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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 26 October 2022

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: I wish to inform the House that I have received a letter from the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) informing me of his resignation as Chair of the Treasury Committee, following his appointment to the Government. Arrangements for the election of his successor will be as follows: nominations will close at 12 noon on Tuesday 8 November, and nomination forms will be available from the Vote Office, Table Office and Public Bill Office. Following the House's decision of 16 January 2020, only Members from the Conservative party may be candidates. If there is more than one candidate, the ballot will take place on Wednesday 9 November, from 11 am to 2.30 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Hate Crime

1. **Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the levels of police-recorded hate crimes targeting individuals on the basis of their (a) race, (b) religion, (c) sexual orientation, (d) disability and (e) transgender identity. [901837]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mims Davies): I greatly welcome the fact that people feel more willing to report hate crime. We have seen an increase of 26% in recorded incidents and believe that the biggest driver of it is the welcome improvement in police recording. Let me be clear: hate crime is a scourge on communities and will not be tolerated, which is why we are committed to reducing all crime, including hate incidents, and are on track to recruit 20,000 extra police officers.

Matt Western: According to the Office for National Statistics, nationally we have seen a sixfold increase in hate crime over the past decade. Locally, in the recent efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy inspections of Warwickshire police, criticism was made of the way in which the force supports victims in the aftermath of such crimes. This was felt by a constituent who was physically and racially assaulted; his assailant was charged with physical damage of a phone after Warwickshire police failed to complete a case action plan sent to them by the Crown Prosecution Service. Can the Minister

advise us of how frequently she meets her colleagues in the Home Office? What is being done to arrest this rise in violent crime?

Mims Davies: As I hope the hon. Gentleman will see, I am personally committed to ensuring the best possible response to these terrible crimes and, indeed, to all crimes. There is an online hate crime hub, True Vision, which police can now directly work with; he mentions a constituent's case, and victims of online hate can submit reports and get the right support, which is equally important. That is there on both sides—it is for the police also.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Women and Equalities, Caroline Nokes.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Con): In his question, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) did not include hate crimes committed against women, yet we know that the Nottinghamshire police force is doing some great pilot work on recording misogyny as a hate crime in the incidents it encounters. Will the Minister update us on how that pilot is going and whether there are plans to roll it out further? What progress is the Home Office making on its work and consultation on tackling public sexual harassment, which is one of those significant crimes that impacts women every day?

Mims Davies: My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that I am very interested in both those issues. The consultation on public sexual harassment has been completed and I am currently looking at it. On misogyny as a hate crime, I am aware of the Nottinghamshire police work. It is absolutely right that a number of police forces are choosing of their own volition to record those particular crimes. I will update her further in writing, because there is more to say.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Anneliese Dodds.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Minister for Women and Equalities to her place.

With reference to the previous question, I should of course say that making misogyny a hate crime is something the Government have stood against until now, when they have been pushed by a Labour police and crime commissioner in Nottinghamshire, but we hope the tide may be turning.

A moment ago, the Minister referred to some statistics on hate crime, but not the most concerning ones. One was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) when he talked about violent hate crime, which is six times higher today than it was 10 years ago. Hate crimes that are reported are up by 269% in England and Wales since 2010. We have also seen the highest number of religiously motivated hate crimes ever recorded this year. What are the Government going to do about this?

Mims Davies: The hon. Lady knows that we have some of the strongest legislation to tackle everything that she has mentioned, including religious hate crime. Over the past six years, the Home Office's places of worship protective security funding scheme has awarded

323 grants of around £8 million with regard to religious hate crime. I will be clear: I am personally committed to the best possible response to hate crime by every force.

Cost of Living: Women in the Workplace

2. **Hannah Bardell** (Livingston) (SNP): What recent steps the Government are taking to help support women in the workplace during the cost of living crisis. [901839]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Claire Coutinho): The Department for Work and Pensions new progression offer will help claimants on universal credit to identify opportunities in their current role or a new role. We have also increased the national living wage, reduced the universal credit taper rate and increased the work allowance to ensure that work pays.

Hannah Bardell: The current Prime Minister famously insulted millions of mums across the UK during the pandemic when he showed a total lack of understanding of the pressure they were under and the discrimination they faced in the workplace. It is probably lost on a billionaire PM, but his Tory Government have overseen the second most expensive childcare in the developed world. According to Pregnant Then Screwed, 62% of parents pay the same or more for childcare as their rent or mortgage. The cost of living crisis will only worsen that. What real actions will the Minister and the new Prime Minister take? Will she and he be in post long enough to actually do anything?

Claire Coutinho: Childcare is an important issue. Since 2010, we have doubled childcare to 30 hours for working parents, with a universal offer of 15 hours, and covering 85% of childcare costs under universal credit. We have also had much discussion in recent weeks about childcare ratios. I will ensure that the relevant Minister writes to the hon. Lady with more detail.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): One workplace where women need support is the other place, where an eighth of the seats are reserved for men only. Will the Minister support my Hereditary Titles (Female Succession) Bill and get that anomaly changed?

Claire Coutinho: I thank my hon. Friend for her impressive campaigning on this issue. I was privileged to be in the Chamber when she made some of her speeches about it this year. I will look into the matter and ensure that I write to her about it.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, the new Minister for Women and Equalities told investors in New York that the Government were going for growth in a big way. She said of that economic strategy:

“We know it is bold. We know it comes with risk. But in these volatile times, every option, even the status quo is risky.”

One month on from the catastrophic mini-Budget, will the Minister explain what impact going for growth had on women’s finances?

Claire Coutinho: We have provided lots of cost of living support for families and particularly for women. We will write to the hon. Lady further about the issue.

Anneliese Dodds: I am disappointed by that brief response, because today we have found from the latest statistics that women need more than 12 times the average annual salary to buy a home. Our average real-terms wages have plummeted by almost £600 a year since 2010. The Government have simply removed the possibility of home ownership for millions of women. In her speech last month, the Minister for Women and Equalities described the UK as “Europe’s unicorn factory”. Are not her Government Britain’s chaos factory, with working women paying the price through lower wages and lost mortgages?

Claire Coutinho: I completely dispute that characterisation of the Government. We have not only taken comprehensive steps to support people financially this year, targeting support at vulnerable households and families and putting in place an energy price cap, but increased the national living wage and changed the universal credit taper rate. We have taken a number of steps to help people with their finances and we will continue to do so.

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

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): This Tory Government have committed to introducing an employment Bill at least 20 times, but it is nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile, labour market inequalities become all the more acute, especially in the cost of living crisis. The Minister could tell us that she will fix the sick pay system, introduce the day one right to flexible working, improve parental leave and pay and strengthen protections against pregnancy and maternity discrimination, but her Government are making a choice not to do those things. That is a real contrast with the Scottish Government’s recent “Building a New Scotland” paper, which sets out how an independent Scotland would deliver fair working practices. Why do this Tory Government support inequality in the workplace?

Claire Coutinho: The changes in flexible working that we saw during the pandemic have been helpful to women. The Government have taken action in consulting on flexible working. It is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so I will ensure that the relevant Minister writes to her about that issue.

Women in British Motorsport

3. **Greg Smith** (Buckingham) (Con): If she will take steps with Cabinet colleagues to encourage more women into British motorsport. [R] [901840]

The Minister for Women (Katherine Fletcher): This Government and I are absolutely committed to supporting women’s sport at every opportunity, pushing for greater participation, employment, commercial opportunities and visibility in the media. We want to continue to work with stakeholders to ensure that all aspects of women’s sport continue to flourish. I welcome the W Series, as it provides equal opportunities for women to compete competitively in motorsport. I also recognise what organisations such as Motorsport UK and the British Women Racing Drivers Club are taking forward to increase women and girls’ participation within the sport.

Greg Smith: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that answer. As she said, the all-female W Series championship is another jewel in the crown for British motorsport, won for the third time this year by British driver Jamie Chadwick, but it has sadly had to curtail the season by three races, with the sad reality being that women's sports such as the W Series have much lower funding available than their male counterparts. Will my hon. Friend commit to working with the W Series to help it continue to support women drivers, engineers and mechanics into motorsports?

Katherine Fletcher: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for motorsport, and, as he knows, I am more than a little bit of a petrolhead myself. I approach motorsport with an enormous amount of enthusiasm and almost no talent, which is probably the problem. I also add my congratulations to Jamie Chadwick. I did watch the championships and she did a phenomenal drive. It is disappointing that the season was cut short, and we want women's sports to thrive. The Government are unable to intervene directly, but the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is working with the wider support sector on the commerciality of women's sport and how it can be promoted.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): One way to encourage more women into motorsport and, indeed, into every job and every industry is to make workplaces endometriosis-friendly. One in 10 women have endometriosis, and it has a huge impact on the workplace. What encouragement can the Minister give to companies to adopt the Endometriosis UK strategy to make all workplaces endometriosis-friendly?

Katherine Fletcher: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. Women's health issues are coming to the fore in the workplace. Although I do not have the level of detail to commit exact policy, I will get the Department of Health and Social Care to write to her about the matter.

Disabled People: Building Adjustments

4. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What her timescale is for the commencement and implementation of provisions in the Equality Act 2010 on reasonable adjustments to common parts of buildings for disabled people. [901841]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): We are committed to the commencement of this provision of the Equality Act 2010. Our consultation on the detail of implementation closed on 18 August 2022, and we are analysing responses before taking further steps. We expect to introduce regulations and prepare comprehensive guidance prior to commencement in England and Wales in due course.

Christine Jardine: I welcome the Minister to her place. Access to public buildings is one of issues that my constituents most often bring to me: those who have a problem with accessibility feel that they are excluded in many ways. I know that, in England and Wales, there are almost half a million wheelchair users who are awaiting the results of the consultation for their own homes as much as for public buildings. I welcome the Minister's statement, but can she assure us that this matter will not be put aside in the recent chaos?

Kemi Badenoch: That is something that we have committed to. Obviously, it is important to properly address the cost implications of implementation given everything that is happening, and we will do everything that we can to further this piece of work.

Higher Education: White State-Educated Children

5. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): If she will take steps with the Secretary of State for Education to help ensure that the proportion of white state school educated students obtaining a place in higher education is raised to the same proportion as mixed heritage, black, Asian and Chinese students. [901842]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Andrea Jenkyns): Ensuring that everyone can access world-class education remains a priority. In 2021, we saw record higher education progression rates for disadvantaged white students who had free school meals. The Government are investing £3.8 billion more in high-quality education, skills and training provision, leading to good outcomes for young people and getting them the skills needed for economic growth, whichever good-quality route they choose.

Mr Hollobone: On the Government's own figures, the percentage of state school pupils getting a higher education place by ethnicity is Chinese 72%, Asian 55%, black 49%, mixed heritage 41% and white 33%. Are the Government concerned about those widening disparities, and if so, what are they going to do to level up university entry?

Andrea Jenkyns: As a meritocrat, I believe not in positive discrimination, but in a society where people are judged on their character and ability. Access to HE should be based on a student's attainment and their ability to succeed, rather than their background. As I said, 2021 saw a record high number of white students who receive free school meals progressing on to higher education, but since the publication of the report, "The forgotten: how White working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it", we have tasked the Office for Students with refreshing its entire access and participation work and with looking into that.

Cost of Living: Children with SEND

6. **Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Education to help ensure equality of opportunity for children with special educational needs and disabilities in the context of the cost of living crisis. [901843]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Andrea Jenkyns): For pupils with complex needs, high-needs education funding is increasing by £1 billion in the 2022-23 financial year, bringing the total funding to £9.1 billion. The Department also provides £27.3 million per annum to deliver grants to support low-income families raising disabled or seriously ill children and young people.

Theresa Villiers: I welcome that support, but constituents who are parents of disabled children often tell me that they feel it is like an obstacle race and there are many hurdles put in their way to get the support they need for

their children, both at home and at school. Can the Government make it easier to access essential special educational needs and disabilities support?

Andrea Jenkyns: My right hon. Friend raises an important question. The SEND and alternative provision Green Paper proposals aim to improve experiences and outcomes for children and young people with SEND within a fairer and more sustainable system. We are investing £301.75 million jointly with the Department of Health and Social Care to transform start for life and family support services in 75 local authorities across England.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): As we face the worst cost of living crisis in memory, it is becoming increasingly difficult for parents to provide important life experiences for their children. Springfield House in Birmingham is a wonderful SEND school, which many students across Coventry North West attend. For many years it has provided away nights for pupils, giving children the chance to spend time away from home, with their peers, in a safe environment. Because of Government cuts, those away nights are being axed. Will the Minister speak to her counterpart in the Department for Education to ensure that families in Coventry do not lose that much-needed service?

Andrea Jenkyns: The Government are doing some amazing work, and I point the hon. Lady's constituents and those of MPs across the House to a fantastic website, governmentssupport.co.uk, which demonstrates the great services open to people who are having difficulties.

Topical Questions

T1. [901852] **Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Kemi Badenoch): I am delighted to have been appointed as Minister for Women and Equalities. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, this Government will bring

“compassion to the challenges we face”,

put people's needs above politics and reach out to communities across the country. My priority will be to deliver our groundbreaking Inclusive Britain strategy, our cross-Government work to improve the lives of disabled people, and to break down barriers to opportunity for people from all backgrounds up and down the UK.

Sarah Green: I recently met the chair of the Chesham mosque committee, who had been told that medical examiners in our area will be available only five days a week and not at the weekend. That will cause significant problems for our Muslim and other religious communities who bury their loved ones as soon as possible following a death. Will the Minister meet me and my constituent to find a way forward to ensure that the new system does not infringe the rights of religious communities?

Kemi Badenoch: I did not fully hear the question, but if the hon. Lady writes to me in more detail about what she requires, I will be able to follow up in better detail.

T2. [901853] **Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con):** Back in the 1990s, a colonel in the Royal Marines said to me that he would rather have a gay Marine alongside him who could shoot straight than a straight Marine who could not. My right hon. Friend will know there was much persecution of gay people in the armed forces. Can she update us on how the LGBT veterans independent review is getting on?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I can tell him that under Lord Etherton as chair, this important independent review has launched a call for evidence on the experiences of LGBT veterans who served between 1967 and 2000, when LGBT people were barred from openly serving in the armed forces.

T4. [901855] **Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab):** Why was the post of Minister for Disabled People demoted? What message do we think that that sends to disabled people, who already feel like an afterthought for this Government, and will the Government reverse that decision immediately?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Claire Coutinho): This continues to be an important ministerial post in Government. The Secretary of State will have strategic oversight, but let me leave the hon. Lady in no doubt about how important the issue is to this Government. With 1.3 million more people in work, billions more in funding for children with SEND, a new BSL Act, Down's syndrome Act and special rules for end of life, this continues to be a very important area for this Government.

T3. [901854] **Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con):** I am delighted that two entrepreneurs, Janet Percival from Jaspels cider and Stacey Chadfield from Emberwood Creative, will be coming to Westminster as part of the Savvitas MP HERoes initiative. Does my hon. Friend agree that our entrepreneurs are the backbone of our economy, particular in places such as Ynys Môn?

The Minister for Women (Katherine Fletcher): With family on the island running businesses, including my own—businesses based in Llangejni and Aberffraw, a wonderful part of the island—I absolutely support the work that the Savvitas MP HERoes have done to celebrate female-led enterprises across all areas of the UK. I particularly want to take this opportunity to thank Helene Martin Gee for her excellent work in this area. I am also delighted to announce that to date, 40% of start-up loans issued by this Government have gone to female entrepreneurs.

T5. [901856] **Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab):** Women's Budget Group analysis shows that 100,000 lone parents, mostly women, and 200,000 children will be forced into poverty if the Government raise benefits in line with average wages rather than inflation. Will Ministers confirm that they will push the Chancellor to uprate benefits in line with inflation so that women are not forced into further hardship because of the Government's economic incompetence?

Kemi Badenoch: The hon. Lady will know that we do not make fiscal policy in Equalities questions. She will have to wait for the Chancellor to give a statement to get an answer to her question.

T6. [901857] **Mrs Sheryll Murray** (South East Cornwall) (Con): The Government have an excellent opportunity to grant investment zones in South East Cornwall. What work are the Government doing to ensure equality of opportunity for those investors?

Katherine Fletcher: My hon. Friend is a role model to all the female entrepreneurs in her constituency. Whether through investment or expressions of interest by different areas, or making sure they take account of equality of opportunity in their conduct, the Government recognise that a diverse and inclusive business ecosystem is good for investors, entrepreneurs, businesses and my hon. Friend's society.

T7. [901858] **Dame Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): It is widely acknowledged that public spending cuts impact most on women. The Chancellor has signalled that he will seek such cuts in an effort to close the £40 billion hole his predecessor recklessly blew in the public finances. Will the Equalities Minister now undertake to publish an equality impact assessment on the 17 November autumn statement, as required by the Equality Act 2010?

Kemi Badenoch: We will undertake all due assessments on fiscal statements, as we regularly do over the course of things.

T8. [901859] **Paul Maynard** (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The Government rightly want to see more disabled people in employment, but what more can the Minister say about encouraging in-work progression for those with a disability and, most importantly, getting more disabled representation on company boards to drive wider corporate change in business?

Claire Coutinho: My hon. Friend has always been a passionate advocate for compassionate conservatism. We are looking at the issue very carefully. We are going to accept all the recommendations of the Holmes review of public appointments and I point my hon. Friend in the direction of the DWP progression work that we are doing.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): Next week, we come together to recognise National Fertility Week, and yesterday I had the great opportunity to meet Fertility First, a fantastic charity that provides information to everyone who requires fertility treatment. What more can the Minister do to ensure fair and equal access to fertility treatment for everyone in the UK who needs it?

Kemi Badenoch: I thank the hon. Lady for raising that subject, which I would be happy to meet with her to discuss in due course. As she knows, I returned to this role only a few hours ago, so I do not have a full answer for her now, but I am happy to work with her on this issue.

Angela Richardson (Guildford) (Con): What is the Secretary of State's response to the allegations made yesterday, following her appointment, by Ben Cohen of *Pink News*?

Kemi Badenoch: I know everyone wants to start Prime Minister's questions quickly, but please forgive me, Mr Speaker, if my answer to this question is a tad longer than it ordinarily would be.

I am afraid that this particular individual is one who uses Twitter as a tool for defamation. He has even been sued by people in this House, such as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). As we begin a new era of equalities, I would like to say that the Equality Act is a shield, not a sword. It is there to protect people of all characteristics, whether they are young or old, male or female, black or white, gay or straight. We are running a compassionate equality strategy and we should not be distracted by people who use Twitter as a way to insult or accuse Members of Parliament.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I would like to point out that a British Sign Language interpretation of proceedings is available to watch on parliamentlive.tv. I welcome the Prime Minister and call Dr Alan Whitehead to ask the first question.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901860] **Dr Alan Whitehead** (Southampton, Test) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 26 October.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): Mr Speaker—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I just say to hon. Members, cheer the Prime Minister by all means, but do not damage the furniture!

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

Dr Whitehead: I congratulate the Prime Minister on his new post and as the first Prime Minister of a south Asian heritage, which I think will be a cause of great pride among many of my constituents. I also take some pride in welcoming a fellow Southampton, or Saints, supporter into No. 10.

During the last campaign that the right hon. Gentleman ran to become Prime Minister, he pledged to prohibit any development of onshore wind, which is now the cheapest form of power available to us in this country. Now that he is Prime Minister, will he change his mind?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words and look forward to seeing him at St Mary's—although my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House may have something to say about our love of the Saints.

When it comes to energy policy, I stick by what we said in our manifesto. The important thing is to focus on our long-term energy security. That means more renewables, more offshore wind and indeed more nuclear, and that is what this Government will deliver.

Q4. [901863] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I am surprised to be asking a question, and I know you are shocked too, Mr Speaker, because I know that, like many others, you thought I would already have been offered a ministerial post.

Mr Speaker: Let me tell you, I didn't hold my breath. [*Laughter.*]

Philip Davies: Go figure, as Joe Biden might say.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming Prime Minister. He is absolutely the right person for the job and I wish him every success. He knows he has my full support. His two immediate predecessors made levelling up a key part of their agenda. Will he reaffirm his commitment to levelling up and start as he means to go on by approving the levelling-up fund bid for Bingley in my constituency?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his warm remarks. I can confirm that he must be the only person who texted me in the last 24 hours to say that he did not want a job. I can give him my cast-iron commitment to levelling up, particularly in Yorkshire, which he and I share. Obviously, he will know that I cannot comment on individual bids, but by the end of the year, an announcement is expected on the successful ones, and I wish him every luck with that.

Mr Speaker: Let us come to the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister? The first British Asian Prime Minister is a significant moment in our national story. It is a reminder that, for all the challenges we face as a country, Britain is a place where people of all races and all beliefs can fulfil their dreams. That is not true in every country, and many did not think that they would live to see the day when it would be true here. It is part of what makes us all so proud to be British.

Was the Prime Minister's Home Secretary right to resign last week for a breach of security?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his kind and, indeed, generous welcome to the Dispatch Box. I look forward to Prime Minister's Question Time with him. I know that we will have no doubt robust exchanges, but I hope that they can also be serious and grown up.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked about the Home Secretary. She made an error of judgment, but she recognised that, she raised the matter and she accepted her mistake. That is why I was delighted to welcome her back into a united Cabinet that brings experience and stability to the heart of Government. Let me tell you, Mr Speaker, what the Home Secretary will be focused on. She will be focused on cracking down on criminals and on defending our borders, while the Opposition remain soft on crime and in favour of unlimited immigration.

Keir Starmer: Yesterday, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised "integrity, professionalism and accountability", but then, with his first act, he appointed a Home Secretary who was

sacked by his predecessor a week ago for deliberately pinging around sensitive Home Office documents from her personal account. Far from soft on crime, I ran the Crown Prosecution Service for five years. I worked with Home Secretaries to take on terrorists and serious organised crime, and I know at first hand how important it is that we have a Home Secretary whose integrity and professionalism are beyond question. Have officials raised concerns about his decision to appoint her?

The Prime Minister: I just addressed the issue of the Home Secretary. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about fighting crime. I would hope that, as we look forward, he would welcome the news today that there are over 15,000 new police officers on our streets. The Home Secretary will be supporting them to tackle burglaries, while the Opposition will be backing the lunatic protesting fringe that is stopping working people going about their lives.

Keir Starmer: I listened carefully; that was clearly not a "no". We can all see what has happened here: the Prime Minister is so weak that he has done a grubby deal, trading national security because he was scared to lose another leadership election. There is a new Tory at the top but, as always with the Tories, it is party first, country second.

Yesterday, on the steps of Downing Street, he also admitted what the whole country knows: the Tories have crashed the economy and now somebody has to pay for their mess. I say it should not be working people, who have been hammered time and again by this lot, and those with the broadest shoulders must step up. Does he agree?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about party first and country second. Perhaps he can explain to us why it was that, a few years ago, he was supporting the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). My record is clear. When times are difficult in this country, I will always protect the most vulnerable; that is a value of our compassionate party. We did it in covid and we will do that again.

Keir Starmer: The Prime Minister says he will protect the most vulnerable. Let us test that. The Government currently allow very rich people to live here, but register abroad for tax purposes. I do not need to explain to the Prime Minister how non-dom status works; he already knows all about that. It costs the Treasury £3.2 billion every year. Why does he not put his money where his mouth is, and get rid of it?

The Prime Minister: I have been honest: we will have to take difficult decisions to restore economic stability and confidence, and my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will set that out in an autumn statement in just a few weeks. But what I can say is that, as we did during covid, we will always protect the most vulnerable and we will do this in a fair way. What I can say is that I am glad that the Labour party and the right hon. and learned Gentleman have finally realised that spending does need to be paid for. It is a novel concept for the party opposite. This Government are going to restore economic stability, and we will do it in a fair and compassionate way.

Keir Starmer: I know the right hon. Gentleman has been away for a few weeks, but he should have listened to what has been going on for the last two months. Anyway, I have to say I am surprised that he is still defending non-dom status. He pretends he is on the side of working people, but in private he says something very different. Over the summer, he was secretly recorded at a garden party in Tunbridge Wells, boasting to a group of Tory members that he personally moved money away from deprived areas to wealthy places instead. Rather than apologise or pretend that he meant something else, why does he not now do the right thing, and undo the changes that he made to those funding formulas?

The Prime Minister: I know the right hon. and learned Gentleman rarely leaves north London, but if he does, he will know that there are deprived areas in our rural communities, in our coastal communities and across the south, and this Government will relentlessly support them because we are a Government who will deliver for people across the United Kingdom. He mentioned the last few weeks, and I am the first to admit that mistakes were made, and that is the reason I am standing here, but that is the difference between him and me. This summer I was talking and was being honest about the difficulties that we were facing, but when he ran for leader he promised his party he would borrow billions and billions of pounds. I told the truth for the good of the country; he told his party what it wanted to hear. Leadership is not selling fairy tales. It is confronting challenges, and that is the leadership the British people will get from this Government.

Hon. Members: More!

Keir Starmer: I think everyone should watch the video and make up their own minds. In public, the Prime Minister

“claims he wants to level up the North, but...he boasts about trying to funnel vital investment away from deprived areas... He says one thing and does another”—

[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members are shouting, but those are not my words; they are the words of the former chair of the Tory party, sacked yesterday for telling the truth about the Prime Minister. Even his own side knows he is not on the side of working people. That is why the only time he ran in a competitive election, he got trounced by the former Prime Minister, who herself got beaten by a lettuce. So why does he not put it to the test, let working people have their say and call a general election?

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. It will take a long time to get through the Order Paper if we carry on like this.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. and learned Gentleman talks about mandates, about votes and about elections, and it is bit rich coming from the person who tried to overturn the biggest democratic vote in our country’s history. Our mandate is based on a manifesto that we were elected on—to remind him, an election that we won, and they lost—which says we want a stronger NHS, better schools, safer streets, control of our borders and levelling up. That is the mandate that I and this Government will deliver for the British people.

Mr Speaker: I call Heather Wheeler. [HON. MEMBERS: “More!”] Order. Heather has not even asked her question and you want more? Come on, Heather.

Q6. [901865] **Mrs Heather Wheeler** (South Derbyshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate my right hon. Friend our new Prime Minister and thank our previous Prime Minister for the straightforward way in which she handled her resignation. I wish her and her family well for the future.

Will my right hon. Friend please use his first appearance at the Dispatch Box to make it clear to the General Medical Council and the British Dental Association that, as well as opening up more training spaces, they must allow new doctors and dentists to work in the UK so that the good people of South Derbyshire can get treatment on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She is absolutely right. I am pleased that there are 3,500 more doctors and over 9,000 more nurses working this year than last. We are working in particular to simplify registration for dentists who have not trained here so that they can practise here. That is how we will help deliver a long-term workforce plan for the NHS and ensure that everyone can get the care that they need.

Mr Speaker: We come to the leader of the SNP.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate the new Prime Minister on becoming the first British Asian to hold the office. The significance and symbolism of the achievement is to be warmly welcomed by everyone.

Yesterday, on the steps of Downing Street, the new Prime Minister promised to bring

“compassion to the challenges we face today.”

On his first full day in the job, let us put that to the test. A winter of uncertainty is coming, and next April will see a cliff-edge moment, with millions facing a double whammy when the energy price guarantee is cut off while households are hit by austerity 2.0 and real-terms cuts to the social security benefits that many rely on to survive. If people are to trust the new Prime Minister’s words about compassion, will he reassure people today and guarantee that benefits will rise in line with inflation in his upcoming Budget?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. What I can tell him is that my record is clear. Through the difficult times that we faced in this country during covid, I always acted in a way to protect the most vulnerable. That is because that was the right thing to do, and those are the values of our compassionate party. I absolutely reassure him and give him a commitment that we will continue to act like that in the weeks ahead.

Ian Blackford: Well, let us test that. As Chancellor, the Prime Minister slashed universal credit and presided over the worst levels—[*Interruption.*] For the hard of hearing on the Tory side, I remind them that universal credit was cut by £20 a week, and he presided over the worst levels of poverty in north-west Europe. I hope that he has learned from his mistakes and will guarantee that benefits will rise in line with inflation.

Speaking of mistakes, yesterday the Prime Minister appointed a Home Secretary who was forced to resign only last week for breaching the ministerial code and who boasted that she dreamed of sending vulnerable asylum seekers to Rwanda. We all know why he appointed her: a sleazy backroom deal to shore up his own position. Far from being a fresh start, it is a return to the sleaze, scandal and ghosts of Cabinets past. The Prime Minister promised to govern with integrity and humility. If he has an ounce of either, will he admit his mistake and sack the Home Secretary without delay?

The Prime Minister: I was pleased to have a call last night with the First Minister of Scotland. It was important that I spoke to her on my first day in office, because I wanted to express my desire to work constructively with the Scottish Government so that together we can deliver for the people of Scotland. That is what I plan to do. Indeed, I hope that crime is one thing that we can collaborate on. The right hon. Gentleman will know that violent crime is rising in Scotland and police numbers are falling, whereas we are increasing police numbers here. I look forward to working with the Scottish Government on our shared challenges, because I believe in a strong United Kingdom.

Q8. [901868] **Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What a pleasure it was to welcome the Prime Minister to my constituency in the summer. He will know that one of the burning issues in my constituency is the proposed waste incinerator at Westbury. With the Government rightly reviewing their air quality targets, will my right hon. Friend signal his intent to continue promoting public health, net zero and the environment by placing a moratorium on any more unwanted unnecessary toxic waste burners?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is a vociferous campaigner on that issue, as I learnt over the summer. He will know that local authorities determine these issues, but I reassure him that all large incinerators in England must comply with strict emission limits and receive permits only if plants do not cause any damage to human health. Hopefully, that is reassuring for him.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister's reckless predecessor, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), took a wrecking ball to nature, prompting millions of members of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Trust and the Wildlife Trusts to rise up in opposition. Yesterday, he promised to fix her mistakes, as well as to uphold his party's 2019 manifesto. If he is a man of his word, will he start by reversing the green light she gave to fracking, since it has been categorically shown not to be safe, and instead maintain the moratorium that was pledged in that very manifesto he promised to uphold?

The Prime Minister: I have already said that I stand by the manifesto on that. What I would say is that I am proud that this Government passed the landmark Environment Act 2021, putting in more protection for the natural environment than we have ever had, with a clear plan to deliver it. I can give the hon. Lady my commitment that we will deliver on all those ambitions, and that we will deliver on what we said at COP,

because we care deeply about passing on to our children an environment that is in a better state than we found it ourselves.

Q10. [901870] **Simon Baynes** (Clwyd South) (Con): I, too, welcome the Prime Minister to his place. Farmers in my constituency are delighted that after 20 years they are once more able to sell Welsh lamb to the US market. Will the Prime Minister comment on the size and prospects of that market for our world-beating Welsh lamb?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on that fantastic achievement. I can tell him that that market is worth, I think, something like almost £40 million over the first few years—an enormous boost for our land farmers. I would just encourage the 300 million US consumers to give Yorkshire Swaledale lamb a look-in as well, but if my hon. Friend and I disagree on that, I know that we are united on the fact that we will unequivocally back British farming and British farmers.

Q2. [901861] **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): This is certainly a topsy-turvy Tory Government. A few days ago, I was going to put my question to the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), the now former Prime Minister. My inbox has been full of emails from constituents writing to me about their desperate situation. Their wages are simply not going far enough. I am also receiving emails about rents going up, energy prices going up and mortgages going up. And of course, the cost of living is already up. This week, my constituents are writing to me demanding a general election. I absolutely agree with them. Can the Prime Minister tell me and my constituents when there will be a general election?

The Prime Minister: We have already addressed that, but as I said in the summer, inflation is indeed the enemy. It makes everyone poorer and erodes savings. That is why it will be a priority of our Government to grip and reduce inflation, and provide support to those who need it as we do so.

Q12. [901872] **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): This autumn, I am launching my campaign to extend the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty across thousands of acres of scenic beauty, chalk streams and valuable habitats that happen to surround the wonderful town of Hitchin in my constituency. Will the Prime Minister join me in celebrating areas protected by AONB status and support my campaign to potentially extend them in rural Hertfordshire?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I know this is a matter of great importance to him and his constituents. He is right to highlight the benefit that natural parks and AONBs can bring to our lives and wellbeing. I understand that Natural England is considering an extension of the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty, and I know my hon. Friend will be vigorously taking up his campaign with it.

Q3. [901862] **Richard Burgon**2002 (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister to his place.

A nurse would have to work for over 20,000 years in order to match the vast wealth of the Prime Minister. He knows only too well that the super-rich could easily afford to pay more in taxes, so rather than announcing a new wave of cuts and austerity, would it not be fairer for the Prime Minister to introduce wealth taxes on the very richest in our society?

The Prime Minister: We will always support our hard-working nurses. That is why, when I was Chancellor, we reintroduced the nurses' bursary, provided more training and introduced very strong pay increases. As I committed to previously, as we approach the difficult decisions that confront us, we will do so in a way that is fair and compassionate, because those are our values and that is what we will deliver.

Q13. [901873] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's determination to be straight with people about the challenges that we face as a country. Last week, the Care Quality Commission's report "The state of health care and adult social care in England" showed that our health system is in gridlock. I hear the same from my constituents who are struggling to see a GP or waiting for treatment, so I urge him to make unblocking the NHS a priority for him and his Health Secretary.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows this subject very well from her own experience, and I thank her for the work that she did in the Health and Social Care Department. She is absolutely right about the challenge that confronts us. That is why we have put billions of pounds into busting the backlogs and the elective recovery fund and are delivering funding and staffing to do that. I look forward to working with her to deliver what we said in our manifesto: a far stronger NHS.

Q5. [901864] **Alyn Smith** (Stirling) (SNP): I add my congratulations on the Prime Minister's appointment; we might not agree on everything, but I think we can all agree that a more diverse politics can only be to the good.

We on the Scottish National party Benches believe that Scotland's best future is independence in Europe—*[Interruption.]* Keep it coming. I really would urge Government Members to show a little more respect, because it is not just the SNP—*[Interruption.]* I will not be shouted down. It is not just the SNP; in the last opinion poll, 72% of the people of Scotland wanted back into the European Union. If the Prime Minister is to maintain any credibility in the eyes of the people of Scotland, how long does he think he can deny Scotland's democracy?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He talked about respect, and I gently urge him to respect the result of the referendum that we had on this topic. While we will disagree on that issue, I remain committed to working constructively in partnership with the Scottish Government to deliver for the people of Scotland.

Q14. [901874] **Mark Eastwood** (Dewsbury) (Con): Last week, I visited worried year 3 and year 6 pupils to hear their suggestions to tackle road safety following a number of serious road accidents outside Boothroyd Primary Academy in Dewsbury. They suggested that

the council should do more to help, that their parents should walk them to school to reduce traffic and that commuters should slow down. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and with them that we all have a part to play in ensuring road safety outside our schools?

The Prime Minister: It is fantastic that my hon. Friend is engaging with his younger constituents at Boothroyd Academy on such an important issue, and I know that they will welcome his commitment to supporting them. I agree that there are various things that we can do. There is an updated highway code that strengthens pedestrian access; local authorities can introduce lower speed limits; and we are increasing the number of school streets, which restrict motorised traffic at busy times. I look forward to hearing from him about progress on that issue.

Q7. [901866] **Stephen Kinnock** (Aberavon) (Lab): Yesterday, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said that he wanted to restore trust, yet in the past 24 hours, we have seen that he is prepared shamelessly to swap red boxes for political support. There are serious consequences to all this horse-trading, so I would like him to be clear on this point: did he seek or receive any advice on security concerns about the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) before his appointment to the Government yesterday, given that the right hon. Member was sacked in 2019 for leaking sensitive information relating to our national security?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is talking about events that happened four years ago. He is right to raise the topic of national security, because four years ago Opposition Members were busy supporting the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who wanted to abolish the nuclear deterrent, leave NATO and scrap our armed forces. We will not take any lectures on national security.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I sincerely congratulate my right hon. Friend and wish him every success. More than three years ago, my constituent Harry Dunn was killed in a tragic road accident. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Harry Dunn's family on the incredible campaign they have run for more than three years, with huge support from all colleagues across the House, and on finally achieving justice for Harry?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her role and to the former Foreign Secretary and colleagues across the House for the part that they have played in bringing about that outcome. My thoughts are with the family, and I join my right hon. Friend in her sentiment that it is very welcome.

Q9. [901869] **Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust in my area is still hoping to receive funds from the new hospital programme—the same programme that is supposed to deliver the Government's so-called 40 new hospitals. There has been a lot of speculation that the new Prime Minister and his Chancellor might seek to cut infrastructure projects, so can the Prime Minister confirm that my local hospital trust, as well as all the

other local hospital trusts that are set to benefit from the new hospital programme, will in fact get that money—yes or no?

The Prime Minister: The Chancellor will set out our plans in the autumn statement shortly, but this is the Government who put in place plans that will significantly increase capital expenditure. Even though difficult decisions need to be made, I think the country can rest assured that we will continue to invest in our future productivity and, indeed, invest in our public services like the NHS.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): In Aldridge-Brownhills, we are at risk of 8,000 new homes being dumped in the constituency. Will my right hon. Friend use this Prime Minister's question as an opportunity to reaffirm the Government's commitment to protecting the green belt and adopting a really rigorous "brownfield first" policy?

The Prime Minister: I can indeed give my right hon. Friend that assurance. She is absolutely right: we must protect our green belt and we are adopting a "brownfield first" strategy. I am pleased that we had a record number of new homes built in the last year, but it is important that we build those homes in the right places.

Q11. [901871] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West) (Lab): While we welcome the new Prime Minister to his place, we remember that lawbreaking was the order of the day in

Downing Street during the pandemic. We will never forget that the current Prime Minister was fined by the police for attending a birthday party hosted by his next-door neighbour. As both a witness to and a participant in that lawbreaking, if he is called to give evidence to the Privileges Committee's investigation into the former Prime Minister, will he fully cooperate?

The Prime Minister: Of course, and I addressed these matters earlier this year.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Mr Speaker, you will know that I fought hard to bring back Boris. In '97, I campaigned for Kenneth Clarke and then for Michael Portillo, so I cannot always get it right—but I do know about the west midlands. I know that the West Midlands Mayor very much welcomes the reappointment of the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and looks forward to working with our new Prime Minister. May I ask the Prime Minister what his vision is for levelling up?

The Prime Minister: What I can say is that our desire is to ensure that wherever people live in our fantastic country, they have enormous pride in the place they call home and have every opportunity to succeed—and you know what? It is the fantastic Mayor Andy Street who is delivering that for his constituents in the west midlands.

Home Secretary: Resignation and Reappointment

12.35 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask a question of the Home Secretary about her resignation and reappointment.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Jeremy Quin): I was disappointed, on leaving my previous Department last night, that I would no longer be seeing the right hon. Lady across the Dispatch Box, and I am so glad that she has put that right for me today. She has a good memory, and I know she will recall that last week the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office—my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith)—said, in responding to a question that she had tabled, that questions relating to “breaches of the ministerial code” or related issues

“are a matter for the Cabinet Office, not the Home Office”.—[*Official Report*, 22 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 834.]

That is why I, not the Home Secretary, am here answering the question today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw set out the circumstances regarding the departure of the Home Secretary last week. The Home Secretary made an error of judgment. She recognised her mistake, and she took responsibility for her actions. The ministerial code allows for a range of sanctions when mistakes have been made. The Home Secretary recognised her mistake, raised the matter and stepped down. Her resignation was accepted by the then Prime Minister.

The right hon. Lady will be aware that ministerial appointments are a matter solely for the Prime Minister, as the sovereign’s principal adviser on the appointment, dismissal and acceptance of resignations of Ministers. The Prime Minister was very clear in his speech to the nation yesterday when he said:

“This government will have integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level.”

He has said that he will work “day in, day out” to earn the trust of the country and live up to the demands and expectations that the public rightly have of their Prime Minister. The Prime Minister expects all Ministers to uphold the values and standards set by the ministerial code, as the public would rightly expect.

As I have said, the Home Secretary made an error of judgment. She recognised her mistake, and she took accountability for her actions in stepping down. After consideration, the Prime Minister has decided, given the apology issued by the Home Secretary, to reappoint her to the Government. They are now focused, together, on working to make our streets safer and to control our borders. However, while we should learn from mistakes, we should also look to the future, and the Prime Minister has appointed a team of Ministers to lead the country through the issues that it faces.

All Ministers are bound by the ministerial code, and the Prime Minister expects his Ministers to uphold the code and hold the highest standards. As I have noted, the code allows for a range of sanctions for breaches, and on the recommendation of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, the code was updated in May to make that clear. On an ongoing basis, we will need—every

Minister—through our actions and in how we conduct ourselves, to demonstrate that we can continue to command this Prime Minister’s confidence as we tackle the huge challenges that are to come for the country.

Yvette Cooper: My questions are about security breaches and the protection of our national security. They are questions to the Home Secretary, who was here just five minutes ago and who then left.

Yesterday the Prime Minister promised “integrity, professionalism and accountability”, yet the Government have discarded the ministerial code and reappointed someone who breached core professional standards and has now run away from basic accountability to this House. It is the same old Tory chaos, and it is letting the country down.

I have questions for the Home Secretary that the Government need to answer. The Home Secretary accepted that she had sent an official document via her personal email to someone who was not authorised to see it. Is that the only time she has done that? Has she shared other documents, or other sensitive information? The Home Secretary is responsible for national security, so has the Home Office, the Cabinet Office or the Security Service now undertaken an investigation of her security breaches to establish how many others there have been? If not, may I urge the Minister to ensure that that happens as a matter of urgency?

What security clearance has the Home Secretary been given? Does she still have access to the most sensitive documents and information, and did the Cabinet Secretary warn against her reappointment? She has been Attorney General, she has been a Minister on and off for four years, so she knows the rules about Government documents, yet she sent one to her own private email, to someone outside the Government, and also copied it by accident to someone else entirely. How is anyone supposed to believe that she is such a novice that she did not know exactly what she was doing, and if she really is that much of a novice, why on earth are the rest of us supposed to trust her with our national security? It has been reported that she sent this as an error of judgment because she was tired after going on an early-morning raid. Is the Home Office just supposed to block her phone and email if she has been up half the night because she might do stupid things while she is tired? There are suggestions that the Home Secretary while she was Attorney General was investigated for a leak of information relating to the Security Service; is that true?

The Minister is a former policing Minister; does he think that if police officers breached their code of ethics and were sacked or forced to resign, they should then be reappointed to their jobs six days later because they said sorry, or is it just one rule for the Cabinet and another for everyone else? Everyone knows this was a grubby deal to get a coronation, to put party before country, but national security is too important for this.

Jeremy Quin: The Prime Minister has made it clear that this Government will act with professionalism, integrity and accountability; that is exactly what this Government will be doing. As the right hon. Lady will be aware, I cannot comment on what the Cabinet Secretary may or may not do; that is a matter for the Cabinet Secretary. On the speculation the right hon. Lady raised—I am not going to comment on speculation either; the right hon. Lady would not expect me to do so.

[Jeremy Quin]

At the end of the day, it is very simple: the Home Secretary made a mistake, and has acknowledged that she made a mistake, but she offered her resignation and stood down. The Prime Minister has looked again, and has decided, as is his right, that she can return to Government. I believe in redemption; I hope the right hon. Lady can as well. The Home Secretary is busy today, doing the job of the Home Secretary: keeping our borders secure and helping the police do their job—and I am sure that the right hon. Lady welcomes, as I do, the fact that we now have over 15,000 additional police officers, delivering day in, day out for the country. That is what this Government can be relied upon to do.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I remind my hon. Friend that I recall that Tony Blair had to remove one of his very senior and most trusted Ministers for a breach of the ministerial code and later reappointed him to the Government? The public will respect the fact that we have a system that holds Ministers accountable for breaches of the code, but there is learning from mistakes and not just blame. I can vouch for the fact that my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has the highest integrity. I do not blame the Opposition for one minute for doing their job and probing this matter, because matters of national security are extremely important, but the Government have my confidence in that they have acted proportionately in this matter.

Jeremy Quin: I thank my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right that there were circumstances in other Administrations—in which the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) played a prominent part—of members of the Government making mistakes and then being brought back into the same Administration. If people have made a mistake, have accepted that they made a mistake and have stepped down as a result of that mistake, that enables them at a future point to be re-employed if they have a good job to do—and my right hon. and learned Friend the Home Secretary has an important job to do.

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

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): New Prime Minister, same old Tories—a Government just like their predecessors who clearly do not think the ministerial code is worth the paper it is written on. This appointment is an absolute disgrace. So many questions simply have not been answered. How many so-called errors of judgment have there been? Do Ministers behave like this all the time, as one source close to the Home Secretary apparently said? Did the Cabinet Office raise concerns prior to this particular breach? Who first alerted officials to the breach? Who is undertaking an inquiry? Will there finally be an independent ethics adviser? Is it not shocking that there is not one just now?

However, as the Minister has acknowledged, the real question here is for the Prime Minister, because there are a million other reasons why the Home Secretary is unfit for office, from her trashing the Office of the Attorney General to her refugee-bashing policies; from

her trash talk of “Benefits Street” to her advocating our withdrawal from the European convention on human rights; and from her anti-migration, anti-growth policies to her being the last defender of tax cuts for the rich. And then there is her Rwanda “dream”. How can the Prime Minister ever talk again about integrity and compassion in politics after blatantly making an appointment in his own interest that is completely against everybody else’s interests? Actions speak louder than words.

Jeremy Quin: I reiterate that my right hon. and learned Friend made a mistake, she acknowledged that and she stepped down. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the independent adviser, and I am glad that he has done so. He will be reassured that it is the absolutely the Prime Minister’s intention to appoint an independent adviser. That is the right thing to do, and I know that it is absolutely his intention.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Last week, the Home Secretary’s sharing of a draft parliamentary answer barely got a mention. They were all over it because this was a damaging policy row with the Prime Minister’s subordinate. She lost her Home Secretary. Why does my hon. Friend think that has changed?

Jeremy Quin: The former Prime Minister lost her Home Secretary because the Home Secretary recognised that she had made a mistake. She accepted that mistake, she offered to resign and that resignation was accepted. I do not think that means that a mistake should hang over someone for the rest of their career. There is an opportunity for redemption and the Prime Minister has decided that this would be an appropriate appointment. I know that he is working hard with the Home Secretary on the immense challenges we face.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It is notable how much support the Home Secretary has on the Government Benches. She did immense damage, in her previous brief tenure in the job, to our relations with India through her comments about Indian visitors overstaying their visas. The consequence is that the British people are now the only people in Europe who do not have access to e-visas to visit India. That is doing great damage to our tourism sector and jeopardising the travel plans of thousands of British families. Will the hon. Gentleman please use his good offices in the Cabinet Office to bang heads together in the Government, get this sorted out and try to repair the damage that the Home Secretary did when she was in the job last time?

Jeremy Quin: Our relationship with India is clearly important. I know that the right hon. Gentleman would not expect me to go into detail about that. I note from the Annunciator ticker that we have an urgent question on India following this one, and I am sure he will use that opportunity to make his point.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Given the reappointment of the Home Secretary, and given what the Prime Minister has said about 50,000 more police officers, will my hon. Friend work with the Home Secretary to ensure that we get more of those police officers on the beat in Harlow, which is what our residents want?

Jeremy Quin: My right hon. Friend will be aware that I am not the policing Minister. Had I been the policing Minister, I am sure that I would have talked about the operational independence of the police, but I am proud to say on behalf of the Government that there are well over 15,000 new police officers—additional police officers—and that is a tremendous step forward. With those extra resources, the police can make use of them operationally as they wish, and I am sure they will have heard my right hon. Friend.

Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It seems to me that the ministerial code has been honoured more in the breach than in the observance in this last period of multiple Governments and the clown show that we have seen operating on the Government Benches. The Minister says that the new Prime Minister is going to appoint an independent adviser on the ministerial code. Can he give this House an assurance that when that appointment is made—we expect it to be soon—there will be a proper investigation into the behaviour of the Home Secretary in her last iteration, before she had her six days off?

Jeremy Quin: I reaffirm the point I made that the Prime Minister is keen to appoint an independent adviser, but I have to say that events in the last Administration would not be properly part of the remit of the new independent adviser. That matter was dealt with under the previous Administration. We have a new Administration and the Home Secretary has been appointed to her post.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The appointment by this Prime Minister of a Home Secretary is not something relating to the previous Administration. If the Minister is correct in his assertion that there is nothing improper or inappropriate about this appointment, surely it will be in the interests of this Prime Minister and his Government to have the independent adviser on the ministerial code run the rule over it once he or she is appointed.

Jeremy Quin: I do not think there is any mystery here. The fact is that a mistake was made. The Home Secretary accepted that she made a mistake, she informed the relevant parties and her resignation was accepted. I do not see the grounds under which there would be any utility in the independent adviser going over past ground.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does the Home Secretary have full security clearance, including access to the most classified information?

Jeremy Quin: I am unable to comment on any security matters. The right hon. Gentleman knows me well, and he knows that I would not say anything publicly in this House that I did not know. I do not know the security clearance of the Home Secretary, but I know she is in the Home Office doing her job, acting as Home Secretary, and doing the right things to keep our borders secure. That includes all aspects of counter-terrorism and the full remit of her role as Home Secretary.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I congratulate the Home Secretary on her appointment and wish her well in a very difficult job. The fact that she made a mistake, confessed to having made it, said she was sorry and then took the honourable decision to step down before being reappointed is not unique. There is not a

party in this House that has not reappointed somebody to ministerial office in such circumstances, or even worse. The real judgment we will make of the Home Secretary is whether she tackles crime on our streets, deals with the protesters who are defacing artworks and disrupting our streets, and takes on the criminal gangs that are ruthlessly exploiting the desperate immigrants who are trying to get into our country.

Jeremy Quin: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his characteristically fresh approach. Members will remember that many people appointed by their respective parties have made mistakes, have accepted those mistakes and then made a fresh start. I thank him for his openness in saying that and for reminding us that this is the case across the House. I agree that the real challenges are those facing this country in the years ahead, and the Home Secretary is hard at work getting on with it.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister has talked a lot about accountability today, and the Home Affairs Committee has an important role in scrutinising and questioning the Home Secretary on her policies. We have not been able to do that since 2 February. When it comes to accountability and making this place work properly, we need Home Secretaries and Ministers to come before the Home Affairs Committee. Can the Minister confirm that the Home Secretary, as she now is again, will appear before the Home Affairs Committee, as will all her Ministers? This morning we heard some very disturbing evidence about the current chaos within this country's immigration system.

Jeremy Quin: Clearly, I cannot make commitments on behalf of my fellow Ministers, but it is a long-established practice of this House that Ministers make themselves available. I have no doubt that my ministerial colleagues are very aware of that.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Minister's defence of the Home Secretary reminds me of the old saying:

“The louder he talked of his honour, the faster we counted our spoons.”

The Prime Minister said a few moments ago that the right hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir Gavin Williamson) had been reappointed to the Cabinet, despite his leaking confidential data. Of course, that was four years ago, and now we are talking about something that happened six days ago, so what is the minimum period of punishment or rehabilitation for breaching the ministerial code?

Jeremy Quin: I am sure the hon. Gentleman understands that where a person has made a mistake, and accepted that they have made a mistake, the Prime Minister is entitled to re-evaluate the circumstances and decide whether it is appropriate for them to serve in office. That may be the case after a few days, a few months or a few years. The answer depends on the circumstances of the case, and in the Home Secretary's case the Prime Minister has chosen to invite her back into Government.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Is there a published tariff for offending Cabinet Ministers—possibly with a period of restorative justice, remission for good behaviour and perhaps even probation options—or is it just a matter of political convenience?

Jeremy Quin: It depends on the circumstances. If someone says that they have made a mistake, it is important that their mistake is looked at in the context of the ministerial code, which has a range of sanctions. We all serve and do our utmost, and admitting a mistake, having it recognised and being sanctioned is in itself a serious matter, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We all know that mistakes happen, but the Minister talks as if it were a junior member of staff who had made an inadvertent clerical error. This is a Home Secretary who released secret information through a personal email address. This suggests a pattern of behaviour, and that she thinks it is okay to snap on her phone at 4 o'clock in the morning and make this atrocious mistake. This is much more serious than the Minister is trying to paint it. I had the privilege of serving in the Home Office, and it would never have happened under previous Governments. Will the Minister not demean himself any further and honestly recognise to the House that this is of a different scale than he is trying to present it?

Jeremy Quin: I am not trying to present it in any way other than the known facts, as contained in the Home Secretary's resignation letter, which set out that she had made a mistake and she apologised for it. The Prime Minister has clearly taken a view and the Home Secretary has returned to Government, and she has a task ahead of her.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm that under this Prime Minister—who knows how long he will be in office?—the ministerial code will be updated to say, “As long as you acknowledge and recognise your mistake, you can be reappointed immediately”?

Jeremy Quin: The ministerial code was last updated in May, so I very much doubt that a further update is likely. The ministerial code makes it clear, after a recommendation from the Committee on Standards in Public Life, that it is not the case that every single breach should result in resignation or dismissal, but that appropriate measures need to be put in place, depending on the circumstances of each case.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): A risk assessment is carried out in other workplaces when somebody returns to work following a data breach, inadvertent or otherwise. What risk assessment is the Home Office carrying out to ensure these things do not happen again? Indeed, what assurances has the Home Secretary given that she will not engage in this behaviour again?

Jeremy Quin: The Home Secretary is clearly very aware that she has made a mistake and very aware that it can never be repeated. It is a salutary lesson not only for her but for everyone else who is privileged to serve in Government that we need to be extraordinarily careful on these matters. I think we should leave it there. The Home Secretary knows what she needs to do in future, and she knows that she has to ensure there is no

repetition. She will focus on her proper role, which is to ensure the safety of this country and the future of the police.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The role of Home Secretary has major security implications for our country. Does the Minister accept that a Home Secretary who does not have full security clearance cannot do the job?

Jeremy Quin: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman has got the concept of people not having full security clearance—I do not understand where that would come from. As I have said, the Home Secretary is doing the job of the Home Secretary, with all that that entails. I hope that that reassures him.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Is anyone in Government, including the members of the Cabinet, using personal email accounts to conduct Government business?

Jeremy Quin: By and large, we use Government communications to conduct Government business, but, as I understand it, there is not a total ban on this; there may be certain circumstances, when things are nugatory, where other forms of communication are used. We all live in a digital age, where we need to have rapid communications. As the hon. Lady will be aware, a range of communications are legitimately entered into by Ministers, including in relation to their constituency or to political issues, that cannot and should not be conducted on Government mechanisms.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last week, the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (Brendan Clarke-Smith), who is in his place, said clearly to me, in response to a question, and to other Members that there had been a significant security breach by the Home Secretary and that this had led to her resignation. Yet the Home Secretary had implied that the real reason for her dismissal was a blazing row between her and the then Prime Minister. That was clearly not the case and not the reason for her departing Government. What does this say about the Home Secretary and the new Prime Minister?

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I look, as to the rationale for my right hon. and learned Friend's departure, at the text of her resignation letter, where she made it absolutely clear that she had made a mistake, she was sorry she had made a mistake and she felt it was appropriate in those circumstances to tender her resignation.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I ask again: is a simple apology now enough for anybody who breaches the ministerial code and gets reinstated after six days without any inquiry?

Jeremy Quin: It really does depend on the circumstances, what has happened and what other methods can be used to sanction the member of the Government concerned. There may well be circumstances, as is stated in the ministerial code, where some sanction other than resignation or dismissal is appropriate.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened to the Minister this morning outline that the Home Secretary has apologised and been reappointed. We have a situation where six police authorities are in special measures and where in some parts of the country trust and confidence in the police is at an all-time low, yet we want these same officers to go out and arrest criminals and uphold the law. Does the Minister not recognise that a Home Secretary who has broken the law—something so serious—might not command trust and confidence among those same police officers?

Jeremy Quin: I think the hon. Lady will accept that there is no suggestion here of a breach of the law. There was a mistake made by the Home Secretary, which she has accepted and apologised for. I am sorry that there is very little to add to that. She is determined, as we all are, to give the police the powers and resources they need to go after the criminals, which the hon. Lady referred to. I think she will welcome, as I do, the fact that we have now got 15,000 additional police officers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his responses to the questions. Rather than focusing on political point scoring, can we instead focus on political solutions? Will he give an indication of when the Government will outline fresh plans as to how they will address the issue of illegal channel crossings, which put lives in danger each day and week—our services are at breaking point—to help those migrants who seek a better future?

Jeremy Quin: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the real issues that underpin this Administration and are affecting our country. I am not going to set out a timetable for him, as that is for others to do, but I absolutely recognise the pith of his comments. There are really important challenges that we need to get after and the one he mentions is right there among them, and I have absolute confidence that the Home Secretary and the immigration Minister are working on that night and day to get us the results we need.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for answering the urgent question.

UK-India Trade Deal

1.4 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Trade if she will make a statement on progress made on the UK-India free trade deal.

The Minister for Trade Policy (Greg Hands): First, let me say that it is good to be back at the Department for International Trade.

India is, of course, an economic superpower, projected to be the world's third largest economy by 2050. Improving access to this dynamic market will provide huge opportunities for UK business, building on a trading relationship worth more than £24 billion in 2021. That is why we are negotiating an ambitious free trade agreement that works for both countries. We have already closed the majority of chapters and look forward to the next round of talks shortly.

A strong free trade agreement can strengthen the economic links between the UK and India, boosting the UK economy by more than £3 billion by 2035, helping families and communities. An FTA can cut red tape, making it cheaper for UK companies to sell into India's dynamic market, helping drive growth and support jobs across every nation and region of the UK. Greater access could help UK businesses reach more than a billion more consumers, including India's growing middle class, which is estimated to reach a quarter of a billion by 2050, and give them a competitive edge over other countries that do not have a deal with India. An FTA with India supports the Government's growth strategy, by taking advantage of the UK's status as an independent trading nation championing free trade that benefits the whole of the UK. We remain clear that we are working towards the best deal for both sides and will not sign until we have a deal that is fair, reciprocal and, ultimately, in the best interests of the British people and the UK economy.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I welcome the Minister back to the Department once again, wish him well and thank him for his response. I am also grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question.

Not only is Diwali this year an important celebration, but it marks another milestone. In January, negotiations on the UK-India trade deal began, with the Government promising to conclude those talks by Diwali—this week. Under this Government, economic growth has been almost non-existent and promised progress on new free trade deals has not materialised. The Government are all talk and no delivery.

Not only would an agreement with India be potentially worth billions of pounds to the UK economy and would provide new markets for exporters, but it would offer the opportunity to advance key areas of shared interests. Labour Members have also been clear that it should also be an opportunity to raise issues such as workers' rights, and environmental and climate standards.

However, it appears that progress on trade talks has stalled—this is yet another product of Conservative infighting. Members across this House are well aware of the comments on overstaying visas made by the Home Secretary, which have caused such offence. Does the Minister agree that the Home Secretary has completely undermined the UK Government's negotiating position?

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

Will he confirm whether she will be withdrawing those comments? Has a future target date for completion of the deal been agreed? Or is this destined to be kicked into the long grass, along with the promised United States deal? Does he acknowledge that the delay in this deal, and the US deal, means there is no prospect of the Conservative party meeting its manifesto aim of 80% of trade being covered by FTA agreements by the end of this year? Does he not accept the simple truth: on trade, the Conservatives have quite simply broken their promises?

Greg Hands: I am delighted to have the opportunity to answer this urgent question and some of the points that the right hon. Gentleman raised. [Interruption.] I will answer all of them. First, on his question about the end of the deal, we have been clear that we have concluded, as we said we would, the majority of the chapters of the deal. Sixteen chapters, across 26 policy areas, have been agreed so far. The right hon. Gentleman will know that, after each round of negotiations, a written ministerial statement, which he can study, has been tabled in this place.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about visas. Perhaps he is trying to have a second go about the Home Secretary, about whom we have just heard an urgent question. I am not sure whether members of the shadow Cabinet are properly co-ordinating their urgent questions, but the right hon. Gentleman should know that we are talking about mode 4 arrangements. They are not immigration visas. They relate to business visas, not permanent settlement. The terms of the mode 4 arrangements remain an area of active negotiation.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman said that the Government were all talk and no delivery on trade. That amazed me the most. He is obscuring the bigger issue for the Opposition. Let us assume that we get a good deal with India for Britain and that we get a good deal elsewhere, as we have done with Japan, Australia and New Zealand. I have been away from the Department for a year, and in that time Labour has not supported a single trade deal that the Government have undertaken. The Opposition did not support the Japan deal, they were against the Singapore deal and they split three ways on Canada. Only last month, they abstained on the Australia and New Zealand deals.

The Government are delivering on trade and the Opposition are in chaos and confusion. They have been unable to support a single trade deal to date and it sounds as though they will not support this one.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for taking the urgent question. It is a pleasure to have a moment to pop down and add my voice to the important point that the deal was commenced earlier this year—I had the privilege of launching it—and that we and the Indian Prime Minister set ourselves the task of providing clarity about what a deal between our two nations could look like by Diwali. I am pleased that progress has been made.

It is important to understand the value that the deal brings not only because the Indian diaspora are such an important part of our economy—they have been incredibly important in driving what we are trying to achieve—but

because so many British businesses are excited at the prospect of some of the trade barriers coming down. I would be pleased to hear from my right hon. Friend what the key areas, particularly innovation, will bring for British businesses as the deal crystallises in the weeks ahead.

Greg Hands: I thank my right hon. Friend for her incredible service as Secretary of State for International Trade in the past year. She moved things forward in so many areas—crucially the area we are discussing. When I left the Department, an India trade deal was just a concept rather than something material. Five rounds of negotiations later, she is right that we are in a good place.

We expect the deal to do a lot on tariffs. Many of our exporters face considerable tariffs on services—professional, financial and legal. I cannot promise that we will get everything in the deal. On intellectual property, it will be easier for companies to work through innovation and so on. There is a huge number of areas of potential gain for India, including investment and life sciences. I welcome my right hon. Friend's support. Perhaps the Opposition will take it as a lesson and support a trade deal in future.

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

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Welcoming a Minister back to his place is now a standard response, but I welcome the Minister back.

Increased trade, ties and co-operation between India and the UK are welcome, especially in Scotland. However, that should not be at the expense of human and workers' rights. Will the Minister belatedly guarantee that issues about human rights, the environment and health and safety, along with climate and equality concerns are fully resolved before any deal is signed?

Does the Minister really believe that there is no anger and no problem about the Home Secretary's comments in India that might cause difficulties for the deal?

Scotch whisky exports to India are already subject to 150% tariffs. New Delhi has threatened even higher tariffs on whisky and gin in retaliation for domestic steel protections. Whisky and gin producers need to know that the UK Government are doing something to reduce those tariffs drastically. What is going on? What will be done to ensure that barriers are not just replaced at Indian state level?

Jagtar Singh Johal remains in an Indian prison without trial. He has been detained since 2017. The UK has had four Prime Ministers and five Foreign Secretaries since his illegal detention. What is the Minister doing during negotiations to right that wrong?

Greg Hands: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that list of questions. As ever, the UK's commitment to workers' rights in our trade deals and negotiations and in all our international talks remains undiminished. That is fundamental for this country.

I am glad that the hon. Gentleman mentioned whisky tariffs. He did not support the Australia free trade deal, which means a reduction in whisky tariffs. Tariffs on Scotch whisky going to India are currently 150%. I will therefore watch closely his approach to the deal. Our

successful removal of the Airbus-Boeing tariffs has hugely benefited the Scotch whisky industry. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman fully supported that.

The hon. Gentleman raised human rights. At all times, the Foreign Office engages vigorously on the case mentioned and on other cases.

Let me end with the SNP. On trade deals, it is even worse than Labour. SNP Members have never supported a trade deal concluded by either the European Union or the UK. They did not even support the trade deal between the EU and the UK. They voted for no deal two years ago. They were against the deals with Canada, Korea and South Africa. They did not even support the trade deal between the EU and Ukraine. They also abstained on the Japan and Singapore deals. The SNP is fundamentally against trade and the interests of Scotland as a trading nation.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend back to his place.

I am a member of the Scotch whisky all-party parliamentary group and have had the opportunity to work closely with Scotch Whisky Association. Notwithstanding the Minister's previous answer, will he confirm that the deal is a great opportunity for businesses up and down our great country to increase their order book and, more importantly, work with countries with shared values?

Greg Hands: Pretty much the first visit our new Secretary of State for International Trade made was to a distillery just a few weeks ago, showing our commitment to our brilliant UK food and drink exporting sectors. My hon. Friend is right to mention the exceptionally high levels of tariffs on whisky and other alcoholic products exported to India. I cannot guarantee that we will eliminate those tariffs, but if we are not at the table conducting those negotiations—the Opposition parties do not seem to think we should be there—we will not achieve anything.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The trade deal is being discussed against a background of India not protecting human rights and civil liberties for the Christian community, the Hindu community, the Sikh community, the Muslim community and the Kashmiri community. If we are to go ahead with a trade deal, does the Minister understand that it must be based on the Indian Government's actions on human rights and civil liberties? Otherwise, we should not proceed with it.

Greg Hands: As I said earlier, the UK Government have an exceptionally proud record of promoting human rights around the world. In my 12 years as a Minister and a Back Bencher, I have always been impressed by the Government's vigour in supporting global human rights.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned Kashmir. He has plenty of opportunities to raise the issue at Foreign Office questions, but the Government's position is unchanged. It is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the Kashmir dispute. India and Pakistan are long-standing, important friends of the

UK. We encourage both to engage in dialogue and find lasting diplomatic solutions to maintaining regional stability.

Anthony Mangnall (Totnes) (Con): There is absolutely no pleasing the Opposition. They criticise us when we sign our deals too quickly and they criticise us when we take too long. The point is that we have to get this absolutely right. This Government have signed deals with Australia and with New Zealand, and negotiations are under way on the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. We are exploring the Gulf Co-operation Council and we are looking at India. We have concluded a digital partnership with Singapore. We have done a trade deal with Japan and we are improving the roll-over deals that we took from the European Union. That is what we are doing and what we are delivering on. Frankly, we have had this conversation before with the Opposition. Does the Minister agree that they do not recognise the very many benefits that these deals bring?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is an experienced, dedicated and committed member of the International Trade Committee. He is right in what he says. I was in opposition myself some, gosh, 17 years ago to 12 years ago. If the Opposition are serious about going into Government they need to be clear not just about what they are against—they are against trade talks, against trade deals, and against the India trade talks—but about what they are in favour of. What are the Opposition for, Madam Deputy Speaker? The shadow Cabinet might have had a better session this afternoon deciding that rather than tabling more urgent questions.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): The House of Lords International Agreements Committee published its report on the Government's negotiating objectives in July. It criticised them as being very general and high-level, and said that they provided no clue as to the Government's negotiating priorities. Can the Minister confirm whether high animal welfare standards are a negotiating priority?

Greg Hands: What happens with a set of trade negotiations is that, when we set out the negotiating objectives and the scoping assessment, they are by necessity rather general, because the teams have not started negotiating, so they do not know what the other side will want to achieve in those talks. They have not actually started on any of those issues, so those things are by necessity rather general.

The hon. Lady asked about animal rights and she was quite right to raise that, as it is very important part of the Government's agenda. None the less, the Government's position remains unchanged: we have very high standards of animal welfare and we will make sure that they are not undermined by any trade agreement. In any case, we as a country set our animal welfare standards; they are not set through any trade deal.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my surprise at the Opposition's foot dragging on this given that one of the great prizes with India is on legal services? The right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) is himself a lawyer. Does this deal not present a great opportunity, given that English

[Alex Chalk]

law governs so many contracts, for us to progress this vital industry to secure more jobs for lawyers in this country?

Greg Hands: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. Legal services are a really important part of this agenda. One of the first meetings that I had in the Department was with the chair of the Bar Council, Chantal-Aimée Doerries, who told me in some detail about some of the gains that could be achieved in legal services by getting a good deal with India to make sure that our global, high-quality legal services are appreciated right the way across the world.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It would be easier to do trade and commerce with India if it were easy to travel there. As I am sure the Minister is aware, the British are the only nationality in Europe who are currently barred from India's e-tourist visa system. We always used to be able to get e-visas for India, but, following the Home Secretary's remarks, we no longer can. This is doing great damage, as we have heard on the Transport Committee, to our travel industry, to the Indian tourism industry and to the thousands of British families whose plans to travel to India are now in jeopardy. Will he use his good offices across Government to get this issue resolved in advance of any trade deal? This is real damage that is being done now.

Greg Hands: We take an ongoing interest in the ability of our citizens to travel abroad and to access other countries. However, I stress again that a trade negotiation covers what is called mode 4, which relates to the movement of people—in other words, business visas. I am confident that we can get a good deal with India when it comes to mode 4.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is an exciting opportunity to help unlock the economic potential of the living bridge that Prime Minister Modi has recently described? As for the notional timeline of Diwali, does he also agree that getting the right deal is much more important than getting any deal?

Greg Hands: My hon. Friend is right. We have a brilliant diaspora community in this country. I was delighted to celebrate Diwali—a little bit early—last week with the India Global Forum. That was a really telling example of the strength of the diaspora deal. He is also right that the content, the depth and breadth of the deal are more important than the data that it delivers. That is the case for all trade negotiations. It is a matter not of getting a quick deal, but of getting the best deal for Britain, which is exactly what we have done with Japan, exactly what we have done with Australia and exactly what we have done with New Zealand.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): My colleague on the International Trade Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Anthony Mangnall), mentioned the trade deals that we have already signed and the progress that has been made on others. As a Committee, we have had some concerns about when trade deals are presented to the Committee. They need to be presented in a timely

fashion so that the detail can be scrutinised. I do not wish to hold up a deal being made, but we understand that it can be important to get things done in a timely fashion. Can we have an indication as to when a deal will be put together and presented to the Committee?

Greg Hands: I will not set a deadline today for this ongoing negotiation. May I commend the hon. Gentleman for one thing—apart from his work on the Committee? I think it was the Democratic Unionist party that voted with the Government on the Australia and New Zealand trade deals. It is nice to see an Opposition party that is willing to take a constructive approach to what the Government are proposing, if it is in the interests of the UK and Northern Ireland. I commend him for that.

When it comes to interaction with MPs, I did an MPs briefing last week on the India trade deal. I mentioned that we have had written ministerial statements after each round of negotiations. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be appearing before the ITC, I believe, on 30 November at an introductory hearing, and I am sure that this will crop up there as well.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): I welcome the Government's efforts to secure a free trade deal with India and the growth, jobs and investment that this will help to create. However, the Minister will be aware of our manifesto commitment to reduce net migration and the perception among many of my constituents that we are not succeeding in that aim. Will the Minister reassure the House that throughout these negotiations, in seeking to boost economic growth, he will also balance this against abiding by our manifesto commitments?

Greg Hands: The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear about the importance of our manifesto commitments. I remind my hon. Friend, as I reminded the whole House, that this deal is not about immigration; it is about mode 4 business visas, which will be really important for both countries to continue to do trade, particularly services trade, such as the legal services that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) mentioned. We need to make sure that our professionals can get into the Indian market to deliver their fantastic, world-leading services.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Will the Minister please confirm that, during negotiations on this and any other trade deal, vital issues such as human rights, workers' rights, especially women's rights, and environmental standards have not only been discussed but that guarantees have been secured, and is he able to share what those guarantees are?

Greg Hands: The hon. Lady is right to raise those issues. I repeat what I said earlier: the UK is very proud of our standards and of the work that we do around the world on these really important questions. These are questions and issues that are raised with India and with all of our partners at all times.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): The Minister will not be oblivious to the human rights record of Indian Prime Minister Modi and his Government given the atrocities being carried out against ethnic communities across India, namely the Christians and the Sikh community, and also their revocation of articles 370

and 35A in Indian-occupied Kashmir. Will the Minister categorically give us the assurance that no trade agreement will go ahead until India meets its obligations under international law and fulfils many of its outstanding UN commitments?

Greg Hands: I have already talked about Kashmir and the Government's commitment to finding a resolution of that issue, working peacefully and with the two Governments together.

May I just return to the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, raised by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), and add a little bit of detail on that important human rights case? The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Government have consistently raised our concerns about Mr Johal's case directly with the Government of India. I believe that our then Prime Minister raised it with Prime Minister Modi earlier this year as well.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I strongly welcome the Government's progress on this incredibly important deal. We have a thriving Indian community in Harlow, and I hope my right hon. Friend will wish them a happy Diwali. I ask him, when we sign these deals, to ensure that it is not just the big multinationals in the UK that benefit, but that he goes directly with information to smaller companies, like the many in my constituency, so they can benefit from these wonderful trade deals too?

Greg Hands: I certainly join my right hon. Friend in wishing all his Harlow constituents a happy Diwali; it is a fantastic and particularly appropriate moment for that festival to come to this country and to India. He mentions ensuring that the trade deals work not only for multinationals, but for small and medium-sized enterprises, and he is right. The UK has an SME-led economy and it would be strongly in our interest to ensure that all trade deals work for SMEs. That is why it is typically our practice to negotiate an SME chapter in our trade deals to ensure that SMEs, which do not always have the resources to wade through a 1,000-page-plus free trade agreement document, are given headers and pointers on how that deal will help to benefit them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. With increasing violations of FORB in India and the systematic disenfranchisement of those of Christian and Muslim faith, does the Minister agree that human rights provisions must be included in the India trade deal, and can he guarantee that no blind eye will be turned to human rights abuses for the sake of economic benefit?

Greg Hands: I think this Government have a fantastic record of promoting religious tolerance and religious diversity abroad. The current Chancellor, when he was Foreign Secretary in this Government, made that one of his key early launch pads. I might add that the British high commission in New Delhi and our deputy high commissions right across India regularly meet with religious representatives and have run projects supporting minority rights. That is a big part of what the UK presence on the ground in India is all about.

BILLS PRESENTED

GENERAL ELECTION (DATE) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Ed Davey presented a Bill to amend the Dissolution and Calling of Parliament Act 2022 to provide for a general election to be held no later than 1 December 2022; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 18 November, and to be printed (Bill 174).

FORMER MINISTERS AND PRIME MINISTERS (ABOLITION OF PAYMENTS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rachael Maskell presented a Bill to prevent certain non-statutory payments being made by the Government to former Prime Ministers; to abolish the payment of grants to persons ceasing to hold ministerial offices; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 9 December, and to be printed (Bill 175).

Consumer Telephone Service Standards

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.33 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for maximum waiting times for customers who are contacting providers of utilities and certain other services by telephone; to require such companies to ensure that customers can speak to a person within that maximum waiting time; to restrict the use of automated menus on telephone services offered by such companies; to provide for financial penalties for companies that fail to meet these standards; and for connected purposes.

I would first like to say how pleased I am to have worked with the *Daily Mail* and Money Mail, specifically Helena Kelly and Tilly Armstrong, to support the Money Mail “Pick Up or Pay Up” campaign.

How often do we hear the dreaded phrase, “Sorry, we’re rather busy right now, but your call is important to us. Please hold the line”? How often do we have to wait 15, 20, 30 or 40-plus minutes on the phone to get through, after spending the first five minutes being asked to press 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6? How often do we wait all that time to get through and then get cut off, so that we have to start the whole horrific process all over again?

Utility companies, big multinationals with chief executives earning huge salaries, have created a Kafkaesque torture chamber of customer service. That is now happening every day across the United Kingdom, and has been for some time now, as families all over Britain try to contact their utility and service providers. Customer service standards plummeted during the pandemic, as companies grappled with the new work guidelines, but they still have not recovered and, worse still, some companies use that as an excuse, despite most workplaces having returned to normal.

According to Citizens Advice, customer service ratings for energy firms, for example, are the worst they have been since 2017, with the highest-performing suppliers scoring less than 60% for customer satisfaction. Those ratings, as the suppliers admit, are due to these egregiously long waiting times, yet seemingly no action has been taken to rectify that terrible quality of service for essential needs. In fact, consumer-facing service providers seem to be finding any way to avoid blame or accountability, to the point that NOW TV, talking to a member of my office, claimed that the death of Her late Majesty the Queen was the reason for any potential waiting times. As the saying goes, you couldn’t make it up.

Often, once we have surpassed such messages and clicked all the right buttons, we are then told by an automated voice that in fact the best route is via an online portal or text chat, despite having already been on hold for 20 minutes—and that is if we are even lucky enough to find the necessary contact details. Money Mail and the *Daily Mail* discovered that telecoms giants

and energy suppliers are burying their telephone numbers on obscure pages of their websites to deter customers from calling for help.

That is unacceptable, and it does not even take into account vulnerable or elderly customers who either do not have access to a computer or simply do not have the tools to use one. One 80-year-old reader told the *Daily Mail* that they do not have a smartphone and hence are frustrated when making calls to providers when an automated voice asks them questions that they cannot answer with their phone.

My office colleague, who I mentioned earlier, tried to purchase a NOW broadband package, still did not have their broadband connected after two months. They were told, incredibly, that their complaint about the delay had in fact caused a further delay to their service. Yet there are no consequences for increasingly anxious and frustrated consumers across Britain.

That is why we need to have financial penalties for large utility and service providers, much like the precedent that has been set in Spain. New Spanish consumer laws will force big companies and utility firms to answer calls within three minutes or face fines of up to £85,000. Consumers will also have the right to be put through to a human on the phone, rather than having to deal with an automated system.

We need a similar law in the UK to ensure, first, that no one would have to wait longer than 10 minutes on the phone—even that is pretty generous—secondly, that every customer would get through to a real human being, as opposed to an automated machine or robot, and thirdly, that companies would remove the “1, 2, 3” options, which are all about trying to get customers off the phone instead of talking to them. Should businesses fail to meet those standards, they will be fined heavily and the money paid back to the customer through rebates.

We are in a cost of living crisis. Consumers need easy and accessible customer service from their energy and utility providers. Companies such as SSE, which supplies energy, phone and broadband to UK homes, should not be allowed to leave people waiting for up to 50 minutes. Utility and service providers have a duty to their consumers, and currently, practices are not good enough with telephone services aiming to get people off the phone, rather than on it. That needs to change, which is why this Consumer Telephone Service Standards Bill is so vital to making large providers accountable. As the *Daily Mail* says, “Pick Up or Pay Up.”

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Robert Halfon, Margaret Ferrier, Dame Caroline Dinenage, Sir Roger Gale, Peter Aldous, Daisy Cooper, Kevin Hollinrake, Mr Louie French, Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck, Lucy Allan, Stephen Metcalfe and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Robert Halfon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 March 2023, and to be printed (Bill 176).

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[DAME ELEANOR LAING *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

NATIONAL AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

1.42 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South) (SDLP): I beg to move amendment 6, page 1, line 14, leave out from “that” to second “and” in line 16 and insert “respects the rights of others”.

This amendment would replace the principle taking account of the sensitivities of those with different national and cultural identities with a principle of respecting the rights of others.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): With this it will be convenient to consider the following:

Amendment 15, page 2, line 5, after “means” insert “the Northern Ireland Office, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and”.

This amendment would include the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in the definition of public authority within the bill.

Amendment 7, page 2, line 13, at end insert—

“rights of others’ means Convention rights within the meaning of the Human Rights Act 1998 and other international human rights standards.”

This amendment defines rights of others in reference to Convention rights and other international human rights standards.

Amendment 28, page 3, line 32 at end insert—

“(4A) The Office must comply with any directions (of a general or specific nature) given by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly as to the exercise of the Commissioner’s functions.”

This amendment is intended to ensure the bodies established by the provisions of the Bill remain accountable to guidance issued by the First and deputy First Ministers acting jointly in respect of the exercise of their functions.

Amendment 31, page 3, line 32, at end insert—

“(5) The First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly must annually assess and report on the costs arising from the operation of the Office in line with the duties prescribed in Section 10(4).”

Amendment 21, page 3, line 33, leave out subsection 78I. *This amendment would remove the power of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression to establish the Government’s obligation to establish the Castlereagh Foundation (see Clause 8 of the Bill).*

Clause stand part.

Amendment 8, in clause 2, page 4, line 22, leave out “have due regard to” and insert “comply with”.

This amendment would amend the duty on public authorities to one of compliance with best practice Irish language standards from one of due regard.

Amendment 27, page 5, line 18 at end insert—

“(4A) The Commissioner must comply with any directions (of a general or specific nature) given by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly as to the exercise of the Commissioner’s functions.”

This amendment is intended to ensure the bodies established by the provisions of the Bill remain accountable to guidance issued by the First and deputy First Ministers acting jointly in respect of the exercise of their functions.

Amendment 23, page 5, line 20, at end insert—

“(6) The Commissioner must exercise its functions under this Part in a manner that is reasonable, proportionate and practical, and which serves to promote mutual respect, good relations, understanding and reconciliation.”

This amendment reflects the stated intent under paragraphs 5.10 and 5.17 of the New Decade New Approach agreement for each Commissioner established under the Bill to exercise his or her functions in a way that is reasonable, proportionate, practical and conducive to mutual respect.

Amendment 32, page 5, line 20, at end insert—

“(6) The First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly must annually assess and report on the costs arising from the role of the Commissioner in terms of—

- (a) the operation of the Commissioner’s Office,
- (b) the engagement and compliance of public authorities with the Commissioner, and
- (c) any other costs.”

Amendment 9, page 5, line 28, leave out subsection (2).

This amendment would remove the requirement that best practice Irish language standards produced by the Irish Language Commissioner be subject to the approval of the First and deputy First Ministers.

Amendment 10, page 5, line 31, leave out “approved under subsection (2)” and insert “prepared under subsection (1)”.

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 9.

Amendment 24, page 5, line 37, at end insert—

- “(c) ensure requirements placed on public authorities are reasonable, proportionate and practical.”

This amendment reflects the stated intent under paragraphs 5.10 and 5.17 of the New Decade New Approach agreement for each Commissioner established under the Bill to exercise his or her functions in a way that is reasonable, proportionate, practical and conducive to mutual respect.

Amendment 11, page 6, line 20, leave out “have due regard to” and insert “comply with”.

This amendment would amend the duty on public authorities to one of compliance with best practice Irish language standards from one of due regard.

Amendment 16, page 7, line 27, after “means” insert “the Northern Ireland Office, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and”.

This amendment would include the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in the definition of public authority within the bill.

Amendment 12, page 7, line 29, after “(N.I.)” insert “and any public authority under the Cabinet Office that provides public services in Northern Ireland”.

This amendment would ensure key UK wide services are included.

Clause 2 stand part.

Amendment 29, in clause 3, page 8, line 27, leave out “arts and literature” and insert “heritage and culture”.

This amendment would revise and expand the functions of the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British traditions provided in the Bill. The Commissioner would be responsible for developing the language, culture and heritage associated with these traditions, reflecting the body of established work and existing human rights law.

Amendment 30, page 9, line 6, leave out from “subsection (3)” to end of line 6 and insert

“so far as affecting Ulster Scots”.

This amendment restores the language used to address this commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. The new wording is taken from the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

Amendment 25, page 9, line 25, at end insert—

“(5A) The Commissioner must exercise its functions under this Part in a manner that is reasonable, proportionate and practical, and which serves to promote mutual respect, good relations, understanding and reconciliation.”

This amendment reflects the stated intent under paragraphs 5.10 and 5.17 of the New Decade New Approach agreement for each Commissioner established under the Bill to exercise his or her functions in a way that is reasonable, proportionate, practical and conducive to mutual respect.

Amendment 26, page 9, line 25 at end insert—

“(5A) The Commissioner must comply with any directions (of a general or specific nature) given by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly as to the exercise of the Commissioner’s functions.”

This amendment is intended to ensure the bodies established by the provisions of the Bill remain accountable to guidance issued by the First and deputy First Ministers acting jointly in respect of the exercise of their functions.

Amendment 1, page 9, line 31, at end insert—

“78SA Duty to have regard to published advice or guidance

(1) A public authority must, in providing services to the public or a section of the public in Northern Ireland, have due regard to any advice or guidance published pursuant to section 78S(2).

(2) A public authority must prepare and publish a plan setting out the steps it proposes to take to comply with the duty in subsection (1).

(3) A public authority—

- (a) may revise and re-publish the plan if the authority considers it necessary or desirable to do so;
- (b) must revise and re-publish the plan if relevant revised advice or guidance is published in accordance with section 78S(2).

(4) In preparing or revising a plan under this section, a public authority must consult the Commissioner.”

This amendment would place public authorities under a duty to have regard to advice, support and guidance issued by the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British traditions. It would also require authorities to prepare and publish a plan demonstrating how they will adhere to the duty. This mirrors the duty to have regard provision that applies to the Irish Language Commissioner giving expression to the need for public authorities to give expression to the parity of esteem principle in relation to both Commissioners.

Amendment 33, page 9, line 31, at end insert—

“(9) The First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly must annually assess and report on the costs arising from the role of the Commissioner in terms of—

- (a) the operation of the Commissioner’s Office
- (b) the engagement and compliance of public authorities with the Commissioner
- (c) any other costs.”

Amendment 2, page 9, line 34, leave out “facilitation”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 3, page 10, line 17, leave out “facilitation”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 4, page 10, line 20, leave out “facilitation”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 5.

Amendment 5, page 10, leave out lines 24 to 27 and insert—

“(6) In this section “published guidance” means guidance published under section 78S(2)(b).”

This amendment would extend the grounds on which an individual can submit a complaint to the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British Traditions to cover the conduct of public authorities in relation to all the guidance issued by the Ulster Scots Ulster

British Commissioner, as is already the case with respect to all the guidance issued by the Irish Language Commissioner. It would thus help restore/achieve the parity of esteem.

Amendment 17, page 10, line 29, after “means” insert “the Northern Ireland Office, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and”.

This amendment would include the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in the definition of public authority within the bill.

Clause 3 stand part.

Clause 4 stand part.

Clause 5 stand part.

Amendment 13, in clause 6, page 12, line 2, at end insert—

“(3A) In the case of the absence of compliance with regard to identity and language functions by a Northern Ireland Minister or Northern Ireland department, the Secretary of State must—

- (a) act to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner within 30 days, in the case of the First Minister and deputy First Minister not acting jointly to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner as laid out in section 78J of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (as inserted by section 2 of this Act) within 30 days of the legislation coming into force or a vacancy arising;
- (b) act within 30 days to approve the best practice standards submitted by the Irish Language Commissioner with or without modifications, in the case of the First Minister and deputy First Minister not approving best practice standards submitted under section 78M of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (as inserted by section 2 of this Act) within 30 days.”

These step-in powers for the Secretary of State include a timescale whereby a decision by him or her must be taken. With this amendment the Secretary of State must act within 30 days of progress being restrained.

Amendment 14, page 12, line 16, at end insert—

“(c) a function conferred by or under section 28D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

This amendment seeks to permit the Secretary of State to intervene, reflecting the commitment given in New Decade New Approach. The Irish language strategy is not included under these functions and this amendment would amend the legislation to include the Irish language strategy as a function.

Clause 6 stand part.

Clause 7 stand part.

Amendment 22, in clause 8, page 13, line 9, leave out “may” and insert “must”.

This amendment would require the Government to establish the Castlereagh Foundation.

Amendment 18, page 13, line 21, at end insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State must, within 3 months of the passing of this Act, publish a report on the establishment or funding of any body or organisation under subsection (1).

(2B) A report published under subsection (2A) must include details of the relevant body or organisation’s—

- (a) membership or proposed membership;
- (b) funding structure or proposed funding structure;
- (c) functions, responsibilities and objectives;
- (d) compliance with Article 1(v) of the British-Irish Agreement 1998; and,
- (e) compliance with the National and Cultural Identity Principles.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to publish a report on the structure and functioning of the proposed Castlereagh Foundation.

Clause 8 stand part.

Amendment 20, in clause 9, page 14, line 30, leave out subsection (2) and insert—

“(2) Part 1 comes into force on such day as the Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument appoint subject to subsection (3).”

This amendment would remove the concurrent powers and powers of direction granted to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland under Part 2 from the Bill.

Amendment 34, page 14, line 31, at end insert—

“(2A) Before Part 1 comes into force the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report assessing—

- (a) the annual costs to the public purse of—
 - (i) the establishment and operation of each of the three bodies constituted under this Bill, and
 - (ii) the relevant public authorities engaging and having regard to the three offices, and
- (b) how this spending allocation gives effect to the principle of the parity of esteem between the unionist and nationalist communities.”

The explanatory notes for this Bill only provide costings for the running costs of the three new offices. This amendment requires the Secretary of State to assess the costs to the public purse both from running the three new offices and for meeting the cost of public authorities engaging with and having regard to the three new offices.

Amendment 35, page 14, line 33, at end insert—

“(4) After the Bill comes into effect, the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly must—

- (a) publish an annual report comparing the total public monies spent in relation to—
 - (i) the Irish Language Commissioner under Section 2(6), and
 - (ii) the Ulster Scots Ulster British Commissioner under Section 3(5), and
- (b) assess the costs associated with running the Office of Identity and Expression,

to ensure that the parity of esteem is respected in the spending between the unionist and nationalist communities.”

This amendment requires Ministers to annually compare the total public monies spent in relation to the Irish Language Commissioner and the Ulster Scots Ulster British Commissioner to ensure that parity of esteem is respected in the spending between the unionist and nationalist communities. It also requires them to assess the costs associated with the Office of Identity and Expression on the same basis.

Clause 9 stand part.

Clause 10 stand part.

Clause 11 stand part.

Government amendment 19.

Clause 12 stand part.

New clause 1—*Duty in relation to the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages*—

“A public authority must, in carrying out functions relating to Northern Ireland, act compatibly with its obligations under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.”

This new clause would oblige public authorities to comply with obligations accepted by the United Kingdom under the Council of Europe Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

That schedule 1 be the First schedule to the Bill.

That schedule 2 be the Second schedule to the Bill.

That schedule 3 be the Third schedule to the Bill.

Claire Hanna: Go raibh maith agat, Dame Eleanor. I rise to discuss amendment 6, tabled in my name and those of my hon. Friends the Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) and for North Down (Stephen Farry), as well as to speak about some of the other amendments

we have tabled, including amendment 13, which we might seek your permission to press to a vote later. For the convenience of the Committee, I will comment on amendments tabled by others as well.

Amendments 6 and 7 to clause 1 clarify the issues with the clause and seek to move provisions on to a more rights-based footing. The amendments bring the Bill into line with international human rights standards and the drafted legislation worked on between the parties prior to New Decade, New Approach. The phrase in the Bill as drafted, without amendment, refers to the “sensitivities” of others, but unfortunately in Northern Ireland we know that there are people of various political hues who might be hostile to the cultural expression of others. The amendments seek to place these measures on a rights-based footing, because in the same way as there is no right not to be offended, there is not really a right for anyone not to have other people speak around them a language that they do not support.

Elsewhere in clause 1, the Social Democratic and Labour party also supports the Opposition’s amendment 15, which seeks to include the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in the definition of a public body. We have concerns about amendments 28 and 31, which locate further powers and duties with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, which I shall expand on later. We also do not support amendment 21, which would seek to remove the proposed Castlereagh Foundation from the architecture that we are creating through the Bill and would be a further departure from New Decade, New Approach.

On clause 2, I want to speak in favour of amendments 8 to 12, which we do not seek to push to a Division. Amendments 8 and 11 focus on amending the duty on public authorities to one of compliance with best practice standards rather than just due regard. We think that the duty should flow from the St Andrew’s agreement on language rights based on the experience of Wales, and the amendments would ensure that that was the case.

1.45 pm

Amendments 9 and 10 would remove the requirement that best practice language standards should be approved by the First Ministers. That eliminates the potential for yet more frustration of the issue, which, as Members will be aware, has been problematic for decades. It would also prevent the further embedding of issues to do with language and culture within the fairly binary Unionist-nationalist atmosphere around the Executive Office. Amendment 12 would widen the legislation to include more UK-wide authorities as per the Welsh experience that flowed from the St Andrew’s commitment.

Elsewhere in clause 2, a few amendments have been tabled by the Democratic Unionist party. We appreciate the thrust of amendments 23, 24 and 25, and the direction and the intent in some of the language, but we have concerns about tabulating them into law. We also have concerns about amendments 27 and 32 for the aforementioned reasons of Executive Office dysfunction.

We have no amendments tabled to clause 3, but will note the various points made by others in Committee. That underlines again why we would have been better off hammering the issue out and drawing it out in the Assembly, where we could hear from witnesses from human rights bodies and others who could clarify the

possible implications of some of the amendments. We think that it is appropriate that the final legislation reflects the various stages of development of the different languages.

I believe that there are no amendments tabled to clauses 4 and 5. On clause 6, we will press amendment 13 to a vote. It would provide for new step-in powers for the Secretary of State to unlock the provisions in the Bill in the event of there being either no First Ministers or further delay and denial. That would help to build trust, to get this done and to prevent the issue from being a bone of contention and a frustration. The 30-day period that we specify would commence only after an initial window to allow the First Ministers to agree a process. It would protect the primacy of devolution and the First Ministers' ability in the first instance to deliver the powers granted to them. It would not go over their heads unless progress were locked out, as it has been in the past. Amendment 14 to clause 6 is in a similar vein and would provide step-in powers for the Secretary of State to do anything that a Northern Ireland Minister or Northern Ireland Department could do in the exercise of a language and identity function.

There are no amendments tabled to clause 7. We have tabled no amendments to clause 8, but, again, we will observe some of the points that others will make. Additionally, we have tabled new clause 1, which would oblige public authorities to comply with obligations accepted by the United Kingdom under the Council of Europe's charter for regional or minority languages. It relates to a recommendation in the NIHRC's Bill of Rights advice to the Secretary of State in 2008.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak, but it is even more of a pleasure to be called to speak second in this debate. I am very honoured. I will speak to amendments 1 to 5. Members of my party have tabled some 23 amendments, which show the quantity of our concerns and the quantity of ways in which the Bill does not set the scene for those of my Unionist community. I have been contacted by many of my constituents in Strangford, and indeed by some people who do not have an MP who will take their place to do their job. As a member of the public said to me, "Why would Sinn Féin need to take their seats at Westminster when Members of this House and"—I say this with respect—"on certain occasions, members of the Government are intent on doing their work for them?" What an accusation to those on the Government Front Bench, whose party we have supported on many occasions, and to the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, with whom I have friendship but who has not grasped this issue for us, despite what we said the last time around.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): I congratulate the hon. Member on being called to speak early in the debate. Does he accept that it is not just Sinn Féin that cares about the Irish language or the protection of minority languages and cultures?

Jim Shannon: I accept that. The hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) explained very well where her party stands on this issue. I will speak from my Ulster Scots point of view and from the Unionism that I represent in this House and in the constituency of Strangford.

The fact is that a large proportion of people in Northern Ireland feel that this Bill is nothing more than a sop to Sinn Féin, and that the losers will not be simply the Unionist population, whose culture and heritage will be in second place legislatively; people will lose financially, because the money for this could be used to pay for an additional midwife on shift to assist the safe delivery of babies, an extra surgeon to perform a cataract operation, or an extra classroom assistant to help a special needs child to achieve their potential.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Bill does not reflect the terms agreed in New Decade, New Approach—in fact, it goes well beyond them. The Sinn Féin hand in the Northern Ireland Office is all over this. The NIO's default position is always to give Sinn Féin what Sinn Féin cannot get in negotiations. It is unfortunate that when Ministers are appointed to the NIO, they seem to accept that default position, so that the NIO seems to be an extension of the Department of Foreign Affairs in the Republic of Ireland and a voice for Sinn Féin.

Jim Shannon: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I believe that he is absolutely right.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Steve Baker): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jim Shannon: In a wee second. First let me say that we have real concerns about what is proposed in the Bill. We have had discussions with the Minister of State and the Conservative party, so they can understand our angst and—perhaps—anger. If the Minister has not understood that, by the end of this debate he will clearly understand it.

Mr Baker: I have clearly understood. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) are two of my best friends in this place, and to hear them speak as they just have is personally very painful. I want to reassure them and say on a slightly lighter note that while they accuse us of being a wing of Sinn Féin, Sinn Féin is perfectly content to tell me that we pander too much to the Democratic Unionist party—

Colum Eastwood: You do.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I suspect that, at the moment, what the Government are doing is about right, given that we appear to be offending all quarters. When I make my speech, I will answer the hon. Member for Strangford as best I can.

Jim Shannon: Thank you.

Claire Hanna: Just to clarify, I do not know how much the hon. Gentlemen are in touch with the voting public, but believe me, between the two of them, they are driving voters into the arms of Sinn Féin. Sinn Féin Members hardly need to turn up for the debate with all the platforming the hon. Gentlemen are giving them.

Jim Shannon: I am happy to platform Unionism and more than happy to voice the Unionist opinion, which comes clearly to me from my constituents in Strangford. At the end of the day, we will hear the Minister respond and probably be disappointed—we know what he is

likely to say. However, I hope he will listen intently to what we have to say. We are looking for parity under the Bill, and we do not see that.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My hon. Friend will set out our aspirations in the amendments we have tabled. Those amendments are about getting back to what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach. On Second Reading, we heard time and again that the Bill was all about honourably introducing what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach. It is not. The three model Bills published at that time differ fundamentally from what we have before us this afternoon. Despite the bonhomie and friendly assurances, the Government have an opportunity to embrace amendments that take us back to what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach. Will my hon. Friend encourage the Government to embrace what was agreed and to not set aside what was agreed for the sake of political expediency and at the behest of others?

Jim Shannon: I will make that point very clearly. My hon. Friend is right. That is our plea to the Minister. He and I entered this House together in 2010. We were good friends from the very beginning and we still are, but in the spirit of our good friendship, I suggest that we need some understanding of our point of view, and we are not convinced we have that at the moment.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I say very politely to the hon. Gentleman that I have had conversations with the Minister of State about the Bill. My hon. Friend understands the Bill and the issues completely; I share his understanding and think the Bill is fine as it is. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me—my hunch is that he will not—that often when people say that somebody does not understand, what they mean is that that person does not agree with them, and until that person does so, they will continue to allege that that person does not understand?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has a point of view that it will not surprise him and many others to hear I disagree with. When we say the Minister may not understand, we mean that we feel that he has not grasped as we have what the Bill will mean to those of an Ulster Scots persuasion, like me. It is not that we are anti-Irish language. What we want is parity and equality in the Bill. Perhaps the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee will appreciate that.

The drive to put a political weaponised language Bill before other needs during this cost of living crisis sends the message to people throughout Ards and North Down—96% of whom have no knowledge of Irish and 12% of whom have Ulster Scots knowledge—that they do not have parity and their needs are not paramount. That is the issue. The Government must carefully consider the messaging, because at the moment it is simply wrong, and if it is wrong, it has to be righted. The Bill is set to go forward regardless of timing, so I will speak to the changes to the Bill that are imperative if it is even to come close to being accepted by the people of the Province.

We all agree that the two commissioners—the Ulster British commissioner and the Irish language commissioner—should be of equal value to their respective communities, and that to secure that goal they should have different functions. Not only have we agreed this; we have insisted

on it. In arguing that different commissioners should have different functions, with the objective of their being of equal value to their communities, it is plainly essential that the enforcement powers of both in respect of their different functions should be equally robust in engaging that which they also have in common—exactly the same group of public bodies. There are around 70 of them and the idea is that they follow guidance issued by the two commissioners with respect to their different briefs.

There is a serious problem though. The Bill before us today places a statutory duty on those 70 public bodies to have regard to what the Irish Language commissioner says, but places no such obligation on them to have regard to what the Ulster Scots commissioner says. What is the point of a commissioner whom public bodies can ignore? That is the straight question I put to the Minister of State. In the context of a cost of living crisis, can the Government justify spending money on creating an Ulster Scots commissioner whose representations public bodies can ignore? Why would anyone want the job of a commissioner whom all the public bodies could ignore if they so wish?

What conclusions might people from that community draw about how the Government view the importance, or lack thereof, of the community that the Ulster British commissioner is supposed to serve? They would know that they were less than second class, whereas if they had been denied a commissioner altogether, at least everyone would know that they were being discriminated against, and they would not have to suffer the indignity of being made to look as if they were being treated as equal to the other community, when everybody knows that they are not. Today, the Ulster Scots community is not.

2 pm

In the other place, the Government sought to defend their discriminatory treatment on two bases. As my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) mentioned, they said that the discrimination was in NDNA, but if we look at NDNA, it makes no reference to the provision of a statutory duty to have regard to the Irish language commissioner or the Ulster Scots commissioner. As a matter of common sense, that is implied in the sense that it would be a waste to spend money on creating a commissioner who everyone can ignore—wow. We do not object to the provision of a duty to have regard to the Irish language commissioner, but the lack of provision of a parallel duty to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner is completely indefensible on the basis of any sensible reading of NDNA, as my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East referred to in his intervention.

Secondly, the Government said that the lack of duty to have regard was to compensate for the fact that the Ulster British commissioner has a much wider brief than the Irish language commissioner, which does not even begin to stand up to scrutiny. The Ulster British commissioner is allowed to engage with arts and literature as well as language because there is no desire on the part of the Ulster British community for bilingual Ulster-Scots services, whereas there is a desire on the part of the nationalist community for bilingual services. In that context, it was plain that had the Ulster British community been provided with an Ulster Scots language

commissioner, the Unionist community would not have been afforded something of equal value to the nationalist community.

There is real interest within the Ulster Scots community, however, in the Ulster Scots heritage, music, culture, poetry, storytelling and all those things. Ulster Scots is in great abundance in my constituency of Strangford and I would say—my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) might dispute this—it is the core constituency in Northern Ireland where it thrives and does well. As I said on Second Reading, the street names of Ards Borough Council, as it was then, such as Ballywalter for Whitkirk, Ballyhalbert for Talbotstown, Greyabbey for Greba, and Portavogie for St Andrews, are an example of the Ulster Scots ingredients that we have in the constituency. We also had a sign saying “Fair fae ye to the Ards”, which means “Welcome to the Ards” in Ulster Scots, which was an indication of the depth of usage of the language in my constituency.

In that context, it was determined that while the nationalist community should be afforded an Irish language commissioner, in order for the Unionist community to be given something of equal value, it should be afforded an Ulster Scots commissioner whose remit extended beyond language to art and literature. There are three major difficulties with the notion that it is fair to argue that public bodies should not be subject to a statutory duty to have regard to what the Ulster Scots commissioner says.

First, the notion that Unionism would be favoured if the public bodies were required to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner would make sense only if the Unionist community wanted its commissioner to promote bilingualism across the 70-plus public bodies and had a remit covering arts and literature. In that instance, Unionism would have been provided with a commissioner that was of more value to it than the commissioner afforded to nationalism. In that situation, one might have talked about taking something such as enforcement away from the Ulster Scots commissioner to balance things out, but where we are beggars belief.

In reality, things have already been balanced out by the fact that the language function of the Ulster Scots commissioner will be much more limited than the language function of the Irish language commissioner. Having compensated for that extension once, the Government cannot compensate for it again without giving Unionism a commissioner that is of less value to it than the Irish language commissioner is to nationalism.

Secondly, as a matter of practice, far from having a much wider brief than the Irish language commissioner, the Ulster British commissioner has a much narrower brief. To understand why that is the case, one must understand the following. We have 70 public bodies, all of which operate with a language—English. The Irish language commissioner wants them all to operate bilingually. In that case, the nationalist community has a commissioner to engage extensively with all those public bodies. The Ulster Scots commissioner will make far more limited language demands on those same 70 public bodies, because there is no desire for bilingualism.

Thirdly, to compensate for that unequal arrangement, the remit of the Ulster Scots commissioner is extended to apparently make it wider, so that it embraces arts and literature, but while all 70 public bodies operate using a language and could be asked to use another language,

only a few of them have functions that might be deemed to have anything to do with arts and literature. Unionists have asked for the Ulster British commissioner to cover heritage and culture, on which point we are supported by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, which would have made the remit broader and helped to secure a better balance. That request was rejected, but we have now tabled amendment 29.

The truth is that if we are trying to develop two commissioners who will be of equal value to their different communities by making similarly extensive demands on public bodies and their budgets, it is hard to conceive of a less balanced package. Even if public bodies were subject to the same statutory duty to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner as the Irish language commissioner, it is plain that the Ulster British commissioner will make far fewer demands for its community and be of far less value for its community than the Irish language commissioner. For the Government to seek to make things even more unequal by not even requiring public authorities to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner beggars belief. I do not know what the Minister will say, but it will have to be something pretty good.

Today is the last chance to put that right, which is why the DUP has tabled amendment 1 to place on public bodies the same duty to have regard as already engages them with respect to the Irish language commissioner. That will not result in overall equal treatment for Unionists, because the remit of the commissioner will still be too narrow due to the limited relevance of art and literature to most public bodies, but it will make things better. It is imperative that the amendment passes today. Even at this late stage, I ask the Minister to review his notes and his recommendations in a way that can address the issue.

In response to my arguments for amendment 1, the Government could point out that Unionists can secure a measure of enforcement, notwithstanding the failure to place on public bodies the duty to have regard to the Ulster Scots commissioner to which they are subject with respect to the Irish language commissioner, courtesy of the right to complain—but we need a lot more than the right to complain. Rather than helping the Government's position, that move would serve only to weaken it by highlighting yet further effective discrimination against Unionists.

There are two major problems with the notion that the right to complain offsets the lack of duty to have regard—it does not. First, the duty to have regard to the Irish language commissioner, which is placed on public bodies, applies across the full spectrum of the function of the Irish language commissioner, but the right of Unionists to complain only relates to the use of the Ulster Scots language, which, as we have clearly said, is not the priority for Unionism. Through the duty to have regard, therefore, nationalism has been given something far more valuable than the right to complain afforded to Unionism. I am reminded of the quote from “Animal Farm”:

“All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”

We want to be equal with everyone else, and that is what we are choosing.

Secondly, the right to complain also exists for nationalists through the Irish language commissioner, so it is not a unique provision for Unionists. Again, it applies across

the full spectrum of the function of the Irish language commissioner, which gives nationalists a set of more meaningful rights than those accorded to Unionists. That is the key issue of our stance and where we are coming from.

Amendments 2 to 5 remedy that situation by providing people with a right to complain about failings by public bodies across the full spectrum of the function of the Ulster Scots commissioner that has been deemed to provide a service of equal value to Unionism as that accorded to nationalism through the Irish language commissioner. Again, however, because the function of the Ulster Scots commissioner cannot actually provide a service of equal value to Unionism as the Irish language commissioner can to nationalism because of the limited relevance of art and literature to most public bodies, these amendments will not completely solve the difficulty, but they will make the current arrangements significantly less offensive.

If the Bill becomes law in its current state, the Ulster-Scots Agency has questioned the extent to which the Ulster British commissioner can be of any substantive value. It seems likely that the legislation will give rise to a situation in which we have an Irish language commissioner who makes extensive demands of public authorities, which involve those public authorities spending significant amounts of public moneys to the benefit of nationalism and which generate extensive public engagement through the right to complain through the commissioner. On the other hand, we have the Ulster Scots commissioner, who can make very limited demands of public authorities, which they will be able to ignore, and who can generate no public engagement through the complaints procedure because Unionists are not interested in complaining about the absence of the use of Ulster Scots in public services. Again, I ask the Minister whether he will at the very least monitor the impact of the legislation, and when it becomes apparent that this is the effect of the legislation, take robust action to fix the problem.

There are many more amendments I would like to speak to, but there is not time. I conclude with great sadness and I ask the Minister this question with all solemnity, dignity and honesty: what has Northern Ireland Unionism done to so upset the Government that they see fit to treat us this way? First, we had a Prime Minister—the Prime Minister has changed—who came to Northern Ireland, promised that there would be no border down the Irish sea, and then went home and imposed a border down the Irish sea. Now we have the way the Government have treated us in relation to the Ulster Scots commissioner.

It is hard not to draw a very painful conclusion, and I say with great sadness in my heart that I look upon the Minister as a friend, but the legislation today is here to punish us. Even at this late stage, I ask the Government to think again.

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Simon Hoare: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I was not intending to speak in this debate, but I suddenly realised that I probably owed the Committee a small apology in that I was not able to take part in the Second Reading debate, due to having been called home for a reason.

If I may, I want to put on record my support for the Bill. It has been a long time coming, and I think it is laudable for His Majesty's Government to bring it forward. Too often, when we have seen agreements that are part of moving the dial on Northern Ireland or of resurrecting the Executive, the agreement is seen as an event that does the trick and then gets forgotten. This was a very key part of New Decade, New Approach and the Government are right to bring it forward.

It will come as no surprise to the hon. Member for Strangford that I do not see the Bill as being an opposed to Unionists, glass half-full, Conservative Government attack, which is how he sees it. If we start from the premise that no Bill is ever perfect, any fair reading of the Bill shows that it effectively addresses the two sides of the same coin in a way that respects two different traditions and the people who have advocated for those traditions. It is an issue that has been too long neglected, and it is wise and right that the Government should do this.

I make the point, which I would certainly have made in my Second Reading speech, that I am a Welshman who attended a Welsh high school, but at a time when South Glamorgan County Council said that Welsh was a dying language, so we learned it for a year and then it was dropped. When I return to Wales, which has seen a renaissance of the Welsh language, I wish I could take part in those conversations, and I feel as though a piece of the cultural jigsaw is missing.

If we are Unionists, we do not have to be uniform. Part of the great strength of our United Kingdom comes from the cultures, the language, the music, the literature, the poetry and all those things that make us such a strong and attractive geopolitical force in the world. One does not have to be uniform to be a Unionist, and we should be celebrating those differences and those traditions.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con) *rose*—

Simon Hoare: Of course, I give way not only to a distinguished former Minister, but to the newest member of my Committee.

Mr Walker: I thank the Chair of the Committee, and it is a pleasure to intervene on him. Further to his point, would he agree that Unionists and, indeed, Northern Ireland Presbyterians played an important part in the resurrection of the Irish language in the late 19th century and own some of that culture themselves? It was Unionists who insisted, in the NDNA negotiations, on having the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition commissioner as part of this, and we would of course like DUP politicians to be able to have a more direct say in it. They must do that by getting back into the Executive and back into the Assembly, and they could have delivered this law themselves.

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend, as always, is absolutely right. Just as the Welsh language is not owned by Plaid Cymru or Welsh nationalists, so neither is the Irish language so owned. I think it is testimony to the commitment to the history and traditions of our country that Sir Wyn Roberts—the noble Lord Roberts of Conwy, as he then was—put the Welsh Language Act 1993 on the statute book under John Major's premiership.

2.15 pm

I think the Bill that my hon. Friend the Minister is piloting through the House today follows in the tradition of being so confident in our Unionist skins, and in the underlying strength of the Union, that we see it neither as a sign of weakness nor as a ceding of territory when we champion and provide such platforms for Ulster Scots and for Irish. I would also love to see the Scottish Government do far more in this regard for Scotland—you are looking at me in a very frowny way, Dame Eleanor—and I would like to see additional support for Cornish, which is the only language on mainland GB that has had no real intervention and support.

Sammy Wilson: Anyone listening to the speech that the hon. Gentleman has made so far might get the impression that somehow the Irish language is given no status in Northern Ireland at present, that this Bill is required for that, and that Unionists have been reluctant for that to happen. Does he not accept that hundreds of millions of pounds are already spent on Irish language promotion in Northern Ireland—from Irish language broadcasting to Irish language education, Irish language street names and Irish language festivals? We already spend money on a whole range of things, so it is not right to give the impression that there is not promotion or facilities for people to speak Irish, learn Irish and appreciate their Irish culture.

Simon Hoare: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman enjoys all of those things that he has set out to the Committee that relate to the Irish language, but that was not the point I was making. It was about official recognition, status and the underpinning via the commissioners in this Bill, which I hope will not be amended—I say that to the supporters of all the different amendments. I hope the Bill goes through unamended and that they will not press those amendments to a vote. This is about the status and the role of the commissioners, which I think will help with the delivery of New Decade, New Approach. This Bill is important to a lot of people, and I support it.

Let me close by reiterating this point. The hon. Member for Strangford can make many criticisms of the Bill—this is a democratic House, and we are entitled to support and criticise as much as we like. However, the Committee will know that my hon. Friend the Minister and I are not necessarily known for being on the same page of the same hymn book at the same time—very often, we are singing entirely different hymns in entirely different keys, but at precisely the same time during the same service—so when unanimity breaks out between us, I am not quite suggesting that the bunting should be put out, but I think it is something we should note.

Frankly, I think it is unfair of the hon. Member for Strangford to say that my hon. Friend the Minister does not understand the Bill. If there is one thing we know about my hon. Friend, it is that he reads every document put before him, as a Minister, as chairman of the European Research Group and as a Back Bencher. He is annoyingly knowledgeable about the minutiae—my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), who served with him in the Department for Exiting the European Union, nods in a way that shows the scars are just about healing. To suggest that the Minister does not understand the legislation he is bringing to the Committee is a totally unfair attack on him.

Jim Shannon: This of course is not about friendships; it is about actions and about what is right. What is not right in this Bill is that the Ulster Scots commissioner has not been given parity with the Irish language commissioner, and the issue for us is to have parity. If it is going to be right, let us have it right in every sense of the word. This is not about friendships, or about being bosom buddies again; it is about getting it right.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman misconstrues what I am saying. My support for the Bill is not based upon the fact that the Minister is an hon. Friend in party political terms. I heard the hon. Gentleman say that the Minister does not understand the Bill and that the Government, whom I am proud to support, seem hellbent on appeasing people who are in a politically different place from him. He suggested that the Minister was kowtowing, if one will, to a Sinn Féin agenda.

I have suffered some unfair and untrue brickbats from hon. Members over the time I have chaired the Committee. I say politely to the hon. Member for Strangford that it has to stop. This is New Decade, New Approach, and the Government are trying to move things forward with fairness and equity, respect and support for all of those whom the Government recognise as citizens of the United Kingdom. That is the central mission. That is what underpins New Decade, New Approach. That is the bedrock of the Bill. It has my wholehearted support.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Thank you, Dame Eleanor, for calling me in the debate. Its focus has already tended to drift towards the issue of language, but the Bill is about identity and language. I want to comment specifically on identity and the amendments that affect that.

Identity is a pithy matter. It is not so easily defined, and it affects us all in very different ways. Dame Eleanor, you have been to my constituency on many occasions. You will know that if you go to the townlands of Dunseverick or Ballintoy and raise your eyes to the horizon across the great Dalriada bay, first and foremost you will see Scotland—the outland of your home nation. At the same time, standing in that part of my constituency, Belfast, the capital city of Northern Ireland, is almost 70 miles away. The capital city of the Republic of Ireland, Dublin, is about 160 miles away—some might say that it is 160 light years away. The identity of that part of my constituency, which infuses itself in the people of my constituency and those of that northern corner of Ulster, is a strange mix of Ulster and Scot; an identity that is unique.

If we are to deal with the protection of an identity, we need to get back to what the law states. The law in Northern Ireland is about protecting heritage, culture and equality; it is not a single-minded thing just about language.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP) rose—

Ian Paisley: Of course, I give way to another Ulster Scot.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It is not just something that is contemporary. The view from the Glens of Antrim is beautiful, but the kingdom of Dalriada used to cover much of Scotland; it was both Ulster and Scotland. Historically, that culture and identity is embedded

in the DNA of the people. What I find most offensive is that the Bill does not reflect the historic significance of my Ulster Scots, Ulster British heritage and culture, and it does not afford it adequate protection.

Ian Paisley: I thank my right hon. Friend for that point, which he makes powerfully.

When we deal with identity in this framework, we are dealing with equality law, we are dealing with equal rights, and we are dealing with something that has an impact across the whole of this kingdom, because it is about a person's individual and community perspective. That enforces who and what we are. It is nebulous; it is shadows; but it is who and what we are, in terms of our identity. That cannot just be written down, with the Government saying, "We will give so many millions to the Irish language and so many millions to this other thing, and then we will have protected everyone." That is not how equality legislation should work. It should be much more thoughtful and detailed.

If we are to take a perspective only on the language issue, according to the latest census in Northern Ireland, the language spoken by 95.3% of people is English. The next largest language is spoken by 1.1% of people in Northern Ireland, and that is Polish. There are no protections in our law for that. The next language, at 0.49%, is Lithuanian. There are no protections outlined about that. We come to the Irish language, spoken by 0.32% of the population, followed closely behind by Portuguese on 0.27%. So if we are to characterise this as a matter of language protection, let us protect the Polish language in Northern Ireland and the Polish people, who make a major contribution to employment. Let us identify and protect those cultures that are actually under threat, not cultures that are emboldened in certain ways by money and resources that appear to many to be unending. That is what the Bill should really be addressing, if it is about language protection.

When we come into this building through Westminster Hall, we pass under that marvellous window—the rights, equality and liberties window—that faces the portrait of Moses. That window contains representations of scrolls, and each and every one of those scrolls signifies disability rights and equality rights—I know that the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), is not interested in any of this—and all the legislation that the House has made on emancipation, the right to vote, and women's rights and liberties. If we in the House are to make a piece of legislation to deal with equality in a part of this kingdom, we should ensure that it is fit for purpose. The reason why there is a screed of amendments on the amendment paper is because the Bill is not fit for purpose as equality legislation. It is severely damaged, and it would not reinforce the rights and liberties of the people we have talked about.

I think that the Minister expects Unionists just to vote for the Bill, to accept it and to swallow it down. In the negotiations that he hosted, I discussed the issue with him. Other Members of the House will not vote for it. They will not be compelled to vote for it or be under any pressure whatsoever to vote for it because they do not come through the door to the Chamber, yet the Minister will hand them issues that address a lot of their rights and concerns. They are entitled to have

those concerns, but that damages and demeans the issues that I have put on the agenda and in *Hansard* today.

The starting point for me is this: if the Bill is already broken, at what points is it not fit for purpose? Let us take New Decade, New Approach. The Chair of the Select Committee was quick to point to that as the starting point, the refresh and where we are supposed to be. Actually, the Bill breaches what was outlined in "New Decade, New Approach". My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) went into some detail, and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), in an intervention, identified where some of the breaches are. Where a negotiation has taken place on what a Bill should say and do, we are used to seeing that Bill reflect the New Decade, New Approach agreement. But this Bill is completely at variance with the issues negotiated and put into New Decade, New Approach. That is why the Bill is not fit for purpose. No matter where one stood on New Decade, New Approach, that is what the Bill is supposed to represent. As a House, we should collectively take offence when we are told, "This Bill represents what was in New Decade, New Approach." It is pretty obvious that it does not—it just doesn't. That is the point that the Minister needs to address. In the same way that the Belfast-Good Friday agreement has been breached by the protocol arrangements, New Decade, New Approach has been breached by the Bill. That is the problem. That is why Unionists are agitated about this and why it should be fixed.

2.30 pm

Over the past years, I have been used to hearing lots of people saying that they want to protect the terms of the Belfast agreement, but they are silent when Unionists rightly argue that that applies to all of us. "Here is an issue where there is a breach," we say, "Let us fix it." "Oh no, you're not entitled to that. That's not your rights. No, our rights are special; yours aren't". That is the attitude and the conduct. Maybe that is why there is silence, and will be silence, on the Labour Benches. But I tell the House one thing: if we were accused of breaching the Belfast agreement or New Decade, New Approach, there would be a statement from the White House, a statement from Dublin, a statement from all over the place. You would not be able to hear Unionists above the cacophony of noise coming from that chorus of usual suspects. That is what we would face under those circumstances. This House needs to address the issue of how the Bill breaches the New Decade, New Approach arrangement.

New Decade, New Approach had a very wide scope—I will elaborate on this—on Ulster Scots. For example, the commissioner would have powers to extend his or her full remit over the human rights treaties that have been agreed. Essentially, there were no restrictions on what the commissioner could do—they could protect the heritage, the culture and the identity of a community. But that has now been watered down to deal only with certain issues to do with language, arts and literature. The Bill does not address the real depth and detail that was specified in New Decade, New Approach. Why is that, Minister? Please explain. Why is the Bill so narrow when the expanse of the negotiations was so broad? It is as if the only thing that matters is a couple

of wee poems that an Ulster Scot person has written, or a nice piece of art that will not really offend anyone, or a mural. But the heritage, the culture, the thing that makes us a people? “Oh, you’re not having that protected—your rights. If you ever become a minority in Northern Ireland”—as some people say we are—“see if that happens, but you’re not having that protected. But you have your wee artwork and your wee bits of language. Well, that’s okay.” That is the essence of why this breach is the point.

Sammy Wilson: Even those are not protected. The powers of the commissioner are to give guidance, not direction, as is the case with the Irish language.

Ian Paisley: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that very important point about the powers of the commissioner, which was going to be my next point.

Far be it from me to hand out any advice to nationalists, but if I was a nationalist, I would want to try to satisfy Unionists on this point. I would not want to laugh at them, as appears to be the attitude—

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Who’s laughing?

Ian Paisley: Laughing and pouring scorn on their identity leaves Unionists—*[Interruption.]* “I’m laughing at you, not what you’re saying”—so you’re laughing at a people and at a community—is the barrow-boy response that comes back. I do not say those things. I have a very good record of not saying those things. I cherish people’s identity. What makes me strong as a Unionist is that I can have my identity and understand someone else’s. I love—not despise—the diversity that is there. It is the diversity that makes us strong. That is the point that the hon. Member for Foyle (Colum Eastwood) should dwell on when he speaks later on. No doubt he will.

The issue—this is the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) made—is about having due regard in terms of the commissioner. That is the point of the authority of the commissioner. The commissioner that will deal with the identity that matters most to me will effectively be powerless and emasculated from day one, unable to make a single ruling that must be taken care of or noted.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The reality is that under the office of identity there are a number of principles set out about how identity should be respected. The office can monitor how those principles are being adhered to and report to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is absurd to believe that the current make-up of the Assembly will offer any comfort when the same Assembly, during the jubilee year of her late Majesty the Queen and the centenary year of Northern Ireland, refused to allow us to put up a little rock in the grounds of Stormont, a little stone, to commemorate the fact that Northern Ireland was 100 years old? It refused to allow us to plant a rose to mark the jubilee of her Majesty the Queen, yet the Minister expects us to have confidence that the same Assembly will protect our identity when it will not even allow us to mark our identity in that way.

Ian Paisley: My right hon. Friend really drives home the point. The problem is that it is not one or two minor encroachments; it is a catalogue and the catalogue is growing. It is not as if it has diminished in time and

these were examples from years ago. These are examples at some of the most key moments in our identity as a people: when we celebrate the jubilee of her late Majesty and when we celebrate the historic foundation of the state we cherish. When those things are threatened in the immediate past, I agree wholeheartedly with the point made so powerfully by my right hon. Friend. Under the Bill, the Government and the authorities in Northern Ireland will be obliged to listen to and direct people by one side, but they can ignore the other. If anyone on the Government Benches or the Opposition Benches thinks that that is a sensible way to address this issue, they really need to tell us how, because it just will not work. That is, and will continue to be, a recipe for disaster.

We should expand the protection of culture and heritage, because we are only going to protect one tiny part. As was outlined in the St Andrews agreement and later put into law, as section 28D of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, the Government are duty bound—Minister, I would really like you to answer this point—to “adopt a strategy” and proposals that “enhance and develop” heritage and culture. It does not say anything about language. It talks about heritage and culture, which embrace language and all those things. The law is telling us that we should have protections that develop our heritage and culture, yet the Bill will limit our heritage and culture, and any protections that will be put on them.

Members have already identified the vast resources that are spent on identity and language in Northern Ireland, and the balance is very much out of kilter—extremely so. In fact, it is through the floor on one side and through the ceiling on the other. That is how out of kilter it is. Until that issue of resourcing is properly addressed, the Bill will be unfit for purpose. Minister, I would like to see proposals and protections for my identity. I would like to see them genuinely put in place. Until that happens, the Bill will be a travesty.

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): Go raibh mile maith agat, Dame Eleanor. I rise to proudly support the Bill and I welcome the fact that it is back before us so quickly. I confess that I had some hope that another Bill may well be here today as well, but that does not seem to have materialised yet.

It would be useful to reference some of the comments that have been made about the Northern Ireland Office. Frankly, I have a lot of criticism to make of the Northern Ireland Office, as many Members have, but the new Minister has hit the ground in many ways through his engagement, so all credit to him. Let us be clear, however, that the Northern Ireland Office is doing only two things.

First, it is doing its best to faithfully implement what was agreed by the Northern Ireland parties in New Decade, New Approach, including by my colleagues on the DUP Benches. We had extensive or, dare I say it, tortuous negotiations—I stress that word “tortuous”—over two or three years to try to get some way forward on language and culture issues, so that we could get our institutions restored and they could get down to work. That comes from the history of there being little progress on the language issue since St Andrews. It is important that we do our best today to faithfully implement what

was agreed in New Decade, New Approach. Time has moved on and there are issues, which is why I am supporting some of the amendments. However, we need to be cautious about doing anything that unpicks what was agreed, because there was a carefully balanced compromise at that stage.

Secondly, I stress that it is regrettable that this House has to do the work to put this into law. The Northern Ireland Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive had the chance to do that, notwithstanding covid, over the previous two and a half years, but that opportunity was not taken up. That process would have allowed much more scrutiny and a whole range of interest groups to tease out the issues.

I will focus primarily on amendment 1, which has tended to dominate much of the debate. It is important that we do our best here—I know it will be difficult—to separate language and culture from Unionism and nationalism as political identities. They are not the same. We often—sometimes lazily—end up in that position, but that does not really address the subtleties around language and culture in Northern Ireland, where we have a shared heritage. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) referred to *Dál Riata*, the kingdom that spanned the northern part of the island of Ireland and Scotland, but he also referred to Ballintoy, a town name that has an Irish root. Surnames, townland names and the names of towns and villages across Northern Ireland reflect the different language roots. There are many, many names, including in many places that would be perceived as being dominated by Unionists and Protestants, that have those Irish origins.

Ian Paisley: I thank the hon. Member for making that point, because that diversity is there every single day of the week. Ballymena in my constituency is the middle town—the middle place—in the area. That is what it means: the middle part. I embrace those things as they are part and parcel of the identity of our culture and our country. I emphasise that this is not about despising something, but about making sure that if we are going to legislate on it, we get it right. The Bill fails to meet the New Decade, New Approach agreement, as I hope he agrees. No matter what side of the argument someone is on, it fails to meet it.

Stephen Farry: I disagree; I think that the Bill is a good, honest attempt at getting these proposals over the line. Frankly, we need to move on, get this done and get it into law.

Colum Eastwood: I thank the hon. Member for giving me a useful opportunity to make this point. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) talked about embracing diversity. That is wonderful language. In Derry, since we got rid of the old Derry Corporation, we got proper democracy into local government after the civil rights movement, and we have been embracing diversity in Derry. We have all the old Unionist and British symbols still up in the Guildhall. We have added new ones that represent other traditions, such as the one that I represent. We have also done power sharing since the beginning of that council's inception. The Social Democratic and Labour party had the most seats, but we had a Unionist deputy mayor and we had Unionist mayors over many years. The council in the area that the hon. Member for North Antrim represents has not

had a nationalist mayor or deputy mayor since its inception. Does the hon. Member for North Down (Stephen Farry) think that that is acceptable or that it embraces diversity?

Stephen Farry: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. It did take the use of the d'Hondt method in councils to get diversity moving, although the council in question, which has been in the news somewhat—rather controversially—over the past number of months now has an Alliance mayor, so hopefully that is progress to an extent.

2.45 pm

It is important to make the point that we should cherish diversity in Northern Ireland and that it is a crossover, cross-cutting issue. To stress that point, I will mention two individuals who have been very active on language issues. On the Irish language, there is Linda Ervine in east Belfast, who comes from a Unionist background. There is also Liam Logan in my North Down constituency—I am not sure whether he is a current member of the SDLP, but he certainly is a former member and candidate for the SDLP—who is a well-known advocate for Ulster Scots and has been broadcast on Radio Ulster many times in relation to that language.

The hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) mentioned heritage and how Ulster Presbyterians—as well as Irish Presbyterians—were heavily involved in the revival of the Irish language towards the end of the 19th century and the early 20th century. There is a shared heritage. The problem has been that, in recent times, the language has, wrongly, become politicised and people have been forced into different camps. That is not where we should be and I hope—that may well be naive, although I trust not—that the Bill may well be a fresh start in how we embrace the language issue in Northern Ireland.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is a good and fair man, as I know because I am on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee as well. However, there must be something that is worrying our friends in the DUP. They are all concerned about this and, rightly, we have to try to alleviate those concerns. That is quite proper and I hope very much that we can do that.

Stephen Farry: I want to listen to reasoned arguments. Some of the DUP amendments may well have merit, but I am dubious about amendment 1 for a detailed reason, which I will mention.

I also want to address the points about Polish, Lithuanian and other languages needing greater attention. It is important to move beyond that argument, which is often thrown up. The reason that the Bill is before us is not about facilitating the use of language and people who face a barrier to understanding. It is about respecting, embedding and celebrating the indigenous languages of the island of Ireland, particularly the northern part. We should, of course, do work in parallel with that to ensure that we properly integrate people with other European and global languages into our society, but it is important that Members do not fall into the trap of trying to conflate the two and diminish what we are trying to achieve with the Bill. It is also important that we celebrate the language as being cross-cutting and to recognise that Unionism and nationalism are not monolithic

[Stephen Farry]

in Northern Ireland. There are many other traditions. There are people who have moved away from those traditions and people who share both those traditions. We need to celebrate all that in our life in Northern Ireland.

At times, this debate has drifted into the Bill being somehow a threat to Unionism and the British identity in Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: With the greatest respect to the hon. Member, no DUP Member has said what he just suggested. We are saying that the Bill does not adequately protect our identity and culture. We are not saying that the Bill is the threat, but that it does not adequately protect them. We have explained why and I wish that he would sometimes actually listen to what Unionists are saying, instead of being so dismissive.

Stephen Farry: With all due respect, I have been listening. People are entitled to look back through *Hansard* to see exactly what was said, but the tenor of many comments that have been made today is that this is some sort of slippery slope, where the British-Ulster identity is being eroded and is under threat, and that there is no protection for it and people are fearful for the future. We have to embrace a shared and integrated future in Northern Ireland. That is the only way forward.

The Bill also needs to be considered in line with the wider human rights and equality architecture in Northern Ireland. It is not about protecting two different traditions in Northern Ireland, but about language and culture, which are separate issues. We already have extensive equality protections in various legislation; I think we should have a single equality Bill to better embed them.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It is the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill—identity, not culture.

Stephen Farry: Yes, but identity is not something that we should see in a polarised way. That is the point that I am trying to stress. Let us focus on languages and on the identity that goes with them. Let us see them not as monolithic or as the sole preserve of one side of the community or the other, but as something that is shared across the board.

The framing of the Bill, with different approaches to the Irish language and to Ulster Scots, reflects the different uses of those languages and the different demands from sectors. It also reflects the different ways in which the UK Government have embedded them in the wider European and international human rights framework around languages. The UK Government ratified the European charter for regional or minority languages with respect to Irish and Ulster Scots in 2001, but Ulster Scots was ratified only in relation to part 2 of the charter, whereas Irish was ratified in relation to parts 2 and 3. That gives some indication of the pre-existing differential approach that has fed through into the New Decade, New Approach agreement and into the Bill.

We must ensure that we do not end up creating duties and expectations that are not actually being sought. Equally, we must not magnify what is already there and build it up into some sort of trope or threat to change the complexion and nature of areas. I have to say that a

lot of fear has been whipped up about what the Bill's provisions will do to the characteristics of some areas, which I do not think stands up to any scrutiny whatever.

One of the trade-offs in the negotiations behind New Decade, New Approach was that what is being done in relation to Irish is seen in perhaps a narrower sense around language, whereas the demand in relation to Ulster Scots was to do things on a much wider basis and over a wider range of areas. We do not talk about the Irish identity in the same way that we talk about the Irish language in the Bill, or in the same way that we have added the Ulster British identity to the Ulster Scots language. Already, in the framing of the terminology, we are not seeing a like-for-like comparison. Once again, that illustrates a differential approach in the legislation.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: The hon. Member touches on an important point. I am not prepared to have my aspiration determined and defined by the aspirations of others. If the key demand of nationalists is that the Bill do what it does for the Irish language, that is their right, but at no stage during the NDNA negotiations did we ever suggest that our aspiration for this legislation was limited to language. We made it absolutely clear that it was not limited to Ulster Scots; it was about protecting our Ulster British heritage, culture and identity. Why does the hon. Member feel that his Unionist constituents in North Down should have their aspiration limited to conform to the aspirations of others who have limited their demand to language? We never did so. We were clear about what we sought to achieve. I therefore think that the hon. Member does not understand, and does not seek to understand, where we are coming from.

Stephen Farry: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for his comments, but I fear he has misunderstood what I am saying. I am not attacking the Bill in that respect; I am pointing out that there is already an in-built differential. What happened in relation to the Irish language was focused more narrowly on language and arguably went deeper in that respect, whereas what happened in relation to Ulster Scots and Ulster British is wider in NDNA and in the legislation, but does not go quite as deep. That is the fundamental differential—one is deeper, one is wider—and that is perfectly fine.

I am not seeking to diminish anything or remove anything from the Bill. I simply make the point that in the Irish language aspects there is not the same reference to the equivalent of an Ulster British identity. That reflects the different demands in the negotiations and confirms my point that what we have before us was hammered out extensively in negotiations over several years. All the arguments that hon. Members—the few of us who are here—are hearing today have been rehearsed many, many times. Very little has been said that is particularly new.

Let me move on from amendment 1 and touch briefly on some others. Amendment 6 addresses the use of the word “sensitivities”—a word that I think the Government should reflect on removing from the Bill. As the hon. Member for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) outlined, the qualifier for someone's use of their rights should be someone else's rights, as it is in international and domestic human rights law. “Sensitivities” is a very subjective term, and its use could be seen as implying that not liking what someone is saying or doing, in terms of

culture, is a reason to intervene and stop it happening. The criterion for stopping something happening should not be simply whether someone is offended, but whether someone's rights are infringed.

It would be a nice gesture if the public authority duty were extended to the Northern Ireland Office, not least because the new Minister of State is very active in Northern Ireland. If the Bill is good enough for public authorities in the devolved space, it should be good enough for the NIO, at least in terms of how it operates within Northern Ireland.

Amendment 13 concerns safeguards. Regretfully, I have to say that it is necessary to have an assurance that if there is no progress on the appointment of an Irish language commissioner, the Northern Ireland Office may need to intervene. The same applies to the publication of standards. My wish is for the devolved structures to be restored and to make quick progress on appointments and the approval of standards, but regretfully I must say that evidence from the past two and a half years or more and from what has been said today does not fill me with optimism that will happen. I have spoken to the Minister and I fully appreciate that it is not the Government's intention to come in with a heavy hand, but it may well be necessary.

My final point relates to the Castlereagh Foundation. I have no issue with the foundation being referred to in the Bill along with the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. The fact that we have the office reflects how the Bill is engaging with language and identity issues in Northern Ireland; it is broader than what we are doing with respect to the Irish and Ulster Scots languages. It is important to have proper transparency. I must point out to the Minister the lack of transparency in the appointments process whenever the advisory panel was put in place in relation to the Castlereagh Foundation. I seek assurances from him that that will not be the practice in future.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): You will know, Dame Eleanor, as we know, that Northern Ireland works best when our communities feel fairly treated. Our amendments are about offering that fairness to those with a Unionist background. They do not disadvantage those who genuinely cherish the Irish language. Instead, they are about ensuring that the provisions both on Irish and on Ulster British and Ulster Scots are equitable and can truly be described as fair by all, and that no identity recognised by the Bill can be seen through any prism as having any "for one" advantage.

Unamended, the Bill will be rejected by the Unionist community. We will reject it because the Bill places the community's Ulster British and Ulster Scots identity on a plinth below that on which Irish language is placed. That is not the basis for successful consensus legislation, but the foundation for division, mistrust and agitation.

We have sought to engage positively with the Minister of State to address these concerns. It is a matter of deep regret that despite warm words, he has indicated that he will endorse this inequality. That is regrettable, but reflective of the trajectory to which officials in the Northern Ireland Office remain wedded when faced with Unionist concerns.

3 pm

The Minister needs to understand one thing, however. On Second Reading, I made it clear that as we approach the 25th anniversary of the Belfast agreement, those who are making the birthday cake cannot start removing the key ingredients. Cross-community consent, the devolution settlement and parity of esteem all seem to be being slowly but surely eroded from the way in which Northern Ireland is approached by this Government, and, indeed, by the cheerleaders for the agreement. The Bill is a perfect example of that approach. At the same time, the Minister must grasp the fact that if the Government are not faithful to their commitments in "New Decade, New Approach", this party will see NDNA as dead. He will understand all too well what that means for the restoration of devolved government. Our amendments can remedy that—they can prevent such a situation from ensuing—and I hope that the House will support amendments that can avert such an unsatisfactory outcome.

That leads me to amendment 20, tabled by my colleagues and me. The matters addressed in the Bill are devolved issues, and they ought to be dealt with if and when a new Executive are formed. What we have, however, is a remarkable overreach in terms of the powers bestowed on the Secretary of State in this regard. I believe that the Government cannot credibly oppose other amendments to the Bill on the basis that they deviate from the terms of New Decade, New Approach, while at the same time granting the Secretary of State unprecedented powers which denigrate the need for cross-community consent and cut across devolved competencies.

The Government may view these as dormant measures that will be activated only in extreme circumstances, but that is not the effect they will have. These powers will have a corrosive effect on relationships within the Executive, and will amount to an invitation to either the First or the Deputy First Minister not to seek agreement and instead to lobby the Government to intervene unilaterally. This sets an unhelpful precedent, and follows hard on the heels of the decision of previous Governments to override Ministers in areas such as abortion and the implementation of the protocol. The Government should not make themselves hostage to the manufactured grievance factory of Sinn Féin or any other parties.

We saw that this issue was weaponised for three years to block the restoration of an Executive in Northern Ireland. The hon. Members for Foyle (Colum Eastwood), for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and for North Down (Stephen Farry) stood shoulder to shoulder with those who demanded no return of Stormont until this issue was addressed.

Claire Hanna: Will the hon. Member give way?

Carla Lockhart: No, I will not.

Claire Hanna: Will the hon. Member retract that?

Carla Lockhart: I will not retract what I have said. It is absolutely correct: you stood shoulder to shoulder during the time when the Executive were pulled down by Sinn Féin at the behest of its demands. The same political activists will adopt the same approach should they not be appeased again. Like many others, there is little faith in the Northern Ireland Office's ability to withstand such demands. That is a road to further instability and division in our Province.

[Carla Lockhart]

Intertwined with this issue is the role of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister, and in that context we have tabled amendments 26, 27 and 28. These amendments underline the importance of political accountability and consensual ministerial agreement in the exercise of the functions of the headline offices and bodies established by the Bill. The two commissioners and the director of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression will ultimately be appointed by the First and Deputy First Ministers. Compliance with guidance or directions mutually agreed by those Ministers must therefore be a defining feature of their operation. We would point out that the wording “must comply” is drawn word for word from the three draft Bills published in the aftermath of “New Decade, New Approach”. The existing drafting in this Bill reneges on that provision, emphasising the power to direct rather than the duty to comply.

There is an urgent need to place consensus working and cross-community protections at the heart of our politics. That is the key to the parity of esteem that all parties claim to value and cherish. As I have said before, it is ignored in the Bill, and the Government have the opportunity to address that.

Amendment 1 and amendments 2 to 5 address the duty to have regard to Ulster Scots guidance, and the current imbalance in the enforceability and robustness of the functions of the commissioner for the Ulster British Ulster Scots tradition in comparison with those specified in the Bill empowering the Irish language commissioner. The amendments, if accepted, would extend the grounds on which a complaint can be brought to the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition to cover the conduct of public authorities in relation to all the guidance that they issue. Importantly, it would deliver parity of esteem by applying a due-regard duty for advice and guidance to the Ulster British Ulster Scots commissioner comparable with that which applies to the Irish language commissioner. The Bill, as currently drafted, creates an office for Ulster British Ulster Scots in which the commissioner can be ignored. With no binding duty or incentive for public bodies to adhere to recommendations from the commissioner, the likely impact of such a commissioner is seriously restricted. To the Unionist community, such a toothless tiger is not acceptable. We will not be bought off with the image of a commissioner with the substance of a ghost.

It is window dressing to expand the scope of the Ulster Scots commissioner to arts and literature but not to include guidance issued in those areas as eligible for the purposes of complaints. Limiting the scope to language is not fair or balanced. It has always been recognised that in order for the Unionist community to be afforded a commissioner who is of equal value to it as the Irish language commissioner is to the nationalist community, it must have a broader focus than language, because the development of bilingual service provision in Ulster Scots has never been a priority for Unionists. If adding arts and literature to the scope of the commissioner was deemed necessary by the Government to offset the risk of the added value for Irish language trumping Ulster Scots, it follows that the parameters of the complaint’s mechanism should also be extended.

Amendments 21 and 22 seek to right a failure in the Bill as drafted relating to the Castlereagh Foundation. The amendments tabled by my party colleagues in the other place would have required the Secretary of State to take action and establish the foundation. The eventual provisions to be enacted are ambiguous and provide an escape clause for the Government to farm out the function to an outside body without a clear explanation.

Throughout my comments, I have cited instances in which there is a departure from NDNA, and we see this once again in relation to the Castlereagh Foundation. The NDNA obligation on the Government to fund the foundation is precisely that: an obligation on the Government. We do not believe it would be appropriate to vest this power on the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression irrespective of whether it is deemed an operationally independent branch. Moreover, the change ushered in by the Lords does not go far enough in respect of funding and establishment. It is not appropriate for clause 8 to rest as merely a permissive power which the Secretary of State may or may not use.

Let me now deal with our amendments relating to cost to the public purse. Amendments 31 to 35—again, in the names of my colleagues and me—address the fact that there is currently no mechanism in the Bill to ensure transparency and accountability with regard to public spending on each of the bodies and officers established. It would be wholly wrong for one office to run at a disproportionate cost to the other in fulfilling its duties. The existence of such a mechanism is therefore vital to ensuring parity of esteem between the various traditions.

An indicative £9 million is stipulated in the explanatory notes in relation to the establishment and operation of the two commissioners and the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression. However, there is no equivalent assessment of the likely financial implications for public authorities of having to give due regard to Irish language best practice standards and respond to advice on Ulster Scots. This is alarming; it is alarming for councils, who are looking at double-digit rate rises on hard-pressed householders; it is alarming for housing associations and our Housing Executive, who have record waiting lists and a homelessness epidemic to address; and it is alarming for our health trusts, who face unprecedented pressures.

Jim Shannon: I rise to reinforce what my hon. Friend says about councils. Newry, Mourne and Down District Council enforced Irish language signage in Saintfield town against the wishes of the people there. That is an example of pushing something that local people do not want.

Carla Lockhart: At a significant cost, no doubt, to the ratepayer.

Ultimately, in the delivery of visible and frontline public services, the measure will mean substantive added cost. The new Prime Minister has been elected on his handling of the public finances; let us have some management of public money in this Bill.

The last amendment I will address is amendment 29. This amendment would revise and expand the functions of the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition. The commissioner would be responsible for developing the language, culture and heritage associated

with the tradition, reflecting the body of established work and existing human rights law. It is clear that all of the 70-plus public authorities engaged by the legislation provide services using a language and that the bilingual objective of an Irish language commissioner is such that they could all logically receive guidance from the Irish language commissioner. By contrast, the fact that there is no objective or duty for the 70-plus public authorities to operate bilingually using the Ulster Scots language means that the comparative engagement by the Ulster Scots Ulster British tradition commissioner will be far less. The addition of “arts and literature” is likely only to result in a slight increase in guidance for Ulster Scots. Thus a fundamental inequality remains. In this context, the case for widening the scope of the Ulster Scots Ulster British tradition commissioner to “heritage and culture” is very strong. Such a function is more likely to cut across the 70-plus bodies and have a more substantive impact for the Unionist community.

Colleagues have addressed other amendments and I am sure some will be picked up in the winding-up remarks. I urge the Government and the Minister to take heed of our desire to make this Bill better by making it consistent with NDNA, and consistent with the principles that lie at the heart of our political process around cross-community consent. I ask the Minister to seize the opportunity and to support our amendments.

Sammy Wilson: First, I want to make it clear that, although the Bill was part of the NDNA agreement, the priority given to this issue at this time will bemuse many in Northern Ireland, and I suspect many in this House as well. A Government who say we have to tighten public expenditure and cut the number of quangos then promote a Bill which will have substantial costs attached to it and will set up three more quangos. At this particular time, people will ask whether that is a wise move.

I could understand it if the issues we are addressing today were being totally ignored in public policy in Northern Ireland, but they are not. As I pointed out in an intervention, the Irish language already attracts substantial public funds, and those who wish to speak the Irish language have lots of opportunities to learn it, speak it, promote it and enjoy it in Northern Ireland, running to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds.

3.15 pm

Irish language schools are opened with a fraction of the number of pupils that would see a state school, a voluntary school or Catholic maintained school closed, so there is preferential treatment in the promotion of Irish language in education. A substantial amount of money goes into Irish language broadcasting, too. I do not know how many people listen to the BBC programmes, broadcast at prime times, in the Irish language, but I suspect there are not too many, yet substantial public money goes into that.

Where people wish to have Irish street names in Northern Ireland, they can have them—and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) pointed out, sometimes even where they do not want them nationalist councils will impose them at substantial funding. And of course Irish language festivals are granted substantial amounts of money every year.

So the idea that the Irish language is not well catered for in Northern Ireland is wrong. I have nothing against it. Indeed I think I am one of the few Unionist MPs who have done this: when approached by members of the Irish language community to promote a book in my constituency, where there are Irish language speakers, I hired the facility from the council and got the leaflets out. Some keen Irish language speakers attended—very few, I have to say, even though there are a substantial number in my constituency, apparently—and the author of the book was more than thankful that a Unionist had helped facilitate this in a Unionist community. So I am not against people speaking Irish, but I do question whether it should have the priority it has.

I want to make something very clear. We are not erecting a building that is fixed; we are planting a tree today. And we are not planting a slow-growing beech tree; we are planting a fast-growing leylandii language tree, which will absorb huge amounts of public money over time, and unfortunately it will not be possible to apply the high hedges legislation to it because the commissioner will be able to stop anyone trying to cut it down to size. We must bear that in mind.

My second general point is that this legislation was part of the NDNA initiative. It was designed to get the Assembly up and running again. Many commitments were made in that, and the commitments made in respect of this particular aspect have been well overstepped. I am not blaming the Minister for that; I know that he is not too amused by me making some criticism of him, but personal friends do criticise each other now and again, especially when they are wrong.

Mr Steve Baker: Just let me say to the right hon. Gentleman that he should not worry about it; we will talk about it over a cup of tea.

Sammy Wilson: I assure the Minister that I am not worried about it, just in case he thought I was. But he must ask why and how did this get changed? Who changed it? Who took the initiative to change the terms of the Bill we now have before us? I have to say that I stand by the points I have made, because I have made them time and again, and Unionists are frustrated with the Northern Ireland Office, whose default position seems to be that if Sinn Féin wants something, it has got to be given, for whatever reason.

What we can be sure of is that some of the changes have been made not at the behest of Unionists, not even in compliance with what was agreed during New Decade, New Approach, but because of the whisperings that something that could not be achieved in negotiations should be delivered in another way. That is why I take exception to this, and I am angry at the Minister, because he has had spelled out to him the dangers and the imbalances that lie in the Bill and the way in which it is going to promote not unity or harmony but further division—division that he himself is now accepting and that he might well have to referee and adjudicate on. That is why he has included powers in the Bill that were never originally intended.

Mr Baker: I will deal with the things that the right hon. Gentleman is raising when I come to my remarks, but I think it has to be said for the benefit of the Committee and the public that, just as he is accusing us of doing whatever Sinn Féin suggests, we are accused of

[Mr Steve Baker]

pandering to the DUP by Sinn Féin. I think everybody should take stock and remember that, as was said earlier, this Bill is an attempt faithfully to implement New Decade, New Approach in good faith, and we are only doing it in this House because the Assembly is not up and running. When I get to my remarks, I hope that I will demonstrate to him the sincerity with which I have engaged with his and others' passionate pleas on this point, and if he would leave just a little room in his rage for me to respond at the end, I would be grateful.

Sammy Wilson: I would be interested to hear how the Minister has pandered to the DUP on this Bill. We have highlighted that what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach is not in it and we have shown him where the imbalances are, and I would like to see where he believes he has balanced towards the point of view that we have expressed in this debate or in the discussions we had with him earlier.

Those are the introductory remarks I want to make. Let me come to some of the amendments and explain why they are necessary. We have asked for an amendment to clause 1, in amendment 27, to ensure that the views of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister are taken into account by the commissioners. Why is that necessary? It is necessary for one particular reason: once commissioners are appointed, if there is no accountability and no restraint or rein on those commissioners, they will be able to do what they want without any political accountability. They could recommend and introduce measures that could have huge political consequences and cause massive political division, annoyance and costs. If they are not subject to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly, there will be no restraint on them.

One thing the Minister can be absolutely sure of is that he is not going to get anyone applying for these posts who does not feel strongly about these issues. In fact, these posts are going to attract people who are zealots, who believe in what they are being asked to do and who want to promote what they are being asked to promote. If they are left unrestrained, he can be sure that they will be making recommendations, giving guidance and making demands that will cause difficulties to the people who have to adhere to them. And of course they will want to build their impact. That is why it is important that there is some accountability and some political restraint on them. For positions such as these, we cannot allow somebody to be appointed who has no curtailment upon them.

The second amendment I want to address is the one about the powers of the commissioner. It follows from the first amendment that I have spoken about, because not only are we going to have commissioners who will have no political accountability if we do not require them to act in response to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister acting jointly, but when they obtain those positions, there will be an unequal balance in their powers. The Irish language commissioner can issue guidance, look at best practice, listen to complaints about what people want and then make recommendations to which public bodies will have to show due regard. It is not that the public bodies should do so or might do so; they must do so. They must show due regard to the

issues that come from the commissioner's office. In the case of the Ulster Scots commissioner, there are no such powers. The Ulster Scots commissioner can issue guidance, to which public bodies may or may not show due regard. They might decide to act on it, or they might not. If they do not decide to act on it, people can complain. What will the commissioner do? The commissioner will write a report to say that they have not acted on it.

This becomes even more important when one asks who the chief offenders are when it comes to ignoring and abusing the likes of councils or public bodies and discriminating against the views of one side or the other. The leader of my party has already given examples. At Stormont, when we wanted to celebrate the Queen's jubilee, we could not even plant a rose bush. When we wanted to commemorate the anniversary of Northern Ireland, we could not even put a stone in the ground. That was a result of a decision by a bigoted Sinn Féin Minister who had control of the grounds of Stormont and refused to give any recognition to what Unionists regarded as their heritage and their culture.

Let us contrast that with what happened when the Gaelic Athletic Association wanted to commemorate its 125th anniversary. I have great reservations about the GAA, especially given the fact that it names clubs after murderers. I was in the same position as Conor Murphy was when the GAA asked to plant a tree in the grounds of Stormont to commemorate its 125th anniversary. I did not agree with the GAA and I had many reservations about the way in which it behaved, but I accepted that it was part of the nationalist tradition and the nationalist sporting culture and without hesitation I gave it the permission to do so.

It is the same across Sinn Féin-dominated councils and nationalist-dominated councils in Northern Ireland—in some cases the SDLP went along with Sinn Féin rather than stand up against it—where money was refused to community groups to celebrate the Queen's jubilee and the anniversary of Northern Ireland, statues were taken down, windows were removed and emblems were taken out of council chambers. What would the purpose of a commissioner have been in those circumstances, if they had been afforded the same powers as those being afforded to the Irish language commissioner? That commissioner would have had the ability to go to those councils and require them to recognise the Unionist culture and heritage and then require them to behave in a way that gave recognition to it. This Bill does not give the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition the power to do that, but it gives the Irish language commissioner the power to go to Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in my area, for example, and dictate that it must spend money on the Irish language even if that is not wanted by the council or by residents.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): My right hon. Friend mentions putting up a stone or memorial, or planting a rose bush, to commemorate the centenary of Northern Ireland. A complaint was lodged by those working in the Northern Ireland Office about a picture of the Queen hanging on the wall, asking that it be removed. The Northern Ireland Office, a Department run by this Government, actually wants to remove the Queen's painting or photograph from its work environment, which proves how unfair it is.

3.30 pm

Sammy Wilson: My hon. Friend makes a good point. That controversy might indicate the political colour of some of those who populate the Northern Ireland Office, which bears out the point I made earlier.

How does the Minister believe that this Bill protects the heritage, culture, language and interests of Unionists, especially Unionists living in nationalist-dominated council areas, when the commissioner is not being given the powers to do that? Why will the Irish language commissioner have the power to require public bodies to have due regard?

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman. I have not set any time limits or restrictions, but I had hoped for co-operation to make the Committee work well this afternoon. He has now been on his feet for 19 minutes, which is a long time. I hope that he will now draw his remarks to a close, because I would at least like to call the leader of his party before the wind-ups. I hope he will show some consideration for the rest of the Committee.

Sammy Wilson: I will, of course, obey your request, Dame Eleanor.

Can the Minister show how that discrepancy in this Bill will give Unionists the same protection? He is welcome to get involved in the quagmire, the chaos, the complaints and the friction that this Bill will cause. He may say that the Bill will be light-touch, but I suspect he will be dragged into controversies over it time and again. A requirement to impose rather than reach agreement is not a good way to proceed. With the powers the Bill gives to the Minister, he can be sure that the default position will always be that is for him to decide. Rather than reaching a resolution on these issues, it will become yet another focus for controversy.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Members for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), for Belfast South (Claire Hanna) and for North Down (Stephen Farry), my hon. Friends the Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and for North Antrim (Ian Paisley), and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), for their contributions this afternoon.

I will not rehearse the arguments that have been made very effectively by my colleagues, but I will touch on the politics of all this, which is very important and needs to be understood by those on the Government Front Bench. I was present during the negotiations on New Decade, New Approach, and the hon. Member for North Down is right that the negotiations on identity and language were tortuous, detailed and lengthy, because these issues are very sensitive in Northern Ireland. We know that, and we know some of the trouble we have had in Northern Ireland on issues arising from identity, culture and so on.

We want to get to a new place where we mark our diversity of culture, identity, language and so on through respect. That is the landing zone for us. When I look at this Bill, I recall clearly what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach, and I understand clearly, as a senior member of the DUP negotiating team, what we signed

up to. I remember the detailed arguments that took place within our party about NDNA and the detailed consideration we gave this aspect of that agreement, and I am clear that the Bill does not reflect what we agreed.

My colleagues have made reference to the other draft Bills that were published and the difference there is in respect of NDNA. I wrote to the Minister—I am not going to repeat what I said in a very lengthy letter to him—setting this out in detail. He asked us on Second Reading to explain where we were able to highlight a disparity between what was in NDNA and what is in the Bill, and we have done that in detail. I was disappointed with his response to that, because I do not think the Northern Ireland Office understands fully the strength of feeling on these Benches about this matter. That is important, because we cannot support the Bill in its current form, which means we cannot go out to promote it to the communities we represent. The Bill will therefore fail in its objective, which is to promote respect in Northern Ireland, because the Unionist community—those of us who come from an Ulster British, Ulster Scots background—do not feel that it adequately respects and protects our identity.

Our identity is much wider than just the question of language. I will not repeat what I said to the hon. Member for North Down, but let me say that if nationalist parties wanted to use this vehicle to achieve what they have sought to achieve on language, we were clear that our objectives and aspirations were much broader than the issue of language. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford made that point clear. I therefore believe that the Bill fails adequately to offer the protection we wanted for our identity, culture and heritage, and so the Bill is not adequate.

I say to the Minister that we on this side of the House have watched closely the actions of the NIO in the past week. We are coming up to an Assembly election, we are told by the Secretary of State. The draft Order Paper for business for this week did not include this Bill. I was told by the then Government Chief Whip that the legislation would not come until after any Assembly election, in order to avoid any perception that there would be an attempt by the Government to influence the election. Yet here we are, with the Bill fast-tracked. All of a sudden it is on the Order Paper and we find that the Government are putting a tick in the Sinn Féin box. Sinn Féin can go out after today and say, “We achieved what we set out to achieve.”

Stephen Farry: This is a point of information, which I hope will be of service to the House. To be fair to the Government, this Committee stage was announced in last Thursday’s business statement, so it did not come as a surprise in the sense that we were bounced today with this Bill; it was properly telegraphed, as far as I am concerned.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I did not say that; I said that when the draft order was published last week, this was not on the Order Paper. I spoke to the then Chief Whip, who gave me the assurance that such a sensitive issue as this would not be debated further until after any Assembly election, yet here we are.

[*Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson*]

I have to look at this and come to the conclusion that there appears in the NIO to be fairly blunt attempt, in fast-tracking this legislation today and in refusing to take any amendments to deal with Unionist concerns, to further an agenda. I do not say that lightly. I am not given to making accusations that have no substance. I believe that this is a blunt attempt by the Northern Ireland Office to deliver a key demand made by Sinn Féin so that Sinn Féin can go to the polls and trumpet their achievement, and not to accept any Unionist amendments so that Unionism cannot go out and say, “We believe this is a fair and balanced approach to very sensitive issues.”

When we signed up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement, it was about the terms for restoring devolved government in Northern Ireland after three years of Sinn Féin saying that we could not have a Government until the Irish language issue was addressed. That is an indisputable fact. That was their key demand. New Decade, New Approach was therefore a package that was designed to address the concerns of people across the community, and it was the basis for restoring devolved government.

For Unionism, two key elements—among others—of that agreement helped us take the decision to go back into the power-sharing Executive. One was the UK Government’s commitment to protect and restore Northern Ireland’s place in the UK internal market. Two and a half years later, that has not been delivered. That is why, in February, I reluctantly had to take steps to withdraw the then First Minister—because the Government had not delivered their New Decade, New Approach commitment.

The second element was ensuring a balanced outcome on language and identity. The Bill destroys that balanced outcome. I therefore say to the Minister in all candour that if the Bill goes through unamended, we will have to return to the issue, because it is a key part of New Decade, New Approach. The measure needs to be balanced and respect the identity and culture of the Ulster British and Ulster Scots communities in Northern Ireland. We will not settle for second best. We will not settle for our identity and culture being treated as second class.

Our amendments are not about changing the provisions on the Irish language. We are not seeking to level down. We are not trying to diminish the rights in the Bill. We want to ensure parity of esteem for the Ulster British and Ulster Scots tradition, heritage and culture. We are not seeking to do anyone down. We want—to use a phrase that the Government often use—to level up, so that our identity, culture and heritage can be fully protected and respected, just as we expect the identity, heritage and culture of others to be protected and respected.

Colum Eastwood: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving way, but will he bring a little clarity to some of his remarks? He said that DUP Members would return to the issue. He is entitled to his opinion and position on any issue, but we already have no Government in Northern Ireland because of the DUP’s stance on the protocol—we will not debate that today. What exactly is the right hon. Member saying about the

DUP’s position if the Bill goes through? In my view, we have a desperate need for a Government in Northern Ireland.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I agree that we want the political institutions to be up and running. We have often heard from others that agreements should be honoured. That is often the mantra of others. New Decade, New Approach is not being honoured today. I simply say to the hon. Member and the House that we will not settle for the Bill as the final outcome. We will continue to argue our case that further protections need to be provided. I will listen carefully and closely to the Minister. This is not the end of the matter. It needs to be dealt with properly. We need fairness, equity and parity of esteem. We have often been told that that is what we want. That is what we need, and that is what I desire for the communities that we represent.

3.45 pm

I say to the Minister—and I will listen to what he has to say—that I and my colleagues are disappointed that the outcome today is an unwillingness and an inflexibility on the part of the Northern Ireland Office, in the mouth of an election that the Government will call, to accept Unionist amendments to a Bill that is about providing equity, parity of esteem and respect for the diverse culture, heritage, traditions and languages of the people of Northern Ireland. It is not lost on us that the haste the Government have shown in bringing the Bill forward and concluding its proceedings before the election and in ignoring Unionist concerns has, for us, an implication for the election. That is a matter of deep regret because the Government should be above that, and they should tread sensitively when they deal with these issues.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), on retaining his position on the Front Bench. I am sure that he had an anxious few days waiting by the phone. I also congratulate his boss, the Secretary of State, who I know is engaged elsewhere on business related to Northern Ireland.

As I start my comments, I am very conscious of the opening remarks of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) about the sensitivity of the issues that we are discussing here today. I am very aware of the sensitivities relating to identity and language in Northern Ireland. As I have said numerous times, I regret that I am standing at the Dispatch Box speaking to these comments. I wish that all these issues had been resolved within the Assembly. I hope that the follow-up from this—let us be honest, the Bill will pass—is that that can be redressed and that any wash-up that needs to come will be dealt with locally.

For reasons that I will come on to, I do not want to take up too much time of this debate. Northern Ireland voices need to be heard, and I am glad that so many have been heard so far. Our view is that the Bill broadly keeps with the identity and language commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. Language and identity issues have clearly always played a part in the peace process, and this Bill is a welcome development in creating an unambiguous framework for them.

It is important to remember that the Bill is an amalgamation of three draft Bills. These separate Bills were published alongside the New Decade, New Approach agreement. They were supposed to go through the Northern Ireland Assembly where I am sure that, with scrutiny, they could have been improved on and developed. Again, it is with regret that we are dealing with the legislation in this place, but the Government are right to uphold their commitment to take the legislation through Westminster when Stormont is unwilling or unable to do so. Nevertheless, it does present a challenge for how we approach the amendments today. We are conscious of not straying too far from the deal that was struck some years ago between the then Secretary of State, the political parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government.

Moreover, there was a very short period of time between the stages of the Bill in this House. As a result, there have been fewer opportunities for the Opposition to engage with important stakeholders. Some of the groups that I have spoken to feel frustrated that they have not been consulted to the degree that they would have wished. I had a constructive meeting with representatives from the Ulster-Scots Agency yesterday, but I would not want the Committee to misconstrue having a meeting as an endorsement from them. I fear that others may have done so, and I do not want to fall into the same trap. They have misgivings about the Bill and I have committed to meet them again afterwards to understand their concerns and to see how they can be addressed. As I said to them yesterday, I understand that this is most likely to happen from a position of this Bill having passed through Parliament. I would like to explore with them how the issues they are raising can be addressed, and I hope the Minister will similarly agree.

May I remind the Committee that the agency was set up by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement? I hope the Minister will keep engaging with it as much as possible. I have also met with Conradh na Gaeilge—

Jim Shannon: Before the hon. Gentleman moves off Ulster-Scots, I understand and respect him for his meetings with all the organisations that he should meet, but when he met the Ulster-Scots Agency it put forward a point of view on this legislation, asking for the same thing we are asking for. How does he see this legislation addressing the concerns of the Ulster Scots, when it is here to make those changes?

Peter Kyle: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for the comments he made earlier, which I learned a great deal from. I see this going forward via the Northern Ireland Assembly taking it forward in Northern Ireland. That is how it must happen. I am happy, from the Opposition perspective and as the aspiring Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to start engaging and keep the engagement going, but I am aware that the best place to resolve these issues is within Northern Ireland itself. I hope we can create the circumstances and the Government will redouble their efforts to deliver on the commitments made to all parties in Northern Ireland, which so far have been elusive.

I also met yesterday with Conradh na Gaeilge, which has suggested parts of the Bill it believes could be strengthened regarding the Irish language commissioner. Taking this Bill through in one piece in this place,

instead of in three separate Bills in Northern Ireland, has let those groups down. I am grateful for all the help those organisations have given—their expertise is invaluable. I also note that the Government Minister in the other place stated that he saw this legislation as being open to updates in Stormont once the Assembly has returned.

Our Opposition amendments 15 to 17 are probing amendments, and I hope the Minister will engage with them in good spirit. The amendments are simple and would expand the definition of public authority within the Bill to include the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. There were amendments accepted in the other place to address concerns that had cropped up since New Decade, New Approach. For example, the addition of the Castlereagh Foundation was not part of the draft legislation, but keeps within the wider agreement.

It is with that approach in mind that we have tabled our amendments today. The Bill currently excludes the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission from being subject to the proposed statutory provisions. As these bodies have a base in Northern Ireland and focus solely on Northern Ireland, it does not seem logical that they are not included. It seems to be accepted that both bodies will have a substantial role to play once the legislation is established. Considering the Northern Ireland Office is taking such an active approach with this Bill, I do not think it is unreasonable for it to have regard to the principles in it.

When these matters were discussed in the other place, the Minister conceded this point when he said:

“Of course, given the close interest of the Northern Ireland Office in the New Decade, New Approach commitments on which the Bill delivers, I would still expect consideration to be given to the national and cultural identity principles set out in the first part of the Bill, and the guidance issued by the respective commissioners. I would expect much the same with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 6 July 2022; Vol. 823, c. 1020.]

For the benefit of our friends and hard-working members of *Hansard*, that was said in House of Lords *Hansard*, Volume 823, debated on Wednesday 6 July.

I do not believe that the uncertainty between what is expected and what is legislated is necessary. That is something the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission itself has made a compelling argument for amending. Its detailed briefing on the Bill stated:

“While it is reasonable to expect that such public authorities will act in good faith and comply with the Bill to the best of their ability, if they are not supported to do so it is likely that their actions will be significantly limited”

It recommended that the interpretation of public authority be amended to reflect section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, which goes far beyond what our amendments suggest.

There is also the example of how Welsh language legislation works in this regard, which the Government could learn from. I am very curious to hear whether the Government’s views on amendments 15 to 17 have developed.

Turning to other amendments under consideration, we are supportive of amendments 6 and 7, which received support from all parties when they were discussed in the other place. We share the concerns about qualifying cultural expression on the basis of the sensitivities of others. Human rights groups have pointed out that it is

[Peter Kyle]

not clear how that should be interpreted in practice. Without further definition, the concept of the sensitivities of others is subjective. We are concerned that it could restrict free expression purely on the basis of the prejudice and intolerance of others to such expression. When I put that to the Minister on Second Reading, he stated that,

“the approach we are taking is consistent with the draft legislation published alongside NDNA; it really is for OICE to implement this in practice.”—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2022; Vol. 720, c. 198.]

We understand why the Government do not want to stray too far from what was previously agreed, but that puts the new Office of Identity and Cultural Expression in a very difficult position as it will have to work out immediately what “sensitivities” mean in practice.

To take a step back, the Bill has been praised for trying to depoliticise language and cultural issues in Northern Ireland. In my opinion, the amendments would improve the Bill in that regard as there would be no further debate on the meaning of “sensitivities”. Using a human rights basis would provide much more certainty about the limits of cultural expression.

Finally, we are sympathetic to amendment 1. It would oblige public authorities to give due regard to the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition. When I met the Ulster-Scots Agency, it felt very strongly about that. The agency helpfully pointed me to the relevant passage of *New Decade, New Approach*, which says:

“The functions of the Commissioner will be to...provide advice and guidance to public authorities, including where relevant on the effect and implementation, so far...affecting Ulster Scots”.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has said:

“For the Commissioner’s advisory function to be meaningful, public authorities must be required to have regard to that advice.”

For that reason, we support amendment 1.

Mr Steve Baker: What a debate it has been. Such passion and fire in Committee is relatively unusual, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government.

The first thing I should say is that we have engaged widely with the Ulster-Scots Agency, Conradh na Gaeilge and others. I have been pleased to do so and Opposition Members spoke about the Government and me hitting the ground running and making good progress. That is why we have been so active in Northern Ireland, because we have engaged. Of course, we will continue to engage. Before we go any further, I should say that of course we will keep the operation of the Bill under review, but let us not forget that, as was pointed out, the Bill is before the House only because the Assembly is not able to take it through. It is an attempt to implement *New Decade, New Approach* faithfully and I want to get on to some of the detail about that.

We have worked closely with right hon. and hon. Members. I am grateful to the leader of the DUP, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), for his letter, and we have exchanged lengthy letters. I will not have time to get into all the points he made, but to make the best use of the time available I

think I should turn directly to the DUP amendments. The Government stayed in regular contact with the DUP and the five parties to *New Decade, New Approach* on the content of the Bill and we have certainly appreciated regular engagement at both an official and a political level. This morning, the right hon. Gentleman and I met to discuss the provisions and I am under absolutely no illusions whatsoever about the great and earnest passion with which he approaches these issues.

I am 51 years of age and a former Royal Air Force engineer officer. Anyone can work out what the security situation was when I was a young man, so it takes quite a deal of Christian charity for me not to respond in kind when I am accused of pandering to Sinn Féin. I think perhaps we had better leave that there. I have no intention of pandering to Sinn Féin; I am a Unionist and I am under an obligation to play my part in governing Northern Ireland impartially, and that is what I intend to do.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley particularly talked about the delay in memorialising the victims of Enniskillen. It is shocking to think that anyone stood in the way of memorialising the victims and it is frankly shaming on those who stood in the way of putting that memorial in place, but I do not think the amendment he proposes will solve that problem or category of problem.

Colum Eastwood *rose*—

Mr Baker: I am very short of time, but I will give way.

Colum Eastwood: I understand that, but I think that it is important to put this point on the record. We have heard talk about Sinn Féin this and Sinn Féin that, so will the Minister maybe take the opportunity to put it on the record that people who love the Irish language do not necessarily vote for Sinn Féin? It is a language that has been embraced by people from right across our community; it is not a political tool and it should not be treated as one. That has been part of the problem up to now.

Mr Baker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record. I am also conscious that I need to respect the fact that Sinn Féin are not here to speak for themselves, but I do engage with them regularly and I hope that they have found that I do so respectfully. I just wanted to make the point to the hon. Gentlemen opposite who have made some strident allegations towards me and towards the NIO, and I hope that they will not mind if I respond gently that these things are potentially also offensive to me and to others.

On the substance of the amendment, I really do appreciate the strength of feeling, as I think I have indicated, and I understand the rationale advanced by right hon. and hon. Members. I draw their attention to clause 1 and the establishment of the office, because the national and cultural identity principles are there, applying to all public authorities, and they should take considerable comfort from that.

The crux of the matter is that the two commissioners each have a very different scope. The Irish language commissioner must have their guidance approved by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister acting in concert, whereas although there is a power to direct the Ulster Scots and Ulster British commissioner, they can issue what guidance they see fit and across a broader

scope. I could comment further on the exact definition of that scope, but the point is this: were I to accept the DUP amendments, there would be four serious problems.

First, they would create a much more powerful commissioner, with a much broader scope and less accountability to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister. I think that nationalists could reasonably object that that was out of kilter. We have been trying to stay very close to New Decade, New Approach and to respect its balance. We have the office dealing with issues of identity and the principles, and the two commissioners with different scopes and purposes. That is why we have this very delicate balance.

I just do not think that the amendments would achieve some of the purposes sought—in a heartfelt way—particularly those relating to language, arts and literature. It is difficult to see how some of that would work out in practice. Again, I refer people to the principles. It would be difficult to implement and, on a practical note, it would open the Bill up to ping-pong, which could lead to the whole agreement being unpicked in this House.

I will finish by making three firm commitments to the DUP in particular from the Dispatch Box. First, I will discuss the issues they have raised with the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland. Plainly, these matters need to be addressed. Secondly, we will of course keep the operation of this legislation, when it comes into force, under review. However, I say gently that it is probably for the Assembly to legislate in this area. Thirdly, as hon. Members have seen, I am not afraid to call out intolerable conduct when it arises—for example, I called out the chanting of “up the ’RA”. Without promising to do so on every occasion, because I suspect I would do nothing else, I am absolutely committed to getting involved in this problem.

What I observe is that some of the hurt and the problems will never be dealt with through legislation. What is required is a change of hearts and for people to do as they would be done by. I am sorry that I have not had more time to go through all the amendments in detail, but I have been asked to wrap up my speech at this point.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 136, Noes 276.

Division No. 77]

[4.3 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane	Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Ali, Rushanara	Charalambous, Bambos
Ali, Tahir	Cooper, Daisy
Amesbury, Mike	Cooper, rh Yvette
Anderson, Fleur	Creasy, Stella
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Cruddas, Jon
Barker, Paula	Cryer, John
Beckett, rh Margaret	Cunningham, Alex
Benn, rh Hilary	Daby, Janet
Betts, Mr Clive	David, Wayne
Blomfield, Paul	Davies, Geraint
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Davies-Jones, Alex
Brown, Ms Lyn	Debbonaire, Thangam
Bryant, Chris	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Burgon, Richard	Doughty, Stephen
Byrne, rh Liam	Dowd, Peter
Cadbury, Ruth	Duffield, Rosie
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Eagle, Dame Angela
Carden, Dan	Eastwood, Colum

Edwards, Jonathan	Mearns, Ian
Efford, Clive	Moran, Layla
Elliott, Julie	Morden, Jessica
Elmore, Chris	Morgan, Helen
Evans, Chris	Morgan, Stephen
Farron, Tim	Morris, Grahame
Farry, Stephen	Murray, Ian
Fletcher, Colleen	Murray, James
Foord, Richard	Nichols, Charlotte
Foxcroft, Vicky	Norris, Alex
Gardiner, Barry	Olney, Sarah
Green, Kate	Onwurah, Chi
Greenwood, Lillian	Osborne, Kate
Greenwood, Margaret	Owatemi, Taiwo
Gwynne, Andrew	Owen, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian	Pennycook, Matthew
Hanna, Claire	Phillipson, Bridget
Hardy, Emma	Pollard, Luke
Harris, Carolyn	Rayner, rh Angela
Healey, rh John	Reed, Steve
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Reeves, Ellie
Hobhouse, Wera	Reeves, Rachel
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Reynolds, Jonathan
Hollern, Kate	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Hopkins, Rachel	Rodda, Matt
Jardine, Christine	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Slaughter, Andy
Jones, Gerald	Smith, Cat
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	Smith, Jeff
Jones, Ruth	Smith, Nick
Jones, Sarah	Sobel, Alex
Kane, Mike	Stevens, Jo
Khan, Afzal	Streeting, Wes
Kinnock, Stephen	Tami, rh Mark
Kyle, Peter	Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Lake, Ben	Thornberry, rh Emily
Lammy, rh Mr David	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Leadbeater, Kim	Wakeford, Christian
Lewis, Clive	Webbe, Claudia
Lightwood, Simon	West, Catherine
Long Bailey, Rebecca	Western, Matt
Lucas, Caroline	Whitehead, Dr Alan
Lynch, Holly	Williams, Hywel
Mahmood, Mr Khalid	Wilson, Munira
Maskell, Rachael	Winter, Beth
Mayhew, Jerome	Yasin, Mohammad
McCarthy, Kerry	Zeichner, Daniel
McDonnell, rh John	
McFadden, rh Mr Pat	Tellers for the Ayes:
McKinnell, Catherine	Liz Twist and
McMorrin, Anna	Mary Glindon

NOES

Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun

Carter, Andy
 Cartlidge, James
 Cates, Miriam
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Simon
 Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast
by Craig Whittaker*)
 Clarke-Smith, Brendan
 Clarkson, Chris
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Colburn, Elliot
 Collins, Damian
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, Claire
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Crosbie, Virginia
 Crouch, Tracey
 Daly, James
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davison, Dehenna
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Docherty, Leo
 Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
 Donelan, rh Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, Sir James
 Duguid, David
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dunne, rh Philip
 Eastwood, Mark
 Edwards, Ruth
 Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
 Eustice, rh George
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Everitt, Ben
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fell, Simon
 Firth, Anna
 Fletcher, Katherine
 Fletcher, Mark
 Fletcher, Nick
 Foster, Kevin
 Frazer, rh Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Mr Marcus
 Garnier, Mark
 Ghani, Ms Nusrat
 Gibb, rh Nick
 Gibson, Peter
 Gideon, Jo
 Girvan, Paul
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Gray, James
 Green, Chris

Green, rh Damian
 Griffith, Andrew
 Grundy, James
 Gullis, Jonathan
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matt
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harris, Rebecca
 Harrison, Trudy
 Hart, Sally-Ann
 Heald, rh Sir Oliver
 Henderson, Gordon
 Henry, Darren
 Higginbotham, Antony
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Adam
 Holmes, Paul
 Howell, John
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hughes, Eddie
 Hunt, Jane
 Hunt, Tom
 Jack, rh Mr Alister
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenkinson, Mark
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnston, David
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Fay
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Jupp, Simon
 Kearns, Alicia
 Keegan, Gillian
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kniveton, Kate
 Lamont, John
 Langan, Robert
 Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
 Levy, Ian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Loder, Chris
 Longhi, Marco
 Lopez, Julia
 Lord, Mr Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Maclean, Rachel
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mangnall, Anthony
 Mann, Scott
 Marson, Julie
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McPartland, rh Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Merriman, Huw

Metcalfe, Stephen
 Millar, Robin
 Miller, rh Dame Maria
 Milling, rh Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Mordaunt, rh Penny
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mortimer, Jill
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Neill, Sir Robert
 Nici, Lia
 Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew
 Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Damien Moore and
Sir David Evennett

Question accordingly negated.

Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3

THE ULSTER SCOTS AND THE ULSTER BRITISH TRADITION

Amendment proposed: 1, page 9, line 31, at end insert—
 “78SA Duty to have regard to published advice or guidance

(1) A public authority must, in providing services to the public or a section of the public in Northern Ireland, have due regard to any advice or guidance published pursuant to section 78S(2).

(2) A public authority must prepare and publish a plan setting out the steps it proposes to take to comply with the duty in subsection (1).

(3) A public authority—

(a) may revise and re-publish the plan if the authority considers it necessary or desirable to do so;

(b) must revise and re-publish the plan if relevant revised advice or guidance is published in accordance with section 78S(2).

(4) In preparing or revising a plan under this section, a public authority must consult the Commissioner.”—(*Ian Paisley*.)

This amendment would place public authorities under a duty to have regard to advice, support and guidance issued by the Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British traditions. It would also require authorities to prepare and publish a plan demonstrating how they will adhere to the duty. This mirrors the duty to have regard provision that applies to the Irish Language Commissioner giving expression to the need for public authorities to give expression to the parity of esteem principle in relation to both Commissioners.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 106, Noes 286.

Division No. 78]

[4.17 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Jones, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Kinnock, Stephen
Anderson, Fleur	Kyle, Peter
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Lammy, rh Mr David
Barker, Paula	Leadbeater, Kim
Benn, rh Hilary	Lewis, Clive
Blomfield, Paul	Lightwood, Simon
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Brown, Ms Lyn	Lynch, Holly
Bryant, Chris	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Burgon, Richard	Maskell, Rachael
Byrne, rh Liam	McCabe, Steve
Cadbury, Ruth	McCarthy, Kerry
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	McDonnell, rh John
Carden, Dan	McKinnell, Catherine
Charalambous, Bambos	McMorrin, Anna
Creasy, Stella	Mearns, Ian
Cruddas, Jon	Morden, Jessica
Cryer, John	Morgan, Stephen
Cunningham, Alex	Morris, Grahame
Daby, Janet	Murray, Ian
David, Wayne	Murray, James
Davies, Geraint	Nichols, Charlotte
Davies-Jones, Alex	Norris, Alex
Debbonaire, Thangam	Onwurah, Chi
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.	Owatemi, Taiwo
Doughty, Stephen	Paisley, Ian
Dowd, Peter	Pennycook, Matthew
Duffield, Rosie	Pollard, Luke
Eagle, Dame Angela	Rayner, rh Angela
Edwards, Jonathan	Reed, Steve
Efford, Clive	Reeves, Ellie
Elliott, Julie	Reynolds, Jonathan
Elmore, Chris	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Evans, Chris	Robinson, Gavin
Fletcher, Colleen	Rodda, Matt
Foxcroft, Vicky	Shannon, Jim
Gardiner, Barry	Slaughter, Andy
Girvan, Paul	Smith, Cat
Glindon, Mary	Smith, Jeff
Green, Kate	Sobel, Alex
Greenwood, Lilian	Stevens, Jo
Greenwood, Margaret	Tami, rh Mark
Gwynne, Andrew	Thornberry, rh Emily
Hardy, Emma	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Harris, Carolyn	Twist, Liz
Healey, rh John	Wakeford, Christian
Hendrick, Sir Mark	Western, Matt
Hobhouse, Wera	Winter, Beth
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Yasin, Mohammad
Hollern, Kate	Zeichner, Daniel
Hopkins, Rachel	
Jones, Gerald	
Jones, rh Mr Kevan	
Jones, Ruth	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Carla Lockhart and
Sammy Wilson

NOES

Afolami, Bim	Donelan, rh Michelle
Afriyie, Adam	Double, Steve
Aiken, Nickie	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Aldous, Peter	Drax, Richard
Allan, Lucy	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Anderson, Lee	Duguid, David
Anderson, Stuart	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Andrew, rh Stuart	Dunne, rh Philip
Ansell, Caroline	Eastwood, Colum
Argar, rh Edward	Eastwood, Mark
Atherton, Sarah	Bacon, Gareth
Baillie, Siobhan	Edwards, Ruth
Baker, Duncan	Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Baker, Mr Steve	Eustice, rh George
Baldwin, Harriett	Evans, Dr Luke
Baron, Mr John	Everitt, Ben
Baynes, Simon	Fabricant, Michael
Bell, Aaron	Farron, Tim
Beresford, Sir Paul	Farry, Stephen
Bhatti, Saqib	Fell, Simon
Blunt, Crispin	Firth, Anna
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Fletcher, Katherine
Bowie, Andrew	Fletcher, Mark
Bradley, rh Karen	Fletcher, Nick
Brady, Sir Graham	Foord, Richard
Brereton, Jack	Foster, Kevin
Bridgen, Andrew	Frazer, rh Lucy
Bristow, Paul	Freeman, George
Britcliffe, Sara	Freer, Mike
Browne, Anthony	French, Mr Louie
Bruce, Fiona	Fuller, Richard
Buchan, Felicity	Fysh, Mr Marcus
Buckland, rh Sir Robert	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Burghart, Alex	Garnier, Mark
Butler, Rob	Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Cairns, rh Alun	Gibb, rh Nick
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Gibson, Peter
Carter, Andy	Gideon, Jo
Cartledge, James	Glen, John
Cash, Sir William	Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Cates, Miriam	Gove, rh Michael
Caulfield, Maria	Graham, Richard
Chalk, Alex	Gray, James
Chishti, Rehman	Green, Chris
Churchill, Jo	Green, rh Damian
Clark, rh Greg	Griffith, Andrew
Clarke, rh Mr Simon	Grundy, James
Clarke, Theo (<i>Proxy vote cast by Craig Whittaker</i>)	Gullis, Jonathan
Clarke-Smith, Brendan	Halfon, rh Robert
Clarkson, Chris	Hall, Luke
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Hammond, Stephen
Colburn, Elliot	Hancock, rh Matt
Collins, Damian	Hands, rh Greg
Cooper, Daisy	Hanna, Claire
Costa, Alberto	Harper, rh Mr Mark
Coutinho, Claire	Harris, Rebecca
Crabb, rh Stephen	Harrison, Trudy
Crosbie, Virginia	Hart, Sally-Ann
Crouch, Tracey	Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Daly, James	Henderson, Gordon
Davies, David T. C.	Henry, Darren
Davies, Gareth	Higginbotham, Antony
Davies, Dr James	Hinds, rh Damian
Davies, Mims	Hoare, Simon
Davies, Philip	Hobhouse, Wera
Davison, Dehenna	Holden, Mr Richard
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Hollinrake, Kevin
Docherty, Leo	Hollobone, Mr Philip
	Holloway, Adam
	Holmes, Paul
	Howell, John

Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Jardine, Christine
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leadsom, rh Dame
Andrea
Levy, Ian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr
Ian
Loder, Chris
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrisey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia
Nokes, rh Caroline
O'Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew

Olney, Sarah
Opperman, Guy
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Philp, rh Chris
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Pritchard, rh Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Richards, Nicola
Richardson, Angela
Roberts, Rob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Russell, Dean
Rutley, David
Sambrook, Gary
Saxby, Selaine
Seely, Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Simmonds, David
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, rh Chloe
Smith, Greg
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Solloway, Amanda
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, rh Mark
Stafford, Alexander
Stephenson, rh Andrew
Stevenson, Jane
Stewart, rh Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunderland, James
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Syms, Sir Robert
Throup, Maggie
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
Trott, Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vara, rh Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Webb, Suzanne
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Sir
John
Wiggin, Sir Bill
Wild, James
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira

Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
Damien Moore and
Sir David Evennett

Question accordingly negatived.

Clauses 3 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 6

CONCURRENT POWERS AND POWERS OF DIRECTION

Amendment proposed: 13, page 12, line 2, at end insert—

“(3A) In the case of the absence of compliance with regard to identity and language functions by a Northern Ireland Minister or Northern Ireland department, the Secretary of State must—

(a) act to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner within 30 days, in the case of the First Minister and deputy First Minister not acting jointly to appoint an Irish Language Commissioner as laid out in section 78J of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (as inserted by section 2 of this Act) within 30 days of the legislation coming into force or a vacancy arising;

(b) act within 30 days to approve the best practice standards submitted by the Irish Language Commissioner with or without modifications, in the case of the First Minister and deputy First Minister not approving best practice standards submitted under section 78M of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (as inserted by section 2 of this Act) within 30 days.”—(*Claire Hanna.*)

These step-in powers for the Secretary of State include a timescale whereby a decision by him or her must be taken. With this amendment the Secretary of State must act within 30 days of progress being restrained.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 129, Noes 279.

Division No. 79]

[4.29 pm

AYES

Ali, Rushanara	Davies, Geraint
Ali, Tahir	Davies-Jones, Alex
Anderson, Fleur	Debbonaire, Thangam
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Barker, Paula	Doughty, Stephen
Benn, rh Hilary	Dowd, Peter
Betts, Mr Clive	Duffield, Rosie
Blomfield, Paul	Eagle, Dame Angela
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Eastwood, Colum
Brown, Ms Lyn	Edwards, Jonathan
Bryant, Chris	Efford, Clive
Burgon, Richard	Elliott, Julie
Byrne, rh Liam	Elmore, Chris
Cadbury, Ruth	Evans, Chris
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Farron, Tim
Carden, Dan	Farry, Stephen
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Fletcher, Colleen
Charalambous, Bambos	Foord, Richard
Cooper, Daisy	Foxcroft, Vicky
Cooper, rh Yvette	Gardiner, Barry
Creasy, Stella	Green, Kate
Cruddas, Jon	Greenwood, Lilian
Cryer, John	Greenwood, Margaret
Cunningham, Alex	Gwynne, Andrew
Daby, Janet	Hamilton, Fabian
David, Wayne	Hanna, Claire

Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Rachel
Jardine, Christine
Jones, Gerald
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Khan, Afzal
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lynch, Holly
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Maskell, Rachael
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonnell, rh John
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, James
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex

Olney, Sarah
Onwurah, Chi
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillipson, Bridget
Pollard, Luke
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, Steve
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Wakeford, Christian
Webbe, Claudia
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Munira
Winter, Beth
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Liz Twist and
Mary Glindon**

NOES

Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aiken, Nickie
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, rh Edward
Atherton, Sarah
Bacon, Gareth
Baillie, Siobhan
Baker, Duncan
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Baynes, Simon
Bell, Aaron
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bhatti, Saqib
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Bristow, Paul
Britcliffe, Sara
Browne, Anthony
Bruce, Fiona
Buchan, Felicity
Buckland, rh Sir Robert
Burghart, Alex
Butler, Rob
Cairns, rh Alun
Carter, Andy
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Cates, Miriam
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Simon
Clarke, Theo (*Proxy vote cast
by Craig Whittaker*)
Clarke-Smith, Brendan
Clarkson, Chris
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Colburn, Elliot
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, Claire
Crabb, rh Stephen

Crosbie, Virginia
Crouch, Tracey
Daly, James
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davison, Dehenna
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, rh Michelle
Double, Steve
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, Sir James
Duguid, David
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dunne, rh Philip
Eastwood, Mark
Edwards, Ruth
Elphicke, Mrs Natalie
Eustice, rh George
Evans, Dr Luke
Everitt, Ben
Fabricant, Michael
Fell, Simon
Firth, Anna
Fletcher, Katherine
Fletcher, Mark
Fletcher, Nick
Foster, Kevin
Frazer, rh Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gibson, Peter
Gideon, Jo
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Sir Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Gray, James
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Griffith, Andrew
Grundy, James
Gullis, Jonathan
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Sally-Ann
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Henderson, Gordon
Henry, Darren
Higginbotham, Antony
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Holmes, Paul
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, Jane
Hunt, Tom
Jack, rh Mr Alister
Javid, rh Sajid
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkinson, Mark
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnston, David
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Fay
Jones, Mr Marcus
Jupp, Simon
Kearns, Alicia
Keegan, Gillian
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kniveton, Kate
Kruger, Danny
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Largan, Robert
Leadsom, rh Dame Andrea
Levy, Ian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lockhart, Carla
Loder, Chris
Longhi, Marco
Lopez, Julia
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mangnall, Anthony
Mann, Scott
Marson, Julie
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, rh Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Millar, Robin
Miller, rh Dame Maria
Milling, rh Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morrissey, Joy
Mortimer, Jill
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Sir Robert
Nici, Lia

Nokes, rh Caroline
 O'Brien, Neil
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Paisley, Ian
 Penning, rh Sir Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Philp, rh Chris
 Poulter, Dr Dan
 Prentis, Victoria
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
 Richards, Nicola
 Richardson, Angela
 Roberts, Rob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Russell, Dean
 Rutley, David
 Sambrook, Gary
 Saxby, Selaine
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Simmonds, David
 Skidmore, rh Chris
 Smith, rh Chloe
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, rh Julian
 Smith, Royston
 Solloway, Amanda
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, rh Mark
 Stafford, Alexander
 Stephenson, rh Andrew

Stevenson, Jane
 Stewart, rh Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunderland, James
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Throup, Maggie
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, rh Anne-Marie
 Trott, Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vara, rh Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Villiers, rh Theresa
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Warman, Matt
 Watling, Giles
 Webb, Suzanne
 Whately, Helen
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wiggin, Sir Bill
 Wild, James
 Williams, Craig
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, Mr William
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Jacob

Tellers for the Noes:
 Sir David Evennett and
 Damien Moore

Question accordingly negatived.

Clauses 6 to 11 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 12

SHORT TITLE

Amendment made: 19, page 15, line 4, leave out subsection (2)—(*Mr. Steve Baker.*)

Clause 12, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 3 agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Bill, as amended in the Committee, considered.

Third Reading

4.40 pm

Mr Baker: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

First and foremost, I want to thank everyone involved in the passage of the Bill: the whole House, all the officials, everybody we have engaged with externally, and everybody involved with the negotiation—I am extremely grateful. I know that the Secretary of State would want me to convey his apologies for not being here, but he is of course in Northern Ireland.

The nature of the Bill is that it sets out to be a good-faith implementation of the New Decade, New Approach deal, and I genuinely regret that my friends in the DUP have not been able to support this. Some words have been spoken today that I regret very much.

This should be a day for rejoicing for advocates of the Irish language, and it is very much my hope and ambition that the passage of the Bill will lead to a depoliticisation of the Irish language. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) mentioned the Presbyterian Unionist tradition of support for the Irish language, and I can only express my heartfelt desire for a renewal of that spirit of moving forward by remembering everyone's common heritage.

As I pledged in Committee, we will certainly keep under review the operation of these measures when they become an Act, but it is properly a matter for the Assembly. I very much hope that the Assembly and the Executive are brought up and running.

Finally, it seems to me that there is a lot of low-hanging fruit for reconciliation in this area of identity and culture, and that just a little bit of love would go a long way.

4.43 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Labour party supports this Bill because it broadly reflects the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was agreed by all parties. I welcome the fact that the Government, in bringing forward this legislation, have recognised the importance of the commitments made in the agreement. However, I share the disappointment that Westminster is having to legislate on this, rather than the Northern Ireland Assembly in Stormont. We want all efforts to be made to restore the devolved Government.

The Bill rightly aims to create structures and legal protections for the Irish language and for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition. Its foundations are based in the Good Friday agreement's principles of equality and respect. Previous debates on this legislation have highlighted the importance of language as part of identity and culture; indeed, the Good Friday agreement recognised that the Irish language and Ulster Scots form part of the cultural wealth of the island of Ireland. As I have previously said in this Chamber, one need only look at Wales to see the impact of the creation of a clear framework outlining the duties and responsibilities of public bodies in relation to a minority language, and not simply in preserving but in expanding the language and taking some of the political sting out of its promotion. It is my hope that the Bill will ensure that identity and language issues do not belong to just one section of the community or one political outlook but are an important, shared part of Northern Ireland's rich and diverse culture and heritage. The United Kingdom must stick to its international agreements and we must ensure that the Good Friday Agreement is protected and work towards the restoration of power sharing at Stormont.

4.45 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I will detain the House for only a few seconds, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Second Reading I mentioned to those on the Front Bench that I was concerned that British Sign Language, which this House has now placed in statute,

was not in the body of the Bill. Can those on the Treasury Bench make sure that when, as we hope, Stormont is re-established, British Sign Language is used in Northern Ireland as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom?

4.46 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank you for your chairmanship of the Committee, Mr Deputy Speaker. At this point in the parliamentary consideration of this Bill, I rise in sorrow rather than anger. When I spoke on Second Reading, I departed somewhat from my colleagues by not only trying to embrace the overall impact and ethos of what was agreed in New Decade, New Approach but asking the Government to come back to what was agreed two years ago. When New Decade, New Approach was agreed in 2020, it was the foundation, the bedrock, for the restoration of devolution in Northern Ireland. It included not only the provisions, aspects of which we see today, but a commitment on legislating to protect the UK's single market, yet here we are, with no progress on the main issue. This is destabilising, ensuring that we do not have functioning devolved government in Northern Ireland. Another departure, another stepping away from the basis of what restored our Executive two years ago, and that grieves me.

When we went through the Bill in detail, not only on the Floor of this House but in private meetings with officials over the last 18 months and with the Minister this week and last week, showing exactly how the Bill departs from what was agreed, we were met with indifference or with a response that indicated, "We hear you but we are going to do nothing for you." I was pleased to hear the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), mention the totality of the relationships involved in the Bill, but the Minister talked about joy for one community.

I know that Members have stayed in the Chamber not to hear my contribution but because of what they expect to come. We cannot support this Bill. We cannot support the departure from that which restored devolution just two years ago. My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) indicated that this would be an issue that we as a party would have to revisit, but although we consider—regretfully, sorrowfully—that the proceedings around this Bill have been a charade, we are not going to put the House through the charade of a Third Reading vote. This is an issue that we will have to come back to, because the fine balance that was there two years ago has been shattered by this Bill.

4.48 pm

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): This Bill is a very welcome development. It is not the Irish language Act that we would have liked to see, but it is an important step on the way to recognising that the Irish language is a key part of the identity of many people in our community, and that has to be recognised in law. I am also sorrowful that this was not done in the place where it should have been done. People should be there at work in Stormont, doing the work that they were elected to do, and I am sorrowful that we could not do this in the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is a terrible shame that we have had to wait for decades even to get to this

point, and maybe there is a lesson in that. If we keep dragging out these issues, if we keep denying our respect for each other's diversity, we will keep having to come back to do it this way, which is shameful.

The Irish language has been embraced by people across our community. It was protected, supported and defended by Presbyterians many years ago, and it is now being supported, protected and enriched by people from different backgrounds in east Belfast and right across our community, in the same way that the Ulster Scots tradition and identity has informed my identity and the identity of the people I represent. We should all be big enough to be capable of acknowledging, embracing and celebrating each other's identity. That is the only way forward for the community we all represent.

4.50 pm

Stephen Farry (North Down) (Alliance): I will be extremely brief, but I want to thank the Government and all the Members who have supported this Bill. I am pleased and relieved that we are at this stage, because this has been a major saga in our politics. I appreciate there is still a lot of unease and that we have a lot of work still to do in Northern Ireland on reconciliation and building a shared future, but many people in Northern Ireland will warmly welcome the Bill's passage today. It should have been passed by the Assembly, not to rehearse that point, but Parliament has intervened. Although this is a less desirable route, it is none the less a welcome outcome.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with an amendment.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

MERCHANT SHIPPING

That the draft Merchant Shipping (Safety Standards for Passenger Ships on Domestic Voyages) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2022, which were laid before this House on 11 July, be approved.—(*Stuart Anderson.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Ramsgate Town Council and Manston Airport

4.51 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I rise to present a petition signed by 340 South Thanet residents. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I own 2p of share capital, being a 100% holding in a company called Mama Airlines Ltd. It has never traded, has never so much as owned a bank account and has been dormant since its inception in April 2001. It is like keeping a scrapbook of the patchwork of a former life. The company does not even own an Airfix model of an aircraft, let alone a real one.

The petition states:

[Craig Mackinlay]

To the House of Commons,

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Thanet.

We note the previous spending of £10,000 of local Council taxpayer precept by Ramsgate Town Council to attach themselves to a prior judicial review action to prevent aviation activities at the Manston site.

The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport has granted the Manston site development consent (a DCO) so that a new cargo hub and associated businesses can be advanced. The project is promoted by RiverOak Strategic Partners Limited and has long enjoyed the support of both Thanet MPs.

Thanet perpetually has unemployment rates and average salaries behind South-East norms. A re-opened airport is expected to bring huge investment of hundreds of millions of pounds. This means new opportunities and a huge number of new jobs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Ramsgate Town Council to accept the decision of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Transport, work constructively with the Government, RSP, Thanet's MPs and other local authorities and elected representatives towards the re-opening of the airport, and to refrain from spending more public money on further legal challenges.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002776]

Diagnostic Hospital: Stockton

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

4.54 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): I thank the House for allowing me the opportunity to raise this important and urgent issue, making the case for one of the Government's new diagnostic hospitals to come to Stockton.

First, I would like to take the opportunity to thank the incredible workforce who are the backbone of my local NHS. Having volunteered during the pandemic and shadowed shifts in my local hospitals, North Tees and James Cook, I have seen at first hand their incredible commitment and dedication; the doctors, nurses, porters, domestic staff, care workers and everyone else each day provide a lifeline to those most in need. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. These people deliver grade A public service and deserve grade A resources and workplaces.

I welcome the fact that a Conservative Government have given the NHS the biggest cash boost in its history. I welcome the incredible difference that this additional £33 billion of funding will make, and I welcome the commitment to build 40 new hospitals by the end of the decade and to create a network of diagnostic hospital hubs to tackle the post-coronavirus backlog. In recent times, I am delighted to have seen tens of millions of pounds of capital investment put into my local hospitals. At South Tees, that has meant, among others things, upgrades to life-saving radiology equipment, and at North Tees we have seen upgrades to our award-winning urgent care centre and the provision of a new respiratory unit.

However, nowhere is investment in healthcare needed more than in my area. There is a debate about health inequalities in this country; this is about the difference in access to care, the impact on people's quality of life and the differences in the resulting life expectancy. It is an appalling fact that there is a street in Stockton where if someone travels from one end to another, just 5 miles, they pass through two areas where the difference in life expectancy is 20 years! Those living in Yarm in my constituency can be expected to live until the age of 84, whereas those living in Stockton Town Centre, in neighbouring Stockton North, can expect to live, on average, only to the age of 64—that is equivalent to the life expectancy of those living in Ethiopia. That is entirely unacceptable in Britain in 2022; we cannot go on like this.

I realise that a new hospital or diagnostic hub is not the entire solution to this problem, and that it requires interventions from the health service, social services, the local council and other agencies, but investment in our local health service is part of that solution. I have already held an Adjournment debate on the need to improve North Tees hospital and I have talked of the huge maintenance costs that consume the hospital's budget, the fact our operating theatres are not big enough to house modern robotics and the fact that the hospital is just not fit for the 21st century. Our bid is in to the new build hospital programme, but today I am here to make the case for us to have one of the Government's new diagnostic hospital hubs.

The pandemic has created a huge pressure on our NHS; with elected surgery paused, the waiting lists and backlogs have grown to unprecedented levels. During a shadow shift at North Tees, I saw the unbelievable challenges facing our doctors as they have to decide which patient's surgery is the most urgent and who must wait, whether it be the youngster involved in a car accident at the weekend or the elderly person awaiting a hip operation. These are harrowing choices for clinicians to make and we must do everything we can to help tackle that backlog. Among the 88,000 people on waiting lists across North Tees, South Tees and County Durham NHS trusts, more than 2,500 have waited more than a year for an appointment. So as well as pushing the bid for a new hospital at North Tees, I believe Stockton would be the ideal place for one of the Government's new diagnostic hospital hubs. Such a hub could save lives in my area, by ensuring that people can get the checks and tests they need more quickly. They could get the MRI scan that could detect cancer and ensure they get the treatment they need in time, or the CT—computerised tomography—scan that detects the stroke and ensures the right care to aid their recovery.

I realise that the Minister, and several of her predecessors, may well be sick of hearing from me on these two bids, but I am not the only person who believes this diagnostic hospital hub needs to come to Stockton.

Both North Tees and South Tees NHS trusts have agreed that Stockton should be the home of such a hospital hub. I spent my summer delivering tens of thousands of leaflets and knocking on doors across my constituency, speaking to residents about the plan. Thousands of people signed the petition and backed the plan. Our proposal is to build the new diagnostic hospital in Stockton town centre, which is due to be reconfigured and made fit for the future, thanks to £16.5 million from the Government's future high streets fund. Putting the hospital hub here will mean that it is accessible to all by public transport, as well as driving footfall and breathing life into our town centre to support the local economy.

It would be remiss of me to discuss this without mentioning the challenges in attracting radiographers to operate and man such a hospital hub. It is great that, thanks to a Conservative Government, there are now 30,000 more doctors and 40,000 more nurses working in our NHS than there were in 2010. However, there remains a problem in attracting radiographers. A chronic workforce shortage means that a diagnostic centre would need additional staffing rather than extracting from the teams already based in acute hospitals.

The north-east is hit worst by these shortages with a vacancy rate of 17%, the highest vacancy rate in England and, worryingly, 90% of those vacancies have been unfilled for more a year. Alongside my plea for a diagnostic hub, I urge the Government to invest in local clinical radiology training places.

This Conservative Government and their levelling-up agenda have meant huge investment in my area, improving infrastructure with upgraded roads, new cycle lanes, railway stations and the saving of our airport. We have seen new jobs and training opportunities delivered through the UK's first and biggest freeport, supporting the development of a new training hub to upskill local youngsters and increasing investment in local schools.

Tens of millions of pounds of funding have been put in to improve town centres in Stockton, Thornaby, Yarm and—hopefully soon—Billingham.

Now it is time to level up on health, so that people from my area can live long and happy lives and we can eliminate health inequalities that have no place in modern Britain.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): My hon Friend is making a fantastic speech on the importance of diagnostic hubs in the north of England. Does he agree that that levelling up also applies to areas in the south, particularly my area of Sidcup, where we have also been lobbying for a diagnostic hub? We also need to level up and provide that local service for my hospital, Queen Mary's, in Sidcup.

Matt Vickers: I agree. I know how much work my hon. Friend has put in to try to seal the deal in his part of the world. I am sure that the Minister will have good news for us all. It is well earned if it is there.

I hope that Ministers will back the bid that has been put forward to provide my area with the much-needed increase in diagnostic capacity so that my local NHS is fit for the future, fit for patients, and fit for its amazing staff. I know that the Government are committed to modernising the NHS and have announced massive investment that will fund healthcare across my region. I know that the Minister is probably sick of hearing from me on this issue, but I will continue to push for the resources we need to tackle the heartbreaking health inequalities that my area faces.

I thank the Minister for her attention and look forward to her response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I call Alex Cunningham.

5.2 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for calling me, especially given that I arrived late.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers), my constituency neighbour, on securing this important Adjournment debate. I apologise to him for missing the opening paragraphs of his speech. We do not agree on very much politically, but we agree about the need for improved health provision in the communities that we both serve. I agree that Stockton desperately needs better health provision so that we can tackle the entrenched health inequalities that blight our communities. We have got fantastic staff—the hon. Member referred to them—but they need the support of proper facilities.

I have cited appalling statistics many times on the Floor of the House. I will do that again tonight and keep doing so until the Government take the necessary action. Men in the town centre of Stockton-on-Tees in both my constituency and that of the hon. Member for Stockton South live 18 years less than their peers just down the road. In Stockton North, 7.4% of our population suffer from asthma—a higher figure than the 6.5% rate across England. The figure for chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in my constituency is 3.1%, again higher than the rate of 1.9% across England. In England, 14.1% of people have high blood pressure. That figure rises to 16.2% in Stockton North. I have been calling for

[Alex Cunningham]

a new hospital to be built in Stockton for the past 12 years after the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition Government axed the one we were promised in 2012. In the past 12 years and over the course of the pandemic, the health inequalities in our area have actually grown wider; they have not narrowed.

The hon. Member talked about our town centre in Stockton. We have an innovative local council. The idea of bringing together health and council facilities in the town centre was a tremendous initiative between the council and the North Tees and Hartlepool Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust—a trust that I have had the honour to serve on for some years. I pay tribute to all of its staff for the tremendous work that they have done over the years to get to the point where we just need a final Government decision for this project to go ahead.

There are all manner of reasons why we need the new hospital, but for me it is because we need certainty in our community about the future of structures in the health service. There is now a proposal to merge the chief executive role for North Tees and South Tees hospitals. I am against that, and I want to see a situation where whoever is the chief executive concentrates on delivering for people north of the River Tees—and, of course, part of south of the River Tees served by the hon. Member for Stockton South. It is critical that we achieve that sometime in the near future.

I know that the integrated care board has a tremendous responsibility in all of this, but, again, much of its focus seems to be on structures rather than on getting things done. I hope the Minister will encourage the board to back this tremendous proposal, so that the hon. Member and I can see our constituents get the services that they require, and that we can end these health inequalities that are killing people day in, day out in communities such as ours.

5.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Caroline Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) on securing this debate. He will appreciate that I am standing in for my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who has been promoted to the Cabinet and the Home Office, so I ask him to forgive me if I do not have the answers to all of his questions, but I will ask the Department to write to him with those.

I know that this is an important subject for my hon. Friend and that he works tirelessly for the people of Stockton South on healthcare and on other matters. The waiting time for a diagnosis or an all-clear can be a very anxious one. It is something with which all of us who have been on a waiting list, or who have had a family member, a friend or a loved one on a waiting list, will be familiar. It is right that we do all we can to support services to recover from the pressures of the pandemic and to innovate and improve so that patients can have tests and receive diagnoses in a quicker and more convenient way.

Today, I will outline the work being done through the elective recovery programme to improve access to diagnostics and how that will impact patients across the

UK, including in Stockton South. The waiting list for diagnostic tests in England currently stands at more than 1.5 million patients. Some 30% of those patients are waiting more than six weeks. That is up from a little under 1 million in 2019, before the pandemic. In the north-east and Yorkshire region, the waiting list for diagnostic tests is more than 213,000 patients, 26% of whom have been waiting more than six weeks. Community diagnostic centres are part of the answer and are a fantastic example of how we are providing more efficient, easier and more convenient access to vital services in the community.

The Government have committed £2.3 billion in capital spend as part of the 2021 spending review to support diagnostic services to recover and improve and to ensure that patients have access to often life-saving diagnostic tests that they need. This includes money to allow the NHS to continue to roll out a community diagnostic centre programme across England. This is a new way of delivering care, and it will ensure that elective diagnostic services are resilient in the face of winter pressures, because they have ring-fenced elective diagnostic activity.

Local healthcare systems, including NHS trusts, integrated commissioning boards, and local authorities, which know their patients and communities best, are being empowered to plan and bid for funding for new CDC sites, ensuring that they are placed where there is the greatest community need and the most clinical value, with successful bids ultimately signed off by the Secretary for Health and Social Care. I am pleased to say that 89 CDCs are currently operational across the country in a variety of sites, including hospitals, football stadiums and shopping centres, ensuring that patients have access to the care they need where they live. Those centres and hard-working NHS staff have so far delivered more than 2 million tests and are well on their way to providing capacity for 9 million tests a year by 2025.

With regard to the provision of a community diagnostic centre in Stockton, I am pleased to be able to inform my hon. Friend that the business case for the centre is currently in development. He will be pleased to learn that a large-model CDC, including capacity for imaging, physiological measurements, pathology and endoscopy, is planned for construction on the Castlegate shopping centre site, with plans for the centre to be fully operational by March 2025.

Castlegate is an ideal site for a CDC because of its accessibility for different population groups experiencing health inequalities, with excellent transport links. It is exactly the sort of area where the new centres can have the biggest impact. The Castlegate CDC will add to the 12 existing CDCs in the north-east and Yorkshire region and the four hub and spoke sites in the Tees Valley area, which have delivered more than 200,000 tests for patients in the north-east and Yorkshire region. Ten further sites across the north-east and Yorkshire are due to be approved in the near future and will all be operational by March 2025 to support our target of up to 160 CDCs.

I heard the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Mr French), but I am afraid I do not have the answers for him today. I will ask the Department to write to him with information on his specific bid.

Alex Cunningham: This is music to my ears. We have all worked very hard for this—local authority, health authority and politicians—and I am grateful for the

positive message the Minister is giving us. Now I am going to be even cheekier and say that we desperately need a new general hospital to serve Stockton and the wider Hartlepool area. We need new facilities there. I hope, 12 or 13 years after the original hospital was cancelled, that this Minister will be the one to deliver it.

Dr Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. The building new hospitals programme is in process and bids are in play, so I am afraid I cannot comment any further, as he will appreciate.

In conclusion, I encourage my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South to continue his productive conversations with both his local ICB and NHS England to ensure that new developments in Stockton continue to support the local community health needs. I will ensure he is

made aware when the proposal for the new centre has progressed further and when he can expect to see it open in his constituency.

I look forward to continuing to work with NHS England, local NHS systems such as the North East and North Cumbria ICS and fellow Members of the House to ensure that as a Government we meet the challenge posed by diagnostic waiting lists and ensure that patients are able to receive the often life-saving diagnostic tests that they need, as quickly and conveniently as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

5.12 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 26 October 2022

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

Global Food Security

[*Relevant documents: Second report of the International Development Committee, Food insecurity, HC 504; and the Government response, HC 767.*]

9.30 am

Mrs Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered global food security.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard, and I want to thank all Members for attending the first debate I have ever hosted in this place.

I will start by setting out what we mean when we use the term “global food security”. The UK Government define it as

“stable global production and a well-functioning global trading system that reliably, efficiently and sustainably meets the needs of the UK and the world.”

It is about the security of our food system and our ability to ensure that people do not go hungry, both at home and abroad. But this issue stretches way beyond tackling hunger. Global food security involves education, international aid, tackling poverty, the impact of war and the climate crisis. I want to touch on each of those issues, looking at the worldwide situation first.

The United Nations has a global target to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition by 2030 as part of its sustainable development goals, but the UN has said that we are not on track to achieve that, with the latest estimates showing that between 702 million and 828 million people—10% of the world population—are currently going hungry. The UN estimates that that number could rise to 840 million people by 2030. If we look specifically at famine, the World Food Programme has said that a record 345 million people across 82 countries are facing acute food insecurity, including up to 50 million people in 45 countries who are at risk of famine. Over 970,000 people are already living in famine-like conditions in Somalia, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Yemen.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that farmers and agricultural workers across the world are the backbone of the globe’s access to food, despite smaller rural farmers often having to overcome the barriers of poverty and inequality? Does she agree that providing those smaller, poorer farmers with the support and technology they need is vital to every country’s food security?

Mrs Hamilton: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I absolutely agree.

Famine is also projected in parts of Somalia this month. Up to 60 million children worldwide could become acutely malnourished by the end of this year. Evidence from previous famines shows that young children are the most vulnerable in times of crisis. During the Somalia famine in 2011, more than half the deaths were

among children under five. International aid is an extremely important part of the solution, but short-sighted cuts to the aid budget by the Government have left us isolated on the world stage. No other G7 country cut aid in the middle of the pandemic; Britain sadly stands alone in having turned its back on the world’s poorest. We are already seeing the impact of the cuts to international aid. The Government have paused all non-essential aid spending to ensure the budget does not push above their new target of 0.5% of our national income. That is yet another broken Tory manifesto promise. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the Chair of the International Development Committee, in calling for more clarification on what the spending pause means in practice.

The climate crisis is one of the leading causes of the rise in global hunger. The World Food Programme estimates that if average global temperatures rise by 2°, an additional 189 million people could be pushed into food insecurity. The Climate Change Committee has warned that global warming could lead to a 20% rise in food prices globally by 2050, hurting the poorest wherever they live on our planet. I hope to hear some reassurances from the Minister that the Government will finally deliver on their promise of providing international climate finance to help developing countries fight the climate crisis and to protect food supply.

Although there are many factors causing global food insecurity, we cannot ignore the role that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has played in increasing food prices around the world. Before Putin’s invasion in February, Russia and Ukraine were responsible for about 29% of the world’s wheat exports. Ukraine grew enough food to feed an estimated 400 million people, despite having a population of only 44 million. Both countries are also significant suppliers of fertilisers.

The World Food Programme has warned that rising food and energy prices due to the war are likely to exacerbate humanitarian crises around the world, particularly in the middle east and Africa, which are some of the most dependent regions on Ukrainian and Russian food imports. More than 80% of the wheat supply of countries such as Egypt and Somalia comes from those two countries. Russia’s blockage of grain exports from Ukraine has fuelled an international humanitarian crisis. The UN-backed Black sea grain initiative, an agreement between Ukraine, Russia and Turkey, is essential in combating rising food prices. Russia must continue to meet its commitments under the agreement in full. I hope the Minister will tell us that international pressure is being applied to make sure that happens. The war in Ukraine affects us all. In the UK, we may not be experiencing problems with our food supply in the same way that many poorer nations are, but we are seeing the impact of the war through higher energy costs and inflation.

I now turn to food insecurity in Britain. Recent research by the Food Foundation shows that 18% of British households experienced food insecurity last month, and that 4 million children live in households that experience food insecurity. Food prices are reported to be rising at their fastest rate in 42 years. That means it is more important than ever to ensure healthy, nutritious food is affordable and accessible by the most vulnerable through policies such as free school meals and by investing in healthier sustainable urban food systems. I will draw

[Mrs Paulette Hamilton]

on one particular example that is close to my heart; it is something I worked on in my previous role as the Birmingham City Council cabinet member for health.

In Birmingham, we developed an eight-year strategy, in partnership with the Food Foundation, that put sustainable food at the heart of our local economy and used the power of education to transform people's diets and help them to eat more diverse and nutritious food. I am particularly proud of our focus on nutrition in the work that we did in Birmingham. Food Foundation research shows that only half our city's population eats five portions of fruit and veg per day, and that fruit and veg make up only 11% of expenditure, while 34% of money is spent on food high in fat, salt and sugar and takeaways. We can end food insecurity only by focusing on nutrition, to ensure that people have healthier diets. I hope the Minister can give us some assurances that nutrition will be a central part of the Government's approach to this issue.

Let me finish by pressing the Minister to take on board three key points about food security. First, I hope the Government will acknowledge the simple fact that there is no shortage of food in our world today. The problems we face with food insecurity, both at home and abroad, are down to food being made unavailable as a result of economic and political factors shaped by people. We can change this, and we must work together to make food available for all.

Secondly, we hear a lot about the cost of living crisis and its devastating impact on our economy in Britain, but it is a global crisis that is increasing poverty everywhere. People everywhere are getting poorer, and when people get poorer they eat less food—and, crucially, less nutritious food.

Thirdly, I urge the Minister to acknowledge that food insecurity hits women and children the hardest, wherever they live in the world. All the available research points to this being a gendered issue. I hope the Government's strategy will take that into account.

By working together internationally to reduce poverty, invest in local food production and improve nutrition, we can end global food insecurity. I urge the new Government to put these priorities at the heart of their approach to this issue.

9.43 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is not often that I get called immediately after the proposer of the debate, so I am greatly encouraged and a bit taken aback that that should be the case. It is a real pleasure to be here and to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I commend the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) for setting the scene in such an evidential and factual way. I am sure this is the first of many debates that she will have in Westminster Hall, and we look forward to her making many more contributions.

This debate is incredibly important in today's climate, for every aspect of daily life is being drowned in the cost of living crisis. It has engulfed us all; we read about it in the newspaper, hear about it on the radio and see it on the TV. The negativity that seems to permeate society about rises in the price of energy, fuel and foodstuffs is real, in every sense of the word. I commented last week about the price of some products back home; for example,

eggs that were £1 for 10 are now £1.89—an 89% increase. Milk, another staple, is up 79p since before the crisis. Those are just two of the basics of life. The problems that people face are real, and that has been especially true in the last couple of weeks.

In addition, the devastating impact that the Northern Ireland protocol is having on smaller food producers in both the mainland and Northern Ireland often goes ignored. I will develop that theme when I talk about how we in Northern Ireland are impacted by global food security.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I think this might be a new portfolio for him. I know that he has been exceptional in past portfolios, and I look forward to his reply to this debate. I also look forward to the contribution of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who is a good friend of mine.

Margaret Ferrier: According to new research, 40% of the global commercial seed market is owned by two companies, compared with 10 companies 25 years ago. Does the hon. Member share my concern that the lack of competition in the global food market broadly risks leaving the world's food security at the mercy of a select few?

Jim Shannon: Yes, wholeheartedly. We are in a complex situation, and that has implications. There are some who control what happens. I know that the Minister and the Government do not always control whether we can have the impact we want to have, but I know that the Minister will address some of these issues when he responds.

Our food industry has shown incredible commitment in manufacturing, farming and fishing throughout the pandemic, including during the panic buying. It has dealt with the impacts of Brexit and the protocol, and our dedication to the Ukrainians after the Russian invasion. Our Government have committed to all those things. I fully support that, and I understand the need to do those things. This is about the safety of the world. We are not just individuals playing our own game; the rest of the world impacts us all, so the title of the debate, "Global food security," is apt. We are part of a team that work together as best we can.

We therefore have a need for greater resilience in the UK's entire food system. We are fully aware of the threats that can damage our food systems, emphasising the greater need for systems to be in place for our protection. Recent pioneering research from the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen's University Belfast in Northern Ireland has established us as leaders in addressing global food security through our agritech industry partnering with different industries to develop solutions. Elected representatives often understand the need to partner with universities. Queen's University Belfast is one of those. Such partnerships are replicated across the whole United Kingdom, and I know that others will emphasise that. For us in Northern Ireland, Queen's University is a key partner to take this matter forward.

We recognise how important the agrifood sector is in Northern Ireland. Some 80% of what we produce in Northern Ireland is sold overseas, so it is important for us to develop that sector. There are many, many markets

that we can develop. Lakeland Dairies, for example, produces a milk powder that it exports all over the world, and it is instrumental in growing that market. Even through the hard times of covid, that market was growing because the agrifood and agritech sectors have taken great steps forward.

We have been somewhat left behind by ignorance—I say that with great respect—as little consideration has been given to how the Northern Ireland protocol has impacted our food security strategies. We want to grow our sector. We need that protection and security. The Food and Drink Federation surveyed 83 members, half of which were deemed large businesses with over 250 employees, and found that food and drink imports into Northern Ireland had decreased by 10% because of the Northern Ireland protocol. I fail to see how we can possibly encourage food security strategies when Northern Ireland has been left behind. I always try to be constructive, but there is an anomaly here that has to be addressed.

I am sure Members are aware that my constituency of Strangford is rich in farming and fishing. I know the Minister has been to Portavogie. His former portfolio as Veterans Minister prompted him to visit Beyond the Battlefield there, so he knows the village and exactly where I am talking about. It is the second largest fishing village in Northern Ireland. Fishing is incredibly important for us. The Northern Ireland agrifood sector is imperative for our food security system. We produce food for five times our population and employ more than 100,000 people in that sector alone, and it is our largest manufacturing industry, so agriculture, the production line and manufacturing are critical.

I have mentioned before the concerns that land could be reforested, when it could be used further to advance the security of our agriculture sector. I urge the Minister to ensure that that is not the case. I appreciate his response to me and the debate. Food poverty has been an issue in the past two years. Local food banks in my area have been inundated with those struggling to obtain food. My office refers at least 20 people each week for assistance; that is more than 1,040 a year. That gives an indication of the impact.

The Trussell Trust food bank was the first initiated in Northern Ireland, in Newtownards in my constituency. That has grown alongside the need and demand. There is also an issue with food access, emphasised by the fact that more than 97,000 children are entitled to free school meals. It is important that the Government have responded to that, and made sure that those children have free school meals, but the fact that so many—the largest number ever—are in receipt of free school meals indicates that things are not the way they should be. I make that point in a constructive fashion. We must ensure that poverty is taken into account when it comes to food security.

The UK imports 47% of our food. I know we cannot grow everything here. It is not possible to grow some of the fruit, vegetables and minerals that we bring in. There have been debates on this issue in the past in Westminster Hall. I mentioned reforestation; it is good to have more trees for the lungs of the world, but it is also important to have land. Good, productive land should be retained for production. Other land could be used for reforestation and becoming the lungs of the world.

We must ensure that our imports are secure for the benefit of local and global food security. Our food security strategy falls within the UK and also externally,

which is why the debate title, “Global food security,” is so important. We must protect and encourage the alignment of the four regional Administrations to pave the way for global food security. When we make decisions at Westminster, we must think about how they work in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so that we can do the job better together.

I hope that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will do all in its power to preserve and protect our agriculture sector, which has proved instrumental for our food security, especially the contributions for my constituency of Strangford, as I am sure all Members will agree. I encourage the Minister to consider the installation of a private body to oversee the UK as a whole and our joint collaboration to achieve our food security goals. I say this often, but that does not lessen its impact: I believe that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can do great things together. I think the Minister will endorse that. Let us do that.

9.53 am

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. It is a rare experience to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), rather than him following us. He said that we cannot grow everything in this country, but anyone listening to “Good Morning Scotland” earlier would have heard about the tea plants that have just been harvested on Orkney.

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): And in Stirling.

Patrick Grady: My hon. Friend says that has also happened in Stirling. That shows that, with a bit of ingenuity—and possibly as the result of a changing climate, which we will come back to—it is surprising what can be harvested when minds are put to it.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) on securing her first debate in Westminster Hall, and on an incredibly powerful speech. I agree with pretty much every word that she said, which makes it quite difficult to find something new to add to the debate. It is slightly unfortunate that it seems to be the case in Westminster Hall these days that very few Government Back Benchers want to come along, contribute and offer their perspectives. That leaves the Minister with a slightly unenviable task. Perhaps we will hear in due course which portfolio he is going to be addressing—I understand that these are slightly uncertain times.

I welcome the appointment of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) as a Minister of State in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Perhaps it is understandable that he is not right here right now, although it is unfortunate, because I suspect he would have been here to speak from the Back Benches if circumstances allowed. He has been a real champion of global poverty and global justice issues, and that is a rare thing to say about a Conservative Member. Out of all the chaos and everything else that is going on, his presence at Cabinet should be welcomed, but he has a very high standard to live up to now. Those of us who have been in these debates over the years will be looking to see whether development and justice issues really do start to feature more prominently in the Government’s foreign and development strategy.

[Patrick Grady]

As both previous speakers have said, food security is a challenge both at home and abroad. People watching this debate might wonder why we are spending time discussing food security around the world when there are people reliant on food banks in our own constituencies—Glasgow North is no exception—but the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington powerfully laid out precisely why that is, why it is a common challenge for humanity as a whole, and the range of steps that need to be taken to tackle the issue.

If food insecurity is a global challenge, it requires a global, as well as a domestic, response. The reality is that it is the same attitudes and philosophies among decision makers, whether at home or abroad, that have left people queuing at food banks here in the UK and queuing for emergency food supplies in famine-hit countries in east Africa. The constituents I hear from in Glasgow North, including supporters of the Borgen Project, who I hope to meet in the next few days, do not want to live in a world where anyone goes hungry, whether that is families down the street or families halfway around the globe—especially not when they know that hunger and food insecurity simply should not and do not need to exist in the modern world.

The reality, though, is, as we have heard, that for too many people, hunger continues to be all too real. We have heard about some specific examples. The food crisis in east Africa is now affecting about 50 million people. In particular, Somalia is on the brink—or perhaps even past the brink—of the official definition of famine. However, food insecurity is not only a crisis or emergency situation, but a daily reality for hundreds of millions of people around the world. As was said by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington, who introduced the debate, the number, astonishingly and depressingly, seems to be rising. That is particularly frustrating because the solutions are not unknown. In my time as a Member of Parliament, I have had the huge privilege of meeting farmers in Colombia, Zambia, Rwanda and Malawi, and in Wellingborough and Scotland, and they all know perfectly well how to farm sustainably. They know how to grow crops that will feed themselves and their families and produce a surplus for market, if only they have the right kind of support and fair access to markets.

In the middle years of the 2010s, as we came close to the deadline for the millennium development goals and negotiation for the sustainable development goals was under way, a coalition of international development and advocacy organisations, including one that I worked for at the time, ran a campaign called “Enough food for everyone IF”. It made the point clearly that we live in a world that is more than capable of producing sufficient nutrition for the global population—even taking into account the rapid increase in world population numbers in recent years—provided that we get the priorities and processes right, and that is still true today.

First and foremost, as both previous speakers have said, small-scale farmers all over the world have to be at the heart of how we produce and distribute food, and they need support to grow what works best for them—as I said, enough to feed their families and enough surplus to sell at market. Too often, small farmers become reliant on particular crops and particular fertilisers and inputs, or are forced off their land altogether by

multinational monocroppers and agribusinesses. That is to slightly over-simplify a whole range of interventions that are also needed, from decent irrigation, to proper education on farming techniques, to fair access to energy and fair access to markets.

We have to change our own food habits here too. Reducing western demand for meat and for out-of-season fruit and vegetables has the potential to change demands for land use around the world. A fantastic report was launched last week by campaigners for the Climate and Ecology Bill, which looks at the paths towards net zero through changing land use and changing global diets to more sustainable, more nutritious, better diets that will make us all healthier, thinner, fitter, more resilient to disease and more resilient to climate change. It is a win-win-win situation, which gets us closer to net zero into the bargain as well.

We have to address the root of the issue, and help people to understand where food comes from. It comes not from packets in supermarkets, but from the ground; we have to put things into the ground to get it in the first place, and we have to work very hard. We have to help more people understand how to cook and prepare cheap, nutritious food for themselves. That is the whole point of a holistic and rights-based approach to development that tackles a range of problems all at once.

The UK Government have to rediscover the leadership that they once showed in these areas and rebuild the consensus. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington said today’s debate was the first Westminster Hall debate she has led; the first Westminster Hall debate I led was in 2015, on the sustainable development goals. In those days, there was a consensus. Members from all parties would speak together and would congratulate the Government on achieving the 0.7% target and on taking a leading role in shaping the SDGs. Now, the SDGs seem to have been forgotten, the aid target has been slashed to 0.5%, and the Government have announced that non-essential aid spending will be frozen. What on earth is non-essential aid? Surely, by definition, all aid is essential. All aid meets a vital need that cannot be met by a domestic Government.

Cutting the aid budget and diverting funding away from long-term sustainable development projects that boost food and other security is ultimately a false economy. Perhaps, for example, fewer people would be tempted to get on small boats and cross the English channel if their countries of origin were not being dried up or flooded by climate change, with their families and communities going hungry as a result. There would certainly be less need to spend vast amounts on emergency intervention and famine relief if there was proper investment in long-term sustainability.

I was thinking back to my days in the international development sector and was reminded of a saying that was attributed to the late Brazilian archbishop, Dom Hélder Câmara:

“When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor are hungry, they call me a communist.”

I think that attitude still pervades in a lot of the world today. Investing in global food security is perhaps the ultimate in preventive spending policy. If people at home or abroad have access to good quality, nutritious, affordable and culturally appropriate food, they will live longer, happier and more successful lives.

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): The hon. Member is making an important point. Given that malnutrition plays such an important role in a child's development, that 45% of all deaths of under-fives are due to malnutrition and that we are in the midst of a global food security crisis, does he agree that food security should play an integral part in the Government's international development strategy?

Patrick Grady: Absolutely. The hon. Member makes a valid point. Children will not be able to study at school, either in the UK, in a developing country in sub-Saharan Africa, or in a middle-income country in Latin America, if they are hungry. We recognise that in the UK; we have free school meal programmes and campaign for free school meals. The Government were embarrassed into extending the free school meals programme during the pandemic, and I pay huge tribute to the Scottish Government for their roll-out of free school meals. We recognise that children who have a decent, good quality, nutritious meal will be more able to concentrate at school, and that will improve their education, which improves society as a whole in the long run. It is the ultimate in levelling up, and I hope the Minister might reflect on that.

All development processes are linked, and that is the route to tackle instability. Hungry children are more likely to go out and get radicalised. If they cannot grow their own food, if they cannot get food in the local supermarkets or the local shops and markets, and if they cannot rely on their own Governments to provide them with support, of course people will end up getting radicalised and seek more violent or extreme solutions to the challenges that face them in their country.

I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) that tackling the root causes of poverty is in everybody's interests; that was pretty much where I was going to conclude. Food security is at the root of a lot of the sustainable development goals, and a range of different international development interventions are aimed at achieving it, because that is the basis for what we all need to survive. It is on that basis that we can all live in a fairer, more peaceful and prosperous world.

10.5 am

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) for securing this timely debate.

Global food networks are innately linked to our national security. Throughout Putin's illegal war, Russia has refused to fulfil its commitment to export grains from Ukraine, which in turn has poured fuel on the fire of an already serious humanitarian emergency. Rising food prices across the globe are having a devastating impact on the poorest communities, which cannot continue. Yet at a time of such calamity for global food security, what do the Government decide to do? They continue to cut the UK's aid budget, with disastrous effect.

As the global community reels from conflict, hunger and climate catastrophe, the Conservatives continue to heap damage on to our global reputation. Britain should be at the forefront of providing aid to the hungry, not turning our backs on the world stage when help is most needed. Our allies are noticing, and they will not forget

this moment. Britain is a leader on the world stage or it is nothing, so I urge the Government to think again and provide the help that is so badly needed. The Conservatives' own manifesto contains an explicit commitment to end "the preventable deaths of mothers, new-born babies and children by 2030".

Given that malnutrition plays a role in 45% of all deaths of under-fives, and with global food insecurity rising, it is unacceptable that food receives only three mentions in the international development strategy. This Government are showing their true colours when it comes to fighting global food poverty. They will not act when it matters, and that is truly disgraceful.

The Government are breaking their own promise not only on preventable deaths, but on the looming threat of climate change. Global warming could lead to a 20% rise in global food prices by 2050, hurting the world's poorest countries. The Government must finally deliver on their promise on international climate finance, to help developing countries fight the climate crisis, and help to protect food supply. If food security is not connected for the world, it is not protected for us at home. This, more than most, is an interconnected issue, and if we do not deal with it on a global scale, there is minimal chance of success. We cannot close ourselves off from the reality of climate change; we must work together with those who will be worst affected to find a solution now.

In the United Kingdom, we need a sustainable pivot towards self-sufficiency, meaning a decisive shift towards a farmer-focused food chain. We have a target to double the amount of locally sourced food in our shopping baskets. We need to put local farmers in Coventry, the west midlands and across the country, and fishers, food producers and workers, at the heart of plans to deliver healthy food locally. To support our farmers and save our planet, locally produced food must be the future. To achieve that, we need to boost the viability of small and medium-sized enterprise producers of fruits, vegetables, dairy and livestock, and increase the land area dedicated to smallholdings. City gardens and other urban green spaces must provide local populations with a much higher percentage of their daily food. That is something that we need to urgently address.

Unless the Government act, the UK's reputation will continue to wane as we are seen to be closing ourselves off. This is an opportunity for our country to become a world leader in an area that will only grow in significance in the years to come, and for the Government to tackle a key issue that also affects the United Kingdom. Food poverty is on the increase, and in my city of Coventry many families now depend on food banks. If the Government refuse to act, Labour is ready and willing to do what is needed to provide food for the children of this country and the world.

10.10 am

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard, and to wind up for the SNP in this very important debate. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) on securing it. She said it was her first Westminster Hall debate; I hope it is not her last.

This important discussion is close to my heart. I was a Member of the European Parliament from 2004 to 2019, when that Brexit thing got in the way, and I sat on

[Alyn Smith]

the Committee on Foreign Affairs and the Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development. I was often struck by the interconnected nature of those issues: climate change, food insecurity and resource scarcity are drivers of many of the issues that we traditionally view through a foreign affairs prism, but which actually need to be viewed through a much more coherent prism.

It is a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place. I know that fishing and farming are close to his heart; he has been a strong advocate of both sectors for a long time. He made the point powerfully that the UK imports 46% of its food, so the UK's food security cannot be viewed in isolation; it needs to be viewed through a much wider prism, and our policies need to align better.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made a very powerful point on behalf of his constituents: they do not want to see anybody suffering from food insecurity and hunger, whether in our own communities or worldwide. That needs a far stronger response. In a very powerful speech, the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) spoke about the interconnectedness of climate change and international development policy, and said that we need to do better than we have managed to date.

I feel for the Minister, because there is an awful lot in this. As I say, I was struck by the fact that food, agriculture and foreign affairs are often interlinked, and the same is true domestically. Call it agriculture and only so many people are interested, but many are interested in food, nutrition, land management, trade, climate change, animal welfare, development policy and social justice. Food is at the heart of many of those issues, and we do not have the policy coherence that we need. I feel for the Minister, who has to cover all that.

To make a consensual point—this has been a cross-party, consensual debate—these issues cut across party, country and region. We all need to work on them together, because I am afraid they are getting worse, and they are getting worse faster. The developed world—I do not like that term—is in a position to help other countries that are suffering the consequences of our economic, trade and foreign policy.

I have some concrete suggestions. I am indebted to two organisations: the National Farmers Union of Scotland has produced a number of strong recommendations for domestic food security, which is part of the wider context, and the International Development Committee's "Food insecurity" report contains a number of strong recommendations. I hope the Government take those recommendations to heart, because if they tackle this issue seriously, no one will applaud louder than me. It needs urgent attention and cross-cutting solutions.

The biggest thing we can do to tackle short-term food insecurity is to go back to the 2019 Conservative party manifesto and reinstate the 0.7% international aid commitment. I appreciate that the cut to 0.5% is temporary, but it means that a lot of people in the developing world are suffering. On 6 May, the ONE campaign published concrete data showing that the UK official development assistance cut had caused 11.6 million children, girls and women to lose out on nutritional support, 6.2 million girls under two and 12 million babies to lose out on

nutritional support, 7.1 million children to lose out on education, 5.3 million women and girls to lose access to modern family planning methods, and 3.3 million to lose humanitarian aid. In addition, 54 MW of clean energy has not been installed.

That relates to my wider point about policy coherence. We must remember that food needs a farmer. We should not allow ourselves to get tied up in short-sighted debates about meat versus vegetables, and between competing land uses. Farmers will be integral to how we feed ourselves now and in the future. Farmers need to be at the heart of that policy. Policy coherence needs to begin at home, and our policies are not as coherent as they need to be.

I was struck by the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford about forestry. We are dealing with that issue in Scotland as well; the Scottish Government have recently brought out new forestry guidelines. I remember when I helped to draft the European Parliament's common agricultural policy. It encouraged farmers to diversify into energy crops, photovoltaic panels and forestry, but it was always meant to be for the bits and bats of land that farmers could not do much else with. It was never meant to be taking prime agricultural land out of agricultural production. We must get that back out of our agenda. Of course there are going to be competing land uses—at home and worldwide—but we must put food production far higher up our national security and resilience agenda.

There has been a good debate and discussion. We have a lot of suggestions. I again refer Members to the International Development Committee's report, which has a lot of concrete suggestions and, in a spirit of constructive co-operation, I offer the Minister our support; where we see positive developments, we will be constructive. These points are not party political. They are not limited to one country, however we define country. They are not limited to the domestic, however we define that too. We need to work together on this stuff.

10.16 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) for securing this hugely important debate, which is an existential matter for many of our constituents and millions around the globe.

I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who cares about our role in the world and speaks up for the most marginalised at home and abroad. I also thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his contribution, which made the link between food insecurity at home and abroad. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for making a powerful case on the impact of aid cuts and the decimation of the Department for International Development.

At a time of converging global crises, I look forward to working with the new Minister for Development, who is not in his place, in the interests of the world's poorest and most marginalised, and those of the British people, who expect us to play a leading role in building a fairer, safer world, which is in our national interest. Global food security is national security. The UK imports

almost half the food it consumes, exposing us to fluctuations in global prices. In the year to September, food and non-alcohol beverage prices rose nearly 15%—the highest rate in 40 years. For many basics, the rise was even higher.

For our poorest constituents, the impact stings all the more, as more of their disposable income is siphoned away on the essentials. At this point, we can all cite shocking tales from our constituency mailbag. I spoke to a headteacher from my constituency recently, who told me they have children turning up to school nervous wrecks, unable to concentrate. They have seen their parents skipping meals, and are often hungry themselves. One boy she spoke of was so hungry that they caught him trying to eat from a pot of PVA glue.

This not just a national crisis, but an international crisis that we have an interest in solving. Globally, food prices have soared over the past year. Despite dropping over the summer with harvests rolling in, the Food and Agriculture Organisation shows that prices remain high, at 8% above last year's levels. Global wheat prices remain 10.6% above values in August last year. According to the World Food Programme, 345 million people are experiencing acute food insecurity.

The causes are multifaceted, but the consequences are invariably stark, as many hon. Members have highlighted. Putin's barbaric war of aggression with Ukraine has poured fuel on the fire of inflation. Earlier this year, the Russian block on grain exports from Ukraine contributed to an international humanitarian crisis. Across the House, we are united in standing up for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression. We welcome the UN-backed Black sea grain initiative between Ukraine, Russia and Turkey, which has been essential to get shipments out of Ukraine and to combat rising food prices. The UK has to put its diplomatic weight behind extending the agreement beyond November. Russia must continue to meet its commitment under the agreement in full. I hope that the Minister will continue to provide support to the EU solidarity lanes programme, which is helping to ship millions of tonnes of grain from Ukraine via land and river borders each month.

Let us be clear: Ukraine is only one factor in the global hunger crisis. Even before Russia's invasion, food, fuel and fertiliser prices were rising, and 70% of those facing acute levels of food insecurity in 2021 were in conflict-affected countries. Ukraine-related food price spikes are only the latest evidence that the global agriculture system is broken. That reinforces the global need to diversify our food sources and support developing countries with a bottom-up approach to food security. Households' right to food is put under increased pressure when they experience extreme events that are out of their control. The hungry have few choices: they can migrate in search of food, take food from others by force or die of starvation. The question for us is how to work with partners to stabilise and build resilient local food environments.

Rising global food prices are being felt by people from Nugaal to Northfield. Like the pandemic before it, this crisis is a reminder that island though we are, the greatest challenges facing the world will also reach our shores. In these difficult times, there is cause for solidarity and international co-operation between allies and nations. It is a call that, in times past, Britain has answered proudly.

As many colleagues have said today, the suffering across the world is enormous. Labour has been ringing the alarm about the hunger crisis for the best part of a year. From Afghanistan to Yemen to sub-Saharan Africa, conflict, inflation and accelerating climate change are creating a perfect storm. In June, the World Food Programme warned that the number of people at risk of succumbing to famine or famine-like conditions could rise to 323 million this year. The former Minister, the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), travelled to east Africa last week, where she will have seen the human consequence of the crisis at first hand. It is a shame that she cannot now turn that into action.

Extreme hunger is driving mass displacement and conflict, and putting hundreds of thousands of lives at risk. According to Oxfam, more than 13 million people across Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia were displaced in search of water and pasture in just the first quarter of 2022, while the UN warned that 350,000 children could die by the end of the summer in Somalia alone.

After the catastrophic famine of 2011, which killed 260,000 people—half of them children—the UK and the international community vowed “never again”. The UK learned lessons with a much stronger response to the famine of 2017, when it succeeded in saving thousands upon thousands of lives. However, despite the current crisis outstripping those of five and 11 years ago, the UK's response this year has paled in comparison. The World Food Programme director, David Beasley, said that it has put aid workers in the unimaginable position of having to take food from the mouths of the hungry to give to the starving.

At a time when we should be fortifying our alliances and building international co-operation, the UK, under this Government, has gone missing. Successive cuts to overseas aid and the chaotic block on spending this summer, just weeks after the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office budget was signed off, have left the UK isolated. Repurposing aid away from poverty has not gone unnoticed. In June, Samantha Power, chief of the United States Agency for International Development—USAID—expressed disbelief at this Government's decision to strip back support from east Africa:

“at just the time of this, arguably, unprecedented food crisis, you're actually seeing a lot of the key donors scaling back, if you can believe it...assistance in places like sub-Saharan Africa. And that comes on the heels of the British government...making significant cuts”.

Last week, Abdirahman Abdishakur Warsame, the presidential envoy for Somalia's drought response, made these chastening remarks:

“In the 2017 drought, the UK and its leadership was vital, its advocacy and energy was great, and it encouraged people like me to match that commitment. Britain was a great ally to Somalia but that is all gone. The UK is still an ally, and they help with security, but when it comes to humanitarian response they are not there, not in leadership or in aid. It's all gone.”

He is right to speak out because the situation is so grave. Some 700,000 people are now on the brink of famine in east Africa, and many millions more are suffering from acute malnutrition.

Let me be as clear as I can. When I say famine, I mean mass death. Under the integrated food security phase classification system, that means two in every 10,000 adults or four in every 10,000 children dying

[Preet Kaur Gill]

every single day. Oxfam has warned that across the region, someone is now dying of hunger every 36 seconds. By the time this debate finishes, that will be 150 people more.

The urgency of this crisis could barely be more stark. However, earlier this month, when the Minister in the other place, Lord Goldsmith, was asked how much of the £156 million allocated to this crisis had been disbursed to date, he said that less than half had been allocated. Let me impress on the Minister that when 260,000 people died in the famine of 2011, more than half died before the official declaration of famine was made. What are we waiting for? We cannot wait until a formal announcement to act.

On the steps of Downing Street, our new Prime Minister tried to claim the mandate of the 2019 general election and recommitted to delivering on that manifesto. In the context of this debate, I remind the Minister what that manifesto said:

“Building on this Government’s existing efforts, we will end the preventable deaths of mothers, new-born babies and children by 2030”.

Given that malnutrition plays a role in 45% of all deaths of under-fives, and that in a food crisis it is women and girls who eat less and eat last, we would expect food security to be a top priority for this Conservative Government. Why was food mentioned only three times in the Government’s 10-year international development strategy? Why did Ministers turn up empty-handed to the Nutrition for Growth summit in December and take two years to renew its pledge? Why did an estimated 11.7 million women and children lose out on nutrition support last year due to the cuts?

I will finish by referring to the single greatest long-term challenge to global food security: the climate emergency. This summer, droughts, floods and wildfires wreaked havoc in the UK and across the world. In Pakistan, devastating floods left a third of the country—equivalent to the size of the United Kingdom—underwater. Acres of rice fields were lost. In India, extreme heat decimated crop yields in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, leading to a domestic grain export ban. In the horn of Africa, we face an unprecedented fifth failed rainy season in a row.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned of the impact of global warming on food security—not only from the wanton destruction of extreme weather events, but as soil health progressively weakens and ecosystems collapse, pests and diseases become more common and marine animal biomass depletes. This is a disaster for the world, including for us in the United Kingdom. The Climate Change Committee has warned that global warming could lead to a 20% rise in food prices by 2050. That is a reminder why international co-operation and development is essential to protect people at home and across the world.

The truth is that the UK has a unique role to play, but under this Government we are falling woefully short. Our international development expertise, decimated with the destruction of DFID, is sorely missed here and abroad. Our research institutions and universities have an incredible role to play in unlocking long-term solutions to the global food security crisis, such as their role in developing drought-resistant crops.

In the crises of years past, we stepped up as leaders on the world stage to galvanise action and co-operation on the challenges that we have in common, helping to develop early warning systems so we can act decisively before tragedies strike. What happened to that ambition? Will the Minister tell us why his Government continue to invest in fossil fuels overseas? Why were central projects for adaptation and mitigation indefinitely paused this summer? When will the UK finally deliver on the international climate finance that it promised as host of COP26 last year?

The Opposition know where we stand. We cannot keep lurching from crisis to crisis. It is only long-term development that will help us turn the tide on the greatest global challenges, and rebuild trust based on our shared values and common interests. Global crises demand global solutions. I hope that the new Minister for Development will recognise that and will fight to return the UK to the global stage.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): There is usually a time limit of 10 minutes for Front Benchers. Given that we have a little more time, I allowed the shadow Minister to speak for a bit longer. In the spirit of fairness, if the Minister wants an extra two minutes, that would be in perfect order.

10.28 am

The Minister for Europe (Leo Docherty): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am standing in at short notice after my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) left her position. I wish to put on the record our gratitude for everything that she did so magnificently in the Department in recent months in her role as the Minister for Development. Her work was much admired throughout the House and her recent visit to Ethiopia showed the compassion with which she conducted her duties and the extent of her contribution. I put on the record our thanks to her.

In the same spirit, I congratulate the incoming Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). He will need no introduction on this issue; he has long-standing and deep expertise. I am sure he will fulfil the role with alacrity and that he will be available for Westminster Hall debates in the near future.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mrs Hamilton) on her first Westminster Hall debate. She gave a passionate speech full of information and I am grateful for the issues and questions she raised. She set the issue of food security in the global context very effectively, and mentioned the fact that food insecurity is a function not of food shortage but of a lack of access to food; I agree wholeheartedly. It is with great regret that we see food being weaponised as a political means of achieving certain outcomes around the world—indeed, we are seeing that in mainland Europe right now.

The hon. Member mentioned the fact that we have a global cost of living crisis; I will make some remarks about our contribution to the World Food Programme in that respect. She rightly pointed out that women and children are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, and I assure her that that is why empowering women and girls is one of the main pillars of our international

development strategy. We are in agreement on that issue. She also made some remarks about climate finance, which I will cover presently.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, not least the Labour spokesperson, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill); the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier), who is no longer in her place but talked about the importance of small farmers; and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who talked about the importance of domestic food production and the magnificent production of fish and beef in his constituency, which is an extremely important contributor to UK domestic production. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) talked about the importance of sustainable agriculture and small farmers, which was a very relevant set of remarks, and the hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) mentioned the climate impact of food security, which is something we are serious about and which I will cover presently.

The hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith) made clear the connection between geopolitics and agriculture and brought to bear his deep experience in the European Parliament, which was welcome. He referred to the IDC report; he will have seen the Government response, which is cogent and lays out the fact that the Government are doing a great deal. He should be reassured that there is coherence across Government about bringing development to bear throughout everything we do, and that it is linked into the integrated review in terms of our being aware of climate change and food security as a function of geopolitics, but I welcome his remarks.

The world faces an unprecedented food and nutrition crisis. Conflict, climate change and the lasting impacts of covid have had a devastating impact on local and global food systems and the people who rely on them. On top of that, we have the insecurity coming out of Putin's outrageous invasion of Ukraine and the extent to which he has sought to weaponise the flow of grain, principally, but also other foodstuffs from Europe's breadbasket. We are keenly aware that up to 345 million people face acute food insecurity. Close to 50 million people are one step away from famine and, across the regions of most concern, some 9 million children are suffering from severe malnutrition. Our focus is on meeting humanitarian need, keeping food moving and working to future-proof global food systems. We are working to resolve conflict and address its root causes.

I gently say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston that we have been constrained in our official development assistance budget, given the reduction to 0.5%, but we should be proud that it is still north of £11 billion annually. It is not a decimation: development is still a very important part of our political output through the Foreign Office, so we should be upbeat about what we can achieve given—and despite—our budgetary constraints. Helping those in acute humanitarian need is a top priority. We are taking life-saving action. Our support to the World Food Programme is helping it to reach 150 million people in urgent need of food and nutrition assistance this year. We plan to provide £156 million of bilateral humanitarian assistance to east Africa this year, helping millions of people to access essential services and supplies, including food, water, shelter and healthcare.

Of course, the UK is combining aid with diplomacy, using our political influence to bring others to the table and deliver a greater impact. At September's United Nations General Assembly we co-hosted an event with the head of humanitarian affairs at the UN, Martin Griffiths, the head of the United States Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, and the Governments of Italy and Qatar, to raise the level of alarm around the humanitarian crisis in the horn of Africa.

Furthermore, we have been one of the first to respond to the terrible flooding that has affected more than 33 million people in Pakistan. Alongside the amazing response from the British public to the Disasters Emergency Committee's appeal, we have provided supplies, shelter and essential water and sanitation assistance to help to prevent water-borne diseases. Colleagues have been hugely impressed with Lord Ahmad's leadership on that in the Department.

When it comes to multilateral finance, international co-operation is paramount in addressing food insecurity. With the UK's support, the multilateral development banks are stepping up their assistance. Of course, we remain one of the largest shareholders—indeed, we are joint fifth—at the World Bank. The bank has announced \$36 billion-worth of support alongside a further \$9 billion from other multilateral development banks.

When it comes to Ukrainian grain, it is clear that Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been extremely harmful. We have pushed hard for the Black sea grain initiative and are very grateful for the leadership and co-ordination provided by the Turkish Government, which has helped to stabilise food supplies by increasing the flow of grain out of Ukraine. Since 1 August, more than 8 million tonnes of food has been exported from Ukraine's Black sea ports and, importantly, more than 60% of the wheat exported has gone to low and middle-income countries. That is despite what Putin's regime might say in its propaganda. It is vital that Russia does not block the deal's extension when the initial 120-day period expires on 19 November. We are working really hard through our diplomatic channels to ensure that that does not happen, because the grain must keep flowing.

Several Members mentioned climate change and sustainable agriculture, which is absolutely critical. Feeding the world must work hand in hand with tackling climate change, biodiversity loss and biological threats. I can confirm that our international development strategy reaffirmed our commitment to doubling our international climate finance to £11.6 billion between 2021-22 and 2025-26. At least £3 billion of that will be invested in solutions to protect and restore nature, and we aim to ensure a balanced split between mitigation and adaptation finance. We are putting our money where our mouth is. We think that is important because, as has been discussed in this debate, if the climate is protected to allow small farmers to continue production, that tackles the root cause of these sorts of issues.

Furthermore, under our COP26 presidency we helped to bring agriculture and food systems to the centre of climate discussions at that forum. We launched the agriculture breakthrough agenda, which will help to accelerate the transition to sustainable agriculture. At the World Bank annual meetings, we brought partners together for our policy dialogue, to learn about and collaborate on policies that work for people, climate and nature, such as the repurposing of harmful subsidies.

[*Leo Docherty*]

For example, Vietnam is training farmers in the Mekong delta in sustainable rice production, cutting the use of water resources by 40% and reducing fertiliser use while increasing farmers' incomes. Similarly, Sierra Leone is planting trees on degraded lands to reduce the impact of climate change and to protect farmers from flooding. I am sure Members will be pleased to hear that in Malawi, Nepal, Rwanda and Ethiopia, our commercial agriculture for smallholders and agribusiness programme is helping farmers to adopt climate-smart technologies and improve fertiliser use.

On science, technology and innovation, our investment in science and research has been important to the Foreign Office's work. Our support enables bodies such as CIGR—the International Commission of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering, which is the world's leading agricultural science and innovation organisation—to release new climate-resilient wheat varieties, which help millions of farmers to increase the resilience of their crops to drought and disease. Last year alone, our investments resulted in the release of 59 climate-resistant and nutritious new bio-fortified crop varieties, feeding more than 27 million people.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response to the debate. I and other Members have talked about the partnership between the agrifood sector and universities, and how that advances the technological opportunities that result. Does he recognise that those contributions and those partnerships in universities across all of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland really point the way forward to finding a new way to feed the world?

Leo Docherty: I agree entirely; that co-operation is extremely important. That kind of research and co-operation has shown that the efficiency of things such as photosynthesis in food crops can boost yields by more than 20%. That is critical to drive up yield, improve the efficiency of land use and, of course, feed

the world, so we are in agreement. We need such technological transformation to expand global food supplies in a sustainable way without expanding land use or damaging the environment.

I conclude by thanking all hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions. We acknowledge the fact that feeding the world in the face of such huge challenges demands the attention of us all, and the entire effort of the Government is focused on that. I am grateful for the contributions from all parties. We will continue our extremely important work.

10.40 am

Mrs Paulette Hamilton: We heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who highlighted the important contribution of agriculture in Northern Ireland to our food security. We must ensure that no one feels they are left behind.

I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), who talked about the right type of support for farmers and people having access to markets to sell the products they produce. His experience of working in the international aid sector made his contribution to the debate really helpful.

As a fellow west midlands MP, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) for focusing on the importance of locally produced foods in ending food insecurity. I also thank the hon. Member for Stirling (Alyn Smith), the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and the Minister; I am grateful for his responses. This has been a really important debate and I thank each and every person who has spoken.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered global food security.

10.42 am

Sitting suspended.

Levelling Up Barry, Vale of Glamorgan

11 am

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I will call Alun Cairns to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Alun Cairns (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered levelling up Barry, Vale of Glamorgan.

Thank you, Mr Pritchard, for calling me to propose this debate on levelling up in Barry. It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, and I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the fantastic opportunities for Barry and the background to why it needs UK Government support.

I recognise that economic development is devolved and that the primary responsibility for supporting investment in Wales falls to the Welsh Government, but the levelling-up agenda is central to the UK Government's plans. I am delighted that my long-standing calls to change the law to allow the UK Government to invest directly in communities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has now passed. We no longer have to wait for the Welsh Government to act.

Barry has been ignored for far too long by the Welsh Government. This is our chance. Our Barry Making Waves project provides the next step in the development of Wales's largest town. It is a hugely exciting project, supported far and wide, and meets the aspirations that community groups and I have held for many years. Barry is a fantastic place to live, work and visit. Most recently, it has become best known to many from the BBC comedy "Gavin and Stacey", but the town has a long, proud history steeped in coal exports, built on the back of the Barry Dock and Railways Act 1884. The Act was passed to develop a railway line from the valleys, to create a coal-exporting facility in town, and to break the monopoly of neighbouring Tiger bay.

The railway line also provided the connection for millions of tourists to visit the fantastic coastline every year, notably Whitmore bay, and, since the post-war period, the Butlin's holiday camp, which has long since closed. That highlights the economic activity and relative prosperity that existed throughout much of the previous century. However, with the closure of the south Wales coalmines, changes to larger ships and ports, and overseas holidays becoming commonplace, Barry was left looking for a new focus.

I also want to point out that, although coalmining communities have rightly received significant sums of public money over decades to support their transition to new industries, Barry was left without, because it exported rather than mined coal. Furthermore, as west Wales and the valleys received more than £5 billion in new aid since 2000, the quirks of the map and EU regulations meant that Barry, with some of the most deprived communities in Wales, did not qualify as a priority area. As a result, very small sums were available for community programmes, rather than for significant infrastructure development.

The point I am making to the Minister is that other areas in need have been supported in their economic transition, but Barry has missed out. In spite of that, Barry has made huge strides in its regeneration over the past 15 years or so, with Barry Island, supported by the "Gavin and Stacey" phenomenon, which provided confidence and a renewed interest. The waterfront development has modernised the town and brought new housing. Campaigning groups, such as Pride in Barry, notably led by Paul Haley, and FocusBarry, led by Dennis Harkus, galvanised the community's ambition, and local developers such as Simon Baston, took significant risks with their own investments in developing Goodsheds and former pumping station projects.

It is a town, however, that needs support to move to the next step of development. The data speaks for itself. The Welsh indices of multiple deprivation show that the most deprived communities in Wales over decades have persistently been in Barry. Five areas were among the 10% most deprived wards in Wales in 2011. That is in spite of being just a short distance from the relative affluence of Cardiff and the relative prosperity of the rural Vale. Three areas in Barry remain at the bottom of the league table. Levels of productivity are much lower than the UK average, at £14,706. The town has relatively few employment sites, and most employees commute to Cardiff to work every day.

We need to recognise, however, the positive changes that have taken place. Barry Island has been transformed to a year-round resort enjoyed by locals and visitors alike. The docks area, now referred to as the Waterfront, has been refreshed and regenerated, and a new Cardiff and Vale College campus is to be developed to support new skills.

With the help of the levelling-up bid, the town's redevelopment will move to the next level. The Barry Making Waves project will put rocket boosters under the regeneration ambitions. It is a bid for £19.9 million of levelling-up funds to release a £32 million project. The central feature of the levelling-up bid is a 400-berth marina, which will make the most of the docks area; attract more visitors and increase spend to the community; create jobs, from engineering to hospitality; transform the image of the town; and complete the western side of the Waterfront development. It will have a new flexible 30,000 square feet hot-desking workspace to enable many of the professionals who have moved into the town to the new housing to work locally, rather than travel to Cardiff.

The proposal builds on a small-scale model elsewhere in the town, where demand is strong and the business and environmental outcomes meet local, Welsh and UK aspirations. The plan includes a 2-acre park with an events space, ensuring it remains an open, public area for everyone to enjoy, from Barry and beyond, rather than just the immediate local residents.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this proposal and on his assiduous efforts as an MP on behalf of his constituency. He mentioned Barry and beyond. Beyond Barry, there is my constituency of Strangford. When it comes to levelling up—I welcome the Minister to her place and I look forward to her contribution—the Government have committed to levelling up the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern

[*Jim Shannon*]

Ireland, and I want to ensure that we in Strangford and Northern Ireland also have the same opportunities to level up. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree? Barry is great, and he should be doing that, but it is important for us, too.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making those points, which allows me to underline some points that I touched on earlier. Economic development has generally been a devolved function. Therefore, investing in communities and attracting new jobs and companies has been a devolved, rather than a reserved, responsibility. I am a former Secretary of State and the representative of Barry, but I have also seen communities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland that the devolved Administrations did not have the capacity to focus on because there were more deprived areas elsewhere. Therefore, the UK Government needed to step in.

There is also politics at play. I am concerned that the Vale of Glamorgan does not receive the Welsh Government's support because they choose to prioritise the valley heartlands, where their party is strongly represented. This is an opportunity for the UK Government to reset that balance and invest in needy projects across the whole of the United Kingdom, whether in Northern Ireland or Wales, so that communities that have been left behind have the chance to shine in the sun.

As well as the central feature of the marina, the 30,000 square feet hot-desk workspace and open parkland, the eastern side of the dock will also have a watersports facility that will allow local residents of all backgrounds to access the water. That is hugely popular with community groups. I declare an interest: I am a trustee of the Ocean Watersports Trust Vale of Glamorgan, which will occupy that building. Importantly, that project will be in partnership with Cardiff and Vale College to further support tourism and skills development. That also complements the new college building that is being constructed just a short walk away.

The whole scheme, the whole Barry Making Waves project, is low risk—low risk to the Treasury, to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and to the local authority—because it has only two central partners: the local authority and Associated British Ports. It also has a high cost-benefit ratio that will meet the deep-rooted structural challenges in Barry, provide opportunities to many who have been left behind, and correct a deficiency in public funding support that has existed for decades. It is understandable that the Welsh Government have prioritised west Wales and the valleys, but it is regrettable that Barry has been left to reinvent itself without support compared with other areas, as the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*) mentioned.

The levelling-up fund and shared prosperity fund were designed to meet these types of challenges in communities such as these, across the whole of the United Kingdom. I played a part in planning the policy and sought to ensure that communities across the whole of the UK that have been overlooked because of quirks of maps, EU regulations or devolution, or simply because political will has driven investment elsewhere—communities that did not fall into those favoured categories—could

benefit. Such is the interest in the Barry Making Waves scheme that the Westminster-based think-tank Onward has conducted a study on Barry's challenges and ambitions. Although the report is not yet published, I am confident that it will underline many of the points I have made, and I hope the Minister will look at that report when Onward publishes it, so strong is the interest in that regeneration project.

Finally, I want to recognise that Barry Making Waves is a springboard project that will attract other development opportunities to Barry. I am in discussions with private developers that are prepared to spend tens of millions of pounds on developing other employment sites on the back of that transformation. As well as the merits of the project in its own right, it stands as a catalyst for other private development opportunities, which include ambitions for a hotel—again, building on the strengths of the Barry Making Waves project and the renewed tourism offer.

In closing, I draw the Minister's attention to the capacity issues. The Vale of Glamorgan is a small local authority, particularly by UK standards, and as I have stated, it does not have experience in submitting bids for large-scale capital projects because we simply did not qualify. The project has therefore taken a huge amount of effort and focus, and I pay tribute to Marcus Goldsworthy and Philip Chappell and their team from the local authority for their work in bringing those strands together and working closely with me and others to ensure that such a strong, credible bid has been made. I urge the Minister to look closely at the quality of that bid, but also to look at it in the context of a community that has not received the support it deserves from the Welsh Government or the European Union. This is Barry's time to shine.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (*Dehenna Davison*): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (*Alun Cairns*) for raising the important issue of levelling up Barry town in his constituency. If I may say so, his speech was a brilliant tourism ad. He highlighted some of the best of Barry, not least "Gavin and Stacey", which I am a huge fan of.

As my right hon. Friend highlighted, the Government's central mission is all about levelling up all parts of the UK. For the benefit of the hon. Member for Strangford (*Jim Shannon*), I reiterate that—all parts of the UK, including Wales and Northern Ireland. We will do so by ensuring that we spread opportunities more equally around the country, empowering local leaders and bringing left-behind communities up to the level of more prosperous areas. I was particularly interested to hear about the background of my right hon. Friend's constituency, with its transition from coalmining to a new purpose. In many ways, that is reminiscent of my own constituency, which was reliant on coalmining and, of course, the railways, and has had a journey to find its new ethos and purpose. It was interesting to hear about those similarities, which I know are reflected in a number of constituencies right across the country.

I am delighted to have the chance today to set out the opportunities being made available to Barry and its community through the Government's levelling-up agenda.

Wales is already benefiting from substantial investment across a whole range of new UK Government funding opportunities. In total, Wales has been allocated over £750 million of levelling-up funding in the last year alone. That includes over £45 million from the community renewal fund, benefiting 160 local community projects. Places across Wales have also received an additional £121 million across 10 projects under the first round of the levelling-up fund. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree that those new opportunities mark an incredibly exciting time for local places in Wales to be at the centre of decision making.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for underlining the support that has been made available, but may I draw to her attention the point that I made about the capacity of local authorities? Those projects that gained support were primarily by authorities that were used to bidding for European-aided schemes. Clearly, we have now left the European Union and we have the levelling-up fund, with the shared prosperity fund to follow. Some local authorities that have been left out until now did not have the capacity to bid, or were not up to speed. That is not their fault; it is simply a lack of experience in bidding. I therefore ask the Minister to look specifically at those communities that have been left out for quite a long period.

Dehenna Davison: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. Ensuring that areas have the capacity and experience to complete what can be quite lengthy and complicated bidding processes is something that has featured in my inbox quite a lot during my time as Minister. I am looking at funding simplification to see how we can make these processes simpler and more streamlined so that there are fair opportunities, even for smaller authorities.

We have had a fantastic response to these new funding opportunities from local partners in Wales, including Vale of Glamorgan, which fully embraced its role in the delivery of the community renewal fund. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will know all too well about the £970,000 allocated to six exciting projects in the Vale, which have been delivering for local people, communities and businesses over the last year.

The community renewal fund is all about supporting the people and communities who need it most right across the UK. It is about creating opportunities, being innovative and trialling new approaches and ideas, all at a local level. To nurture that innovative thinking and give the communities the flexibility they need, we encourage partners to deliver on skills, local business, supporting people into employment, and community and place.

Through funds such as the community renewal fund, we have strengthened the relationship between the UK Government and the places we serve in every part of the UK, including Barry, we are working directly with local partners—people who know, understand and are part of the social fabric of their communities. I am proud that we are giving them autonomy over local decisions to support positive changes for their communities. That is evident, as I am sure my right hon. Friend will know, through Barry Bands Together, a community regeneration project run by a local musical partnership in Barry. It is using the skills of its members to work alongside the local authority music service to provide a new focal point for musical training. That multi-agency approach

focuses on upskilling trainees, empowering children and embodying a cohesive and community-centric way of delivering local services through music.

The good news does not stop there. Other areas in the Vale of Glamorgan have also benefited from the community renewal fund. Enterprise Vale, another prominent project in the area, was awarded over £100,000 for its business support services. Over the last year it has been taking action to support local people into self-employment, and helping those in the community who are economically inactive to build confidence and take the important step into the world of business.

Building on the success of the community renewal fund, £2.6 billion is being allocated to places across the UK as part of the UK shared prosperity fund, which my right hon. Friend mentioned. Of that, a sizeable £585 million has been allocated to places in Wales, with over £14 million specifically for the Vale of Glamorgan. This trailblazing new approach to investment, and the empowerment of local communities to level up and build pride in place, will see direct investment in three local priorities: communities and place, support for local businesses, and people and skills.

I am pleased to say that the approach to regional collaboration intrinsic to delivering the shared prosperity fund has seen all 10 local authorities in the south-east of Wales submit a joint regional investment plan, backed with over £278 million of funding. As a partner in the region, Vale of Glamorgan will play its full part in delivering the regional investment plan and tailoring areas of support to local communities, including those in Barry.

I should also take this opportunity—I will be told off by the boss if I do not—to mention that the freeports programme is another core part of the Government's levelling-up agenda taking place in Wales. Freeports will unlock much-needed investment in port communities up and down the country, helping those areas to overcome barriers to investment through a broad package of incentives. Our new freeport programme in Wales, which is being jointly delivered with the Welsh Government and backed by an initial £26 million of funding, will help us to make this vision a reality. The programme will drive forward our ambition for Wales to compete at a global level, while creating new local jobs and putting Welsh communities on the path to long-term growth and prosperity.

I know that my right hon. Friend will be familiar with the levelling-up fund, through which £4.8 billion of investment is being made available to provide crucial capital investment in local infrastructure. The aim of this competitive funding is to empower local areas to identify new opportunities for investment in creating pride in place. Projects are prepared in collaboration with local stakeholders and should have clear benefits to the local community, while being aligned with a broader local economic strategy. Through the first round of the levelling-up fund, over £1.7 billion was awarded to local areas across the UK, of which £121 million came to Wales, substantially more than would have been the case through any Barnett-based formula.

As Members may know, the second round of the levelling-up fund opened for bidding earlier this summer. My officials are continuing the assessment process, and successful bids should expect to be notified by the end of the year. I am sure my right hon. Friend knows that,

[Dehenna Davison]

due to the competitive process involved, I am unable to comment specifically on individual applications, but I look forward to seeing the outcome of all bids submitted, including the Barry Making Waves project, which he spoke so passionately about. I pass on my thanks to all those in his local authority who have worked so hard on making that bid and bringing it to the Government.

I thank my right hon. Friend for bringing forward this important debate—I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford for his contribution—and for drawing my attention to the Onward report, which I am interested in reading once it has been published. I certainly welcome the opportunity—assuming I stay in post—to have further conversations with my right hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Strangford on the future of Barry and Wales as a whole and, of course, of Strangford and Northern Ireland as a whole too.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Online Harms

[PETER DOWD *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant Documents: Second Report of the Petitions Committee, Session 2021-22, Tackling Online Abuse, HC 766, and the Government response, HC 1224; e-petition 272087, Hold online trolls accountable for their online abuse via their IP address; e-petition 332315, Ban anonymous accounts on social media; e-petition 575833, Make verified ID a requirement for opening a social media account.*]

2.30 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered online harms.

It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. This is the first time I have had the opportunity to serve in Westminster Hall under your chairmanship—[*Interruption.*] In a debate about technology, this was always going to happen. It is great to see the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins), in his place. He is enormously respected by Members on both sides of the House. He came to this role with more knowledge of his subject than probably any other Minister in the history of Ministers, so he brings a great deal to it.

This is an important and timely debate, given that the Online Safety Bill is returning to the Commons next week. Obviously, a great deal of the debate will be in the House of Lords, so I thought that it was important to have more discussion in the House of Commons. The Online Safety Bill is a landmark and internationally leading Bill. As a number of people, including my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright), can attest, it has been a long time in gestation—five years, including two consultations, a Green Paper, a White Paper, a draft Bill, prelegislative scrutiny, 11 sessions of the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, and nine days at Committee stage in the Commons. It is complex legislation, but that is because the subject that it addresses is complex.

Some want the Bill to go further, and I have no doubt that on Report and in the Lords there will be many attempts to do that. Others think it already goes too far. The most important message about the Bill is that we need to get on with it.

Technology is a big part of children's lives—actually, it is a big part of all our lives. The vast majority of it is good. It provides new ways of keeping in touch, and ways of enhancing education for children with special educational needs. Think of all the rows in the car that have been done away with by the sat-nav—at least those rows. My personal favourite is the thing on my phone that says, “The rain will stop in 18 minutes,” so I know when to get my sandwich. Technology changes the way we live our lives. Think about our working lives in this place. Thanks to Tony Blair and new Labour, the pager got all MPs on message and disciplined, and now WhatsApp is having exactly the opposite effect.

In particular, in the Bill and this discussion we are concerned about social media. Again, most of what social media has given us is good, but it has also carried

with it much harm. I say “carried with it” because much of that harm has not been created by social media, but has been distributed, facilitated and magnified by it. In the last couple of weeks, we have been reminded of the terrible tragedy of Molly Russell, thanks to the tireless campaigning and immense fortitude of her father, Ian, and her family. The coroner concluded that social media companies and the content pushed to Molly through algorithmic recommendations contributed to her death “in more than a minimal way”.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I entirely agree that the Bill needs to come forward now. The algorithm is the key part to anything that goes on, in terms of dealing with online problems. The biggest problem I have found is trying to get transparency around the algorithm. Does he agree that the Bill should concentrate on exposing the algorithms, even if they are commercially sensitive, and allowing Ofcom to pull on those algorithms so that we do not get into the horrible situation that he has described?

Damian Hinds: I absolutely agree about the centrality of the algorithms and about understanding how they work. We may come on to that later in the debate. That brings me on to my next point. Of course, we should not think of Molly’s tragedy as a single event; there have been other tragedies. There is also a long tail of harm done to young people through an increased prevalence of self-harm, eating disorders, and the contribution to general mental ill-health. All of that has a societal cost, as well as a cost to the individual. That is also a literal cost, in terms of cash, as well as the terrible social cost.

Importantly, this is not only about children. Ages 18 to 21 can be a vulnerable time for some of the issues I have just mentioned. Of course, with domestic abuse, antisemitism, racist abuse, and so on, most of that is perpetrated by—and inflicted on—people well above the age of majority. I found that the importance and breadth of this subject was reflected in my Outlook inbox over the past few days. Whenever a Member’s name is on the Order Paper for a Westminster Hall debate, they get all sorts of briefings from various third parties, but today’s has broken all records. I have heard from everybody, from Lego to the Countryside Alliance.

On that subject, I thank some of the brilliant organisations that work so hard in this area, such as 5Rights, the Children’s Charities Coalition, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, of course, the Carnegie Trust, the City of London Corporation, UK Finance, the Samaritans, Kick It Out, and more.

I should also note the three e-petitions linked to this subject, reflecting the public’s engagement: the e-petition to ban anonymous accounts on social media, which has almost 17,000 signatories; the petition to hold online trolls accountable, with more than 130,000 signatories; and the e-petition for verified ID to be required to open a social media account, with almost 700,000 signatories.

Such is the interest in this subject and the Online Safety Bill, which is about to come back to the Commons, that someone could be forgiven for thinking that it is about to solve all of our problems, but I am afraid that it will not. It is a framework that will evolve, and this will not be the last time that we have to legislate on the subject. Indeed, many of the things that must be done

probably cannot be legislated for anyway. Additionally, technology evolves. A decade ago, legislators were not talking about the effect of livestreaming on child abuse. We certainly were not talking about the use of emojis in racist abuse. Today, we are just getting to grips with what the metaverse will be and what it implies. Who knows, in five or 10 years’ time, what the equivalent subjects will be?

From my most recent ministerial role as Minister of State for Security, there are three areas covered in the Online Safety Bill that I will mention to stress the importance of pressing on with it and getting it passed into law. The first is child abuse, which I have just mentioned. Of course, some child abuse is perpetrated on the internet, but it is more about distribution. Every time that an abusive image of a child is forwarded, that victim is re-victimised. It also creates the demand for further primary abuse. I commend the agencies, the National Crime Agency and CEOP—Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command—and the brilliant organisations, some of which I have mentioned, that work in this area, including the international framework around NCMEC, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, in the United States.

However, I am afraid that it is a growth area. That is why we must move quickly. The National Crime Agency estimates that between 550,000 and 850,000 people pose, in varying degrees, a sexual risk to children. Shall I repeat those numbers? Just let them sink in. That is an enormous number of people. With the internet, the accessibility is much greater than ever before. The Internet Watch Foundation notes a growth in sexual abuse content available online, particularly in the category known as “self-generated” imagery.

The second area is fraud, which is now the No. 1 category of crime in this country by volume—and in many other countries. Almost all of it has an online aspect or is entirely online. I commend the Minister, and the various former Ministers in the Chamber, on their work in ensuring that fraud is properly addressed in the Bill. There have been three moves forward in that area, and my hon. Friends the Members for Hexham (Guy Opperman) and for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) may speak a bit more about that later. We need to ensure that fraud is in scope, that it becomes a priority offence and, crucially, that advertising for fraud is added to the offences covered.

I hope that, over time, the Government can continue to look at how to sharpen our focus in this area and, in particular, how to line up everybody’s incentives. Right now, the banks have a great incentive to stop fraud because they are liable for the losses. Anybody who has tried to make an online payment recently will know what that does. When people are given a direct financial incentive—a cost—to this thing being perpetrated, they will go to extraordinary lengths to try to stop it happening. If we could get that same focus on people accepting the content or ads that turn out to be fraud, imagine what we could do—my hon. Friend may be about to tell us.

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for the work that he has done. He knows, because we spoke about this when we both were Ministers, that the key implementation once this Bill is law will be fraudulent advertising. I speak as a former Pensions Minister, and every single day up and down

[Guy Opperman]

this country our pensioners are defrauded of at least £1 million, if not £2 million or £3 million. It is important that there are targeted penalties against online companies, notably Google, but also that there are police forces to take cases forward. The City of London Police is very good, but its resources are slim at present. Does he agree that those things need to be addressed as the Bill goes forward?

Damian Hinds: I agree. Some of those matters should be addressed in the Bill and some outside it, but my hon. Friend, whom I commend for all his work, particularly on pensions fraud and investment fraud, is absolutely right that as the balance in the types of crimes has shifted, the ways we resource ourselves and tool up to deal with them has to reflect that.

Could you give me an indication, Mr Dowd, of how many Members are speaking in this debate after me?

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): About eight to 10.

Damian Hinds: I shall accelerate in that case. The third area I want to mention, from my previous role as Security Minister, is disinformation. I welcome what is called the bridge that has been built between the Online Safety Bill and the National Security Bill to deal specifically with state-sponsored disinformation, which has become a tool of war. That probably does not surprise anybody, but I am afraid that, for states with a hostile intention, it can become, and is, a tool in peacetime. Quite often, it is not necessarily even about spreading untruths—believe it or not—but just about trying to wind people up and make them dislike one another more in an election, referendum or whatever it may be. This is important work.

Health disinformation, which we were exercised about during the coronavirus pandemic, is slated to be on the list of so-called legal but harmful harms, so the Bill would also deal with that. That brings me to my central point about the hardest part of this Bill: the so-called legal but harmful harms. I suggest that we actually call them “harmful but legal”, because that better captures their essence, as our constituents would understand it. It is a natural reaction when hearing about the Online Safety Bill, which will deal with stuff that is legal, to say, “Well, why is there a proposed law going through the British Parliament that tries to deal with things that are, and will stay, legal? We have laws to give extra protection to children, but adults should be able to make their own choices. If you start to interfere with that, you risk fundamental liberties, including freedom of speech.” I agree with that natural reaction, but I suggest that we have to consider a couple of additional factors.

First, there is no hard line between adults and children in this context. There is not a 100%—or, frankly, even 50%—reliable way of being able to tell who is using the internet and whether they are above or below age 18. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), among others, has been round the loop many times looking at age verification and so-called age assurance. It is very difficult. That is why a couple of weeks ago a piece of Ofcom research came out that found 32%—a third—of eight to 17-year-old social media users appear to be over 18. Why is that?

Because it is commonplace for someone to sign up to TikTok or Snapchat with the minimum age of 13 when they are 10. They must give an age above 13 to be let in. Let us say that that age limit was set at 14; that means that when they are 14, it thinks they are 18—and so it carries on, all the way through life.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The right hon. Member and many other Members present will know that leading suicide prevention charities, including Samaritans and the Mental Health Foundation, are calling on the Government to ensure that the Online Safety Bill protects people of all ages from all extremely dangerous suicide and self-harm content. The right hon. Member makes very good points about age and on the legal but harmful issue. I hope very much that the Government will look at this again to protect more people from that dangerous content.

Damian Hinds: I thank the hon. Lady; I think her point stands on its own.

The second additional factor I want to put forward, which may sound odd, is that in this context there is not a hard line between what is legal and what is not. I mentioned emoji abuse. I am not a lawyer, still less a drafter of parliamentary legislation—there are those here who are—but I suggest it will be very hard to legislate for what constitutes emoji abuse in racism. Take something such as extremism. Extremist material has always been available; it is just that it used to be available on photocopied or carbon-copied sheets of paper. It was probably necessary to go to some draughty hall somewhere or some backstreet bookshop in a remote part of London to access it, and very few people did. The difference now is that the same material is available to everyone if they go looking for it; sometimes it might come to them even if they do not go looking for it. I think the context here is different.

This debate—not the debate we are having today, but the broader debate—is sometimes conducted in terms that are just too theoretical. People sometimes have the impression that we will allow these companies to arbitrarily take down stuff that is legal but that they just do not like—stuff that does not fit with their view of the world or their politics. On the contrary, the way the Bill has been drafted means that it will require consistency of approach and protect free speech.

I am close to the end of my speech, but let us pause for a moment to consider the sorts of things we are talking about. My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries) made a written ministerial statement setting out an indicative list of the priority harms for adults. They are abuse and harassment—not mere disagreement, but abuse and harassment—the circulation of real or manufactured intimate images without the subject’s consent; material that promotes self-harm; material that promotes eating disorders; legal suicide content; and harmful health content that is demonstrably false, such as urging people to drink bleach to cure cancer.

I suggest that when people talk about free speech, they do not usually mean those kinds of things; they normally mean expressing a view or being robust in argument. We have the most oppositional, confrontational parliamentary democracy in the world, and we are proud of our ability to do better, to make better law and

hold people to account through that process, but that is not the same thing as we are talking about here. Moreover, there is a misconception that the Bill would ban those things; in fact, the Bill states only that a service must have a policy about how it deals with them. A helpful Government amendment makes it clear that that policy could be, “Well, we’re not dealing with it at all. We are allowing content on these things.”

There are also empowerment tools—my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie) may say more about that later in relation to anonymity—but we want users to be in control. If there is this contractual relationship, where it is clearly set out what is allowed in this space and someone signs up to it, I suggest that enhances their freedoms as well as their rights.

I recognise that there are concerns, and it is right to consider them. It may be that the Bill can be tightened to reassure everybody, while keeping these important protections. That might be around the non-priority areas, which perhaps people consider to be too broad. There might also be value in putting the list of priority harms in the Bill, so that people are not concerned that this could balloon.

As I said at the start, the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe, knows more about this than probably any other living human being. He literally works tirelessly on it and is immensely motivated, for all the right reasons. I have probably not said anything in the past 10 minutes that he did not already know. I know it is a difficult job to square the circle and consider these tensions.

My main message to the Minister and the Government is, with all the work that he and others have done, please let us get on with it. Let us get the Bill into law as soon as possible. If changes need to be made to reassure people, then absolutely let us make them, but most of all, let us keep up the momentum.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I would not have dreamed of interfering in your largesse, but I am pleased that you interfered in your own. Thank you very much.

2.51 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing this important debate. Many people will be watching who have taken a keen interest in the Online Safety Bill, which is an important piece of legislation, and the opportunities it offers to protect people from harmful, dangerous online content. I also welcome the Minister to his place. I am sure he will listen carefully to all the contributions.

My interest in the Bill is constituency based. I was approached by the family of a young man from my constituency called Joe Nihill, a popular former Army cadet who sadly took his own life at the age of 23 after accessing harmful online content related to suicide. Joe’s mother Catherine and sister-in-law Melanie have run an inspiring campaign, working with the Samaritans to ensure that the law is changed. In the note Joe left before he sadly took his life, he referred to such online content. One of his parting wishes was that what happened to him would not happen to others.

I want to ensure that the Minister and the Government take full opportunity of the Bill, so let me talk briefly about two amendments that might strengthen it. We want to protect people of all ages, and ensure that smaller online platforms as well as the larger ones are covered. Two related amendments have been tabled: amendment 159 by the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and proposed new clause 16 by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). I know that they are backed by the Samaritans and the inspiring campaigners from my constituency.

Amendment 159, relating to protecting people of all ages, addresses the point that clearly harmful suicide and self-harm content can be accessed by over-18s, and vulnerable people are not limited to those under 18 years of age. Joe Nihill was 23 when he sadly took his own life after accessing such content.

As it is currently drafted, the Bill’s impact assessment states that of the platforms in scope

“less than 0.001% are estimated to meet the Category 1 and 2A thresholds”.

It is estimated that only 20 platforms will be required to fulfil category 1 obligations. If the Bill is enacted in its current form, unamended, then smaller platforms, where some of the most harmful suicide and self-harm content can be found, will not even need to consider the risk that any harmful but legal content on their site poses to adult users. Amendment 159 presents a real opportunity for the Government to close a loophole and further improve the legislation to ensure that people of all ages are protected.

The issue is so relevant. Between 2011 and 2015, 151 people who died by suicide were known to have visited websites that encouraged suicide or shared information about methods of harm, and 82% of those people were over 25. The Government must retain regulation of harmful but legal content, but they should extend the coverage of the Bill to smaller platforms where some of the most harmful suicide and self-harm content can be found. I urge the Government to carefully consider and adopt amendment 159.

Finally on closing all the related loopholes in the Bill, new clause 16 tabled by the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden would create a new communications offence of sending a message encouraging or assisting another person to self-harm. That offence is crucial to ensuring that the most harmful self-harm content is addressed on all platforms. As the Minister knows, Samaritans was pleased that the Government agreed in principle to create a new offence of encouraging or assisting self-harm earlier this year. That new offence needs to be created in time to be part of this legislation from the outset. We do not want to miss this opportunity. The Law Commission has made recommendations in this regard.

I urge the Government to make sure that the Bill takes all possible opportunities. I know that the Minister is working hard on that, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire said. I plead with the Minister to accept amendment 159 and new clause 16, so that we do not miss the opportunity to ensure that people over 18 are protected by the legislation and that even the smaller platforms are covered.

[Richard Burgon]

The Bill, which will come back before the House next week, is a historic opportunity, and people across the country have taken a close interest in it. My two constituents, Catherine and Melanie, are very keen for the Government not to miss this opportunity. I know that the Minister takes it very seriously and I look forward to his response, which I hope will include reassuring words that the amendments on over-18s and smaller platforms will both be adopted when the Bill returns next week.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): The Front-Bench speeches will begin at 3.28 pm and quite a number of people still wish to speak. I will not impose a formal limit, but if Members could keep to three to four minutes that would be helpful.

2.58 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) on securing this vital and timely debate. Time is really of the essence if we are going to deliver the Online Safety Bill in this Session.

The scenario whereby the Bill falls is almost unthinkable. Thousands of man hours have been put in by the team at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, by the Home Office team, and by the Joint Committee on the Draft Online Safety Bill, which the Minister chaired so brilliantly. There have been successive ministerial refinements by quite a few of the people in the Chamber, and numerous parliamentary debates over many years. Most importantly, the stakes in human terms just could not be higher.

As my right hon. Friend said, that was painfully underlined recently during the inquest into Molly Russell's death. Her story is well documented. It is stories like Molly's that remind us how dangerous the online world can be. While it is magnificent and life-changing in so many ways, the dark corners of the internet remain a serious concern for children and scores of other vulnerable people.

Of course, the priorities of the Bill must be to protect children, to tackle serious harm, to root out illegal content and to ensure that online platforms are doing what they say they are doing in enforcing their own terms and conditions. Contrary to the lazy accusations, largely by those who have not taken the time to read this hefty piece of legislation, the Bill does not set out to restrict free speech, to protect the feelings of adult users or to somehow legislate for people's right not to be offended.

Following on from other Members, I will talk about the legal but harmful issue. There is no easy way to define "legal but harmful", because it is so opaque. Even the name is clunky and unappetising, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) sometimes uses the phrase "lawful but awful", which often seems more appropriate, but it does not necessarily work from a legislative point of view.

If Molly Russell's tragic case teaches us anything, it is that dreadful, harmful online content cannot be defined simply by what is strictly legal or illegal, because algorithms

do not differentiate between harmless and harmful content. They see a pattern and they exploit it. They are, quite simply, echo chambers. They take our fears and our paranoia, and surround us with unhealthy voices that simply reinforce them, however dangerous or hateful they are. Fundamentally, they breadcrumb users into more content, slowly, piece by piece, cultivating an interest. They take us down a path we might not otherwise have followed—one that is seemingly harmless at the start, but that eventually is anything but.

We have a moral duty to keep children safe on online platforms, but we also have a moral duty to keep other users safe. People of all ages need to be protected from extremely harmful online content, particularly around suicide, self-harm and eating disorders, where the line between what is legal and what is illegal is so opaque. There is an inherent legal complexity in defining what legal but harmful really means.

It feels like this part of the Bill has become a lightning rod for those who think it will result in an overly censorious approach. That is an entirely misleading misinterpretation of what it seeks to achieve. I feel that, perversely, not putting in place protections would be inherently more of a bar to freedom of speech, because users' content can be taken down at the moment with random unpredictability and without any justification or redress. Others are afraid to speak up, fearing pile-on harassment and intimidation from anonymous accounts.

The fact is that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make this legislation effective and meaningful.

3.3 pm

Taiwo Owatemi (Coventry North West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this important debate, which has far-reaching impacts for the whole country. I welcome the Minister to his place. I look forward to the Online Safety Bill completing its passage in this Session. We have had to wait quite some time. Four years ago, the Government promised to tighten the law on online harms. The delay has, unfortunately, had devastating impacts for many people in this country: £3 billion has been lost to fraud and 60,000 offences relating to online sexual abuse material and grooming have been committed.

As many Members have said, cyber-bullying has a disastrous effect on young people and, indeed, everyone across our communities. We know that big tech companies will not regulate themselves if it is not in their interest to do so. Sadly, it has taken a while for the necessary actions that we need to be taken. Instead, leading charities have been forced to support the many families who have been affected. I will focus on a key organisation in my constituency that does excellent work fighting for young disabled people and their rights.

Coventry Youth Activists is a wonderful organisation that has played a central role in campaigning for change in the way that disability hate is handled by social media platforms. CYA told me of a staggering 52% increase in online hate crime in 2021; however, their attempt to reach out and ask social media companies, specifically Facebook, to look into how hateful, ableist crime is posted on their platforms and to review their algorithms and respond effectively has not really been taken up, and certainly not by Facebook.

We cannot continue this way. Many young people have suffered devastating impacts. There are tragic consequences to the bullying that many young people face online. One of my constituents told me that when he went to an online platform and asked to volunteer for a community organisation, someone said to him, “What is this giraffe thing? I hope he doesn’t procreate.” That had a significant impact on his mental health and ability to feel valued within the community. That is absolutely wrong. No one should have to experience such bullying.

As things stand, the online world is a space where bullies feel emboldened, because they know that there are zero consequences for their shameful actions. We cannot allow that to continue. Bullies need to know that when they post harmful, hateful things online, they will be dealt with effectively. I urge the Minister to meet with me and Coventry Youth Activists to discuss the important work they have been doing and to ensure that no young person is bullied online, specifically those with a disability. I want to see a world in which the virtual space is a safe space for everybody, regardless of whether one is able or has a disability.

Lastly, I wish to mention the importance of eradicating misinformation and protecting young people. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire said, misinformation is having a significant impact online and is making the online space more difficult for many people. I encourage the Minister to ensure that action is taken to make the digital space a safe space for young people.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Regrettably, I now have to impose a formal three-minute limit on speeches.

3.7 pm

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd.

As many Members present know, I have been campaigning for verification options on social media to tackle anonymous abuse. I understand that new Prime Ministers and Secretaries of State like to put their own stamp on legislation, but I am appealing for no more delays in protecting children and adults from online abuse. In the time that I have been working on this issue I have had two children, dealt with a pandemic, a war and the deaths of two beloved monarchs, and worked on thousands of cases for people in Stroud; if little old me can fit in that much, I know that the massive Government machine and fantastic civil servants want to get on with this legislation, and we can do it.

I do not mind re-fighting the case for tackling anonymous abuse, because I love working with the Clean up the Internet gang, and anonymity is a really important part of this issue. The ability to operate anonymous accounts is abused on a huge scale and is fuelling racist, antisemitic and sexist abuse, pictures of people’s genitalia being sent around, name calling, bullying, online fraud, misinformation, scams, and the evasion of the law. It is much scarier to receive such abuse when people do not know who is sending it. That is why we have to tackle these issues.

It is not rocket science to understand how the online disinhibition effect makes anonymous users feel less accountable and less responsible for their actions. Recent

research by the charity Reset found that those in the much-fêted red wall seats see tackling abuse from anonymous accounts as a top priority for improving the experience of online life. The University of Sheffield and the children’s charity 5Rights, which has played such an important role, have found that the ability to create anonymous accounts is a risky design feature. I urge the Minister to look again at the work of the Antisemitism Policy Trust, which is a doughty champion on this issue. We know that our Jewish communities have suffered dreadfully, with increased abuse and threats in recent years. Issues surrounding the categorisation of platforms and risk factors are well known, but we need to use this opportunity to bring about change.

Our proposals would require social media platforms to give users the choice to verify their own accounts. They would make it very obvious if someone is verified and there would be the option to follow or be followed by only verified accounts. That would not stop the ability to be unverified. People could remain unverified, and that would assist whistleblowers, journalists and anyone in a marginalised group who wants to remain anonymous. In our plans, users could still be Princess or President So-and-so with a funny Twitter handle, but they would know that there is information behind the scenes.

Let me be clear: social media as it stands is damaging free speech. If someone is going to get a rape threat for saying what they think, they will not speak freely. We have to make these changes. The Minister is so brilliant in this policy area, and I urge him to make changes as soon as possible.

3.11 pm

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing this debate. It is a hackneyed phrase, but the Online Safety Bill is important and genuinely groundbreaking. There will always be a balance to strike between allowing free speech and stopping harms. I think we are on the right side of that balance, but we may need to come back to it later, because it is crucial.

I want to cover two topics in a short amount of time. The first is online harms through social media platforms, touching on the legal but harmful and small, high-harm platforms, and the second is fraud. Starting with fraud, I declare an interest, having spent a decade in that world before I came here.

Damian Hinds: The world of law enforcement.

Simon Fell: I thank my right hon. Friend for clarifying that for me—although I would be better off now had I been on the other side of the fence.

Fraud is at epidemic levels. Which? research recently found that six in 10 people who have been victims of fraud suffered significant mental health harms as a result. I use this example repeatedly in this place. In my past life I met, through a safeguarding group, an old lady who accessed the world through her landline telephone. She was scammed out of £20,000 or so through that phone, and then disconnected from the rest of the world afterwards because she simply could not trust that phone when it rang anymore.

[Simon Fell]

We live in an increasingly interconnected world where we are pushing our services online. As we are doing that we cannot afford to be disconnecting people from the online world and taking away from them the services we are opening up to them. That is why it is essential to have vital protections against fraud and fraudulent adverts on some of the larger social platforms and search engines. I know it is out of the scope of this debate but, on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), that is also why it is crucial to fund the law enforcement agencies that go after the people responsible.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire is right: banks have a financial motivation to act on fraud. They are losing money. They have the incentive. Where that motivation is not there, and where there is a disincentive for organisations to act, as is especially the case with internet advertising, we have to move forward with the legislation and remove those disincentives.

On harms, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire is right to mention the harmful but legal. We have to act on this stuff and we have to do it quickly. We cannot stray away from the problems that currently exist online. I serve on the Home Affairs Committee and we have seen and examined the online hate being directed at footballers; the platforms are not acting on it, despite it being pointed out to them.

When it comes to disinformation and small, high-harm platforms—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. I call Luke Evans.

3.14 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): If it was not intimidating enough to be with the great and the good of the Online Safety Bill, trying to say everything I want in three minutes is even more of a challenge.

I will be brief. I came to this issue through body image; that is why I learned what I have on this subject. I simply ask for two things. In his speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said that this is about frameworks. I have two suggestions that I think would make a huge difference in respect of future-proofing the legislation and providing a framework. The first is to build on the fantastic work of my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Siobhan Baillie). We are talking about having authenticated anonymous and non-anonymous accounts. Giving the end user the choice of whether they want to go into the wild west is fundamental.

Now that, through the Content Authenticity Initiative—to which 800 companies around the world have signed up—the technology exists to have an open standard of transparency in respect of how images are taken, from the camera to how they are put in place, we have a framework that runs around the world that means people can make the same choice about images as about accounts. If we future-proof that in legislation, we simply allow the user to choose to switch on that tool and see images that we know are verified on an open source. It is not about someone making a decision; it is simply about understanding where the image comes from, how it got there, how it was made and who passed it on. That is an incredibly powerful and incredibly simple way to create a protective framework.

That leads me to my second, possibly more important, point, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage). Algorithms are king when it comes to social media. Controlling them is very difficult, but someone should be responsible. In schools we have safeguarding leads for dealing with vulnerable people, and in councils we have financial named people, so why on earth do we not have a named person legally responsible for the algorithm in a company? We have it with GDPR. That would allow anyone in this debate, anyone in the police force, anyone in Ofcom or any member of the public to go that person and say, “Why is your algorithm behaving in the way it is?” Every time I have tried to do that, I have been told that it is commercially sensitive and that there is a team somewhere else in the world that deals with it.

I know that Ofcom has the power to deal with this issue, but it is a one-off notice when it is requested. I simply think that stating that there is a named person legally responsible for the algorithm would change behaviours, because their head would be on the chopping block if they got it wrong. This is about responsibility. That is what the Bill provides, and that is why I am advocating for those two points.

3.17 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I want to offer some help to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) in looking further afield for evidence of this sort of thing working well. That evidence comes from the Council of Europe, which has been very active in this policy area for many years. It works with its 46 member states, the private sector, civil society and other actors to shape an internet based principally on human rights. It aims to ensure that the internet provides a safe and open environment where freedom of expression and freedom of assembly, diversity, culture, education and knowledge can all flourish.

The key pillar for the protection of human rights online is the European convention on human rights. The European Court of Human Rights, which rules on applications, has already delivered landmark judgments concerning the online environment—in particular, in connection with the right to freedom of expression, the right to access information and the right to privacy.

The Lanzarote convention, which we have already ratified, deals in particular with child abuse, which is of great concern to me. It deals with the fact that the form of online abuse keeps changing by involving children in the whole of the process. That is adjusted according to their age. Children and young people who exercise their right to freely express their views as part of this process must be protected from harm, including intimidation, reprisals, victimisation and violations of their right to privacy.

I urge my right hon. Friend and the Minister to look at what the Council of Europe has been doing. It is not part of the EU—they do not have to get tied up with all that—and it represents 46 countries. The issue has been looked at in great depth across wider Europe. They could learn a lot from that experience.

3.20 pm

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): Another day, another Westminster Hall speech.

When I was the Pensions Minister I saw, sadly, hundreds of our constituents being defrauded of millions of pounds every single day by fake advertisers, primarily on Google, Instagram, Facebook and various other social media providers. The offences that have been added in clauses 34 to 36 of the Online Safety Bill are welcome, but I want an assurance from the Minister that there is provision against unregulated advertisers.

I give the example of Aviva, which gave evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee. It indicated that there were 55 separate fake Aviva sites advertising on Google for financial services. Constituents, particularly the elderly and the vulnerable, were being misled by those people and were signing away significant proportions of money. I hope the provisions in clause 36 cover that situation, but I would be nervous that the Minister would rely on consumer protection in respect of the unfair trading regulations and the actions of the Competition and Markets Authority. I mean no disrespect, but those provisions are pretty ineffective and do not really address these points.

To deal with such issues, the answer is clearly to have a burden of proof on the recipient of the advert that they are vicariously liable for the content they have on their site. That would have the massive benefit, as identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), of putting the burden on the site to justify the content on its site, and there should be consequential fines that should be significant and repeated in their actions. It is very important that the Minister works with the new Home Office teams and that the police forces that are going to take these issues forward are beefed up considerably, because there simply is currently not enough resource to address these issues.

I thank organisations such as *The Times*—Matt Dathan has done good work on this issue. A lack of implementation will not be for a lack of money. We should bear in mind that Google, or Alphabet, made \$14 billion profit last quarter. Its ability to regulate and follow through—to take the work that it is required to do by the Bill and to check advertisers and be responsible for the content, to put it bluntly—is very do-able, under all circumstances. I strongly urge the Minister to double-check that unregulated advertisers are covered in clause 36 and that there will be genuine fines and vicarious liability going forward.

3.22 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Dowd. I follow a number of excellent speeches. The most excellent was from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). He said many of the things that I would say, which is just as well given the time constraint I face.

Many people have said that the Bill will be back on Tuesday. I do not expect the Minister to confirm the business for next week, but if it does not come back next Tuesday, we will have a difficulty. The delay to the Bill must be either because people in the Government believe that it can be made perfect, or because they believe that it can be made less difficult. Neither of those two things are possible.

The Bill will always be imperfect. However hard many of us have worked to get it there, it will never be perfect, and it needs to be brought forward anyway. If people think the Bill's fundamental choices will become easier by the passage of time, they are fundamentally mistaken. This will always be a difficult set of choices, but those choices need to be made. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, when it comes to the most contentious part of the Bill—which is only about eight, nine or maybe 10 clauses of 190 or so—on what we shall now refer to as “harmful but legal” material, three things need to be understood by those who believe that that part of it is unacceptable.

First, as others have said, we should start with what the Bill actually says—always a good place to start. There is an important balancing duty on all platforms to protect freedom of speech, in addition to the duties they have to protect others from harm.

Secondly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, the platform is required to describe how it will handle harmful material; it is not required to remove that material automatically. That is not well understood. I would add that if the Government are to do any more work on the Bill, a definition of what is meant by harmful would be helpful and necessary.

We must understand that we regulate in other environments beyond the confines of the criminal law. The objective of this legislation has always been to create a more level playing field between the online world and every other world. We should remind ourselves that that is where the Bill starts and continues.

Thirdly, as my right hon. Friend also said, the status quo does not restrict the platforms from taking down whatever they like now. Anyone worried about freedom of speech should worry about the situation that we have today, not the situation that we will have under this legislation.

The fundamental point is that we have to get on with it. People have talked about the Bill being world leading, and it is, but we can only lead if we go first. Many others are also developing legislation. If we do not succeed in being world leading, we will miss an opportunity to set the standard in this legislation and regulation. Most importantly, we will let down our own citizens, who have a right to be kept safer online than they are.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): The right hon. Member for East Hampshire has indicated that he recuses himself from his closing remarks. I call Kirsty Blackman.

3.26 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) for securing the debate. As he said, it is the right time to have this discussion, as one of the last opportunities to do so before the legislation leaves the House of Commons. He mentioned a number of organisations that have been in touch and have assisted with information. I do not think he mentioned—I apologise if he did—Refuge and Girlguiding, which both do excellent work and have provided an awful lot of useful information, particularly on how women and girls experience the online world. I accept that he could not possibly have covered every organisation in the time that he had to speak.

[Kirsty Blackman]

I apologise to hon. Members for the lack of Scottish National party colleagues here, which is not intentional: three others were supposed to attend, but for genuinely good reasons that I cannot pass on, they did not. I apologise for the fact that I am the only representative of the SNP—it was not intentional.

I want to pass on a comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who highlighted to me what happened to St Albert's Primary School at the beginning of this month or the tail end of last month. The First Minister of Scotland went to visit the school on 30 September to celebrate the work that it was doing on tackling climate change. As a result, the school was subject to horrific racist abuse. Thousands of racist messages were sent to St Albert's Primary. I want to highlight that, because it is one of the reasons that we need this legislation. That abuse was aimed specifically at children and was genuinely horrific. I urge the Minister to look at that case so that he is aware.

The Bill has been needed for 30 years. It is not just something that we need now; we have needed it for a long time. I am very pleased that the Commons stages are nearly completed. Along with all other voices here, I urge the Government to please let the Bill come back to us so that we can finish our debate on it and it can complete its Commons stages. I feel as though I have spent quite a significant portion of my life dealing with the Bill, but I recognise that that is nothing compared with the hours that many hon. Members, organisations and staff have put in. It has been uppermost in my mind since the commencement of the Bill Committee earlier this year.

The internet is wonderful and brilliant. There are so many cool and exciting things to do on it. There are so many ways in which it makes our lives easier and enables people to communicate with each other. I can be down here and Facetime my children, which would not have been possible had I been an MP 20 or 30 years ago. Those things are great. It is brilliant for children to be able to access the internet, to be able to access games and to be able to play. It is amazing that there is a new playground for people—one that we did not have 30 years ago—and these are really good things. We need to make sure that the legislation that comes in is permissive and allows those things to continue to happen, but in a way that is safe and that protects children.

Child sexual abuse has been mentioned. I do not want to go into it too much, but for me that is the key thing about the Bill. The Bill largely covers what I would hope it would cover in terms of child sexual abuse. I strenuously resist any suggestion that we need to have total end-to-end encryption that cannot be looked at even if there is suspicion of child sexual abuse, because it is paramount that we protect children and that we are able to catch the perpetrators sharing images.

We have talked about the metaverse and things in the future, but I am still concerned that some of the things that happen today are not adequately covered by the scope of the Bill. I appreciate what the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) said about amendment 159, which is incredibly important. It would allow Ofcom, which is the expert, to classify additional sites that are incredibly harmful as category 1. It would not be down

to the Government to say, "We're adding this one site." It would be down to Ofcom, the expert, to make those decisions.

Social media is not just Facebook or Twitter. It is not just the way that older adults interact with each other on the internet. It is Fortnite, Discord, Twitch, Snapchat and Roblox. I do not whether Members heard "File on 4" last night, but it was scathing in its criticism of Roblox and the number of horrific experiences that children are subjected to, on a platform that is supposed to be safe. It is promoted as a safe space for children, and it is absolutely not.

I am still massively concerned about clause 49, which talks about exempting

"one-to-one live aural communications".

If one-to-one live aural communications are exempted, a one-to-one communication on Discord will be exempt from the legislation and will not count as user-generated content, even though it is user-generated content. I understand why the Government have put that in the Bill—it is about exempting telecoms, and I get that—but they have accidentally exempted a platform that groomers use in order to get children off Roblox, Fortnite or whatever they are playing and on to Discord, where they can have a conversation with those children. I am absolutely clear that clause 49 needs to be sorted so that the things the Government want to be exempted are still exempted, but the things that need to be in scope are in scope.

A point was made about the level of addiction, and the level of harm, that can be caused by algorithms. The idea of having a named person is very smart, and it is something that I would wholeheartedly support. It makes a huge amount of sense to include that in the Bill.

We have had an awful lot of chaos in the past wee while. Things have not looked as we expected them to look on any given day—things are changing in a matter of hours—but whatever chaos there is, the Government need to be clear that this issue is really important. It transcends party lines, arguments within the Conservative party and all of that. This is about protecting children and vulnerable people, and ensuring that we have protections in place. We need to make sure that legal but harmful is included in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Leeds East talked about ensuring that vulnerable adults are included in the Bill. We cannot just have provisions in place for children when we are aware that a huge number of adults are vulnerable for various reasons—whether that is because of mental health conditions, learning difficulties or age—and are potentially not protected if legal but harmful does not make it over the final hurdle. I urge the Minister to do that. The key thing is to please bring the Bill back so that we can get it into legislation.

3.35 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to be here representing the Opposition in this important debate. This is the first time I have overwhelmingly agreed with every single excellent contribution in this Chamber. That goes to show that, as my friend the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) said, this does cross party lines and is not a political issue—at least, it should not be. There is

huge cross-party consensus in this place, and the other place, about getting the Bill on the statute book and in action to protect everybody on the internet.

I pay particular tribute to the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) who, as a former Education Secretary, comes at this debate with a huge breadth of knowledge and experience. He is a former colleague of mine; we sat together on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, where we scrutinised this legislation and these issues in depth. I know it is an issue he cares very deeply about. I echo his and other Members' sentiments on the reappointment of the Minister, who comes at this with a breadth of experience and cares deeply. I am very pleased to see him in his post.

Regulation to tackle online abuse was first promised many years ago. In the initial White Paper, the Conservatives promised world-leading legislation. However, when the draft Online Safety Bill was published in May 2021, those proposals were totally watered down and incomplete. The Bill is no longer world leading. Since it was first announced that this Government intended to regulate the online space, seven jurisdictions have introduced online safety laws. Although those pieces of legislation are not perfect, they are in place. In that time, online crime has exploded, child sex abuse online has become rife and scams have continued to proliferate. The Minister knows that, and he may share my frustration and genuine concern at the cost that the delay is causing.

I recognise that we are living in turbulent political times, but when it comes to online harms, particularly in the context of children, we cannot afford to wait. Last week, the coroner's report from the tragic death of Molly Russell brought into sharp relief the serious impact that harmful social media content is having on young people across the UK every day. Let me be clear; Molly Russell's death is a horrific tragedy. I pay tribute to her father Ian and her family, who have, in the most harrowing of circumstances, managed to channel their energy into tireless campaigning that has quite rightly made us all sit up and listen.

Molly's untimely death, to which, as the coroner announced last week, harmful social media content was a contributing factor, has stunned us all. It should force action from the Government. While I was pleased to note in the business statement last week that the Online Safety Bill will return to the House on Tuesday, I plead with the Minister to work with Labour, the SNP and all parties to get it through, with some important amendments. Without measures on legal but harmful content—or harmful but legal, as we are now referring to it—it is not likely that suicide and self-harm content such as that faced online by Molly or by Joe Nihill, the constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), will be dealt with.

Enough is enough. Children and adults—all of us—need to be kept safe online. Labour has long campaigned for stronger protections online for children and the public, to keep people safe, secure our democracy and ensure that everyone is treated with decency and respect. There is broad consensus that social media companies have failed to regulate themselves. That is why I urge the Minister to support our move to ensure that those at the top of multi-million-pound social media companies are held personally accountable for failures beyond those currently in the Bill relating to information notices.

The Online Safety Bill is our opportunity to do better. I am keen to understand why the Government have failed to introduce or support personal criminal liability measures for senior leaders who have fallen short on their statutory duty to protect us online. There are such measures in other areas, such as financial services. The same goes for the Government's approach to the duties of care for adults under the Bill—what we call harmful but legal. The Minister knows that the Opposition has concerns over the direction of the Bill, as do other Members here today.

Freedom of speech is vital to our democracy, but it absolutely must not come at a harmful cost. The Bill Committee, which I was a member of, heard multiple examples of racist, antisemitic, extremist and other harmful publishers, from holocaust deniers to white supremacists, which would stand to benefit from the recognised news publisher exemption as it currently stands, either overnight or by making minor administrative changes.

In Committee, in response to an amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spenningsdale (Kim Leadbeater), the Minister promised the concession that Russia Today would be excluded from the recognised news publisher exemption. I am pleased that the Government have indeed promised to exclude sanctioned news titles such as Russia Today through an amendment that they have said they will introduce at a later stage, but that does not go far enough. Disinformation outlets rarely have the profile of Russia Today. Often they operate more discreetly and are less likely to attract sanctions. For those reasons, the Government must go further. As a priority, we must ensure that the current exemption cannot be exploited by bad actors. The Government must not give a free pass to those propagating racist or misogynistic harm and abuse.

Aside from freedom of speech, Members have raised myriad harms that appear online, many of which we tried to tackle with amendments in Committee. A robust corporate and senior management liability scheme for routine failures was rejected. Basic duties that would have meant that social media companies had to publish their own risk assessments were rejected. Amendments to bring into scope small but high-harm platforms that we have heard about today were also rejected. The Government would not even support moves to name violence against women and girls as a harm in the Bill, despite the huge amount of evidence suggesting that women and people of colour are more at risk.

Recent research from the Centre for Countering Digital Hate has found that Instagram fails to act on nine out of 10 reports of misogyny over its direct messenger. One in 15 DMs sent to women by strangers were abusive or contained violent and sexual images. Of 330 examples reported on Twitter and Instagram, only nine accounts were removed. More than half of those that were reported continued to offend. The Government are letting down survivors and putting countless women and girls at risk of gendered harms, such as image-based sexual abuse—so-called revenge porn—rape threats, doxxing and tech abuse perpetrated by an abusive partner. What more will it take for meaningful change to be made?

I hope the Minister will address those specific omissions. Although I recognise that he was not in his role as the Bill progressed in Committee, he is in the unfortunate

[Alex Davies-Jones]

position of having to pick up the pieces. I hope he will today give us some reassurances, which I know many of us are seeking.

I must also raise with the Minister once again the issue of online discriminatory abuse, particularly in the context of sport. In oral questions I recently raised the very serious problem of rising discrimination faced not just by players but their families, referees, coaches, pundits, fans and others. I know the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) tried to make this point in his contribution. Abuse and harm faced online is not virtual; it is real and has a lasting impact. Labour Members believe it is essential that tech firms are held to account when harmful abuse and criminal behaviour appear on, are amplified by and therefore flourish on their platforms.

There are genuine issues with the Government's approach to the so-called legal but harmful provisions in the Bill that will, in essence, fail to capture some of the most harmful content out there. We have long called for a more systems-based approach to the Bill, and we need only to look at the research that we have had from Kick It Out to recognise the extent of the issue. Research from that organisation used artificial intelligence to identify violent abuse that falls below the current criminal thresholds outlined in the current draft of the Bill. There is no need for me to repeat the vile language in this place today. We have only to cast our minds back to 2020 and the Euros to recall the disgraceful abuse—and more—targeted at members of the England team to know the realities of the situation online. But it does not have to be this way.

Labour colleagues have repeatedly raised concerns that the current AI moderation practices utilised by the big social media giants are seemingly incapable of adapting to the rapid rate at which new internet-based languages, emojis and euphemisms develop. It is wrong of the Government to pursue an online harms agenda that is so clearly focused on content moderation, rather than considering the business models that underpin those harmful practices. Worse still, we now know that that approach often underpins a wide range of the harmful content that we see online.

The Times recently reported that TikTok users were able to easily evade safety filters to share suicide and self-harm posts by using slang terms and simple misspellings. Some of the content in question had been online for more than a year, despite including direct advice on how to self-harm. TikTok's community guidelines forbid content that depicts or encourages suicide or self-harm, and yet such content still remains online for everyone to see.

We have concerns that the Government's current approach will have little impact unless the big firms are held more accountable. What we really need is a consistent approach from the Government, and a commitment to tackling myriad online harms that is fit for the modern age and for emerging tech, too. There is a widespread political consensus on the importance of getting this right, and the Minister can be assured of success if only his Department is prepared to listen.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Damian Collins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. This is my first appearance as a Minister in Westminster Hall, and your first appearance in the Chair, so we are both making our debuts. I hope we have long and successful reigns in our respective roles.

It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and to his excellent opening speech. He feels strongly about these issues—as he did both in Government and previously as a member of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee—and he has spoken up about them. I enjoyed working with him when he was a Minister at the Home Office and I chaired the prelegislative scrutiny Committee, which discussed many important features of the Online Safety Bill. One feature of the Bill, of course, is the inclusion of measures on fraud and scam advertising, which was a recommendation of the Joint Committee. It made my life easier that, by the time I became a Minister in the Department, the Government had already accepted that recommendation and introduced the exemption, and I will come on to talk about that in more detail.

My right hon. Friend, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and other Members raised the case of Molly Russell, and it is important to reflect on that case. I share the sentiments expressed about the tragedy of Molly's death, its avoidable nature and the tireless work of the Russell family, and particularly her father, Ian Russell, whom I have met several times to discuss this. The Russell family pursued a very difficult and complicated case, which required a huge release of evidence from the social media companies, particularly Instagram and Pinterest, to demonstrate the sort of content to which Molly Russell was exposed.

One of the things Ian Russell talks about is the work done by the investigating officers in the coroner's inquest. Tellingly, the inquest restricted the amount of time that people could be exposed to the content that Molly was exposed to, and ensured that police officers who were investigating were not doing so on their own. Yet that was content that a vulnerable teenage girl saw repeatedly, on her own, in isolation from those who could have helped her.

When online safety issues are raised with social media companies, they say things like, "We make this stuff very hard to find." The lived experience of most teenagers is not searching for such material; it is such material being selected by the platforms and targeted at the user. When someone opens TikTok, their first exposure is not to content that they have searched for; it is to content recommended to them by TikTok, which data-profiles the user and chooses things that will engage them. Those engagement-based business models are at the heart of the way the Online Safety Bill works and has to work. If platforms choose to recommend content to users to increase their engagement with the platform, they make a business decision. They are selecting content that they think will make a user want to return more frequently and stay on the platform for longer. That is how free apps make money from advertising: by driving engagement.

It is a fair criticism that, at times, the platforms are not effective enough at recognising the kinds of engagement tools they are using, the content that is used to engage people and the harm that that can do. For a vulnerable person, the sad truth is that their vulnerability will probably be detected by the AI that drives the recommendation tools. That person is far more likely to be exposed to content that will make their vulnerabilities worse. That is how a vulnerable teenage girl can be held by the hand—by an app’s AI recommendation tools—and walked from depression to self-harm and worse. That is why regulating online safety is so important and why the protection of children is so fundamental to the Bill. As hon. Members have rightly said, we must also ensure that we protect adults from some of the illegal and harmful activity on the platforms and hold those platforms to account for the business model they have created.

I take exception to the suggestion from the hon. Member for Pontypridd that this is a content-moderation Bill. It is not; it is a systems Bill. The content that we use, and often refer to, is an exemplar of the problem; it is an exemplar of things going wrong. On all the different areas of harm that are listed in the Bill, particularly the priority legal offences in schedule 7, our challenge to the companies is: “You have to demonstrate to the regulator that you have appropriate systems in place to identify this content, to ensure that you are not amplifying or recommending it and to mitigate it.” Mitigation could be suppressing the content—not letting it be amplified by their tools—removing it altogether or taking action against the accounts that post it. It is the regulator’s job to work with the companies, assess the risk, create codes of practice and then hold the companies to account for how they work.

There is criminal liability for the companies if they refuse to co-operate with the regulator. If they refuse to share information or evidence asked for by the regulator, a named company director will be criminally liable. That was in the original Bill. The recommendation in the Joint Committee report was that that should be commenced within months of the Bill being live; originally it was going to be two years. That is in the Bill today, and it is important that it is there so that companies know they have to comply with requests.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd is right to say that the Bill is world-leading, in the sense that it goes further than other people’s Bills, but other Bills have been enacted elsewhere in the world. That is why it is important that we get on with this.

Alex Davies-Jones: The Minister is right to say that we need to get on with this. I appreciate that he is not responsible for the business of this House, but his party and his Government are, so will he explain why the Bill has been pulled from the timetable next week, if it is such an important piece of legislation?

Damian Collins: As the hon. Lady knows, I can speak to the Bill; I cannot speak to the business of the House—that is a matter for the business managers in the usual way. Department officials—some here and some back at the Department—have been working tirelessly on the Bill to ensure we can get it in a timely fashion. I want to see it complete its Commons stages and go to the House of Lords as quickly as possible. Our target is to ensure that it receives safe passage in this Session of

Parliament. Obviously, I cannot talk to the business of the House, which may alter as a consequence of the changes to Government.

Kirsty Blackman: On that point, will the Minister assure us that he will push for the Bill to come back? Will he make the case to the business managers that the Bill should come back as soon as possible, in order to fulfil his aim of having it pass in this Session of Parliament?

Damian Collins: As the hon. Lady knows, I cannot speak to the business of the House. What I would say is that the Department has worked tirelessly to ensure the safe passage of the Bill. We want to see it on the Floor of the House as quickly as possible—our only objective is to ensure that that happens. I hope that the business managers will be able to confirm shortly when that will be. Obviously, the hon. Lady can raise the issue herself with the Leader of the House at the business statement tomorrow.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): Could the Minister address the serious issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman)? There can be no excuse for search engines to give a prominent place, or indeed any place, to fake Aviva sites—scamming sites—once those have been brought to their attention. Likewise, unacceptable scam ads for Aviva, Martin Lewis or whoever are completely avoidable if decent checks are in place. Will the Government address those issues in the Bill and in other ways?

Damian Collins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. The answer is yes, absolutely. It was always the case with the Bill that illegal content, including fraud, was in scope. The question in the original draft Bill was that that did not include advertising. Advertising can be in the form of display advertising that can be seen on social media platforms; for search services, it can also be boosted search returns. Under the Bill, known frauds and scams that have been identified should not appear in advertising on regulated platforms. That change was recommended by the Joint Committee, and the Government accepted it. It is really important that that is the case, because the company should have a liability; we cannot work just on the basis that the offence has been committed by the person who has created the advert and who is running the scam. If an intermediary platform is profiting out of someone else’s illegal activity, that should not be allowed. It would be within Ofcom’s regulatory powers to identify whether that is happening and to see that platforms are taking action against it. If not, those companies will be failing in their safety duties, and they will be liable for very large fines that can be levied against them for breaching their obligations, as set out in the Online Safety Bill, which can be up to 10% of global revenues in any one year. That power will absolutely be there.

Some companies could choose to have systems in place to make it less likely that scam ads would appear on their platforms. Google has a policy under which it works with the Financial Conduct Authority and does not accept financial product advertising from organisations that are not FCA accredited. That has been quite an effective way to filter out a lot of potential scam ads before they appear. Whether companies have policies such as that, or other ways of doing these things, they

[*Damian Collins*]

will have to demonstrate to Ofcom that those are effective. [*Interruption.*] Does my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) want to come in on that? I can see him poised to spring forward.

Guy Opperman: No, keep going.

Damian Collins: I would like to touch on some of the other issues that have been raised in the debate. The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) and others made the point about smaller, high-risk platforms. All platforms, regardless of size, have to meet the illegal priority harm standard. For the worst offences, they will already have to produce risk assessments and respond to Ofcom's request for information. Given that, I would suspect that, if Ofcom had a suspicion that serious illegal activity, or other activity that was causing serious concern, was taking place on a smaller platform, it would have powers to investigate and would probably find that the platform was in breach of those responsibilities. It is not the case that if a company is not a category 1 company, it is not held to account under the illegal priority harms clauses of the Bill. Those clauses cover a wide range of offences, and it is important—this was an important amendment to the Bill recommended by the Joint Committee—that those offences were written into the Bill so that people can see what they are.

The hon. Member for Pontypridd raised the issue of violence against women and girls, but what I would say is that violence against everyone is included in the Bill. The offences of promoting or inciting violence, harassment, stalking and sending unsolicited sexual images are all included in the Bill. The way the schedule 7 offences work is that the schedule lists existing areas of law. Violence against women and girls is covered by lots of different laws; that is why there is not a single offence for it and why it is not listed. That does not mean that we do not take it seriously. As I said to the hon. Lady when we debated this issue on the first day of Report, we all understand that women and girls are far more likely to be victims of abuse online, and they are therefore the group that should benefit the most from the provisions in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Taiwo Owatemi) spoke about cyber-bullying. Again, offences relating to harassment are included in the Bill. This is also an important area where the regulator's job is to ensure that companies enforce their own terms of service. For example, TikTok, which is very popular with younger users, has in place quite strict policies on preventing bullying, abuse and intimidation on its services. But does it enforce that effectively? So far, we have largely relied on the platforms self-declaring whether that is the case; we have never had the ability to really know. Now Ofcom will have that power, and it will be able to challenge companies such as TikTok. I have raised with TikTok as well my concern about the prevalence of blackout challenge content, which remains on that platform and which has led to people losing their lives. Could TikTok be more effective at removing more of that content? We will now have the regulatory power to investigate—to get behind the curtain and to see what is really going on.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Minister, can I just say that there may be votes very shortly? That means that we will be suspending the sitting and coming back, so if you can—

Damian Collins: Wrap it up in the next—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Preferably.

Damian Collins: I will just touch on a couple of other points that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Simon Fell) and other Members raised the point about the abuse of footballers. The abuse suffered by England footballers after the final of the European championship is a very good example. Some people have been charged and prosecuted for what they posted. It was a known-about risk; it was avoidable. The platform should have done more to stop it. This Bill will make sure that they do.

That shows that we have many offences where there is already a legal threshold, and we want them to be included in the regulatory systems. For online safety standards, it is important that the minimum thresholds are based on our laws. In the debate on “legal but harmful”, one of the key points to consider, and one that many Members have brought up, is what we base the thresholds on. To base them on the many offences that we already have written into law is, I think, a good starting point. We understand what those thresholds are. We understand what illegal activity is. We say to the platforms, “Your safety standards must, at a minimum, be at that level.” Platforms do go further in their terms of service. Most terms of service, if properly enforced, would deal with most of the sorts of content that we have spoken about. That is why, if the platforms are to enforce their terms of service properly, the provisions on traceability and accountability are so important. I believe that that will capture the offences that we need.

My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright) rightly said—if I may paraphrase slightly—that we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good. There will always be new things that we wish to add and new offences that we have not yet thought about that we need to include, and the structure of the Bill creates the framework for that. In the future, Parliament can create new offences that can form part of the schedule of priority illegal offences. On priority harms, I would say that that is the stuff that the platforms have to proactively look for. Anything illegal could be considered illegal online, and the regulators could take action against it.

Let me finish by thanking all the Members here, including my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege), another former Minister. A very knowledgeable and distinguished group of Members have taken part in this debate. Finally, I thank the officials at the Department. Until someone is actually in the Department, they can never quite know what work is being done—that is the nature of Government—but I know how personally dedicated those officials are to the Bill. They have all gone the extra mile in the work they are doing for it. For their sakes and all of ours, I want to make sure that we pass it as soon as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered online harms.

Kettering General Hospital Redevelopment

4 pm

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. Can people kindly leave the Chamber, please? I will call Philip Hollobone to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital.

It is a genuine pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Dowd. I thank Mr Speaker for granting me this debate, and I welcome the Minister to his place. The redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital is the No. 1 local priority for all residents in Kettering and across north Northamptonshire because our hospital is a much-loved local institution. It has been in the town of Kettering since the year of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, in 1897. That was a great year for Kettering because of the establishment of not only the hospital but the much-loved local newspaper, the *Northamptonshire Evening Telegraph*. Here we are, 125 years on, with an extremely exciting programme of investment going into the hospital. It is such an important issue that this is now my ninth debate on Kettering General Hospital and my sixth since September 2019. We really want this redevelopment programme to succeed.

I want to start by acknowledging the Government's commitment to the hospital, because they have pledged a massive amount of money, totalling £563 million. That includes the write-off in 2020 of £167 million of trust debt; an award of £46 million, initially to develop an on-site urgent care hub; and the main investment of £350 million—which was always going to be for 2025 to 2030—under health infrastructure plan 2 funding, for the major redevelopment of the hospital. I welcome that very much indeed. However, pledges of investment are one thing; actually delivering the cash is another. That is why this is now the sixth debate since September 2019. I see it as my role to constantly prod the Government to ensure that the investment is forthcoming.

We need that investment because Kettering and north Northamptonshire are among the fastest-growing places in the country. The hospital serves the population of Northamptonshire and south Leicestershire, which has already grown by double the national average over recent years. The latest Office for National Statistics data estimates above-average percentage population growth of up to 40% over the next 30 years in all three components of population change—net within-UK migration, net international migration and net births and deaths. Corby also has the country's highest birth rate. The hospital expects a 21% increase in the number—

4.3 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

4.46 pm

On resuming—

Mr Hollobone: As I was explaining before our debate was interrupted by votes in the House, the redevelopment of Kettering General Hospital is badly needed. Corby has the country's highest birth rate, and the hospital

expects a 21% increase in the number of over-80s in the local area in the next five years. The area has committed to at least 35,000 new houses over the next 10 years, and the local population is set to rise by some 84,000 to 400,000 people. The accident and emergency unit already sees up to 300 patients every single day in a department that is sized to safely see only 110. Over the next 10 years, the hospital expects the number of A&E attendances to increase by 30,000, up from 100,000. That is the equivalent of almost 80 extra patients a day.

Basically, the A&E is full. It was constructed in 1994 to cope with just 45,000 attendances each year, but 170,000 attendances are expected by 2045. Seventy per cent. of the buildings on the main site are more than 30 years old, and there is a maintenance backlog of £42 million. Sixty per cent. of the hospital estate is rated either poor or bad. Local people all know that investment is badly needed, and the Government have rightly accepted that.

I was delighted when the then Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), and the newly reappointed Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), came to visit the hospital on 22 July. The Minister has a photograph, which I have shared with him, of the Health Secretary standing in front of the temporary power plant, which is now 10 years old. It was hissing, spluttering and sneezing in front of us. That is why the newly redeveloped hospital needs a new energy centre.

One month after the visit, I was delighted to get a nice letter from the Secretary of State, which stated:

“Further to my visit on 22 July to Kettering General Hospital. I write to confirm approval of the funding you requested for enabling works for the next phase of the new hospital.

We discussed how the hospital presently relies on a temporary steam boiler plant and your concerns with the main high voltage electricity supply. You made a compelling case. I can therefore confirm that up to £34m is approved for investment in the new Energy Centre and enabling works, together with a further £4.1m for the high voltage cable. This will now enable this work to commence, and is a positive step forward in providing the facilities staff and patients need.

At our meeting we also discussed the scope to apply the new Hospital 1:0 design, through which the NHS will now procure and build new hospitals, enabling a quicker Treasury approval process, economies of scale delivering better value for money, and faster construction timescales unlocking earlier operational delivery. I look forward to working with you on this as we progress the wider programme of work at Kettering General Hospital.”

That is fantastic news, and we need the project to start as soon as possible. The present timescales that the hospital has provided me with suggest that the electrical work for the new high-voltage cable, for which the hospital has the money, can start in April or May 2023 and be complete by the end of the year. As for the energy centre itself, between now and January 2023, the hospital intends to appoint a construction partner. It aims to complete its final business case by early summer next year, with subsequent approval by the Department of Health and Social Care. Construction will potentially start in December 2023 and be complete by December 2024. The good news is that local residents can expect to see works starting on site in the spring of next year.

The trust has received written approval, not only from the Secretary of State but from the joint investment committee of the Department of Health and Social Care,

[Mr Hollobone]

to progress with the next stage of its plans to build the new energy centre. The next stage is to appoint a construction partner to take the scheme to the final stage of design and to submit a full business case. The total cost is £38.2 million, which includes £4 million for upgrading the electrical intake to the site. To manage the risk of further inflation—which is running at 10% nationally—the trust is looking for commitment from the Department’s new hospital programme team to work on the final business case together, in order to prevent delays in later approvals. I would welcome the Minister’s support for that.

There is also a number of other small enabling works that are “final scheme option agnostic”—in other words, whatever the final design of the newly redeveloped hospital after 2025, those enabling works will be required. They are on a critical path for the hospital to start now in order to keep things on track. Those costs, including the £38 million that has been allocated, are all covered by the initial allocation of £46 million already awarded to the trust. They sit outside the national new hospital programme budget. However, the trust has been told by the new hospital programme team that it cannot proceed with those additional small enabling works. I seek the Minister’s intervention to try to unblock that refusal.

The national new hospital programme team has stated that it is not reviewing overall outline business cases for the main build after 2025 until the end of this year at the earliest. That is a shame; I think it should be sped up. The 2025 timeline for the main new building works to start therefore remains at risk. Will the Minister support Kettering hospital trust with £400,000 of capital in this financial year to progress a small number of other works that are on the critical path? That is not a huge sum of money, and it would enable the scheme to be completed earlier.

Will the Minister encourage the new hospital programme team to co-produce, with the hospital trust, the full business case for the energy centre to minimise further inflation risk related to delays? Will he recognise the advanced position of the overall Kettering scheme, its minimal risk and its ability to make visible, significant progress faster than bigger, more complex schemes, by prioritising it among the current wave three and four schemes?

Since the Secretary of State’s visit, the trust has received official approval from the joint investment committee of the Department of Health and Social Care for the energy centre business case. That approval understandably came with a number of conditions, which the trust and the national team are proactively working through together. That is based on the estimated cost of £38 million. Importantly, it has been agreed that the trust can start the procurement process for a ProCure23 construction partner to develop the energy centre scheme to the next level of detail, and to build the centre.

Following a question from the joint investment committee chair, the trust itself has made a proposal for how it could work with the national team to co-produce the full business case for the energy centre, so that the approval process can be as speedy as possible and inflation and procurement matters can be best managed. That was warmly received by the joint investment committee chair. Timescales for completion remain late 2024, but

they could be advanced through such an approach. I encourage the Minister to actively support us in that bid.

In terms of moving other smaller enabling works forward, the trust has set out which elements are on the critical path for a main build start date after 2025. All elements are agnostic about which final option is approved for the main build, but if they do not start soon, they will affect the trust’s ability to make visible progress on the main scheme once approved. Those elements include the creation of a new car park for patients and staff to replace those lost once construction starts, and moving staff and clinical services into Kettering town centre to free up space on the site for any new build to begin. That also supports the levelling-up agenda and the regeneration of Kettering town itself. I remind the Minister that Kettering is a priority 1 area for levelling-up funding.

The trust is requesting £400,000 in the current year to help to progress those elements, but it will require a total eventual early drawdown of around £8 million for the essential enabling works across the calendar years 2023 and 2024. It is worth noting that adding that £8 million to the £38 million for the energy centre brings the total to the original £46 million sustainability and transformation plan wave 4b funding, which is already part of the trust’s allocation. It is not subject to the larger new hospital programme budget; however, up to this point the trust has so far been told that it cannot progress the additional enabling works.

The hospital’s business case for the main £350 million clinical scheme was submitted on 6 July, and the current national position is that none of the waves 3 and 4 schemes is being considered or reviewed. The trust scheme is a wave 4 scheme, and therefore the hospital is unable to progress any further until the timescales are improved. I emphasise to the Minister that the Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust scheme continues to be ready to progress to the next level of detail, and remains a relatively low-risk scheme to deliver visible progress for the national programme quickly. The hospital already has pre-application planning approval. It does not require public consultation or new land negotiations. It is fully supported by the relevant clinicians and the local integrated care board, and it meets all the key national requirements in terms of net zero carbon and digitalisation.

The hospital is confident that, compared with other larger, more complicated and less advanced schemes, the Kettering scheme offers the national programme an excellent opportunity to push forward a scheme to construction stage by early 2025. Kettering General Hospital and its redevelopment is the No. 1 local priority for local residents. The Minister’s own constituents use Kettering General Hospital on a regular basis. This is a nimble scheme that will deliver early clinical benefits to local patients. I urge him to get fully behind it, so that Kettering can have the redeveloped hospital that all local residents want and need.

4.57 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Neil O’Brien): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering

(Mr Hollobone), on securing this important debate. The fact that he has managed to trigger so many debates on this subject shows what a relentless champion he has been for the project. It was pleasing to hear about the good progress that is being made, in no small part thanks to his help. As he says, I should declare an interest: many of my own constituents use the hospital; and, as I come through his constituency on the train each night, I see the expansion of Kettering that he described, and which makes the investment so necessary.

My hon. Friend asked a number of technical questions that I am afraid I will have to take away and come back to him on, because I want to give precise answers rather than ones that are wrong; however, I undertake to do that with the Department. Kettering General Hospital NHS Foundation Trust continues to work closely with our new hospital programme team as part of the plan to deliver 48 hospitals by 2030. I am pleased to see that, to date, the scheme for Kettering General Hospital has received £4.4 million, and on 14 October—these are live events—we wrote to the trust confirming £38.2 million for the package of enabling works that he talked about, including the new energy centre, which as he said is much needed, and the high voltage cable.

On 20 October, just six days ago, officials from the new hospital programme met with the trust to discuss the next steps for the enabling works, to ensure that the funding can be accessed swiftly. It was a very positive meeting and, subject to some technical assurances being met, which are progressing rapidly, we are working towards a memorandum of understanding that will be signed to enable the drawdown of the funds. That will enable the works to commence and is a positive step forward in providing the facilities that the staff and the patients need. All the hospital projects that are part of the new hospital programme, including the one at Kettering General Hospital, will work with that central team with the support of regional system and local trust leadership to design and deliver that new and exciting investment.

The collaborative approach is intended to help each trust to get the most from its available funding, while avoiding repetition of works. For example, modern construction methods and net zero techniques will be embedded in the programme from the outset, as my hon. Friend called for. That will maximise the benefits of the programme and ensure that we get the best value for money for taxpayers in Kettering and across the country. The commitment to fund a programme of new

hospitals is an exciting opportunity to build the next generation of intelligent healthcare facilities, as well as to embed a long-term capability to manage future capital investment into the NHS, which is much needed.

We are working closely with Kettering on how it will deliver better and more efficient design through the standardisation that comes from the approach we are taking. The intention is that end-to-end delivery timescales will be reduced and we will be able to deliver more quickly. That will also allow the new hospitals to benefit from efficiencies and economies of scale and from being built concurrently with others of the same kind. For Kettering General Hospital, that will mean state-of-the-art facilities to ensure world-class provision of healthcare. That will improve patient outcomes, which is what we all want to see.

The Government have been doing ambitious work, providing substantial capital investment to support the biggest hospital building programme in a generation. In October 2020, an initial £3.7 billion of funding was confirmed to support the delivery of 40 new hospitals, with a further eight schemes invited to bid for future funding to deliver 48 hospitals by 2030. I am pleased that six of the hospitals in the programme are already in construction, including the Royal United Hospital in Bath, which is the first of the 40 new hospitals to begin construction. In addition, in August last year, the northern centre for cancer care opened, the first of the eight hospitals confirmed by the previous Government. This hospital building programme comes in addition to significant upgrades to over 70 hospitals worth £1.7 billion, and a wider programme of capital investment.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering. He has done such good work in continuing to push in such a constructive way to ensure that the meetings are happening as quickly as they need to, that everyone is playing their part and that both sides are working together to fix the issues that he has talked about, to deliver the opportunities that he sees so clearly. I am delighted that we have now approved the business cases for the £38 million-worth of enabling works for the energy centre and the cable, which will enable the work to commence at the site. We will make sure that this ambitious and innovative approach to building new hospitals is a success, not only at Kettering General Hospital, but across the country.

Question put and agreed to.

Pension Credit and Cost of Living Support Grant

5.3 pm

Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered pension credit and the cost-of-living support grant eligibility period extension.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I am not going to go through all the stats that demonstrate that far too many older people live in poverty. I expect others might do that, but I also think we are all in agreement about it. I know that we are all in agreement that the uptake of pension credit—the social security payment that goes only to the very poorest of our pensioners—is, at around 60%, far too low. I know this because the Conservative UK Government have an annual pension credit awareness day and, whenever we have talked about it in Westminster Hall or in the main Chamber, everyone says something more has to be done.

My ask today is for the Government to agree to something that could see the biggest ever increase in uptake of pension credit. I published an early-day motion to that effect, I presented a petition on the Floor of the House and I wrote to myriad Chancellors and Ministers, so far to no avail. My ask, as the motion says, is to extend the deadline for eligibility for the £650 cost of living payment, because the deadline for that crucial help has passed. Anybody applying after 19 August 2022 may well get pension credit, but crucially they will not get that £650. That, I believe, is what could make all the difference in convincing people to apply. It is not enough, in my view, but it is a significant amount that could act as a real incentive when we are all collectively trying to increase uptake.

I have a few other asks before I come to the substance of the debate. I appreciate that those who successfully apply by a date in December will receive half of the payment, which is £324. Although I will argue that they should get the full amount, I would like to know the exact date in December, because there is confusion about that. What strategy will the Government put in place to raise awareness of that entitlement? I do not mind if they do not know yet, as long as they agree to look at it seriously and urgently.

I am concerned about that, because I question what strategy was in place to make people aware in the run-up to the 19 August deadline. I certainly did not see any evidence of it, which makes it something of a missed opportunity. In my constituency, I had a strategy to let people know; when people knew, four of my team spent a day and a half helping a steady stream of constituents make their applications. What did the Government do to raise awareness?

I am sure there are pensioners who would also be grateful if the Minister could tell us what the situation is with the triple lock guarantee on pensions.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Pensioner poverty is a significant issue, particularly in my constituency, where 25,000 people receive the basic state pension. I am very concerned at how hard it is to find out how many of those 25,000 are eligible for pension credit but are missing out on that vital support, which could be

the difference between putting food on the table and turning the heating on this winter or not. At one time, the Department for Work and Pensions monitored eligibility for pension credit—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. This is an intervention, not a speech. Would you bring it to a conclusion?

Richard Foord: I am suggesting that the Government should pledge not only to keep the triple lock on pensions but to restart monitoring so we can get support to the people who really need it.

Anne McLaughlin: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. It is really important that we monitor it. We are talking about the people in these four countries who are the very poorest and really need that help.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), clearly said at Prime Minister's questions last week that the triple lock would apply. That seemed to be a little surprising to the Chancellor. Now that we have a new Prime Minister, but the same Chancellor, does the Minister know whether they will renege on that or keep to the Government's word?

Finally, something that pensioners and others are desperately worried about is the uprating of social security entitlements—or benefits, as they are called here. Can the Minister tell us what is happening with that? Coming back to the main thrust of the debate, I believe that if the deadline is extended and anyone who successfully applies for pension credit by 31 March next year is also entitled to the £650 cost of living payment, it will act as a significant incentive and will enable us, together, to convince people to apply.

Let us look at some of the reasons why 40% of those who are entitled to pension credit do not apply for it, why £7.7 million goes unclaimed in my constituency of Glasgow North East and why £2.2 billion goes unclaimed in the UK every year. On that £2 billion, I appreciate that if everyone took up their entitlement it would cost the Treasury a lot of money. However, failing to deliver pension credit to every eligible person costs the UK an estimated £4 billion a year in increased NHS and social care costs. That is according to research commissioned by Independent Age and carried out by Loughborough University. That sounds to me like we would be almost £2 billion better off. More importantly, it would eradicate pensioner poverty almost entirely.

There are lots of reasons why people do not apply, but I will look at the three main reasons: stigma, a perception that the process is complicated and not knowing about it. I thank Independent Age, Age Scotland and Age UK for all the work they do and for meeting me on Monday to discuss the debate. The one thing that they had all repeatedly found was that many older people who do know about pension credit, and who even know how to apply, still do not because they are too embarrassed. They talk about the stigma and how they believe they should be able to cope. They talk about not accepting charity handouts.

Some politicians and some sections of the media have got a lot to answer for here. I have not heard anyone calling pensioners workshy, greedy or layabouts, but that is how so many talk about other people who are in receipt of benefits. If it is rife, it goes largely

unchecked and, while they may not be talking specifically about pensioners and pension credit, the impact on pensioners and the resulting feeling of shame among them is real. It is stopping people applying and we need to stop that. The rest of us need to call it out when it happens.

The Government have to say as loudly, as clearly and as often as possible, exactly what I said when I toured bingo halls, lunch clubs and pensioner groups in my constituency in the summer, trying to get people to apply. The Government need to say, "This is your legal entitlement. This is not charity. You have worked for this. You have brought up families. You have made your contribution to society. Thank you. Now please apply for your legal entitlement." That is what the UK Government have to say when rolling out the awareness-raising strategy I mentioned earlier. Although I did not see any response from the Minister at that point, I sensed agreement that that would happen.

The second issue is that it is perceived to be complicated to apply. Between them, my team applied for around 60 people and found the online process to be fairly straightforward, but that is because they are au fait with technology. Many older people do use it, but many more are frightened by it. I realise that there are other ways to apply, but there is the perception that it will be difficult. We need to work on that, and we need to fund those organisations that help people make their applications when they are struggling.

There are a lot of other reasons why the 40% not apply, but the final one I want to talk about is simply not knowing that pension credit exists. I leafleted thousands of people in my constituency. I focused on some of the poorest parts of Glasgow North East, letting them know about pension credit and offering to help them apply. The phone rang off the hook. We were truly overwhelmed by the response, but also taken aback by the number of people who said, "I have never heard of pension credit. What is it?" There is clearly a massive job to be done to let people know.

I raised this matter in the Chamber in 2020 and was told that there was a poster campaign in GP surgeries, but nobody was getting into GP surgeries then because of lockdown. It did not sound as though anything else was being done to make people aware. A proper professional strategy would look at multiple ways to let people know. Industry professionals will say that someone needs to see something advertised between seven and eight times before it properly sinks in. One day of action a year is not nearly enough.

Age UK has a fantastic briefing on how to get the message across to the right people. The Work and Pensions Committee has called for a proper strategy. Wales and Scotland have benefit uptake strategies. Indeed, in Scotland it is a statutory duty: sections 8 and 9 of the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018 say that Scottish Ministers must prepare, publish and lay before Parliament strategies to promote take-up of Scottish social security assistance. We need a full strategy for pension credit uptake, and there is no better time to do that than this winter.

That brings me to why I want the deadline to be extended, effectively to the end of winter. When I started talking to people in the constituency about the deadline of 19 August, I got lots of blank looks. A lot of people paid lip service and said they would have a look and maybe apply, but when I mentioned the £650 cost

of living payment they would get if they were successful in their application, many of them started to take it more seriously, because they were starting to be concerned about predicted rises in energy costs.

Notwithstanding the fact that so many people do not know that it exists or how to apply for it, for those who do but feel they should be able to manage and are too embarrassed about taking money, it might be only this winter that the message really hits home. If someone is told in the middle of summer about help they can get for heating later in the year, it does not have the same impact as finding out about it in the dead of winter. It is easy when the sun is shining to think, "I'll be fine." That is especially so if the mindset, as it often is with this generation, is, "I should be able to manage." But when someone is sitting at home, so cold that their bones are aching and they have had their one hour of heating, and they now have to hope that the cardigan and blanket are enough to keep them alive, and despite that frugality they are staring at a massive bill they cannot pay, that is when we will be able to get the message across that they could get an extra £650 of help, as well as extra money every week. That is when, for those people who are desperate to manage without so-called handouts, it will stop being a choice. They will have no option but to apply for pension credit—the thing we all say we want them to do.

If the Government do not change their mind, and do not extend the deadline to the end of winter, those people will still be sitting, freezing, in pain. They will still be being frugal, and will still be hit with eye-watering bills that they cannot pay. Then, all they will have is the knowledge that they could have had an extra £650, had they not been too embarrassed to apply back in August.

What about those older people who just did not know? With the pain of the cold reducing them to tears, nobody to turn to for help and no way of paying their bills, someone tells them about the pension credit that they knew nothing about. Then they say, "But you're too late for the £650." How will that help to dry their tears? It will not. It will simply devastate people further to know that the money was there, that the Government believed that they needed it, that they had been entitled to it, and that, despite needing it, they will be denied that help. How will that make them feel, and how are they supposed to survive this winter?

What I am asking for is simple. Currently, any pensioner who was entitled to pension credit by 25 May this year and applied for it by 19 August will get an extra £650 to help with the cost of living crisis this winter. Any pensioner who was entitled to pension credit by 25 August this year and applied for it by December will get half that amount—an extra £324. Let us recognise how hard this winter will be, and how much literally freezing will concentrate people's minds. Let us extend the deadline from 25 May, before the summer, to the end of winter: 31 March 2023. Let us say that anyone who becomes entitled to pension credit before 31 March next year and applies for it by then will also get the full £650. Let us do it without interruption to the payment dates for those who are currently entitled.

Then, let us get in the professionals and get a proper advertising strategy up and running. Let us tell people, "This is your legal entitlement." I want to hear the Minister say that with passion and conviction. Let us help people to apply. Let us not look back on this year

[*Anne McLaughlin*]

as the year that the UK Government completely neglected the pensioners of our four countries, just when those pensioners needed the Government the most. Instead, when we are through the cost of living crisis, let us look back and be proud that there are hundreds—hopefully thousands—more pensioners receiving the pension credit to which they were always entitled, and which enables them to enjoy life a bit more.

There is no excuse for not extending the deadline. It would make all the difference to whether older people eat, heat and live or die. If the Minister cannot say yes today—I understand that this is a new Government—I implore him to at least agree to give it serious consideration. If he is says no, can he tell us what possible justification he has?

5.18 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Dowd. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (*Anne McLaughlin*) for securing this important debate. I fully support her call for the Government to extend the eligibility period for the £650 pension credit cost of living grant to the end of the financial year.

Independent Age's analysis of Government figures shows that around one in six older people in the UK live in poverty. Many are already struggling to afford essentials, and with spiralling energy prices and the general cost of living, that is set only to get much worse. I welcomed the support grant itself, and the plan for an additional £300 pensioner cost of living payment. However, sadly, as hon. Members have heard, Independent Age suggests that more than 850,000 pensioners in the UK do not even receive the pension credit to which they are entitled. That is likely due to a combination of digital exclusion, apprehension about applying and social stigma—and that is before they are even eligible for the extra cost of living payment. We must remember that pension credit is a financial top-up for some of the pensioners who are most in need in this country. In many cases, it means that people do not have to choose between heating their homes and eating. Nobody in the world's fifth biggest economy should ever face that choice.

A great campaign run by Greater Manchester Housing Providers, Independent Age, Age UK Salford and Citizens Advice Salford has been supporting people to take up their pension age benefits. As of June 2022, it estimated there is over £6.3 million of pension credit unclaimed this year in Salford alone. Independent Age estimated that if everybody who is eligible received pension credit, roughly one in three pensioners in poverty would be lifted out of it. That is the impact these payments have on people's lives.

The Government must step up to ensure that our pensioners—our grandmothers, grandfathers and elderly friends—receive the support they are entitled to in the first place, as well as the additional crisis support. They certainly should not be excluded due to short, strict deadlines when we know that these exclusion factors are already at play. This is not just about compassion; as we heard from the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, Independent Age estimates that low uptake of pension credit costs the Government £4 billion a year in increased

NHS and social care spending. These deadlines are an arbitrary, cruel barrier that the Government are choosing to impose, but they can easily amend them in this time of crisis.

Alongside that, the Government should confirm as a matter of urgency that they will increase income top-ups such as pension credit, not just the state pension, in line with inflation according to the consumer prices index or the higher rate of the pensions triple lock. They should also look urgently at increasing all benefits in line with inflation. According to recent figures from the Resolution Foundation think-tank, the number of all people living in absolute poverty in the UK is projected to rise by 2.9 million between 2021-22 and 2023-24. A real-terms benefit cut would add another 600,000 people to that rise, including 300,000 children.

These are our most economically vulnerable households, and if the magical, mythical unicorn of compassionate conservatism that the Chancellor referred to recently is to be given any meaning at all, the Government can start today by extending the pension credit cost of living grant deadline and uprating benefits and pensions in line with recent inflation figures.

5.22 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (*Anne McLaughlin*) on securing this important debate.

We have already heard about the considerable benefits of pension credit and the support it can provide to pensioners in need. I am proud that the previous Labour Government introduced pension credit to tackle the Tory legacy of pensioner poverty. Worryingly, the Department for Work and Pensions itself admits that almost 1 million pensioners are failing to claim money that they are owed. We need to be clear that this is not charity or a handout; this is money that people are entitled to. An eye-watering £1.7 billion in pension credit is left unclaimed. Just think about the difference that would make to pensioners across the UK who are dealing with the Conservatives' cost of living crisis. It really is deplorable that the Government allow so much money to go unclaimed, especially at such a difficult time.

I want to reflect on an event I held at the beginning of this month, a pension credit day of action, with my two local citizens advice bureaux in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. I contacted more than 6,000 people who were likely to be under-claiming pension credit and encouraged them to attend an open day, where Citizens Advice staff helped them to apply. I am delighted to report that over 200 people attended, with many more making contact before and after the event. In fact, during a door-knocking session last Friday, I spoke to another lady who was unable to attend the action day itself, but she will be contacting Citizens Advice to seek its support. In addition to making applications for pension credit, the amazing staff and volunteers at Citizens Advice identified unclaimed eligibility for attendance allowance, personal independence payments and council tax reductions. Incredibly, in just one day we were able to increase income via benefit take-up by over £200,000. As my local citizens advice bureaux stated, in a cost of living crisis that support is simply invaluable.

That shows that the Government could, if they chose, take a more targeted approach to ensure that no one eligible for pension credit misses out.

I hope that the Minister can tell us a little more about what the Department for Work and Pensions can and will do. I know, it knows, we all know, that many people are eligible but not applying. The DWP knows far more of the detail of who may be eligible, so why does it not contact them directly to encourage them to apply? That would, as we have heard, help to eradicate pensioner poverty and, in a cost of living crisis, make a life-changing difference to some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. The DWP can do more. The question for the Minister today is: will it?

5.25 pm

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for securing this important debate. She spoke incredibly eloquently and framed this debate extremely well. She is a passionate advocate on this subject, and is truly a champion of the cause.

The Back Benchers who have spoken today are correct: pensioners are facing the brunt of this cost of living crisis, which has been exacerbated by Tory mismanagement of the economy. It is imperative that we do all we can to support pensioners. As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East noted, pensioners across all four nations of the UK receive the lowest state pension, as a proportion of pre-retirement wages, of any country in north-west Europe. In a recent report released by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2.1 million pensioners, almost a fifth of all pensioners, across the UK were classified as living in poverty. That number continues to grow and is a direct result of a decade of brutal Tory austerity.

As the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) stated, the cost of living crisis has left pensioners making the difficult decision of whether they can afford to buy essentials. Age UK has warned that pensioners have had to switch off vital medical equipment to save on energy costs. This is not pensioners spending their money on luxury items. This is a crisis that threatens some of the most vulnerable in our society, and it is likely to worsen as we approach winter.

Although the support announced by the UK Government, particularly the £650 cost of living payment, is welcome, it is important that decisive action be taken to ensure that all those eligible for payment receive it. As has been stated, to qualify for that support, people must first be eligible for pension credit, but only seven in 10 of those entitled to the credit claim it. That means that each year more than £1.7 billion goes unclaimed; that represents more than 800,000 families not receiving the money to which they are entitled.

As the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) mentioned, it is vital that we do more to ensure that all those eligible for pension credit receive it. It is deeply worrying, given the difficult financial times that we face, that so many families are not receiving the support for which they are eligible, so I echo the calls from all Back-Bench MPs today—well, the two Back-Bench MPs from Opposition parties, because there is none from the Government party. I echo their calls for the

UK Government to take decisive action to ensure greater uptake of pension credit. It is critical that people understand that support is available to them.

As Member of Parliament for Airdrie and Shotts, I receive regular correspondence from pensioners asking for advice. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney spoke of citizens advice bureaux. The Airdrie citizens advice bureau does a fantastic amount of work helping pensioners; actually, today it has its annual general meeting. However, studies have found that 45% of people in my constituency are worried about the future of their pensions. That is why it is so important for the UK Government to extend the eligibility period deadline to ensure that those who have failed to apply in time receive the extra payment. The level of support available can make all the difference during these times.

The Minister must commit to introducing a proper strategy to ensure that the benefits reserved to Westminster are given to those who are entitled to them. The UK Government would do well to copy the strategy of the Scottish Government, who see welfare payments as an investment in society, and so implement strategies to ensure the maximum uptake of benefits. I ask the Minister to agree to the ask of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East, and to specifically clarify what steps he will take to ensure that pensioners are aware of the financial assistance available to them.

It is clear that the only way we can ensure that Scottish pensioners and those across all four nations can receive dignity and fairness in retirement is by having full powers of independence. Time and again, the Westminster-based Tory Government short-change pensioners, whether it be through cutting pension credit for mixed-age couples, which costs some people thousands of pounds, or through the injustices faced by Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign women. It is clear that Scotland cannot wait for Westminster to act.

5.31 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) on securing the debate, and I thank everybody who has spoken on this important subject.

Families and pensioners across the country face an unprecedented cost of living crisis. They need help and support at this difficult time, and it is important that questions be asked about the nature of the Government response. I turn first to the scale of the cost of living crisis. There is no doubt that we face a crisis, the like of which has not been seen since at least the 1950s. Costs faced by families and pensioners have risen dramatically: the cost of energy is going up, the cost of food is going up, and the overall cost of living is going up.

I want to focus on some specifics, including the recent data on inflation. We learned yesterday that everyday foods have risen by over 10%, which hits pensioners and others on low incomes very hard. For example, the price of a loaf of bread has risen by 37.6%, and the cost of tea has risen by 46%. These are dramatic rises that show the importance of pension credit. The benefit was designed to help pensioners on very modest incomes, and it is an important legacy of Gordon Brown's leadership, both at the Treasury and as the UK's Prime Minister, during the last Labour Government. The current Government

[*Matt Rodda*]

are failing to encourage sufficient take-up of this important benefit, and we should bear in mind that many of the recipients of pension credit are women, while others are disabled.

As discussed earlier, nearly 1 million pensioners are eligible for this important benefit but go without it at the moment. That is a total of £1.7 billion unclaimed—to put it another way, that is £1,900 for every qualifying household missing out. It is a staggering sum of money that could make a real difference. This is particularly important because pension credit unlocks other benefits, such as free TV licences for the over-75s. Questions to the Department for Work and Pensions have revealed that the Department is spending approximately £1.2 million on increasing the take-up of pension credit, yet it is still failing to achieve a sufficient level of awareness, as we have heard. A Labour Government would treat this issue very seriously. It would be one of the key priorities for the Department, and we would work really hard to encourage take-up.

In the remaining time available to me, I ask the Minister three questions. As we have heard, there is a lot that the Government should be explaining. First, what is the Government's plan to support pensioners and working families, in both the short and long term? Secondly, how will the Government control inflation and bring down the spiralling cost of living after causing this cost of living crisis? Thirdly, how will Ministers increase the take-up of pension credit for those who urgently need it? I hope the Minister is able to respond to those questions, and to the other points made in the debate. I ask him to commit in writing to responding to me on this issue.

I appreciate that time is pressing and the Minister needs to respond. Let me reiterate the scale of the crisis that we face, and the need for a clear and consistent response. I urge the Government to do a much better job of encouraging take-up of this very important benefit.

5.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Alex Burghart): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Dowd. I hope that hon. Members will forgive me; I am losing my voice, but I will try to speak as clearly as I can into the microphone. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Anne McLaughlin) for securing this important debate on an important subject. I pay tribute to her campaigning work, because helping people to realise the benefits to which they are entitled helps everybody in society. I know she understands that.

My Department will always welcome opportunities to explain what we are already doing to support pensioners. We know the importance of ensuring that people up and down the country are looked after, post retirement. This topic is particularly pertinent given the recent increase in the cost of living. We are taking this challenge incredibly seriously, which is why we have spent more than £37 billion this year on cost of living support, as well as delivering on the energy price guarantee.

This financial year, total expenditure on benefits for pensioners will be well over £134 billion, which represents about 5.4% of GDP. This high investment ensures that

the basis of our safety net for pensioners—the full yearly basic state pension—remains strong. It has brought the British state pension in line with that in other OECD countries. The amount that we provide is higher than it is in countries such as Switzerland, Norway and Germany. One of the major successes of this Government, auto-enrolment, has led to over 10.7 million extra employees paying into a workplace pension, so that they can save for a safe and secure future. The issue is particularly pertinent today, because it is the 10th anniversary of auto-enrolment.

Matt Rodda: Would the Minister like to pay tribute to the last Labour Government for designing the policy?

Alex Burghart: I certainly pay tribute to the last Labour Government, as well as the Pensions Commission, which had cross-party support, and the support of organisations such as the Centre for Social Justice, which I used to work for. Steve Webb, formerly of the Liberal Democrats, also contributed to that work. It was, however, the coalition Government, led by the Conservatives, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), when he was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who made it happen. All that good work has had a demonstrable effect: in 2021, 400,000 fewer pensioners were in absolute poverty than when the Conservatives came to power. That is a remarkable achievement of which we are rightly proud.

To complement the state pension, pension credit—mentioned a number of times in this debate—offers an extra layer of support for people over state pension age and on a low income. Pension credit provides an invaluable top-up to a person's state pension, ensuring that single pensioners receive a minimum of £182.60 per week and couples receive at least £278.70 per week. Crucially, as other hon. Members have mentioned, pension credit acts as a passport to other help, including for rent, council tax and heating.

A comprehensive benefit package including pension credit is only worth while if claimants access the support. We are aware that, historically, take-up of pension credit has been too low. To increase pension credit awareness, in April we launched a comprehensive paid advertising campaign, including a promotional video fronted by Len Goodman of "Strictly Come Dancing" and my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), who did so much in his five years in the job to improve opportunities for people planning for their pensions and claiming them. That campaign has now been viewed well over a million times. The campaign further focused on encouraging the private sector to help drive up claims and reach those who may be reticent about claiming pension credit.

As the hon. Member for Glasgow North East said, no one should feel ashamed about claiming this money. The reason why we have it is so that people can come forward and take it. We want them to have it. Success for us is 100% of people claiming it. I do not think she was implying that the Government sought to stigmatise people who claim benefits—we absolutely do not. We have created a benefits system that is designed as a safety net to support the most disadvantaged in society, but also to help people who are capable of work to move into work.

Anne McLaughlin: To clarify, I was blaming individual politicians and sections of the media for besmirching the character of people in receipt of social security payments. I am not suggesting that the UK Government are doing that. What was the increase in the number of people applying for pension credit after that campaign? What was done in the run-up to the crucial deadline of 19 August, and what will the Government do in the run-up to December, because that is an important incentive for people. It is not enough to have the £324, but it will act as an important incentive.

Alex Burghart: I thank the hon. Lady for her clarification. I have not heard any colleagues use that sort of language. I will answer her point in my speech.

We continue to work closely with a whole range of stakeholders, including Age UK, Independent Age and Citizens Advice, which have reach and expertise to identify other practical initiatives that will help encourage eligible pensioners to claim. On 15 June, the DWP had a second pension credit day of action with the media, in which we encouraged the media to reach out to pensioners, their family and friends. Thanks to that day of action, we recorded a 275% increase in claims in the week of 13 June this year, compared with the same week in 2021. The DWP has received unprecedented volumes of new claims for pension credit. Weekly claims tripled between December 2021 and August 2022, so we are seeing a genuine increase in traffic. Obviously, the quoted figures for uptake are about 70%, and the uptake for guarantee credit, which is the main safety net within pension credit, is 73%. Those figures are from 2019-20, before the current days of action and the campaign push, so we very much hope the next set of figures will be some way above that.

Prior to that campaign, the previous Minister for Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham, wrote to all MPs to request their support. It has been heartening to hear all the Members who have spoken today give evidence of how they responded to that request. I know there is still work to do. The latest available estimates show that there are still substantial numbers of people who may be eligible for pension credit but are not claiming it. That is why we continue to encourage everyone to reach out to their own networks and use resources such as the pension credit calculator on gov.uk. By working together, cross-party, we can ensure that those eligible for pension credit receive the support they need.

It is particularly important that we encourage those eligible to make a claim because for those above state pension age, eligibility for the means-tested benefits cost of living payments is determined through pension credit entitlement. The £650 cost of living payment will help to ease the pressures that pensioners are currently facing. The payment was designed to target those on low incomes, which is why a household will automatically receive a cost of living payment if they are eligible to receive a pension credit payment during the qualifying period. We did this because we needed to get a big system up and running at high speed. We found it was the quickest and most effective way to deliver support to more than 8 million people on the lowest incomes.

Anne McLaughlin: I appreciate the Minister taking another intervention—I am doing so to help his throat and give him the chance to have a glass of water. If he

is saying, “It was set up quickly because we had to help people as a matter of urgency,” that is good. However, we have now had time to think about it. I have written several times and been campaigning on this, but he has not yet answered the question: will he extend the deadline to 31 March, or will he consider extending it? Will he not say no today? Will he give people a little hope that they might get it? He is making the clear point that it is for households in absolute need. Well, they are still in absolute need—

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): Order. You are bordering on making another speech, rather than an intervention.

Anne McLaughlin: I am trying to help the Minister’s throat.

Peter Dowd (in the Chair): I appreciate that. Will you respond, Minister?

Alex Burghart: Thank you, Mr Dowd. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East for her lengthy intervention, which enabled me to get another bottle of water.

In answer to the hon. Lady’s question, this is a complex system that was set up at pace in order to reach about 8 million people. I understand the point that she is making: if the deadline were extended, more people would have a chance to apply. We are looking into a range of measures to encourage people to take it up before the final deadline. She asked earlier when that deadline would be. I am pleased to tell her that it is 19 December.

The £650 payment has been split into two payments with different qualifying periods to reduce the chance of someone missing out completely. If a household did not receive the first payment of £326 in July, it might still receive the second payment of £324 in November. To qualify for the second cost of living payment, individuals must be entitled to a payment of pension credit for any day in the period 26 August to 25 September 2022.

As pension credit claims can be backdated up to three months, however, if the person is eligible for the three-month period, it is not too late to qualify for the second cost of living payment. We therefore urge people to get their applications in as soon as possible and by no later than 19 December, as I said. That will ensure that, if they are eligible for pension credit for the previous three months, they will also qualify for the second cost of living payment. In that way, we can ensure that those eligible will receive the support they need at the earliest opportunity.

We are not changing the qualifying dates for the second tranche of the cost of living payments for any of the means-tested benefits. The eligibility period must remain consistent, so it is simple to deliver the payments quickly and on a scale to support millions of people on low incomes.

I remind Members that cost of living payments are just one part of the welfare support available to pensioners this winter. A key part of the support that we offer is the energy price guarantee, which will reduce energy bills significantly this winter. Also, owing to the impact of higher energy costs on pensioners, the Government will pay an additional £300 in a pensioner cost of living payment as a top-up to the winter fuel payment. Those payments of £500 or £600 per household will be sent

[Alex Burghart]

out from mid-November. That is in addition to the cold weather payments, which helped more than 4 million people last year. Also, we must not forget the £150 council tax rebate earlier this year.

Finally, for those who need additional support, we recently extended the household support fund, which will now run until the end of March 2023, bringing total funding for that support to £1.5 billion. In England, that will take the form of an extension to the household support fund, backed by £421 million. The devolved Administrations will receive £79 million through the Barnett formula, with Scotland allocated £41 million of that.

As a Department, we will continue to work to increase take-up of pension credit to ensure that vulnerable pensioners receive the support they need this year and beyond. I am happy to talk to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East about it again in future.

5.49 pm

Anne McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for his response. He said that the number of claims increased by 275% during the week of pension credit awareness day. That seems to me to be an argument in favour of having more than one such week. If everybody who was entitled applied and the number of claims increased, how many weeks would it take to eradicate pensioner poverty? Perhaps I will go and work that out.

The Minister said that the deadline is 19 December. On the strategy of telling people, “Apply for this because you will also get an extra £324”—which is a real incentive, though not as much as £650—he said that a range of

measures are being looked at. I would like to know more about them, so perhaps he could write to me. The advertising campaign that he mentioned sounds great, but I could not find it on YouTube, so it was not that high profile.

The Minister said that the Treasury is spending £134 billion on social security and extra cost of living payments this year. An extra £2 billion of support is a drop in the ocean for the UK Government, but not for the individuals who receive it. Let us not forget that it costs us £4 billion extra not to pay that money. I could introduce the Minister to people who told me how pension credit enabled them to live life again. They are not talking about partying or living the life of Riley; they are talking about being able to relax and be part of society. Do they not deserve that after working hard all their lives?

This might be because of the Minister’s throat, but I did not hear him say a hard no with conviction. I will take that as a sign that, at some point, he will accept that pension credit is different from other social security payments, in that it has incredibly low uptake, in part because people think that they should not have to ask the Government for money. I will continue to argue that the Minister should make a special case and extend the deadline to 31 March. I look forward to continued discussion with him.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered pension credit and the cost-of-living support grant eligibility period extension.

5.52 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 26 October 2022

CABINET OFFICE

Notification of Contingent Liabilities: Liquidation of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group

The Minister for Crime, Policing and Fire (Jeremy Quin): Today I am notifying the House of the steps taken by the Government in regards to the compulsory liquidation of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group Ltd.

Throughout this unfolding situation the Government have prioritised the continued delivery of public services. Taxpayers should not be expected to bail out a private sector company or allow rewards for failure.

The court has appointed an official receiver from the Insolvency Service who has taken control of the supply of services upon which public services ultimately rely. Whether these services are affected directly or throughout their supply chain, we will support the official receiver to find suitable alternative solutions for these customers.

In order to safeguard our public services, Departments affected have been implementing contingency plans.

The customers exposed to UKCloud Ltd may have their contracts repriced in return for continuation of services in the short term. This will allow the retention and employment of staff to deliver these services until suitable alternatives are found.

I would like to provide further reassurance that all employees affected by this liquidation will be contacted directly by the official receiver with regards to their position, rights and entitlements.

Our top priority, which we have emphasised to the official receiver, is to safeguard the continuity of public services. I have laid a departmental minute today notifying the House of two contingent liabilities that have been incurred by my Department in indemnifying the official receiver for any claims made against him, and for any costs and expenses incurred by him in carrying out the proper performance of his duties as liquidator. The official receiver has now taken over the running of services for a period following the insolvency of the company and will evaluate the appropriate insolvency strategy. The court appointment of the official receiver will allow us to protect the delivery of public services—something that would not have been possible under a normal liquidation process.

Alongside ministerial colleagues, I will keep the House updated on this ongoing situation.

[HCWS344]

EDUCATION

Hesley Group Children's Homes: Independent Report

The Secretary of State for Education (Gillian Keegan): Today, the independent child safeguarding practice review panel published phase 1 findings from its national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings. I want to thank the

panel for their work to date and for their continued commitment as they move into phase 2, which will make recommendations to improve practice and policy in spring 2023. I also want to extend my thanks to Doncaster Safeguarding Partnership and South Yorkshire police for their co-operation and contribution to the review.

The report outlines the shocking abuse and safeguarding failures in three dual-registered children's homes/residential special schools for disabled children in Doncaster, owned by the private provider the Hesley Group. I am horrified about what has happened and I want to assure the House that this is something that I, and the Department, take with the utmost seriousness.

The children living in such homes are some of the most vulnerable in our society and it is imperative that we protect them from harm. We expect all children's homes and residential schools to provide the right support, care and protection for children who live there.

Following whistleblowing referrals in February 2021, Ofsted undertook emergency inspections. The provision's registration was suspended and the 60 children and young adults who resided in the settings were moved to alternative settings by May. I understand that the families and the children themselves found the urgency of moving a very unsettling and disturbing process, and my heart goes out to the children, young people and their families who went through this. Doncaster Safeguarding Partnership took the lead on investigating these incidents and on working with all other relevant local authorities to ensure that the children and families affected have received support and care and been able to participate in this investigation. I am grateful to them for their action.

Given the seriousness of the concerns and the vulnerability of the children, it has been important to learn lessons as soon as possible on how to improve practice and policy to protect children better in future. That is why the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi), agreed the panel should undertake a national child safeguarding practice review at the same time as the ongoing live criminal investigation. This is the first time that the panel has carried out a review while a live police investigation is ongoing, and I am unable to provide any further comments on specifics of the case as we need to respect that process.

The safety and wellbeing of all children and young people in the settings has been at the heart of all the decisions we have made. In January, my officials sought and received assurances from 55 local authorities (LAs) about the wellbeing of all of the children that had been placed in the provision operated by Hesley in scope of the investigation. In February my officials wrote out to remind all LAs of the importance of checks for all children placed out of area and the importance of ensuring that disclosure barring service and pre-employment checks are always undertaken prior to anyone's employment in residential establishments.

We also asked LAs to review their commissioning processes for children and young people with complex needs and ensure that they acted on any concerns. The panel has asked all LAs in England to review urgently the quality and safety of individual placements of children in specialist residential provision, and they will report to the Department by the end of the year.

Phase one of the review has set out the complex interactions between special educational needs and disability (SEND) and children's social care services, and the challenges regarding placement quality, commissioning and oversight. Phase 2 of the review will commence shortly and will ask some important questions about how children with SEND are safeguarded and cared for in residential settings. Most importantly, it will seek to identify ways in which practice, policy and the system might need to change to protect children better in the future.

The independent review of children's social care and the SEND and alternative provision Green Paper provide an opportunity to reset children's social care and SEND services and provide better outcomes for the most vulnerable children. Recent reports by the Competition and Markets Authority, the national child safeguarding panel and the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse will also be reflected in our response. Our plans for children's social care and SEND reform are being drawn up in parallel so that reforms resulting from these reviews lead to a coherent system that works for all vulnerable children. We are rapidly working up an ambitious and comprehensive implementation strategy in response to the reviews.

However, I am committed to taking urgent action to change and improve the system as soon as possible. The Department will bring forward work to:

Strengthen the standards and regulations governing the care of children who are looked after to ensure consistently high-quality provision and inspection, with a high level of ambition for all children;

Strengthen the national minimum standards for residential special schools; and

Work with Ofsted to strengthen its inspection and regulatory powers to hold private providers of children's homes to account.

We will work closely with other Government Departments and partner organisations, particularly local authorities, to review the role of the local authority designated officer (LADO) and consult on developing a LADO handbook that includes improving handling whistleblowing concerns and complaints in circumstances such as these.

In addition, I will convene a roundtable discussion with providers of residential special schools and children's homes, to ensure they are holding themselves and their staff to the highest quality standards and are confident that the vulnerable children in their care are safe and having their needs met. While the majority of children's homes are rated good or outstanding, I want to work with providers to tackle issues which have been highlighted in phase 1 of the panel report and act on the recommendations which will follow on completion of phase 2 of the panel's work.

I also expect Ofsted, as the inspector and regulator of residential children's homes, to take urgent action wherever safeguarding concerns are identified. I have written to His Majesty's chief inspector of education, children's services and skills to ask what lessons Ofsted has learned and the changes they have made as a result.

[HCWS343]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 26 October 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	288	WOMEN AND EQUALITIES — <i>continued</i>	
Engagements.....	288	Hate Crime	279
WOMEN AND EQUALITIES	279	Higher Education: White State-Educated Children.....	284
Cost of Living: Children with SEND.....	284	Topical Questions	285
Cost of Living: Women in the Workplace	281	Women in British Motorsport.....	282
Disabled People: Building Adjustments	283		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 26 October 2022

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	3WS	EDUCATION	3WS
Notification of Contingent Liabilities: Liquidation of UKCloud Ltd and Virtual Infrastructure Group	3WS	Hesley Group Children's Homes: Independent Report.....	3WS

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**not later than
Wednesday 2 November 2022**

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 26 October 2022

Speaker's Statement [Col. 279]

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 279] [see index inside back page]

Minister for Women and Equalities
Prime Minister

Home Secretary: Resignation and Reappointment [Col. 299]

Answer to urgent question—(Jeremy Quin)

UK-India Trade Deal [Col. 308]

Answer to urgent question—(Greg Hands)

General Election (Date) [Col. 316]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Former Ministers and Prime Ministers (Abolition of Payments) [Col. 316]

Bill presented, and read the First time

Consumer Telephone Service Standards [Col. 317]

Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Robert Halfon)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Bill [Lords] [Col. 319]

Considered in Committee; as amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Petition [Col. 372]

Diagnostic Hospital: Stockton [Col. 374]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Global Food Security [Col. 129WH]

Levelling Up Barry, Vale of Glamorgan [Col. 149WH]

Online Harms [Col. 156WH]

Kettering General Hospital Redevelopment [Col. 181WH]

Pension Credit and Cost of Living Support Grant [Col. 187WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 3WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
