consent.

The introduction of graphic or extreme sexual material in sex education lessons also reinforces the porn culture that is damaging our children in such a devastating way. Of course it is not the fault of schools that half of all 14-year-olds have seen pornography online—much of it violent and degrading—but some RSE lessons are actively contributing to the sexualisation and adultification of

children. The Proud Trust has produced a dice game encouraging children to discuss explicit sexual acts, based on the roll of a dice. The six sides of the dice name different body parts—such as anus, vulva, penis and mouth—and objects. Two dice are thrown and children must name a pleasurable sexual act that can take place between the two body parts. The game is aimed at children of 13 and over.

Sexwise is a website run and funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and recommended in the Department for Education's RSE guidance. The website is promoted in schools and contains the following advice:

"Maybe you read a really hot bit of erotica while looking up Dominance and Submission...Remember, sharing is caring".

Sex education materials produced by Bish Training involve discussion of a wide range of sexual practices—some of them violent. This includes rough sex, spanking, choking, BDSM and kink. Bish is aimed at young people of 14 and over and provides training materials for teachers.

Even when materials are not extreme, we must still be careful not to sexualise children prematurely. I spoke to a mother who told me how her 11-year-old son had been shown a PowerPoint presentation in a lesson on sexuality. It was setting out characteristics and behaviours and asking children to read through the lists and decide whether they were straight, gay or bisexual. Pre-pubescent 11-year-olds are not straight, gay or bisexual—they are children.

Even School Diversity Week, a celebration of LGBTQIA+ promoted by the Just Like Us group, leads to the sexualisation of children. Of course schools should celebrate diversity and promote tolerance, but why are we doing that by asking pre-sexual children to align themselves with adult sexual liberation campaigns? Let us not forget that the + includes kink, BDSM and fetish.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving a very illuminating speech. The material that she is talking about talks about the detailed practice of sexual acts. She is a former biology teacher herself. Are there not proper boundaries that teachers have to respect in teaching sex education, so that it does not get into talk about behaviours that really strays into a relationship that teachers and children should not have?

Miriam Cates: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. There is guidance, which I will come on to, but the problem is that the guidance is often very vague and open to interpretation. I will absolutely come on to that in my remarks.

Even primary schools are not immune from using inappropriate materials. An "All About Me" programme developed by Warwickshire County Council's Respect Yourself team introduces six and seven-year-olds to "rules about touching yourself". I recently spoke to a mother in my constituency who was distraught that her six-year-old had been taught in school about masturbation. Sexualising children and encouraging them to talk about intimate details with adults breaks down important boundaries and makes them more susceptible and available to sexual predators, both on and offline.

Another significant concern is the use of RSE to push extreme gender ideology. Gender ideology is a belief system that claims that we all have an innate

gender, which may or may not align with our biological sex. Gender ideology claims that, rather than sex being determined at conception and observed at birth, it is assigned at birth, and that doctors sometimes get it wrong.

Gender theory sadly has sexist and homophobic undertones, pushing outdated gender stereotypes and suggesting to same-sex-attracted adolescents that, instead of being gay or lesbian, they may in fact be the opposite sex. Gender theory says that if someone feels like a woman, they are a woman, regardless of their chromosomes, their genitals, or, in fact, reality.

Gender ideology is highly contested. It does not have a basis in science, and no one had heard of it in this country just 10 years ago. Yet, it is being pushed on children in some schools under the guise of RSE, with what can only be described as a religious fervour. Department for Education guidance states that schools should

"not reinforce harmful stereotypes, for instance by suggesting that children might be a different gender", and that:

"Resources used in teaching about this topic must...be...evidence based."

Yet a video produced by AMAZE and used in schools suggests that boys who wear nail varnish or girls who like weight lifting might actually be the opposite sex. Resources by Brook claim:

"'man' and 'woman' are genders. They are social ideas about how people who have vulvas and vaginas, and people who have penises and testicles should behave".

Split Banana offers workshops to schools where children learn ideas of how gender is socially constructed and explore links between the gender binary and colonialism. A Gendered Intelligence workshop tells children that:

"A woman is still a woman, even if she enjoys getting blow jobs."

Just Like Us tells children that their biological sex can be changed. PSHE Association resources inform children that people whose gender matches the sex they were assigned at birth are described as cisgender.

Gender theory is even being taught to our very youngest children. Pop'n'Ollie tells children that gender is male, female, both or neither. The Introducing Teddy book, aimed at primary school children, tells the story of Teddy, who changes sex, illustrated by the transformation of his bow tie into a hair bow. The Diversity Role Models primary training workshop uses the "Gender Unicorn", a cartoon unicorn who explains that there is an additional biological sex category called "other".

Numerous resources from numerous sex education providers present gender theory as fact, contrary to DFE guidance. However, it is not just factually incorrect resources that are making their ways into schools; visitors from external agencies are invited in to talk to children about sex and relationships, sometimes even without a teacher present in the room.

Guidance says that, when using external agencies, schools should check their material in advance and "conduct a basic online search".

However, a social media search of organisations such as Diversity Role Models reveals links to drag queens with highly sexualised, porn-inspired names, or in the case of Mermaids, the promotion of political activism, which breaches political impartiality guidelines.

[*Miriam Cates*]

In some cases, children are disadvantaged when they show signs of dissent from gender ideology, as we saw in the recent case, reported in the press, of a girl who was bullied out of school for questioning gender theory. I have spoken to parents of children who have been threatened with detention if they misgender a trans-identifying child or complain about a child of the opposite sex in their changing rooms. I have heard from parents whose child's RSE homework was marked down for not adhering to this new creed.

Children believe what adults tell them. They are biologically programmed to do so; how else does a child learn the knowledge and skills they need to grow, develop and be prepared for adult life? It is therefore the duty of those responsible for raising children—particularly parents and teachers—to tell them the truth. Those who teach a child that there are 64 different genders, that they may actually be a different gender to their birth sex, or that they may have been born in the wrong body, are not telling the truth. It is a tragedy that the RSE curriculum, which should help children to develop confidence and self-respect, is instead being used to undermine reality and ultimately put children in danger.

Some may ask what harm is being done by presenting those ideas to children, and, of course, it is right to teach children to be tolerant, kind and accepting of others. However, it is not compassionate, wise, or legal to teach children that contested ideologies are facts. That is indoctrination, and it is becoming evident that that has some concerning consequences.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way, and for the progress she is making on this. I was intrigued, but another question is that in contested areas like this, it actually leads further than that. It is not just a sense of indoctrination; there are also physical consequences, because children will end up going through medical processes that lead them to almost irreversible problems later on, should it turn out to be something that is a problem for them. Does the hon. Lady think that is also a potential consequence of what has been going on?

Miriam Cates: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The problem is that these ideas do not just stay as ideas; they have serious physical consequences. There has been a more than 4,000% rise in the referrals of girls to gender services over the last decade, and a recent poll of teachers suggests that at least 79% of schools now have trans-identifying children. That is not a biological phenomenon. It is social contagion, driven by the internet and reinforced in schools.

The Bayswater Support Group, which provides advice and support for parents of trans-identifying children, reports a surge of parents contacting them after their children are exposed to gender content in RSE lessons and in assemblies. A large proportion of parents say their child showed no sign of gender distress until either a school assembly or RSE lessons on those topics. Children who are autistic, who are same-sex attracted, who do not conform to traditional gender stereotypes, or who have mental health conditions are disproportionately likely to identify as trans or non-binary.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have heard evidence from the Bayswater Support Group as well. Parents who had questioned children who came home from school after the school had supported their wanting to transition were contacted by social services because that could be construed in some way as harm towards the child, which is frightening given that they still have parental responsibility.

My hon. Friend mentioned physical aspects. Is there not also a mental health aspect? Teenagers and young children have so much to cope with these days—much more so than when we were going through puberty and growing up. They have all the pressures of social media. Almost to be forced to question their sex—if they do not, there is something wrong with them—puts extraordinary pressures on children, adding to all that they have to go through as teenagers already.

Miriam Cates: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It does nothing but add to the anxiety and difficulty that many teenagers already face. That is why it is more important than ever that parents and schools tell children the truth about sex and relationships and gender.

When we think about the vulnerability of children with autism or same-sex attracted children to some of these ideas, we can look at resources from the Chameleon sex education group, which tells Tom's testimony. Tom, a female, says:

"I guess I always felt different. Even on my first day of school I remember not feeling like other kids...I didn't realise at the time it was because of my gender identity."

When autistic and vulnerable children who are already struggling to fit in and feel accepted are presented with an explanation for their difficulties, it is not surprising that they are attracted to it.

Katie Alcock, senior lecturer in developmental psychology at the University of Lancaster, told me that children with autism right through the primary and secondary years struggle with the idea that other people think differently to them, and that something can have an underlying essence that is different to its reality. So teaching autistic children that their feelings of awkwardness might stem from being born in the wrong body is a failure of safeguarding.

In fact, children who tell a teacher at school that they are suffering from gender distress are then often excluded from normal safeguarding procedures. Instead of involving parents and considering wider causes for what the child is feeling and the best course of action, some schools actively hide the information from parents, secretly changing a child's name and pronouns in school, but using birth names and pronouns in communications with parents.

One parent of a 15-year-old with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome said she discovered that without her knowledge, her daughter's school had started the process of socially transitioning her child, and has continued to do so despite the mother's objections. Another mother said:

"It's all happened very quickly and very unexpectedly after teaching at school during year seven and eight. As far as I can understand the children were encouraged to question the boundaries of their sexual identity as well as their gender identity. Her friendship group of eight girls all adopted some form of LGBTQ identity—either sexual identity or gender identity. My daughter's mental health has deteriorated so quickly, to the point of self

harm and some of the blame is put on me for not being encouraging enough of my daughter's desire to flatten her breasts and for puberty blockers."

As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, some parents have been referred to social services when they have questioned the wisdom of treating their son as a girl or their daughter as a boy.

Socially transitioning a child—changing their name and pronouns, and treating them in public as a member of the opposite sex—is not a neutral act. In her interim report on gender services for children, paediatrician Dr Hilary Cass remarks that although social transition "may not be thought of as an intervention or treatment,"

it is

"an active intervention because it may have significant effects on a child or young person's psychological functioning."

The majority of adolescents who suffer from gender dysphoria grow out of it, but instead of safeguarding vulnerable children, schools are actively leading children down a path of transition. If a child presented with anorexia and a teacher's response was to hide that from parents, celebrate the body dysmorphia and encourage the child to stop eating, that would be a gross safeguarding failure. For a non-medical professional to make a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, exclude the child's parents and encourage the child to transition is just such a failure.

In some schools, children are not only taught about the concept of gender theory but signposted to information about physical interventions. Last year, sixth-formers at a grammar school sent a newsletter to girls as young as 11, detailing how to bind their breasts to "look more masculine" and outlining how surgery can remove tissue if it hurts too much. Also, schools have played a major role in referrals to gender identity clinics, where children are sometimes set on a path to medical and surgical transition.

I was really pleased to see the Health Secretary announce today that he is commissioning a more robust study of whether treatment at such clinics improves children's lives or leads to later problems or regret, because schools may think that they are being kind, but the consequences of full transition—permanent infertility, loss of sexual function and lifelong health problems—are devastating, as has become clear following the case of Keira Bell.

Anyone hearing for the first time what is going on in schools might reasonably ask, "How can this be allowed?" The answer is that it is not allowed. DFE guidance tells schools:

"Resources used in teaching about this topic must always be age-appropriate and evidence-based. Materials which suggest that non-conformity to gender stereotypes should be seen as synonymous with having a different gender identity should not be used and you should not work with external agencies or organisations that produce such material."

However, many teachers just do not have the time to look into the background of every group that provides sex education resources, and when faced with teaching such difficult and sensitive topics, they understandably reach for ready-made materials, without investigating their source.

Furthermore, those teachers who are aware of the harms are sometimes afraid to share their concerns. A lot of teachers have written to me about this situation, with one writing:

"I left my job in a Primary School after we were asked to be complicit in the 'social transitioning' of a 7 year old boy. This was after Gendered Intelligence came into the school and delivered training."

Relationship and sex education in this country has become a wild west. Anyone can set themselves up as a sex education provider and offer resources and advice to schools. Imagine if someone with no qualifications could set themselves up as a geography resource provider, insert their own political beliefs on to a map of the world—perhaps they would put Ukraine inside the Russian border—and then sell those materials for use in schools. I do not believe that some of these sex education groups should have any place in our educational system.

Indeed, the guidance says that schools should exercise extreme caution when working with external agencies:

"Schools should not under any circumstances work with external agencies that take or promote extreme political positions or use materials produced by such agencies."

Yet all the organisations that I have mentioned today, and many others, fall foul of the guidance. What is more, the Government are actually funding some of these organisations with taxpayers' money. For example, The Proud Trust received money from the tampon tax, and EqualiTeach and Diversity Role Models have received money from the DFE as part of anti-bullying schemes. We have created the perfect conditions for a safeguarding disaster, whereby anyone can set up as an RSE provider and be given access to children, either through lesson materials or through direct access to classrooms.

Yet parents—those who love a child most and who are most invested in their welfare—are being cut out. In many cases, parents are refused access to the teaching materials being used by their children in school. This was highlighted by the case of Clare Page, which was reported at the weekend. She complained about sex education lessons that were being taught in her child's school by an organisation called the School of Sexuality Education. Until this year, that organisation's website linked to a commercial website that promoted pornography. Mrs Page's daughter's school refused to allow the family to have a copy of the material provided in lessons, saying it was commercially sensitive.

Schools are in loco parentis. Their authority to teach children comes not from the state and not from the teaching unions, but from parents. Parents should have full access to the RSE materials being used by their children. We have created this safeguarding disaster and we will have to find the courage to deal with it for the sake of our children.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is making a compelling argument. She must have talked to the Department for Education about the matter before the debate. What I find difficult is everything else—she talked about geography and biology—is heavily inspected, and a school that departs from clear facts and teaches something different would immediately get a bad report and probably be put in special measures, yet when it comes to this subject, there seems to be no controls. Is that the case or is it just that the Department thinks this is something that only schools can judge?

Miriam Cates: I hope that the Minister will answer those questions, but my right hon. Friend is right. That is the source of the problem: the regulation and inspection

[*Miriam Cates*]

criteria is not the same for these subjects, but it is even more of a problem for them because they are contested. As a science teacher, if I were to google a video of sodium being put in water, I will not find anything that anyone disagrees with or that departs from the truth. The trouble with some of these topics is there is such a wide range of contested views that we need a set of regulations and an accepted curriculum even more so, but I will come on to that.

The Health Secretary rightly compared the fear of causing offence, which may happen, with fears of being called racist when discussing the Rotherham grooming gangs. Exposing children to extreme sexual practices and ideology, telling them it is all about choice, connecting them with adults they do not know, cutting out parents, labelling parents as harmful or even referring them to social services, hiding information about a child from those who love them most—there are strong parallels here with grooming practices, and I have no doubt that children will be more susceptible to being groomed as a result of the materials they are being exposed to.

How have we gone so wrong? We seem to have abandoned childhood. Just as in the covid pandemic when we sacrificed young for old, our approach to sex education is sacrificing the welfare and innocence of children in the interests of adults' sexual liberation. In 2022, our children are physically overprotected. They have too little opportunity to play unsupervised, to take responsibility and to mature and grow wise, yet at the same time they are being exposed to adult ideologies, being used as pawns in adults' political agendas and at risk of permanent harm. What kind of society have we created where teachers need to undertake a risk assessment to take pupils to a local park, but a drag queen wearing a dildo is invited into a library to teach pre-school children?

Parents do not know where to turn, and many I have spoken to tell me how they complain to schools and get nowhere. Even the response from the DFE comes back the same every time telling parents that, "Where an individual has concerns, the quickest and most effective route to take is to raise the issue directly with the school." The complaints system is circular and schools are left to mark their own homework.

Ofsted does not seem willing or able to uphold the DFE's guidance. Indeed, it may be contributing to the problem. It was reported last week that Ofsted cites lack of gender identity teaching in primary schools as a factor in whether schools are downgraded. There is a statutory duty on the Department to review the RSE curriculum every three years, so the first review is due next year. I urge the Minister to bring forward that review and conduct it urgently. I understand that the Department is in the process of producing guidance for schools on sex and gender, so will Minister tell us when that will be available?

While much of the RSE guidance is sensible, terms such as "age appropriate" are too woolly and difficult to interpret. The guidance produced on political neutrality has been helpful, but this is not fundamentally a political issue. It is a matter of taking an evidence-based approach to what knowledge and ideas a child is able to process at different stages of their development. We do not try to teach babies to read or teach quantum mechanics to

six-year-olds, because they are not developmentally ready, and neither should we teach about sexual pleasure or gender fluidity to pre-pubescent children or about extreme sex acts to adolescents. The RSE guidance and framework must be rewritten with oversight by experts in child development and put on a statutory footing to determine what should be taught, when and by whom. The DFE should consider creating a set of accredited resources, with regulatory oversight by Ofqual, and mandating that RSE be taught only by subject specialists. The Department has previously said in correspondence that it is

"investing in a central package to help all schools to increase the confidence and quality of their teaching practice in these subjects, including guidance and training resources to provide comprehensive teaching in these areas in an age-appropriate way."

Can the Minister say when that package will be ready?

In the light of the Cass review interim report, the Department must write to schools with clear guidance about socially transitioning children, the law on single-sex facilities and the imperative to include parents in issues of safeguarding. The Department should also conduct a deep dive into the materials being used in schools, the groups that provide such materials and their funding sources.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. There is an awful lot of work that needs doing on this subject. There is an old saying: "Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man." While the Department is working on this issue, children are unfortunately being exposed to this material. The damage could be being done as we speak. We could do with action to withdraw some of this material with immediate effect while we do those deep dive studies. I think it is so important. It is happening now—as we sit here, children are being exposed to things in their school that they should not be. We need to do something immediately.

Miriam Cates: I completely agree. That is why I am calling on the Department to conduct this review urgently. It is incumbent on parents and teachers to speak out when they see those resources and express their concerns. Unfortunately, at the moment, many teachers and parents are powerless, which is why we very much need the help of the Department.

What is the Minister's view on the amendment to the Schools Bill introduced in the House of Lords that would require schools to allow parents to view the materials being used in RSE? Another solution might be for the DFE to create a statutory obligation that schools can only use resources published online. That would put the onus on third-party providers to produce responsible, high-quality material and make it available for public and academic scrutiny. Does the Minister not agree that sunlight is the best disinfectant, and that parents have the right to know what their children are being taught, especially in matters of sex and relationships?

RSE in schools is not fit for purpose. I have no doubt that there are many schools and many teachers doing an excellent job of delivering RSE in a way that helps to prepare children for adult life, as was intended. However, from the sheer volume of evidence I have seen—I have spoken for 32 minutes, but I honestly could speak for two hours with the materials I have been given; however, I will allow other hon. Members to come in shortly—and

the number of parents who have contacted me from all over the country and from all different types of schools, it seems clear that RSE is exposing far too many children to adult sexuality and adult ideology and is doing them harm.

Most teachers and headteachers mean well, but they are overwhelmed by political pressure, too busy to investigate the source of teaching materials and too confused by guidance that is at times weak and contradictory. At the moment, it is left to dedicated parents groups such as the Bayswater Support Group, Transgender Trend, the Safe Schools Alliance, Parents for Education and the Family Education Trust to support parents, guide them to complaints procedures and help them to engage with schools. However, it is the Department for Education that imposed the mandatory requirement for schools to deliver RSE, so it is fundamentally the responsibility of the Department to ensure that schools are equipped and held accountable to deliver it well.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister how the Department plans to clean up this mess and give our children the protection they deserve.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Lloyd Russell-Moyle, I want to indicate that I will call the Opposition spokesperson at 4.08 pm; he and the Minister will have 10 minutes each. There will be a couple of minutes for Miriam Cates to respond at the end. Informally, that is about six minutes a speech. However, if we have too many interventions or the interventions are too long, we will have to cut that back.

3.34 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I want to start with some things that I agreed with in what I have just heard. I agree that education materials in our schools should be made public. I agree with that for all subjects, actually, and not just in schools. I think of the scandal in universities, where academic journals are behind paywalls, so we cannot look to see what academics on public money are researching in this country without paying huge amounts. I totally agree on that point.

I totally agree we needed better guidance from the Government on the issue. In fact, when we introduced RSE or RSHE, one of the big problems was that the Government guidelines were late and delayed, and some of the problems we saw in places such as Birmingham, where parents were protesting outside schools, were because the guidelines were not clear enough, often putting too much on teachers having to negotiate with parents, rather than the Department protecting teachers by saying “These are exactly the things that should be covered.”

I totally agree that we need to have an education facilitated in schools with subject specialists. It is an ongoing scandal that we have biology teachers teaching this wide area when, as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) has said, this is so much more than the metaphorical condom on the banana that students have in the last year of secondary school. It is about the relationship, the emotional aspect and mental health, so I totally agree.

Actually, the inclusion of this in a wider citizenship and RSHE portfolio, by which we developed an education pathway for trainee teachers during the last Labour Government, was important. The destruction of citizenship education over the last 10 years and, therefore, the training of teachers specialised in such areas has been a great failure. I know there has been some reversal of that, but I am afraid that that is the situation we are in now. We have fewer subject specialists in citizenship and RSHE because of the choices made in 2010. I agree on the principle that we need to reverse that.

Where I disagree, I am afraid, is on some of the hon. Member's examples. I did not plan to say this, but during the pandemic, my second cousin—a 15-year-old boy—died in a tragic accident of auto-asphyxiation. It devastated the family, as can be imagined, and happened in the pandemic when we were only allowed six people at the funeral. If he had been taught about risky sex acts—he was 15, not a pre-pubescent child—and how to make sure he did things safely, rather than just learning something from the internet that then led to the end of his life, he might still be around and his family might not be devastated. So, actually, because of that personal experience I do have a problem with saying that we should not teach any of this to our children.

The hon. Member picks out examples of the dice or whatever that might sound frivolous, and I cannot judge how exactly things played out in those schools—she might well be right that it was played out by some teachers incorrectly—but the principle of learning about things before people are legally able to do them but when they are physically able to engage in them, which 15-year-olds are, I am afraid, could have been lifesaving.

My sister, who is a teacher in Essex, has worked hard to try and incorporate some of those teaching methods into the school's RSHE, focused on an age-specific approach and on stories of people such as my cousin and others, so we can talk about the dangers of some of these things. We cannot know about the dangers of things if we do not talk about them, or if we say that they are just things that families need to talk about. I am afraid most families will not do that because those kinds of things are darn embarrassing to talk about—but also because you never think your child will do something like that. I disagree with that element of what we heard today. I do agree that there needs to be oversight and I do agree that there need to be checks to make sure that we are not just promoting risky activities; we need to be talking about the risks of risky activities. Then, when people are of age, they can make their own choices.

I want to reflect on the things I was planning to say in this debate in the last few seconds I have. The UK Youth Parliament ran a campaign for years to try to get RSHE better taught. Elements of the campaign were about emotions and relationships, and it was also about LGBT inclusive education—and that does include T. We have seen the Fédération Internationale de Natation ruling that competitors will not be able to swim unless they transitioned before they were 12, so we are in a difficult and complex world that we have to navigate. Broad-brush bans from the Department are unhelpful; we need to be content specific and school specific. The Department needs to show more leadership, but we cannot exclude talking about trans people or these complex issues in schools because that, I am afraid, would be very dangerous.

3.40 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for his speech, which I know was deeply personal and very difficult to give. It really illuminated what we are talking about and showed that our overall approach has to be to prevent harm. I think we are all addressing the subject in that spirit, but we are now in a deeply unsatisfactory position in executing the delivery of this content and we need to do better.

One of the reasons I championed the importance of relationships and sex education in schools was that I had become concerned about the increasingly sexualised environment in our society, which sees young people exposed to sexuality and sexual practices before they are sufficiently mature to handle them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) said, social media and the internet mean that we are all just one click away from pornography. The content of some of that material is of a much more exploitative nature than perhaps was available pre-internet, which is why we need to equip all our children with the tools to protect themselves.

We need to be able to teach young people about sex in a way that emphasises emotion and intimacy, and all the issues around consent and enjoyment. Their introduction to it can be about the purely physical aspects, which can be harmful and mean that behaviours can be normalised before children are able to properly understand what a healthy sexuality is based on: intimacy and consent. We have an environment that is difficult for both girls and boys, and we need to ensure that we address the emotional needs of both sexes, which are different.

For me, the importance of RSE is all about emphasising the primacy of consent and respect. I want boys to feel that they are able to call out sexually abusive behaviour by their peers when they witness it, because we know from recent campaigns that being a victim of sexually aggressive behaviour starts in schools.

I heard a horrendous example when I visited a local school on International Women's Day. I was with a group of 13-year-old girls. Sometimes such visits go really well and there are loads of questions, but this was one of those really difficult ones, so I just lobbed it out there and asked, "How many of you have been harassed?" The answer was every single one of them, and for most it had happened in school. That abuse is exactly what we are talking about. I want to make sure that girls feel empowered to call that out and not just have to accept it.

The girls told me that they are pressurised into sharing intimate pictures, which are then shared by phone. One girl said to me, "If you make a stand, you just attract more attention to yourself and end up getting more harassment, and if you comply you're easy. What are we supposed to do in those circumstances?" One difficulty with making sure that we start to tackle these issues at an age-appropriate time is, when is that time? The exposure to this content is unregulated and children can be exposed to it at a very young age.

I had high hopes that RSE would empower our girls and be an important tool in the war against sexual violence, but I have been horrified by some of the content highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge that is being delivered in

schools. As she said, anyone can be a provider. The DFE needs to get a hold on that if it is going to protect our children from harm. My hon. Friend highlighted the dice game, which I was utterly appalled to see. It reduces sex to just being about penetrative acts. Forgive me, but at the risk of being romantic and sentimental, a healthy sexual relationship is about fulfilment for both parties—it is not just about physicality.

As the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown said, this is about safety and safe sex. A dice that displays objects and where they can be inserted is not a healthy approach to teaching people about safe sex. We hear that young girls now think that the way to avoid getting pregnant is to have anal sex—that that is safe sex—but that is not without other risks. We can teach people to have a healthier approach to their sexual relationships without sex being reduced to physical interaction.

I have more to say, but at the risk of crowding other Members out, I will stop there. If we are to churn out healthy children with a healthy respect for each other, and a safer environment for both girls and boys, the Department for Education needs to get a proper hold on making sure that good content in this field is circulated, and bad content is exterminated.

3.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) for bringing forward this debate. It is not an easy subject to talk about, to be truthful. It is not one I feel at ease with, but I wanted to come here to support the hon. Lady, because I realise what she is trying to do.

Relationships and sex education is an essential issue, and a crucial topic for young people to understand. We must all realise that there is a time and a place for relationships and sex education in schools. However, underpinning that is the right of a family to pass on their morals and values, and not to be undermined by teachers who do not know individual children and cannot understand the family dynamic.

I am clear about what I want to see when it comes to sex education: no young person should be unaware of how their body works, but similarly, no teacher nor programme should seek to circumnavigate the right of a family to sow into their child's life what they see is needed. That is especially the case in primary school children—I think of innocence lost. The Government's relationship and sex education paper states that,

"Regulations 2019 have made Relationships Education compulsory in all primary schools. Sex education is not compulsory in primary schools and the content set out in this guidance therefore focuses on Relationships Education."

Despite that, a worrying number of schools across the United Kingdom have felt it necessary to teach children not only about sex, but about gender identity and trans issues. Conservatives for Women has said that children are being encouraged from as young as primary school to consider whether they have gender identity issues that differ from their biology—being male or female—as the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge outlined. That leaves children confused for no other reason than the misunderstanding, and it makes them believe that they should be looking at their own gender issues. My humble opinion—I am putting it clearly on the record—is that children in primary schools are too young to be taught sex education at that level.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): It may have already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), but there was a poster put out in primary schools by Educate & Celebrate, stating:

“Age is only a number. Everyone can do what they feel they are able to do, no matter what age they are”.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is pretty alarming?

Jim Shannon: I share the hon. Lady’s concerns, as does the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge, who set the scene very well.

How can we expect our children to understand such complexities, and why should we force them to at an early age? It was clear to me that the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge was saying that this age is too young. As grandfather of five—soon to be six—I look to my grandchildren, who are of primary school age. I can say that the last thing that their parents, or indeed their grandparents, want is someone else teaching them about these sensitive issues. It should be for a family to decide the correct time and what approach they take.

I appreciate that the health and education systems are devolved, that the Minister here has no responsibility for Northern Ireland—I always mention Northern Ireland in these debates, because it is important that we hear perspective on how we do things in our own regions across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and that the extremity of what is being in schools does not currently apply to some devolved Assemblies, but there is no doubt that this could evolve. I want to reinforce with the utmost passion the importance of the family unit, which is exactly what some of the curriculum is destroying. I know that my concerns about that are shared by the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and others in the House.

Nobody knows a child better than their parent, and I for one do not understand why the decision to teach children about sex and relationships has been taken out of the hands of families—parents and grandparents—wholly without their consent. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge gave examples; I am concerned about similar examples back home in Northern Ireland.

I believe that sex education in high schools should be taught within the parameters of biology—that is the way it should be—and that pupils should be taught the value of understanding themselves emotionally. However, the problems arise when the curriculum allows teachers to seek to mould minds, rather than allowing children to formulate their ideas and feelings. We must bear in mind that there is a line between what a child should be taught in school and what a parent chooses to teach their children at home.

The Northern Ireland framework for sex education states that it should be taught:

“in harmony with the ethos of the school or college and in conformity with the moral and religious principles held by parents and school management authorities.”

That is what we do in Northern Ireland, and I think we can all hold to that statement as being not too far away from what we should be doing—but those moral and religious principles held by parents and school management have become somewhat ignored.

It is crucial that we do not unduly influence young people or pupils’ innocent minds by teaching extreme sex and gender legislation. I have seen some material taught in Northern Ireland, such an English book that refers to glory holes, sexual abuse of animals and oral sex. That book was taught to a 13-year-old boy, whose parents were mortified whenever they saw it, and the young boy had little to no understanding of what was going on. I wrote to the Education Minister in Northern Ireland, asking how that book could ever be on a curriculum and what possible literary benefit—there is none—could ever outweigh the introduction of such concepts.

There needs to be a greater emphasis on the line between what is appropriate to be taught at school and at home, and a greater respect for parents and what they want their children to be taught. Family values should be at the core of a child’s adolescence education, as it is of a sensitive nature and needs to be treated carefully, with respect and compassion.

3.52 pm

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) and for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), and the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), on securing this important and timely debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) for sharing his experiences. I acknowledge the pain in his contribution; there is a lesson in there, I am sure.

I approach this debate not as an academic, although I have taken care to speak at length with educationalists and professionals over the last year about some of these matters. I also do not bring lived experience or trauma; I was fortunate with my own upbringing and introduction to sex through education, and in my life, but I recognise that that is not everybody’s experience. I seek to approach the issue as a parliamentarian, as we all do, representing those who have brought concerns to us—concerns for the safety of those who speak to us, about misunderstanding, and for the safety and wellbeing of others.

I have spoken to teachers who have been put on the spot when it comes to making decisions in school about the materials they are being asked to use. Reference has already been made to the Cass review and the dangers of putting teachers in a position where they must make a clinical decision although they are not clinicians. I have spoken to parents who are desperate and feel disarmed, without the tools to reach and help their own children, who they see are confused on matters of identity, sexuality, sex and gender. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge made an important point: we must not lose sight of the fact that teachers are in loco parentis. Sending a child to school and conveying them into the care of another person involves a special level of trust, so to see that damaged in this way is compelling for me as a parliamentarian.

We want our schools to be safe places with trusted teachers, where learners can flourish and grow. One expert told me that good sex education includes helping learners to understand the sexed body; to make decisions about health, contraception and their own boundaries; and to understand the law, so that they can keep safe,

[Robin Millar]

seek help when needed and respect the boundaries of others. The expert also told me that it is important to help learners to understand how to critique messages.

I cannot add to the case laid out by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge that children and learners are being systematically exposed to inappropriate materials that confound and frustrate those three objectives. I support her belief in the principle of sunlight as disinfectant, and I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown in recognising the importance of visibility of materials to parents, governors and those who have an interest in the issue. I also fully support the urgent review of guidelines with the appropriate tightening that my hon. Friend called for.

As we have heard, this is a contested area. It is not a settled matter, which is the reason we are having the debate. I want to mention gender and gender identity, because the materials cited and delivered often use or reflect a certainty that simply is not there. I want to make one key observation about this in the couple of minutes I have left. In the debates that I have heard, we all agree on three things: we want children to be true to themselves; we want them to be accepted; and we want them to be respected and valued as individuals. There is no question about that, but it starts to be problematic when I hear phrases such as “my truth” and “moral relativism”, creeping into the materials that we see, because this is existentialism—anyone can look that up.

We can go back a long time to see the weaknesses in existentialism and the risks associated with it. It was Søren Kierkegaard who outlined some of the risks and conclusions of this form of thinking. He pointed out that existentialism ends in three things. The first is inauthenticity, yet we have said that one of our objectives is to be authentic. Secondly, he said that alienation is another consequence of existentialism and moral relativism, yet we have said that we want children to be accepted, not outcast. Thirdly, he warned against the degradation of individuals into objects or things, and we heard my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock talk about how sex is more than just gratification and the use of another person to satisfy our desires. It cannot be that we use a philosophy to deliver something that confounds its very purpose. If we seek true-to-self acceptance, respect and value as individuals, we cannot use a morally relativist approach that promises exactly the opposite of those things: inauthenticity, alienation and the degradation of the individual as an object.

I will conclude by saying that we are talking about materials, which are the tip of the iceberg. The process of how they came about, and the thinking behind them, needs the Minister’s urgent review.

3.59 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) for securing this really important debate, although there is clearly a separate legislative process in Scotland, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just said. I recognise the support and assistance that she has offered me during my time in this place, and the support from other Members present.

While this debate is England and Wales-focused, it is important to highlight the Scottish perspective. This is not a matter of moral outrage or social conservatism, which is a label that is often used. This, for me, is essentially, fundamentally, about safeguarding. Safeguarding has been a constant in my professional life, from my early days in mental health care and looking after vulnerable people through that lens, right up to working with children and young people in cancer care. The principles are about engendering a broad awareness in an organisation of the kinds of issues that may be faced and the kind of red flags that may be seen. It is a shared responsibility and one, I believe, that everyone in society should participate in. It is not something that we should in any way put at risk.

Awareness has increased in recent years because of misdeeds in religious circles, among sports coaches and teaching staff, and indeed, from my experience, in healthcare, where people have used their position of influence and authority for nefarious purposes. Those who will abuse will find a way, and that is just a matter of fact. Predators will go to great lengths to access those they prey upon.

How have we responded as a society? We have had “stranger danger” education, public awareness, and the introduction of safeguarding legislation and policies. We have dealt with concerns in an open and non-judgmental way. We have set up multi-disciplinary practices through child protection teams and vulnerable adult teams. We have not jumped to conclusions and ascribed labels to individuals, but we have taken the necessary steps to explore any circumstance to ensure that, if there is harm, it is limited and is stopped where that is the case. We have the disclosure and barring service down here and Disclosure Scotland in Scotland to ensure that those with a criminal history of a predatory nature are identified and prevented from entering certain spheres of life.

In my professional life, I have had enhanced disclosure in every single job that I have had. It has never been a particular issue, but there are implications of the use of deed poll to change one’s identity, along with growing concerns about GRC identity changes. On the DBS in particular, I met with an organisation this morning that told me of privacy concerns whereby people who use that method, or indeed deed poll, may be able to circumvent the disclosure of prior history. I suggest that the national insurance number could be used as a constant identifier to deal with that.

But there are other ways that we find out about these nefarious practices: disclosure from the child or the young person themselves, witnesses, evidence and indeed criminal investigation. In that vein, a teacher in Scotland was recently sent to jail for three years for molesting two young boys, one aged 11 and one aged 12. That investigation was peppered with the sexualised language that that teacher used with those young men. Like all predatory behaviour, this was about power, control and manipulation, and it included that sexualised use of language.

In terms of parents and safeguarding, we must look out for changes in the behaviour of the young person—whether they become withdrawn or start to use overly sexualised language. Those are the red flags that are normally identified by professionals working with young people, whether social workers, teachers or indeed healthcare

workers. If we introduce the type of language and knowledge that the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge mentioned in her opening remarks—the dice game is utterly shocking; it is dehumanising and reduces sex to the penetrative act—

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does this not boil down to the very simple point that knowledge without context or consequence is dangerous? Children at these ages, who are often in doubt about who they are, where they are and what they do, and who are sometimes shy and retiring, are very vulnerable to that knowledge leading them down a road, without the understanding of the context and consequences that will come from the decisions that are made, which they may be too young to judge. If that principle were applied, a lot of what my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) has said would disappear from the curriculum because it would be inappropriate.

Neale Hanvey: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about capacity. It is simply impossible for someone who is seven to have the ability to comprehend their adult sexual being. It is simply unattainable.

Introducing such sexualised language will camouflage or mask the red flags and that is dangerous. There is no place for adult sexualised language in pre-puberty education.

4.6 pm

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I will try to keep my comments brief, as I can see the time racing by. I will make reference to Wales, but the issues are pertinent to all of us. This year, the Welsh Government are introducing a new curriculum that will have fully inclusive LGBT education for all pupils, with no right to withdraw. That is so important. We have all stressed that status is important, as is proper timetabling and training for teachers. We have the protected characteristics of the Equality Act; all of those in the LGBT community should be given respect. It is particularly important for children to learn how to relate and how to cope with peer-group pressure and bullying, particularly homophobic and transphobic bullying.

It is important that materials that present society as it is are part of the curriculum, so that children who come from same-sex couple homes do not feel that they are different or odd, and that means not just in the relationship curriculum but in materials across all subjects. Age appropriateness is important, and governors have the opportunity to look at materials, which is commonly done, and should be practised across the board. Parents should do the same, so that they can see exactly what is being presented. It is really important to remember that we do not live in a vacuum. In our day, it was just whispers in the playground and nasty bullying; now, it is a whole range of stuff on the internet, including pornography, plus massive bullying via the internet, through social media.

I am an ex-secondary school teacher. Children are going to bring things into school that we might not even know the words for, frankly, so teachers need to be prepared. They need to be prepared on how to combat that and how to discuss the issues. We need materials that are positive, down to earth, factual and not sensational.

Robin Millar: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dame Nia Griffith: I will not, as I am so short of time—normally I would. We need to gradually increase the degree of explicitness, as is age appropriate. However, it is absolutely essential that the information is taught in context and that, if children raise issues about violent behaviour and different types of sexual behaviour, teachers can talk through the dangers and consequences. That is a valid discussion. Talking about a particular piece of material on its own is not necessarily the context in which it might be taught.

I would like to move on to the issue of trans individuals. Young people will know of or will have encountered trans individuals—they will certainly have heard about them. They need clarity, because there is so much transphobia out there. They need to have the topic talked about. It is perfectly valid to do that in a school context.

The idea that any young person even begins to think about themselves as trans on a whim is fanciful. It is a very long way from beginning to think like that to telling somebody, never mind going any further. Obviously, a teacher needs to know their limitations and be able to access professional help, counselling and interventions. It is not for a school to make any decisions about a young person in that way.

Children are exposed all the time to all sorts of materials and it is absolutely right and proper that, in a responsible way, those in schools listen, take things seriously and present down-to-earth, factual alternatives to some of the stuff they are being shown.

So let us be clear about this. The overwhelming majority of schools and staff, parents and governors, are highly responsible. If there are instances where inappropriate materials are used, those are the things that need to be dealt with. We should not take a sledgehammer to crack a nut. I would be very wary of rolling back on progressive, fully inclusive LGBT education. We can call out individual problems that have occurred in individual schools in individual types of material.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): We are running slightly late. I call Stephen Morgan.

4.10 pm

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Members for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), and my hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) for securing this important debate.

We have had a range of views and insights from Members today. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge spoke about the quality of RHSE guidance and curricula and the age appropriate material and its importance. She went on to give a range of examples and she put a number of questions to the Minister. We all look forward to his response.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) spoke with his trademark passion about a range of relevant issues, including the importance of specialisms in schools and quality materials. I thank him for speaking from the heart about his own personal experience with his loved ones. He gave a very tragic example of why we have to get this right in our schools.

The hon. Member for Thurrock spoke about recognising the impact that the internet has on schools and children, and about the importance of teaching consent at a time

[Stephen Morgan]

when we see significant harassment of women and girls. Other Members spoke about the perspectives from Northern Ireland and Wales, which I am grateful for. The importance of engagement with parents and the visibility of materials that schools use were also mentioned.

There are a great many ways in which good quality relationships, health and sex education can and must address the challenges that our children face. Some of those challenges could define the next generation. Sadly, most of them disproportionately affect young women and girls, so I want to make sure we discuss the full breadth of issues that this debate allows.

Labour Members believe strongly that quality RHSE must be part of the curriculum for every school. The 2019 statutory guidance was an important step forward, but the evidence suggests that too many young people are not getting access to the information that is needed both in school and at home. The pandemic has undoubtedly disrupted the introduction of the 2019 statutory guidance, but there is more that the Government can and should do to prevent a looming crisis.

On the specific issue of information on gender identity for trans and non-binary people, which some Members have raised in the debate today, I would stress the importance of regularly reviewing and updating guidance and signposting by the Department for Education, and the need for training and support for all teachers and staff.

Neale Hanvey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Morgan: I will make progress because I am conscious of time.

I would also point out a recent Sex Education Forum survey, which said that almost 40% of students had been given no information about gender identity or any information relevant to people who are trans or non-binary, so I am very reluctant to accept the opposing argument. In fact, the bigger problem appears to be the lack of information on this issue.

In terms of how RHSE is delivered, there is obviously a balance to be struck. I accept that this is a sensitive debate. That is why guidance must be clear and regularly updated. Support and materials for those teaching in the classroom must be forthcoming. This is about being realistic, proportionate and compassionate.

As we have heard in the debate today, children increasingly face a wild west when it comes to RHSE. Too much is happening in unregulated and unsafe spaces online. Not enough is happening in controlled environments such as classrooms and in conversations with parents. This is feeding a disturbing culture in which sexual harassment is becoming normalised. The same survey by the Sex Education Forum found that a third of children had not learnt how to tell whether a relationship is healthy. More than a quarter had learnt nothing about the attitudes and behaviours of men and boys towards women and girls. One in three said they did not learn how to access local sexual health services, and four in 10 learnt nothing about FGM.

Ofsted's 2019 report on sexual abuse in schools put it best when it said that

"Children and young people were rarely positive about the RSHE they had received. They felt that it was too little, too late and that the curriculum was not equipping them with the information and advice they needed to navigate the reality of their lives."

I recently had the pleasure of meeting Nimue Miles, who is passionate about improving sex education to combat violence against women. She said of her own experience that sex education

"doesn't cover coercion... They don't cover modern day issues like social media... They also don't cover sexist jokes, objectification and the impact of pornography."

Of course, those are complex and delicate issues, and as Ofsted has pointed out, teachers cannot be left to handle them alone. That is why improving the guidance and materials given to teachers is so important, and we must make sure that is delivered.

I therefore have some questions for the Minister. How many of the 10 recommendations made by Ofsted's review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges have the Government implemented? Will he commit today to provide and improve training for teachers and staff and deliver the materials they need, in one place and in a timely manner, to aid lesson planning during the academic year? What steps is he taking to help schools and colleges shape their curriculum? When does he expect to fulfil the pledge set out in the schools White Paper to "create and continually improve packages of optional, free, adaptable digital curriculum resources for all subjects"?

How will the Minister improve the advice he is providing to parents and carers about how to support teachers' work at home? What conversations has he had with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport about defining categories of harmful online content on the face of the Online Safety Bill, and has he made representations that the scope of that Bill should cover all services likely to be accessed by children?

Labour strongly believes that relationship, health and sex education must be an indispensable part of any curriculum. We want to see young people leaving school ready for work and for life, and such education is an essential part of that aim. As it stands, RHSE provision is failing our children and leaving them open to a world in which sex and relationships are misunderstood, harassment is commonplace, and unhealthy and damaging behaviours are rife.

We have a responsibility to our children to ensure they can meet the world as it is now, not as we think it should be or how it was before. Most importantly, we have to give them the tools to shape the world as it will be, and to protect themselves and look after each other in a compassionate and inclusive way. At its most basic, relationship and sex education is about legislation and guidance, but in reality, it is about the information and power we give to young people to shape their world. I hope we can spend more time looking at it in that way, so that we can deliver better futures for all our young people.

4.17 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker):

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates), along with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) and the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), on securing today's debate. I extend my thanks to everybody who has spoken in the debate; I apologise if I do not have time to respond to every single point that

was made, but I think I can respond to many of the points made by the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan).

I have listened carefully to some of the examples that have been given by Conservative and Opposition Members, in particular those cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge. There is no doubt that some of those things are totally unsuitable for school-age children: “age is only a number” is clearly an unsuitable phrase to be used in the context of consent, and the Department has been clear that the Proud Trust’s dice game is unacceptable for use as a school resource. I have to say that, despite a lot of coverage of that particular issue, we are unaware of any individual cases in which that game has been used in schools.

High-quality relationship and sex education is important, and—as my hon. Friend has set out, based on her own experience—can play a key role in keeping children and young people safe, equipping them to understand and resist harmful influences and expectations. It can do so only if it is taught well and appropriately, and good teachers working in good schools that engage expertly with parents can find the right balance. To support teachers to deliver in the classroom, we have run expert-led teacher training webinars that covered pornography, domestic abuse and sexual exploitation—topics that teachers told us they find difficult to teach. We also published additional guidance to schools on tackling abuse, harassment, and other sensitive topics.

It has been almost three years since the Department published statutory guidance on relationship, sex and health education, and almost two years since relationship education became a compulsory subject for all schools and relationship and sex education became a compulsory subject for all secondary schools. As has been acknowledged, primary schools can choose to teach sex education in order to meet the needs of their pupils, but if they do so, they must consult with parents on their policy and grant parents an automatic right to withdraw their child from sex education lessons.

Rosie Duffield: Does the Minister agree that, given that point about parents wanting to see the material, it is disturbing that my colleagues and I have heard reports from headteachers that they are not allowed or enabled to share that material from some of the groups because it is deemed “commercially sensitive”?

Mr Walker: It is concerning, and I want to come to that in more detail, because I think I can help provide some clarification.

At the heart of RSHE is the need to keep children healthy, happy and safe. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) gave a very powerful example of where more education could make a difference in terms of safety. I sympathise with his deep hurt. My hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock also spoke passionately about safety and the centrality of consent. That includes knowing the law on relationships, sex and health, teaching about relationships from primary school onwards and ensuring that younger children understand the importance of building caring friendships and learn the concept of personal privacy, including that it is not always right to keep secrets if they relate to being safe, and that each person’s body belongs to them.

In the schools White Paper, the Government committed to keeping children safe by strengthening RSHE, as well as our statutory safeguarding guidance “Keeping children safe in education”. The hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Neale Hanvey) spoke about the centrality of safeguarding in that. That will support schools to protect children from abuse and exploitation in situations inside and outside school. The guidance is updated annually, and it is clear that schools and colleges should be aware of the importance of making it clear that there is a zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence. Sexual harassment is never acceptable. It should not be tolerated and never be passed off as banter, just having a laugh, part of growing up or boys being boys. Failure to do so could lead to an unacceptable culture of behaviour, an unsafe environment or, in the worst-case scenarios, a culture that normalises abuse, so that children accept it as normal and do not come forward to report it.

The RSHE statutory guidance advises schools to be alive to issues such as sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes and to take positive action to tackle those issues. As part of relationships education, all primary school pupils are taught about the importance of respect for relationships and the different types of loving, healthy relationships that exist. Pupils will also be taught about boundaries and privacy and how to recognise and report feelings of being unsafe. To support teachers to deliver those topics safely and with confidence, we have produced RSHE teacher training modules, which are freely available on gov.uk. We have also committed to developing a further package of support for teachers to deliver lessons on sensitive topics, such as abuse, pornography and consent. That package includes teacher webinars delivered from March 2022 onwards and non-statutory guidance, which offers practical suggestions for supporting children and young people to develop healthy, respectful and kind relationships. The guidance has been informed by an evidence review, stakeholder input and an expert teacher group, and we will publish it this autumn.

The Ofsted review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges found that online forms of sexual abuse are increasingly prevalent, with 88% of girls and 49% of boys reporting being sent unwanted sexual images and 80% of girls and 40% of boys pressured to provide sexual images of themselves. The review also showed that children, even in primary schools, are accessing pornography and sharing nude images. We want to make sure that children receive appropriate teaching in schools on topics that are relevant to their lived experience, rather than going online to educate themselves. Through the RSHE curriculum, pupils will be taught about online relationships, the implications of sharing private or personal data—including images—online, harmful content and contact, cyber bullying, an overreliance on social media and where to get help and support for issues that unfortunately occur online. Through the topic of internet safety and harms, pupils will be taught to become discerning customers of information and to understand how comparing oneself with others online can have an impact on one’s own body image. The Department is reviewing its guidance on teaching online safety in schools, which supports teachers to embed teaching about online safety into subjects such as computing, RSHE and citizenship. The guidance will be published in the autumn of this year. The Online

[Mr Robin Walker]

Safety Bill will also ensure that children are better protected from pornographic content, wherever it appears online.

The statutory RSHE guidance sets out the content that we expect children to know before they complete each phase of education. We have, however, been clear that our guiding principles for the development of the statutory guidance were that all the compulsory subject content must be age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate. It must be taught sensitively and inclusively, with respect for the backgrounds and beliefs of pupils and parents, while always with the aim of providing pupils with the knowledge they need. Given the need for a differentiated approach and the sensitive and personal nature of many of the topics within the RSHE curriculum, it is important that schools have the flexibility to design their own curricula, so that it is relevant and appropriate to the context of their pupils. The Department's policy, therefore, has been to trust the expertise of schools to decide the detail of the content that they teach and what resources they use.

As mentioned previously, we have made a commitment in the White Paper to strengthen our guidance in this respect. We will also review and update that guidance regularly—at least every three years. We are confident that the majority of schools are capable of doing this well and have been successful in developing a high-quality RSHE curriculum that is appropriate to the needs of their pupils, but, in the context of this debate, it is clear that that is not always the case and that there are genuine concerns about many of the materials that have been used.

I stress that allowing schools the flexibility to make their own decisions about their curricula does not mean that they should be unaccountable for what they teach. Schools are required by law to publish their RSHE policies and to consult parents on them. As their children's primary educators, parents should be given every opportunity to understand the purpose and content of what their children are being taught. In the RSHE statutory guidance, which all schools must have regard to, we have set out a clear expectation for schools to share examples of resources with parents. Schools are also bound by other legal duties with regard to the delivery of the wider curriculum. All local authority maintained schools are required to publish the content of their school curriculum, including the details of how parents or other members of the public can find out more about the curriculum that the school is following. There is a parallel requirement in academy trust model funding agreements for each academy to publish the same information on its website. It is our intention that that should form part of the new standards for academies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge raised the point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Robin Millar) echoed, that last week, in a Committee debate on the Schools Bill in another place, peers highlighted the fact that some schools believed that they were unable to share resources with parents because intellectual property legislation placed restrictions on them. We are clear that schools can show parents curriculum materials, including resources provided by external organisations, without infringing an external provider's copyright in the resource.

For example, it is perfectly possible for a school to invite parents into the school to view materials on the premises. Although of course we have to be mindful of not overburdening schools with repeated requests, we do expect schools to respond positively to all reasonable requests from parents to share curriculum material. We therefore expect schools to share RSHE content and materials with parents openly and transparently, where requested. We are clear that they should not enter into any contracts with third parties that seek to restrict them from sharing RSHE resources with parents.

The RSHE train the trainer programme, which we delivered from 2020 to 2021, brought to light several examples of good practice, including in schools that had engaged with parents effectively, but I apologise that I will not have time in this debate to address those.

Many schools draw on the expertise of external organisations, as we have heard, to enhance the delivery of RSHE, and many will use resources that are produced externally. To help schools to make the best choices, the Department published the non-statutory guidance, "Plan your relationships, sex and health curriculum". That sets out practical advice for schools on a number of topics, including using externally produced resources. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge quoted from it.

Concerns have been raised today about what schools teach pupils on transgender issues. School should be a safe and welcoming place for all pupils. We believe that all children should be supported while growing up. However, we recognise that gender identity can be a complex and sensitive topic for schools to navigate and that there is sometimes tension between rights based on the two protected characteristics of sex and gender reassignment. We are working with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to ensure that we are giving the clearest possible guidance to schools on transgender issues. We will hold a full public consultation on the draft guidance later this year. Given the complexity of the subject, we need to get this right and we want to take full account of the review being conducted by Dr Hilary Cass.

I realise that my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge will need time to respond, so I conclude by saying that I hear very clearly the concerns that have been expressed. As a parent of both a girl and a boy, I know that we need to address these issues and to do so in a way that can reassure parents but continue to deliver high-quality relationships, sex and health education.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): We only have just over a minute left, so I call Miriam Cates to wind up very briefly, please.

4.28 pm

Miriam Cates: Thank you, Mr Dowd. I thank the Minister for his response. I am looking forward to seeing the consultation on the guidance. I thank everybody who contributed today. This has been a very good debate. We have had some surprising areas of agreement. I think that most of us have agreed that this is a very important topic. The key phrase that has come out is "age appropriate". I personally do not think that it should be up to schools, teachers or, potentially, parents to have to decide that. I think that we need child development experts on the case to determine which materials are suitable for which time.

I will conclude by reflecting on the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). Family is key to this, and parents' values and parents' choice are so important. We must never teach relationships and sex education in schools outside the context of respecting parents' choice and parents' values. Parents are the people who love and are most invested in children, and theirs are the views that we should most take into account.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered relationship and sex education materials in schools.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 30 June 2022

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Post Office: Compensation for Horizon scandal

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Paul Scully): As the House is aware, the Post Office Horizon scandal, which began over 20 years ago, has had a devastating impact on the lives of many postmasters. Starting in the late 1990s, the Post Office began installing Horizon accounting software, but faults in the software led to shortfalls in branches' accounts. The Post Office demanded sub-postmasters cover the shortfalls, and in many cases wrongfully prosecuted them between 1999 and 2015 for false accounting or theft.

The High Court Group Litigation Order (GLO) case against the Post Office brought by 555 postmasters exposed the Horizon IT scandal which had seen many postmasters forced to "repay" to Post Office sums which they had never received. In March 2022, the Chancellor announced that further funding would be made available to ensure members of the GLO will receive similar levels of compensation to that which is available to their non-GLO peers.

Today, I am announcing that the Government intend to make an interim payment of compensation to eligible members of the GLO, who are not already covered by another scheme, totalling £19.5 million. Together with the share of the December 2019 settlement that we understand was distributed to the GLO postmasters, this brings the total of compensation to approximately £30 million. I hope this will go some way in helping many postmasters who have, and still are, facing hardships.

In parallel, we are working towards delivering the final compensation scheme for the GLO and will be appointing Freeths to access the data and methodology they developed in relation to the distribution of the 2019 settlement. Freeths represented the GLO claimants and have vital knowledge and expertise based on their involvement in the case. This will allow us to work at pace on the design of a scheme.

Furthermore, I can confirm that members of the GLO group will be able to claim reasonable legal fees as part of participating in the final compensation scheme. I hope that this will allay any concerns that they might have about meeting the costs of seeking legal advice and support when applying to the scheme.

Overtaken historical convictions

I am pleased to report that interim payments for overturned historical convictions are progressing well. As of 29 June, there have been 75 overturned convictions, with the most recent convictions being overturned in recent weeks. The Post Office has received 74 applications for interim payments including several new applications in recent weeks. Sixty-seven offers have been accepted by and paid out to claimants, totalling nearly £7 million paid out in compensation so far.

For those postmasters who have already submitted quantified claims, we are working with Post Office to agree part payments of agreed elements of claims, such as loss of earnings, wherever possible, and will continue to do so with additional claims which are submitted. Taking this step should enable us to avoid undue delays in awarding partial compensation while outstanding matters are resolved.

I acknowledge that one area where it has been challenging to agree compensation is non-pecuniary damages, some of which reflect the wider impact on postmasters' lives that these wrongful convictions have had. These include compensation for the loss of their liberty or impacts on their mental health. A number of the postmasters have agreed to refer this issue to the process of early neutral evaluation, to be conducted by former Supreme Court Judge, Lord Dyson. It is hoped that this evaluation will facilitate the resolution of these issues. Government stands ready to support the delivery of the early neutral evaluation process and is keen to ensure that the outcomes of this process enable swift compensation.

Historical shortfall scheme

As of 23 June, 65% of eligible claimants have now received an offer, meaning £29 million has now been offered and that 444 further postmasters have been offered compensation since my last update to the House. I have set the Post Office the ambition to make 100% of HSS offers by the end of the calendar year and the Government are working closely with Post Office to achieve this.

[HCWS161]

GB Warm Home Discount (Scotland) Scheme

The Minister for Energy, Clean Growth and Climate Change (Greg Hands): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Corporate Responsibility (Lord Callanan) has today made the following statement:

The Government have today laid draft affirmative regulations for a GB warm home discount scheme in Scotland to run from 2022-23 until 2025-26.

The scheme, with increased funding of around £13 million and totalling £49 million in 2022-2023, will provide energy bill rebates worth £150 to over 280,000 low income and vulnerable households during winter, when they need it most.

WHD provides direct energy bill support, in the form of a rebate on energy bills, for fuel poor, low income and vulnerable households. It is a key policy in the Government's programme to tackle fuel poverty and reduce energy costs for low income households. Since its launch in April 2011, WHD has provided over £3.3 billion in direct support to households in Great Britain. Now more than ever, this rebate is needed to help low income and vulnerable households with their energy costs. The scheme complements the Government's £37 billion worth of measures this year to support households with rising energy bills and the cost of living.

The WHD is set in legislation and requires energy suppliers above a certain size to participate. While the costs of the scheme are borne by energy suppliers and, ultimately, their customers, Government set the overall spending target. In the 2020 Energy White Paper, the Government committed to extending the warm home discount (WHD) to 2025-26 and increasing its value to £475 million (in 2020 prices) across Great Britain. Since then, we consulted on proposals for England and Wales, the details of which are set out in the Government response to consultation, published on 1 April and for which the regulations have been

approved by both Houses. Similar proposals could not be replicated in Scotland, because the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) whose data we will use to identify homes which are high cost to heat, does not collect that data in Scotland. The Scottish Assessors (the Scottish equivalent of the Valuation Office Agency) do not collect the same data in Scotland.

Under the Scotland Act 2016, the Scottish Government have devolved powers to design and implement a WHD although the exercise of these powers requires the agreement of the Secretary of State, and some powers remain reserved, including determining the overall size of the obligation and the obligated parties. The Scottish Government requested that the UK Government make provision for a continuation of the WHD.

The WHD in Scotland will increase proportionately in line with the GB-wide increase to the scheme: from £350 million to £475 million in 2020 prices. Based on the apportionment methodology consulted on by the UK Government, the scheme in Scotland will be 9.4% or £44.65 million (in 2020 prices) of the overall scheme value. The proportion of funding going to Scotland will exceed its share of the GB population and its share of means-tested benefits recipients. The uplift means rebates are provided to an additional 50,000 families in Scotland each year on top of the 230,000 that already receive payments, and the rebate will also increase from £140 to £150.

We have also reduced the threshold for energy suppliers' participation in the scheme, so more energy suppliers will participate. Suppliers with a small market share in Scotland who cannot meet their obligation through the provision of rebates to their customers will be able to provide other packages of help, including financial assistance, to other low income and vulnerable households.

Under the WHD in Scotland, around 90,000 low-income pensioners will continue to receive their rebates automatically through the core group element of the scheme. In addition, around 190,000 low income and vulnerable households, mainly working age, will receive the rebate by application to their energy supplier. Scottish households in or at risk of fuel poverty will also continue to benefit from support under industry initiatives funded under the WHD, which include benefit entitlement checks, energy debt and financial assistance, energy advice, and energy efficiency measures provided to low income and vulnerable households.

This expansion of the WHD scheme forms part of the wider support to help households with rising energy bills. In May, the Government announced over £15 billion of additional support, targeted particularly on those with the greatest need. This package builds on the £22 billion announced previously, with Government support for the cost of living now totalling over £37 billion this year. This includes: help to all domestic electricity customers in Great Britain to cope with the impact of higher energy bills, with £400 off their bills from October through the expansion of the energy bills support scheme (EBSS); a one-off cost of living payment of £650 to over 8 million households across the UK in receipt of means tested benefits; additional UK-wide support to help 6 million people who receive non-means tested disability benefits receiving a one-off disability cost of living payment of £150; over eight million pensioner households will receive an extra one-off £300 this year to help them cover the rising cost of energy this winter. For households that are not eligible for cost of living payments or for families that still need additional support; the Government are providing an extra £500 million of local support, via the household support fund. The fund will be extended from this October to March 2023, bringing total funding for the scheme to £1.5 billion. Millions of the most vulnerable households will receive at least £1,200 of one-off support in total this year to help with the cost of living.

Subject to Parliamentary processes, the UK Government will implement the scheme in Scotland as quickly as possible and support will be provided to Scottish households during the winter.

More information on the warm home discount scheme will be made available over the summer on gov.uk/the-warm-home-discount-scheme.

[HCWS164]

DEFENCE

Support and Assistance to Partner Nations in Europe

The Minister for the Armed Forces (James Heappey): A new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to enable reservists to be called into permanent service to prepare for, conduct, or contribute to operations by Her Majesty's forces relating to the provision of military support and assistance to partner nations in Europe.

Her Majesty's Government provide a range of military assistance and support measures to partner nations in Europe, including training, advice and equipment.

The Ministry of Defence is regularly tasked to support broader HMG objectives. As part of this support, reserve forces will be on standby, routinely as part of a whole force approach with regular services, to deliver a range of defence outputs, including support to partners across Government. Outputs will be enabled by reserve forces providing capabilities such as (but not limited to) formed sub-units, individual augmentees and specialist skills.

The order shall take effect from the day on which it is made and shall cease to have effect 12 months from the date on which it is made.

[HCWS166]

EDUCATION

School Improvement

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Robin Walker): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Baroness Barran) has made the following written ministerial statement:

The 2019 manifesto committed the Government to intervening in schools with entrenched underperformance. We believe that every child has the right to go to a school that is good or outstanding. While we have rightly focused our attention on inadequate schools in recent years, we now need to look at the minority of schools that are not making necessary improvements. We are especially concerned about schools that have received two or more consecutive Ofsted judgements of below good. There are currently around 900 state schools in England (around 4.3% of schools), with around 420,000 pupils, that meet this threshold.

The above numbers will obviously depend on the outcome of upcoming inspections as schools will fall into and out of scope. Following the pause in Ofsted inspections due to the covid-19 pandemic, Ofsted recommended inspections in May 2021 and, as the Government announced in the recent White Paper, will inspect all schools against the current inspection framework by the end of the summer term 2025, to provide a quicker assessment of recovery from the pandemic.

By amending the definition of a school which is "coasting", this statutory instrument will grant the Secretary of State for Education the discretionary power to intervene in schools that are currently judged as requires improvement by Ofsted and that have met the threshold of two or more consecutive Ofsted judgements below good. This power to intervene will apply equally to maintained schools and academies. It will also apply to maintained special schools, alternative provision academies and pupil referral units which have previously been excluded under the existing power to intervene in coasting schools.

We want to support pupils in schools that are in areas of the greatest entrenched underperformance. Therefore, initially the Department will prioritise interventions in schools that are in one of the 55 education investment areas (EIAs). The Department will also prioritise schools that are not currently part of a strong family of schools, especially where the Department does not believe the current leadership has the capacity to drive school improvement quickly enough.

Regional directors will assess each case on an individual basis, taking into account any representations made by the school's governing body and other interested parties, inspection history (including whether inspection reports demonstrate an upward trajectory), evidence regarding the capacity of leadership and management to secure sustained improvement, performance and other quantitative data and evidence relating to the local context of the school.

The update to the schools causing concern guidance published alongside the response to the consultation on supporting schools not making necessary improvement sets out the process for intervention in schools that meet the new definition of "coasting".

[HCWS162]

TREASURY

Customs Undervaluation Case

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr Simon Clarke): In March 2018, the European Commission launched infringement proceedings against the UK, alleging that between 2011 and 2017 the UK had failed to prevent undervaluation fraud involving importations of Chinese textiles and footwear, leading to approximately €2.7 billion of customs duty going uncollected. Since leaving the EU, the UK has continued to engage with these infringement proceedings as per the legal obligations set out in the withdrawal agreement. Throughout the case, the UK argued that we took appropriate steps to tackle the fraud in question and that the size and severity of the alleged fraud had been overstated. The UK has since taken proportionate and increased steps to combat this fraud without impacting legitimate trade, liquidating suspect traders through enforcement action, and substantially eliminating the illegitimate trade with significant investments in new inland customs infrastructure that opened in October 2017.

On 8 March 2022, the CJEU published its judgment, finding against the UK on most liability points. Importantly however, the Court found that the European Commission overstated the size of its losses, by expanding its claim for losses prior to 2014 beyond those originally claimed and by ignoring action taken by the UK in raising assessments for the period from 2015 onwards. The judgment did not endorse the €2.7 billion claim, instead limiting the Commission's claim for imports from 2011 to 2014 to the amount of certain customs assessments issued and cancelled in error and, for imports in the period January 2015 to 11 October 2017, instructing the European Commission to recalculate the figure. We understand this exercise to be under way and we have not yet received the Commission's revised estimate of the liability. These calculations are likely to be complex.

Following the judgment, the UK is liable for both outstanding customs duties and interest. This could potentially be 16% plus Bank of England base rate and accrues in the absence of any payment. With this in

mind, and in order to protect UK taxpayers from significant continued interest accrual, the UK made a payment on 10 June 2022 to the European Commission of €678,372,885.63. This paid in full the amount due regarding cancelled customs assessments to the end of 2014 and, in respect of the subsequent period, represents the amount the UK considers due at this time, in light of the CJEU judgment, thereby stopping interest accruing on this amount. When the UK receives the Commission's recalculation for the period 2015 to October 2017, we will examine their methodology closely and will not hesitate to reject any claim should we believe it to not be accurate or in line with the CJEU's judgment, to ensure we protect UK taxpayers' interests.

[HCWS167]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Gender Recognition: Disclosure of Information

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Sajid Javid): Today, I have laid the Gender Recognition (Disclosure of Information) (England) Order 2022 in Parliament. This statutory instrument will make a minor change under the Gender Recognition Act (GRA) 2004 in order to facilitate the invaluable research being undertaken as part of Dr Hilary Cass independent review of gender identity services for children and young people (the Cass review).

Under the Gender Recognition Act 2004, it is an offence for a person acting in an official capacity to disclose information about the gender history of a person with a gender recognition certificate (GRC). The Act calls this "protected information", with some existing exemptions, such as where disclosure is to prevent or investigate crime, or the subject of the information agrees to the disclosure.

The order I have laid today will add a further exemption to the GRA so that a closely defined class of people who facilitate, assist and carry out the research for the Cass review will be able to disclose protected information to each other during the course of their work. Without access to information currently protected under the Act, a significant portion of the available data on health outcomes would have to be removed from the study. This would subsequently prevent Dr Cass review from being able to provide robust recommendations rooted in the best available clinical evidence about how this care can best be provided.

This data will allow us to plan the provision of these services from a world-leading clinical evidence base, to promote better health outcomes for those who use these important services. I firmly believe that this will help enable further debate on these issues to be informed by the best available clinical evidence which will better serve everyone, not least children.

I remain committed to upholding the rights and privacy of transgender people, so this data will be carefully controlled. Only those working for a small number of organisations listed in the order and who are involved in the research will be able to access protected information and share it with each other. Furthermore, those within this closed circle will only be able to access

and share the data if doing so is genuinely necessary in order to facilitate, assist or carry out research as part of the Cass review.

As an additional safeguard, the order will expire after a period of five years which is the maximum amount of time that we believe the project will take. The order does not allow patient identifiable information to be made public through the course of this research, and any research outputs subsequently published will be fully anonymised.

[HCWS170]

Financial Directions to the NHS: Variation 2022-23

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): I am varying the 2022-23 financial directions to NHS England made on 31 March 2022.

These are primarily technical changes required as a result of the Health and Care Act 2022. The main purpose of the Act is to establish a legislative framework that supports collaboration and partnership-working to integrate services for patients. Among a wide range of other measures, the Act also includes targeted changes to public health, social care and the oversight of quality and safety.

NHS England and NHS Improvement have now been formally brought together into a single legal organisation. Therefore, NHS Improvement's resource and administration limits, as well as its capital budget, have now been incorporated into NHS England's budget.

HM Treasury's consolidated budgeting guidance will now apply to the whole of NHS spend including providers, requiring the addition of funding for annually managed expenditure and ringfenced funding for impairments for NHS trusts and NHS foundation trusts.

Finally, funding is being provided from NHS England to Health Education England (HEE) for investment in workforce initiatives.

The Act now decouples the financial directions from the NHS mandate and requires the directions to be laid in Parliament. They will be published on gov.uk. The existing NHS mandate remains unchanged.

[HCWS163]

JUSTICE

Criminal Legal Aid

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (James Cartlidge): In December the Independent Review of Criminal Legal Aid made clear the need for fee reform. Among a number of recommendations, the review called for an immediate pay increase of £135 million across the various criminal legal aid fee schemes. In response to these recommendations, in March, we consulted on proposals that would mark the most significant reform to criminal legal aid in more than a decade—and would include an additional investment of £135 million.

Our reforms are twofold. First, addressing the immediate fee increase as called for by the representative bodies, and second, focusing on longer term systemic change. We took this approach precisely because we recognise the urgent need for fee reform, and so we can act swiftly and decisively in the interests of our criminal legal profession. We have been working hard to analyse the

responses of all stakeholders, so all our decisions are rooted in evidence. We will be publishing our formal response in due course, but I can confirm that we will be implementing a fee increase of 15% across the majority of fee schemes.

As set out in the consultation, there are a small number of schemes we are not uplifting at this stage. This includes the uplift to payment related to pages of prosecution evidence which the review found to encourage "perverse incentives". We will be looking at how to address this as part of our longer term reforms and have set aside £20 million for those reforms initially. As well as reform to fee schemes we are considering wider issues, such as the potential roll-out of the successful "opt out" pilot for children, currently taking place at Brixton and Wembley police stations.

We want to make sure practitioners get paid properly for all the work they do. So, in addition to increasing fees, we are extending the scope of payment for pre-charge engagement work to cover work done ahead of an agreement, or where an agreement is not reached, in appropriate cases, in line with the Attorney General's disclosure guidelines. We also intend to abolish fixed fees where individuals elect to have their case heard at the Crown court, and go on to plead guilty. We will lay a statutory instrument by 21 July, which will bring these changes into effect on 30 September this year. Considering the parliamentary process and operational changes required to do this, this is the quickest we are able to deliver this uplift. Solicitors and barristers will start to receive increased fees this year and our modelling suggests that over two thirds of the additional funding will have entered the system within the first year.

Our response to the longer term proposals, including details on the longer term funding and structural graduated fees schemes reform, will be published in the autumn, driven by the evidence in our consultation. Of course, we want to continue engaging with key stakeholders, including the Bar Council and Law Society as we develop our final policies. We are also considering the role of an advisory board as recommended by the review and plan to work closely with the Law Society and the Bar Council to design it with the intention of ensuring legal aid keeps pace with a modern justice system. Further details on the board including a terms of reference will be published in the autumn. If implemented, our longer term changes are good news for the criminal legal profession, helping us to build a sustainable sector that is fit for the future. Most importantly, they are good news for victims and everyone relying on the criminal justice system.

[HCWS168]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Report of the Independent Reviewer for National Security Arrangements 2021

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Brandon Lewis): The role of the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements (IRNSA) in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St Andrews

agreement, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in handling national security matters.

His Honour Brian Barker CBE QC, the Independent Reviewer of National Security Arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me his report for 2021. Due to the classification of the report, I am unable to lay a copy in the Libraries of both Houses, but I am able to provide the House with a summary of its content.

The year commemorated the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland, the twentieth anniversary of the PSNI, and the appointment of the first Lady Chief Justice. More widely, this has been another entirely unpredictable twelve months. The coronavirus pandemic has continued to dominate life in Northern Ireland and across the rest of the United Kingdom, and developments and reactions had a significant impact on health and wellbeing, as well as on the economy and the administration of government in Northern Ireland.

Unionist parties' continuing opposition to the Northern Ireland Protocol has been a defining political theme throughout 2021. The Protocol has also constituted a significant part of the context for some paramilitary activity. The DUP contended that these unique arrangements would divide Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK, and would also threaten the constitutional integrity of the UK. These post-Brexit trade arrangements appeared to magnify the sense of unionist disenfranchisement, partly by raising fears that Northern Ireland would be drawn closer to the orbit of the Republic, and would accelerate a move to eventual unification.

Unrest in unionist areas was apparent, and objection to the Protocol was said to be the predominant cause of sporadic violence and rioting, mainly in loyalist areas of Belfast and Londonderry in late March and early April—the worst for some years. Included were attacks on police officers and a bus, and in the result over 100 officers received injuries.

Violence resurfaced in November with the hijacking and torching of a Translink bus in Newtownards by masked men, and less than a week later another bus was boarded and burnt out in Newtownabbey. It was believed the arson was carried out by loyalists from a local faction of the Ulster Volunteer Force in an apparent protest against the Protocol, although the real effect was to harm local people and make life more difficult for local communities.

The pandemic and the strictures towards working from home continued to have a profound effect. By mid-summer the Chief Medical Officer was concerned that the health service was having to operate under severe pressure and the Northern Ireland Minister for Health called in military medical staff to assist. In early September Stormont was recalled to discuss the high level of COVID-related school absence. Many of the communities hardest hit by the pandemic were those where social-economic problems were at their greatest and often where paramilitary presence was at its strongest.

The dissident activity picture remained much as it was in 2020 and it is assessed covid restrictions limited operational activity. The threat level in Northern Ireland from Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) remained at SEVERE, meaning an attack is highly likely.

The first attack ascribed to NIRA since the arrest of the alleged leadership during Operation Arbacia, in August 2020, took place in April. An improvised firebomb was left next to a police officer's car outside her home in County Londonderry with the apparent intention of killing both the officer and her young daughter. Deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill described the attack as "shocking and deplorable". Arrests were made later in the year, and a number of Continuity IRA members were arrested and charged in June. Arrests were made in September in relation to the shooting of Lyra McKee.

The success of Operation Arbacia in 2020, coordinated jointly by PSNI and MI5, was widely welcomed and the resulting arrests had restricted the ability of NIRA to operate and attack at a sustained level. The reduced activity compared with previous years was apparent, although constant vigilance and pressure was

still necessary. The smaller groups of identifiable dissident republicans had been involved in some activity, not touching national security, attempting to retain their public profile.

The more visible activity was in the name of loyalism, the flash point being the objection to the perceived effects of the protocol. Overall, the dial had been turned up and other issues of contention including the handling of legacy cases and the Irish language, remained just below the surface. On the positive side, the general threat picture was better, being confined to a small sector who were adept at preying on and deploying vulnerable youngsters.

The landscape continues to be complex, with participants ranging from those who use paramilitarism as a cloak for unadorned criminality to those who remain involved for political and identity reasons which reach back to the Troubles. The damage caused by paramilitary activities on communities and society as a whole is undiminished. The cross-Executive Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme supports people and communities across Northern Ireland who are vulnerable to paramilitary influence and uses a public health approach to violence reduction. The Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme Board, chaired by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Political Advisory Group chaired by the Justice Minister, welcomed the increasing emphasis on a "whole of Government" approach in tackling paramilitarism, the development of multi-agency hubs, and the impact of more joined-up, inter-agency approach.

The same observational difficulties that applied in 2020 continued in that it was not possible to conform to any sort of structured plan of visits or avenues of inquiry. It was evident that the various offices and organisations of interest were all under enormous pressure, coping not just with unforeseen unpredicted events but also with illness, self-isolation and working from home, resulting in most offices being pared down to critical staff.

In the event the approach to meetings and research that I adopted in 2020 of some virtual contact where possible, was continued for much of the year. Regular communication continued nevertheless, and I was fully informed of any significant developments. It was not until November, as infection rates subsided, that a suitable opportunity arose for a visit to Belfast, and some more useful face to face personal contact was re-established.

My major update with MI5 was conducted through the secure link from Whitehall in July. Again, although any briefing and discussion on particular investigations was not practical, I was given a clear insight of both the current direction, the prevailing budgetary conditions and the interaction with PSNI. I was able to have a better understanding of the additional problems created by working in a COVID-19 restricted environment and a better picture of how MI5 had adapted to the current conditions. Necessary absences and revised practices had been challenging, but not undermining, and the policy of wider collaboration and further community initiatives continued.

Of note was the continuing development of high-level regular meetings of agency representatives with obvious advantages in mutual understanding and identifying best practice and effective integrated planning and strategic approach to tackling NIRT. Work was also continuing with broader communication and improving protocols with partners in order to be more cooperative with releasing information while maintaining essential security.

I am confident, however, that MI5 continues to maintain the strategic approach to tackling NIRT and the sharing of intelligence at as high a level as is possible. I have been kept apprised of significant events personally, and the Northern Ireland Committee on Protection at its meetings receives an instructive update at each meeting.

I was able to visit PSNI HQ in November, where I was briefed by the Chief Constable Simon Byrne, and other senior officers as to the effective co-operation achieved. They underlined the difficulty of managing and deploying a public service in an environment that was unstable and unpredictable from both the health and political standpoints. A worrying development was the spread of public disorder in a number of areas in late March and early April leading to the need for strategic and tactical command structures in order to protect communities from harm and to keep people safe. There was considerable assistance and support from community

leaders and youth workers in seeking to restore calm, but the widespread and unnecessary level of violence directed towards the police was a serious concern.

Maintaining public confidence within some sections of the community remained a problem, and accusations and perceptions of “two-tier” policing remained prominent. Directing a virus-struck, depleted service that had to interact with the public in changing conditions—with regulations that were difficult to explain and liable to change—resulted in situations which attracted criticism from many sides while pleasing few. There was also the necessity of maintaining vigilance and effectiveness in the drive against organised crime and terrorism, where resilience among the dissident republican groups remained, and about a third of the organised crime groups were loyalist paramilitary organisations or had paramilitary links.

With PSNI as the public face, the response to the worrying period of disorder witnessed in parts of the Protestant, unionist, loyalist community during April was led by the Executive.

Recorded crime level in the spring was below average although antisocial activity was consistent. The absence of disorder and relative stability over the summer was encouraging. The agreement with MI5 and the management of CHIS operatives continues to be carefully monitored particularly in the light of the new power under the Covert Human Intelligence Source (Criminal Conduct) Act 2021. This power has been robustly reviewed and in no circumstances would serious crime against another person be allowed. The regular inter-agency meetings at a very senior level continued and provided a positive contribution in providing a best practice and a complimentary approach to the threat and changing landscape of operating national security during a difficult year.

The key security situation statistics during the year show there were two security-related deaths, the same number as in 2020. There were fewer bombings, shootings and paramilitary-style attacks than in 2020. There were 5 bombing incidents, compared to 18 in 2020 and 25 shootings, compared to 41. There were 36 casualties of paramilitary style assaults, compared to 26 previously. AH casualties were aged over 18. There were 14 casualties of paramilitary style shootings, compared to 15 previously, all of whom were over 18. There were 134 persons arrested under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000, compared with 76 of which 23 were subsequently charged, compared to 14 previously.

Overall, the continued development of regular meetings and exchanges at high level between the police and the security services is noticeable and commendable.

Although dissident republicans continue to pose the most significant threat to national security in Northern Ireland, successful investigations against them in 2020 lowered their operational capacity and activity into 2021. Concerted pressure directed towards them remained effective with positive results, and several plots were thwarted. Efforts by PSNI, MI5, An Garda Síochána, and the Ammunition Technical Officers meant that the overwhelming majority of the population were able to go about their daily lives untroubled by terrorism.

Despite fewer incidents, danger to serving police and prison officers doing a difficult job persists and regrettably the necessity for constant vigilance remains.

My conclusions, again restricted by difficult operational conditions, in relation to Annex E of the St Andrews are as follows:

Further to reinforce this comprehensive set of safeguards, the Government confirms that it accepts and will ensure that effect is given to the five key principles which the Chief Constable has identified as crucial to the effective operation of the new arrangements

- | | |
|---|--|
| a: All Security Service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI | Clear evidence of continued successful collaboration. There is compliance. |
| b: PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter-terrorist activities relating to Northern Ireland. | Regular and effective high-level meetings. There is compliance. |

c: Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures.

There is compliance.

d: The great majority of national security CHIS in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing handling protocols.

There is compliance.

e: There will be no diminution of the PSNI's responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing Board's ability to monitor said compliance.

The Policing Board is under strong leadership and has an effective human rights advisor. PSNI continues to comply with the Human Rights Act.

[HCWS165]

TRANSPORT

Aviation Industry: Government Support

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

The majority of UK flights continue to be on time and without disruption. However, some passengers have faced significant disruption, which has also occurred in the aviation sector across Europe and globally. The outcome for too many consumers has been unacceptable.

I have made it clear to the sector that they need to operate services properly and according to schedule or provide swift, appropriate compensation. I have already announced a one-off amnesty on airport slot rules, enabling airlines to plan ahead and avoid last-minute cancellations.

I expect airlines to use this one-off amnesty now to ensure they are giving consumers certainty by offering schedules they can deliver. By the end of the slot handback period, I expect airlines to be offering services they are confident of delivering, and I will continue to seek reassurances from them that this is the case.

We have been extensively engaging with industry at ministerial and official level since the beginning of the year. As part of this engagement the aviation Minister established a weekly strategic risk group. This brings together CEOs from airports, airlines and ground handlers to work through the issues ahead of the summer.

Today, I am setting out all of the 22 measures the Government are currently taking to support the aviation industry, including: to help recruit and train staff; ensure the delivery of a realistic summer schedule; minimise disruption; and support passengers when delays and cancellations are unavoidable. The Government recognise that these issues are primarily for industry to solve, but this series of targeted measures will support their efforts.

The measures are:

Ensure industry deliver a realistic summer schedule

1. We and the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) have set out five specific expectations to the industry to deliver a successful summer operation:

1. Summer schedules must be reviewed to make sure they are deliverable;
2. Everyone from ground handlers to air traffic control must collaborate on resilience planning;

3. Passengers must be promptly informed of their consumer rights when things go wrong and—if necessary—compensation in good time;

4. Disabled and less mobile passengers must be given assistance they require;

5. Safety and security must never be compromised.

2. We have introduced new regulations on airport slots give airlines the tools to ensure that schedules are manageable and reduce flight disruption over the summer peak.

3. We have strengthened industry-Government working, by establishing a new weekly strategic risk group, chaired by Ministers and attended by airline, airport and ground handler CEOs to ensure they are prepared for summer and can meet the schedules.

4. We have established a weekly summer resilience group with airline, airport and ground handler operational directors to help them work through their pinch-points in the aviation system as they emerge and work collaboratively on solutions.

5. We have established a joint Home Office and Department for Transport ministerial border group to identify and prepare for high levels of demand at the UK border.

6. We have worked with the major airlines and airports to get weekly updates and assurances to Government that they can run their schedule of summer flights.

7. We are working with international partners, neighbouring countries and EUROCONTROL, to ensure that disruption is minimised through co-ordinated planning and cooperation across airspace boundaries.

8. We are undertaking a review of the ground handling market to seek out opportunities to improve quality and consistency of service.

Supporting passengers

1. We will launch a new aviation passenger charter, a one-stop guide for passengers informing them of their rights, responsibilities and what they can reasonably expect of the aviation industry when flying.

2. We have worked with the CAA and industry to publish and promote guidance for passengers as part of a joint campaign of activity to communicate things they need to know and do when travelling by air this summer, helping to speed up processing time and reduce queues and delays.

3. We have written to airlines to remind them of their legal responsibilities in providing information, care and assistance, refunds, and compensation.

4. We are working with the CAA reviewing airlines current practices to ensure legal responsibilities in providing information, care and assistance, refunds, and compensation are being met and encouraging best practice.

5. We intend to strengthen consumer protection for air passengers such as additional enforcement powers for CAA, our proposals are set out in the aviation consumer consultation.

6. The CAA has written to airports to set out their plans for additional measures to improve provision of assistance to disabled and less mobile passengers and support the sector by providing guidance.

Supporting industry to recruit, retain and train staff

7. We changed the law so industry has more flexibility to train staff and allow them to deploy staff quickly and flexibly while maintaining security standards.

8. We are launching a Generation Aviation campaign, working with industry to promote awareness of aviation careers and increase the number of people applying for jobs in the sector.

9. We are working with the CAA to launch a £700,000 skills funding competition this autumn to support outreach across the sector and raise awareness of aviation careers to young people.

10. We have launched the aviation skills recruitment platform to support skills retention and recruitment in the sector.

11. We are building partnerships with colleges and universities to ensure students are attracted to and prepared for a career in aviation—and to support this we have launched the Talentview Aviation platform to connect students to aviation sector employers.

12. We are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to promote aviation roles and recruitment via job centres and training for jobs coaches.

13. We are delivering our Reach for the Sky outreach programme, supported by our aviation ambassadors to promote diversity, inclusion and accessibility in the sector.

14. We introduced the airport and ground operations support scheme (AGOSS) to support commercial airports and ground operators with fixed costs, through £161 million in grants.

There have been calls for a seasonal worker scheme to allow EU workers to fill vacant roles in our aviation sector. However, the Government are clear that more immigration is not an obvious solution. The aviation sector's issues are not confined to the UK. Disruption is happening across the EU and in the USA due to staff shortages, and the Government are committed to building a robust and dependable domestic aviation industry, launching the aviation skills retention platform to help develop and hold onto UK workers. Similar schemes in other sectors experiencing shortages, such as the HGV sector, have not been widely used and have not significantly contributed towards a solution. Building a resilient, well-paid British workforce will prove a far more effective, sustainable and long-term solution.

The Government have taken action to support the industry, now the sector itself needs to take the appropriate steps to ensuring they deliver realistic summer schedules, work together as an ecosystem, and put the consumer first.

[HCWS169]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 30 June 2022

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Housing Regeneration: Former Industrial Areas

The following is an extract from Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Questions on 27 June 2022.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): There are nearly 200,000 fewer council housing properties today than there were in 2010. How have a Government who are committed to levelling up allowed that to happen?

Stuart Andrew: Because we have given people the opportunity to become home owners for the first time in a generation. I am proud of the fact that we have

done that, but my right hon. Friend and I are determined that we will do all we can with our £12 billion affordable homes programme to create more homes in constituencies such as that of the hon. Gentleman.

[Official Report, 27 June 2022, Vol. 717, c. 11.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Housing, the right hon. Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew):

An error has been identified in my response.

The correct response should have been:

Stuart Andrew: Because we have given people the opportunity to become home owners for the first time in a generation. I am proud of the fact that we have done that, but my right hon. Friend and I are determined that we will do all we can with our **£11.5 billion** affordable homes programme to create more homes in constituencies such as that of the hon. Gentleman.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 30 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TRANSPORT	431	TRANSPORT—continued	
A27: Shoreham to Worthing	439	Reopening Railway Lines and Stations	436
Active Travel	441	Road Maintenance.....	439
Automatic Route Setting: Railways.....	441	Rockets and Satellites.....	440
Electric Vehicle Infrastructure.....	433	Rural Bus Services	434
Industrial Action: Railways.....	444	Shrewsbury-Black Country-Birmingham Railway .	443
Inter-city Rail Links.....	440	Topical Questions	445
Legalisation of e-Scooters.....	438	Train Service Providers	435
Modernisation of the Railway	431	UK Supply Chains.....	442

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 30 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—continued	
STRATEGY	27WS	Gender Recognition: Disclosure of Information....	32WS
GB Warm Home Discount (Scotland) Scheme	28WS		
Post Office: Compensation for Horizon scandal	27WS	JUSTICE	33WS
		Criminal Legal Aid	33WS
DEFENCE	30WS		
Support and Assistance to Partner Nations in		NORTHERN IRELAND	34WS
Europe	30WS	Report of the Independent Reviewer for National	
		Security Arrangements 2021	34WS
EDUCATION	30WS		
School Improvement.....	30WS	TRANSPORT	38WS
		Aviation Industry: Government Support.....	38WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	32WS		
Financial Directions to the NHS: Variation		TREASURY	31WS
2022-23	33WS	Customs Undervaluation Case.....	31WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 30 June 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>
LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND	
COMMUNITIES	5MC
Housing Regeneration: Former Industrial Areas...	5MC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Thursday 7 July 2022**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 30 June 2022

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 431] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Transport

Speaker's Statement [Col. 451]

Business of the House [Col. 452]
Statement—(Mark Spencer)

Post Office: Compensation for Horizon Scandal [Col. 470]
Statement—(Paul Scully)

Proxy Voting and Presence of Babies in the Chamber and Westminster Hall [Col. 481]
Select Committee Statement—(Karen Bradley)

Recognition of Armenian Genocide [Col. 490]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business
Iran's Nuclear Programme [Col. 491]
Motion—(Robert Jenrick)—agreed to

50 Years of Pride in the UK [Col. 523]
General debate

Child Sexual Exploitation and Safeguarding in Oldham [Col. 556]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Police Conduct and Complaints [Col. 171WH]
Relationship and Sex Education Materials in Schools [Col. 189WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 27WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 5MC]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
