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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

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House of Commons

Thursday 17 November 2022

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Food Production

1. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase food production. [902203]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government food strategy sets out what we will do to create a more prosperous agrifood sector that delivers healthier, more sustainable and more affordable food, including commitments to broadly maintain the level of food we produce domestically and to boost production in sectors with the biggest opportunities. We are also providing support to farmers to improve productivity.

Maggie Throup: With a greater emphasis on food security as a consequence of Putin's war in Ukraine, does my right hon. Friend agree that her Department's response to the independent Dimbleby review, only to maintain broadly the current level of domestic food production, lacks ambition? Will she now bring forward a national food strategy that not only commits to increasing food production significantly here in the UK but gives preference to the production of healthy food to tackle the growing threat of obesity, especially in children?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to flag these issues, particularly Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, which is a reminder of the crucial importance of UK food producers to our national resilience. I do not intend to change the Government food strategy, but I am conscious that we need to ensure that food security, as the heart of our vision for the food sector, is delivered. That is why we will continue to maintain the current level of domestic food production, but there are opportunities, such as in horticulture and seafood, where we can do even better.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Some supermarkets are now rationing eggs and, ahead of Christmas, there is a real concern about the supply of turkeys. The British Free Range Egg Producers Association has said that a third of its members have cut back on production as a result of avian influenza. Can the Secretary of State say what the Government are doing to help poultry farmers through this very challenging time?

Dr Coffey: I understand that the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), is meeting the industry on a weekly basis. It is fair to say that retailers have not directly contacted the Department to discuss supply chains, although I am conscious of what is happening on individual shelves. Nearly 40 million egg-laying hens are still available, so I am confident we can get through this supply difficulty in the short term.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to visit Old Hall farm in Woodton in my constituency to see the excellent work done by Rebecca and Stuart Mayhew who use regenerative techniques to produce high-quality food that both protects the environment and reduces costs to the NHS through more healthy food?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend offers an interesting invitation. Given my diary, I cannot commit now, but his constituents' work is exceptionally positive. We introduced the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill because we know we need to adapt some of our food production industries to be resilient for the future.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): We will produce less food if we have fewer farmers. In just a few weeks' time, the Government plan to take 20% of the basic payment away from farmers, at the same time that barely 2% have got themselves into the new sustainable farming incentive. Will the Secretary of State consider delaying the reduction in the basic payment scheme to keep farmers farming while she sorts out the mess in her Department on the environmental land management schemes? Will she also meet Baroness Rock at the earliest opportunity to discuss her important tenant review?

Dr Coffey: It has been well trailed for several years that we will shift from the EU common agricultural policy for distributing money to our farmers and landowners to using public money for public goods. That is why we have been working on the environmental land management schemes and will continue to make sure we get them right. We will make further announcements in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Food production is vulnerable to animal disease, and we have heard about the impact of avian flu on supermarkets, which are limiting the sale of eggs. This week, the Public Accounts Committee highlighted what it describes as

"a long period of inadequate management and under investment in the Weybridge site"

of the Animal and Plant Health Agency. The PAC warned that the APHA would struggle if there were a concurrent disease outbreak. As the Secretary of State well knows, other diseases do threaten. Although staff are doing their very best, what is her plan if we face another disease outbreak, or is it just fingers crossed in the hope that it does not happen on her watch?

Dr Coffey: I have been at COP27 for the past few days, so I have not read all of the PAC report, but I reject its assertion that our biosecurity is not well done.

We should be proud that the United Kingdom is protected against such diseases, and that will continue. That is why the APHA is an important part of what DEFRA does, not only for England but for the UK.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Some of the things that we require to ensure increased food production are good trade deals, and in a rare moment of understated candour, the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), has conceded that the much-trumpeted flagship Australian trade deal is "not…very good", something any of us could have told him if he had been prepared to listen. Why does it take the resignation or sacking of former Secretaries of State to get that type of blunt candour? Does the Secretary of State agree that these rotten deals betray and let down all the sectors that she represents?

Dr Coffey: No, I do not.

Water Industry: Competition and Regulation

2. **John Penrose** (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): If she will instruct Ofwat to publish and execute plans to strengthen competition and reduce regulatory burdens in the water industry. [902204]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my hon. Friend for his independent report, "Power To The People", which focuses on competition in the regulated sectors. Through our strategic policy statement, we have instructed Ofwat not only to put the environment at the top of the agenda but to promote competition where that would benefit consumers. This year, we also instructed Ofwat to produce a competition stocktake. It published that in July and we are reviewing it.

John Penrose: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words about my report on competition in all utilities, including the water sector, which was commissioned by the Government but, as she says, is independent. I am pleased to hear that we have now got a statement or a request—a demand, I suppose—that Ofwat introduces more competition. It is essential that we get dates and deadlines on introducing more competition and reducing the regulatory burden. Will she promise me that the Government's response will aim for those dates and deadlines, so there can be no backsliding in progress towards helping my constituents with their water bills?

Rebecca Pow: By putting competition on the agenda for Ofwat, we have already demonstrated that we mean business on this issue and we will respond to that report. Ofwat has already put an outcomes-based approach in its 2024 price review and it is already enforcing competition for the procurement of infrastructure. That demonstrates that we are going in a direction that I think my hon. Friend may be pleased with.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): South West Water, which covers both my constituency and that of the Minister, has been given a one-star rating by the Environment Agency because of water pollution. It is clear that Ofwat cannot properly regulate some of the wayward companies that continue to pay out huge sums in dividends while failing our communities. Does the Minister agree with me that Ofwat should be abolished so that we can create a new regulator that actually has some teeth?

Rebecca Pow: The answer to that is no. We are working very constructively with Ofwat. It can fine a water company that is found to be in breach 10% of its turnover. It has used fines, and Environment Agency fines have significantly increased over the last year as well. I am certain that working with Ofwat, so that it works with the water companies to bring them into line, is the right way to approach the issue, and that is what Ofwat is doing.

Flooding

3. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of preparations to support communities and businesses impacted by potential flooding in winter 2022-23. [902205]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are investing £5.2 billion over the next six years in flood protection to better protect communities across England. Some 35,000 properties have been better protected since April last year. Last week was Flood Action Week and we encouraged many communities to take note of whether they are in a flood area, as many people do not realise that; they can check that on the Environment Agency website. There are steps that we can all individually take. The EA has also taken on more staff, who are all funded and ready to respond whenever necessary.

Cat Smith: In the last few weeks, with the weather getting wetter, I have been contacted by anxious farmers and residents in the Winmarleigh, Pilling and Hollins Lane areas of my constituency, all of which fall within the catchment of the River Wyre. What steps is the Minister taking to protect my constituents in Wyre against flooding before it happens and devastation is caused?

Rebecca Pow: Our flood funding is funding 2,000 infrastructure projects across the country. There are three already in the hon. Lady's constituency: two are about to get under way and one we do not yet have the date for, but all the work has been done. One of the key ways that we work with farmers is on nature-based solutions, so that they can take flood water if they have to do so. I am working closely with the Minister responsible for farming, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), on the environment and land management scheme, so that farms are also catered for to deal with water issues as well as food production.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Residents near Sleaford were horrified to find out that Anglian Water plan to flood a large area near Scredington, flooding their homes, their farms and their businesses. Apparently, this is to create a reservoir to provide water in the south-east of England. It is an entirely unsuitable place for such a reservoir: it is a large concrete-bunded, unnatural-looking structure. Will the Minister meet me so that we can ensure that this reservoir does not happen in this location?

Rebecca Pow: We have already had a conversation on that and I am really happy to follow it up. We need water infrastructure in the right place, but we do need new water infrastructure, because we have to increase our water supply. We also need to tackle leakage and water efficiency. DEFRA is working hard on a combination of measures to make sure that people have the water that they need. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that proposal.

Environment Agency: Enforcement Budget

5. **Simon Lightwood** (Wakefield) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency's budget on its enforcement work. [902207]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I feel a bit like a jack-in-the-box this morning, Mr Speaker.

Environment Agency enforcement is at a record high, and its funding is closely monitored to ensure that it can continue to hold polluters to account. Last year, record fines were handed to water companies, making it clear that polluters will pay. The EA's total budget this year is £1,650 million. I am always bad at reading out numbers and putting them into words. That is nearly 20% of DEFRA's entire budget, including new ringfenced money for special enforcement activities, such as 4,000 more farm inspections and 5,000 more sewage treatment works inspections.[1]

Simon Lightwood: I have been dealing with an Environment Agency complaint from residents near a pig farm in rural Wakefield, which has been operating without the necessary licence for more than a year. However, I have seen delay after delay, with residents getting no anticipated timelines and no commitments to resolve the problem, leaving them none the clearer about when life can go back to normal. Can the Minister set out how she will ensure that the Environment Agency's enforcement actions are fit for purpose so that it can protect our communities?

Rebecca Pow: I have already heard about that particular incident, but I do not have all the details. I would be very happy if the hon. Gentleman would like to meet me. It has been conveyed that the farm is operating illegally, that the EA is involved, and that he has already met the EA and will meet it again, but I am very happy to have the details.

Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): I understand that there are pressures with the prioritisation of any kind of enforcement, but in my constituency, in the village Borstal, we have been blighted with an illegal waste dump for a number of years. It is totally illegal, causing distress to residents and a blot on an area of outstanding natural beauty. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can get the Environment Agency to take really swift action for something that has gone on for too long?

Rebecca Pow: One never wants to hear examples such as that. Of course I will meet my hon. Friend to see what more can be done. We need to work constructively with the Environment Agency, because there is a protocol for what it does, and to get it involved with practical actions that can help.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) back to her place.

The Environment Agency has a heavy responsibility for environmental protection, especially investigation and enforcement of pollution incidents such as sewage dumping. However, the Government more than halved the agency's environmental protection budget from £170 million in 2009-10 to £76 million in 2019-20, and that included the three years in which the current Secretary of State was a Minister. Last year, the budget was only £94 million. I know that the Minister had some issues with the number, but that number was mainly around capital spending on flooding, and we have seen a fall in the budget for environmental protection, which is hugely important to people around the country, especially those who live near rivers and seas.

Morale is at rock bottom at the agency, and vacancy rates are as high as 80% in some teams, with many breaches not being investigated or enforced. How does the Secretary of State and the Minister plan to resolve crippling staff shortages and get us back to where we should be?

Rebecca Pow: First, I would like to put on record that we must stop doing down our Environment Agency, which does a great deal of really exceptional work, particularly on the areas I have already mentioned such as flooding. Its staff numbers have been consistent for the last three years at around 10,700 and enforcement is funded from the EA's environment grant, which the 2021 spending review almost doubled to £91 million.

Coastal Businesses: Sewage

6. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential impact of sewage spillages on coastal businesses. [902208]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I am still bobbing; I feel as if I am back on the Back Benches.

We are the first Government to tackle storm overflows through the storm overflows reduction plan. We recognise the importance of bathing waters to the economy of coastal areas, with each visit adding approximately £12 to the local economy. Our strict new targets will see £56 billion-worth of capital investment over 25 years and we will eliminate ecological harm from storm sewage discharge by 2050. Our impact assessment on the storm overflows reduction plans provides evidence of the benefits to businesses and society of cleaning up the water.

Bill Esterson: People in coastal communities have seen for themselves the increasing sewage on beaches during 12 years of Conservative Government. Business owners have faced the consequences, with tourists less likely to visit. Will the Minister admit that cutting the Environment Agency budget was a mistake, and perhaps

1. *[Official Report, 22 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 4MC.]*

apologise to Environment Agency staff for those cuts and for making it harder for them to do their jobs? While she is apologising, will she also apologise to coastal communities for the damage done and tell us what the plan is to stop sewage discharges on our beaches?

Rebecca Pow: I take issue with that question. Our bathing waters in England are a massive success story, with almost 95% achieving good or excellent status last year, the highest since the stringent new standards were introduced in 2015. I accept that there are issues, and the hon. Gentleman will know how hard we are working—harder than any Government ever before—to tackle storm sewage discharges, hence our reduction plan and all the targets we are setting the water companies. We will do it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): The Minister will be aware that two or three weeks ago there was a well-publicised spillage at the beach at St Agnes in Cornwall, where a large volume of brown material was expelled into the river. Many campaigners immediately leapt to the assumption that it was a sewage discharge and became very voluble about how disgraceful it was. Had it been sewage, it would have been disgraceful, but it was in fact soil erosion. That is in itself another problem, but we need to urge moderate language when we manage these issues. People should not immediately leap to a conclusion, but allow the Environment Agency and the water company to be clear about what has caused the incident.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that particular issue. Everyone jumped on the bandwagon, assuming that it was sewage, and it was proven not to be. That is why monitoring is so important and why this Government have set in place a comprehensive monitoring and data-gathering programme and project. We need that to sort out those issues, as well as all the other measures we have put in place.

Natural England

7. **Sir Christopher Chope** (Christchurch) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Chair of Natural England on the (a) efficiency and (b) effectiveness of that body's regulatory work. [902209]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): I have recently met both the chair of Natural England, Marian Spain, and the chief executive, Tony Juniper. DEFRA frequently discusses regulatory work with Natural England. Its efficiency and effectiveness is appraised in a range of measures, including 19 key performance indicators, which are published in Natural England's annual report and accounts.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that response. When she next meets Natural England, will she tell it to stop exploiting the insufficient information loophole, which prevents it from having to respond within 21 days to planning applications as a statutory consultee? Brocks Pine in my constituency is a development that would be on the heathland and inside the green belt. It took Natural England nine months to respond to that, and when it did, it said it had insufficient information. Is that not wholly unsatisfactory?

Trudy Harrison: Clearly, when statutory consultees do not respond promptly, it causes delays and deeper problems for developers and communities. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and esteemed colleague to discuss what went wrong with Brocks Pine, but I would say that Natural England are making significant progress across a number of measures, from countryside stewardship scheme agreements to the coastal path, national nature reserves and many others. There will be creases to iron out, and I will discuss those when I meet him.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Yesterday I met the chair of Natural England, which is doing excellent work. Will the Minister say a bit more about what she sees as Natural England's role in nature-based solutions to tackle climate change?

Trudy Harrison: Natural England is a vital organisation that I work with closely to ensure that we meet our environmental targets set out in the world-leading Environment Act 2021. Whether it is working with farmers, local communities or environmental organisations, Natural England is at the heart of everything we are doing.

Air, Water and Biodiversity: Statutory Deadlines

8. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of the Government failing to meet statutory deadlines on (a) air quality, (b) water quality and (c) biodiversity. [902210]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Government already have existing legal targets driving ambitious action on air and water quality. As the hon. Lady will be aware, biodiversity was included in the Environment Act 2021, so it is already in primary legislation. When I became Secretary of State, frankly, I was disappointed to discover that we were not in a place to publish these targets, but we are now working at pace, building on the work of my predecessors and the environmental implementation plan.

Marsha De Cordova: My constituents will continue to suffer from breathing toxic air because of the Government's failure to meet the legal deadline to introduce targets under the Environment Act. The Government are also planning to water down standards by committing to cut $PM_{2.5}$ only by 2040, not by 2030, the target that the EU has committed to, reneging on yet another pledge not to water down standards post Brexit. Will the Secretary of State provide a new date for the publication of environment targets and commit to a 2030 target?

Dr Coffey: I know that we are in a debating Chamber, but what the hon. Lady said at the beginning of her question is factually incorrect. It is important to say that legislation is already in place. We are actually seeing air quality improving right across the country. Indeed, I remind her that in her constituency, it is of course the Mayor of London who should be driving improvements in air quality. He has all the powers at his disposal to do so and it is up to him to deliver.

Mr Speaker: We now come to the shadow Secretary of State, Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her post? She has been in post for three weeks now, but the crisis of raw sewage turning England into an open sewer can be traced back to her time as an Environment Minister. To undo that damage, will she update the House on when she held a roundtable with all the water bosses and what the outcome of it was?

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that warm welcome. It is great to be back at DEFRA, a Department in which I served for three years—I am pleased to be there. Let us be candid about this: we have seen some difficult situations with water companies. The Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), is already on the case in that regard. I have not yet prioritised the water companies specifically, because other Ministers are doing so and I am prioritising my work to achieve environmental targets to satisfy the legislation set out by Parliament, as well as the preparation we are doing for the Montreal conference. My hon. Friend has already set out to the House some of the work that is under way. We are taking proactive action on sewage spillage.

Jim McMahon: The Secretary of State's predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), may only have been in office for just over a month, but even he met the water bosses for a roundtable on his first day in office. Why, for one of the biggest scandals in her Department, has she not seen that as a priority?

Moving on, in a stunning turn of events, ahead of COP27, the Secretary of State announced that the Government will breach their own self-imposed legal obligations to publish targets on air quality, clean water and biodiversity. How does she expect other countries to take us seriously at COP15 when we cannot even get our own house in order?

Dr Coffey: I was at the last COP on the convention on biological diversity, COP14, in Sharm El-Sheikh. I just got home from Sharm, from the climate COP, to come back in time for orals today. I assure the hon. Member that we continue to work with countries around the world to ensure that our outcomes in Montreal are as ambitious as they can be, including signing people up to the 30 by 30 coalition, and indeed the 10-point plan for biodiversity financing. I assure him that we are working at pace in the Department on the Environment Act, and the subsequent targets from it that we need to put into legislation, and I hope to update the House in the near future.

Fishing Communities

9. **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support fishing communities. [R] [902211]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): The Government are providing £32.7 million a year to enable all four fishing Administrations to deliver funding schemes to support the seafood sector, such as the fisheries and seafood scheme in England. In addition to that, £100 million is being provided through the UK's seafood fund to support the long-term future and sustainability of the industry, helping to bring economic growth to coastal communities and supporting levelling up.

Peter Aldous: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that answer. I draw attention to my role chairing Renaissance of the East Anglian Fisheries, a community interest company promoting the fishing industry in East Anglia. It is welcome that policy labs in the Cabinet Office are engaging with local fishermen in producing the bass fisheries management plan, and a REAF director recently attended a workshop in Lowestoft. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that he is also liaising with the Department for International Trade to confirm that the management plan accords with the trade and co-operation agreement, and will also apply to EU vessels?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his tenacious campaigning on this topic. The bass fisheries management plan will manage bass fishing in England and Wales. We are delivering on our commitments in the Fisheries Act 2020. The fisheries management plan will apply to all vessels fishing in these waters, and the Fisheries Act 2020 requires consultation with all interested persons. Our fisheries management plans will comply with the UK's international obligations, including the trade and co-operation agreement.

Topical Questions

T1. [902221] **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I pay tribute to the previous ministerial team, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), on the work that they did while they were Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I have just returned from my fourth climate COP, the UN climate conference in Egypt, where I held productive bilateral meetings with a range of counterparts from India to Japan. Yesterday, I was delighted to announce a new big nature impact fund for our country of £30 million as seed investment to bring in other private investment that will help us to plant more woodland, restore precious peatland and create new habitats, as well as bring green jobs to our communities. We should be proud of what we are achieving, and indeed the work that we are doing to unlock financing around the world, but it is critical that we have a great global effort, so that, as we head into the financial negotiations ahead of the COP15 on the convention on biological diversity in Montreal next month, we come together to ensure that we have ambitions for the future of our planet.

Elliot Colburn: Carshalton and Wallington residents warned the Lib-Dem-run council that the incinerator that it campaigned for in Beddington would one day want to increase its capacity. Sadly, they have been proven right, because it is now seeking to burn more. I know

that the waste minimisation strategy calls for the phasing out of incineration, so does my right hon. Friend agree that residents should get involved in the Environment Agency consultation to say that they do not want to see that increase?

Dr Coffey: It will be no surprise to anyone in this House that Liberal Democrats often say one thing to get elected and then do the exact opposite. We should be aware that generating energy from waste should not compete with greater waste prevention, reuse or recycling. Consideration must be given to the Government's strategic ambition to minimise waste and our soon-to-be-published residual waste reduction target, and I agree that my hon. Friend's residents should respond to the consultation in full force.

T2. [902222] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Since the Boxing day floods in 2015, my residents on Riverside Drive have been living in fear. They recently found out that the works will be further delayed until 2026—11 years after the first floods. Moreover, a nearby floor basin project has increased the volume of water in its part of the River Irwell, meaning that the river now rises at a faster rate than before, adding more stress for my residents. I have raised the issue many times in Parliament, and I have asked successive Ministers to come to visit Bolton South East to see it for themselves and speak to residents. I ask the new Secretary of State to do the same.

Dr Coffey: I am not committing to visiting the hon. Lady's constituency, but I am very concerned about what she just relayed. I have already asked for the Environment Agency to meet for a deep dive on the flooding budget. There is a frequently flooded fund, which can support constituencies such as hers, and we need to make sure we are delivering effective action. That also goes for councils, which need to make sure they have cleared the gullies, so that we do not get these levels of surface water flooding.

T3. [902223] **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The packaging industry is ready to play its part in creating a world-class recycling system, and extended producer responsibility with a deposit return scheme and consistent household collections of waste will achieve that, but Government responses to consultations on the latter two are still awaited. Given that businesses are expected to do their bit by starting to record complicated packaging data for EPR from 1 January next year, in just six weeks' time, could the Secretary of State say when the responses to those schemes will be available?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Following consultations on the two schemes my hon. Friend mentions, intensive work is going on in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to make all the schemes link up, because these are complicated issues. I can assure him that we are aiming to publish our responses to the outstanding consultations by the end of this year.

T4. [902224] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Under the previous Prime Minister, it was reported that the best and most versatile land would be re-categorised to include category 3b, with a view to blocking development, including solar power, from that land. Is that still the Government's intention?

Dr Coffey: It is really important that we make the best use of our land, to have the food security that was referred to earlier. It is also important, when considering land use, that we think about the best place to put renewable energy. By and large, I think most people in this country would agree: let us have good agricultural land for farming, and let us use our brownfield sites for other energy projects too.

T5. [902227] **Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I was grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison), for her response to my Adjournment debate last week about our campaign on bathing water status for rivers, and specifically the River Nidd in Knaresborough. Will she meet me to discuss that campaign and the process for inland bathing water accreditation?

Rebecca Pow: I hear that it was a lively debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on his campaign. We are actively encouraging more applicants for bathing water status, and I look forward to receiving the application for the River Nidd and discussing it with him. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland said in that debate, it is time to get your Speedos out.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): There have been many warm words from successive Secretaries of State on saving nature. Many species may soon be extinct, including the red squirrel, the water vole and even the hedgehog. Two years ago, I was on the Environment Bill Committee, and much was made of new targets. The 31 October date for those new targets was missed. Can the Secretary of State be clear today: what is the date for publishing those targets and taking action on saving nature?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): I would like to reassure the hon. Member that we remain absolutely committed to publishing our environmental targets, and I have been meeting partners, including farmers, environmental organisations and the people managing protected landscapes. The most important thing is that we deliver on the outcomes clearly set out in our 25-year environment plan.

T6. [902228] **Siobhan Baillie** (Stroud) (Con): Communities in tiny villages such as Arlingham in my patch, a beautiful peninsular on the River Severn, are desperately worried about proposals for large solar farms. I welcome what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about protecting agricultural land, but can she confirm that she is speaking with colleagues across Cabinet, so that we can tighten up this policy and provide clarity? I am not somebody who thinks these things should be banned, but we need to do better on giving clarity to businesses and communities.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mark Spencer): I thank my hon. Friend for her question. She will be aware that planning policy is a matter for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, and solar

policy is a matter for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but she should be assured that my officials are working closely with those Departments to ensure that we get the right balance between boosting our food production and delivering long-term energy security.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Can the Secretary of State guarantee that the outstanding statutory deadlines we have spoken about on air, water and so forth will be published before COP15, so that we can lead by example? If she cannot guarantee that, does she agree that that bodes incredibly ill for the deadlines in the utterly misguided and reckless Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill? If we cannot meet these deadlines, how will we meet those?

Dr Coffey: I completely understand why Members of the House are concerned that the Government have not come forward with the secondary legislation as set out in primary legislation, and I have already expressed my disappointment. I assure the hon. Lady that we are working at pace to get those targets in place. I am conscious that we are still working on certain aspects of that, but I hope to try to get them done as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Sir Robert.

Sir Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the fisheries Minister for rapidly acceding to the Committee's request to set up an independent panel to investigate the cause of the mass shellfish mortality off the north-east coast last autumn. When does he expect that panel to be established and when might he expect it to report its findings?

Mark Spencer: Obviously we want to set it up as soon as possible and we want it to assess all the available evidence. All interested parties want to make sure that we identify the challenge. A number of—if I can use the term—red herrings have been thrown into the mix, so establishing the true facts as rapidly as possible will be the ambition of this rapid inquiry.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Some 80% of UK firms say that they are struggling to trade with the EU because of Tory Brexit red tape. Scots exports to the EU have been slashed by 13%. The cost to households in Scotland as a consequence of Brexit averages £900 a year. Additional Brexit checks for meat exports are being imposed on 14 December that will further hammer the agricultural sector. Where is the promised Brexit dividend for farmers? So far, all they can see from the Tories are restrictions and red tape.

Mark Spencer: One day, the hon. Lady will have to accept the result of the referendum and the fact that Brexit took place. We are embracing those opportunities in the Department. We are doing trade deals and promoting British products around the world. We are proud of what our British producers produce. We should get on the front foot and big them up, rather than being negative.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to her place and, hopefully, will welcome her soon to Newcastle-under-Lyme to see Walleys Quarry for herself. As she knows, that major issue has been blighting the community for some time. Although the odour is getting better, we still have no accountability. There are two investigations going on—criminal and regulatory. Does she agree that it is imperative for the Environment Agency to bring those investigations to a conclusion as soon as possible so that my constituents can have justice and accountability?

Rebecca Pow: As my hon. Friend knows, I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation, but I can confirm that the EA is continuing to work closely to regulate the operator and to consider appropriate action in compliance with the enforcement and sanctions policy. That includes ensuring that the operator continues to implement all the 20 or more measures that were recommended, which, I think he will agree, are starting to have a real effect.

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Voter Identification

1. **Owen Thompson** (Midlothian) (SNP): If the Commission will publish guidance for returning officers on the implementation of the Voter Identification Regulations 2022. [902269]

4. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the publication of guidance for returning officers on the implementation of the Voter Identification Regulations 2022. [902272]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The commission will publish guidance for electoral administrators on the implementation of the voter ID requirements in phases over the next three months. It was unable to publish detailed guidance before the introduction of secondary legislation, which has been subject to significant delays but is now before the House. It published initial guidance on planning for the implementation of the Elections Act 2022 in August; further detailed guidance will follow on voter ID, which will cover the application process for the free voter authority certificate and polling station processes. It will publish a handbook for polling station staff in early 2023.

Owen Thompson: Although it is encouraging that the legislation has finally been produced, the delays were clearly lengthy, which has had an impact. We all want to see the smooth running of any elections, so I ask the representative of the Speaker's Committee what consideration it has given to the impact of the delays in the legislation and the effect that will have on administrators of elections and voters themselves.

Cat Smith: The commission has highlighted that delays to secondary legislation leave limited time for electoral administrators to implement new voter ID processes and for voters to ensure that they have acceptable forms of ID. Delays increase the risk of ineffective or

inconsistent implementation, which could affect public confidence in elections. The commission will run an advertising campaign and work with local authorities and partners to ensure that voters are aware of the ID requirement and what they need be able to do to vote, but it reports that delays to the legislation have had an impact on its work.

Vicky Foxcroft: In response to voter ID pilots in 2018 and 2019, the Electoral Commission found that some groups might find it harder than others to provide photo ID, such as the millions of people living with a disability. Has the committee carried out an equality impact assessment of the voter ID regulations to ensure that these groups are not being excluded?

Cat Smith: The commission's research has identified groups, including some disabled voters, who are less likely to have an approved form of voter ID or may need additional support to navigate the voter ID requirement. It is working with the electoral community and partners, including the Royal National Institute of Blind People, Mencap and Disability Rights UK, to reach disabled voters to ensure that they understand what they need to do to be able to vote. Understanding the impact of policies on different parts of society is essential. It is, however, for the Government to assess the impact of their own policies. The commission understands that the Government have carried out an equality impact assessment on the voter ID provisions.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Parish Ministry

2. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Church on strengthening its parish ministry. [902270]

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Church on strengthening its parish ministry. [902274]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Parish ministry is at the heart of the mission of the Church. The Church Commissioners will distribute £1.2 billion between 2023 and 2025 to support our mission and ministry—a 30% increase on the current three-year period—and the lion's share of this funding will be used to revitalise parish ministry.

Jerome Mayhew: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that the relationship between a parish priest and his or her congregation is the single most important element of outreach and service for the Church, and as such, its support should be the primary objective of Church funds?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why the Church Commissioners continue to fund increasing numbers of ordinands. In 2020, 570 new priests were ordained and there were 580 in training, with only 320 retirements. Innovative ways of attracting clergy from many backgrounds include the fantastic work of both the Peter and the Caleb streams, which I would commend to his parishes.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The *Church Times* is full of adverts for well-paid jobs at diocesan headquarters, yet clergy are spread ever more thinly across the parishes. It is the wrong priority, is it not?

Andrew Selous: I can tell my right hon. Friend, who I know takes a close interest in these matters, that by far the largest share of diocesan expenditure goes on parish clergy, and many diocesan secretaries are reducing central costs to support parish ministry. We should remember that hard-working diocesan staff support parishes, church schools and chaplaincies on vital issues such as safeguarding, vocations, ministry training, youth work and social action, none of which I am sure my right hon. Friend would argue with.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): I have heard from dozens of voters in Blackburn who will be relying on free voter ID certificates, yet the Government have failed to specify the security features to be included. Can I ask the hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith), representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission—

Mr Speaker: Order. Unfortunately, this is about the Church Commissioners, not voting.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Second Church Estates Commissioner for his reply. Rural communities have been greatly disadvantaged by covid, with Zoom meetings as a method of contact, and attendance at churches has started to lessen as well, so there has to be a new method of reaching out in parish ministry. The hon. Gentleman referred to extra moneys for this process. Within that process, is there more help for those who need cars for travelling out to meet people face to face? That is perhaps how the future of parish ministry will be.

Andrew Selous: I am grateful to the hon. Member, and I really appreciate his interest in these matters. As I have said, the Church Commissioners are increasing the funding to the frontline by 30% over the next three years —£1.2 billion—and it needs to go on exactly the type of initiative that he suggests.

Coronation of King Charles III

3. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What role the Church of England will have in the coronation of King Charles III. [902271]

Andrew Selous: A service of holy communion will be at the heart of the coronation. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Earl Marshal and the coronation committee are planning the service, which will be a moment of great national rejoicing and deep spiritual significance.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am glad my hon. Friend has emphasised that point. By immemorial custom, the coronation is a deeply religious and spiritual event. Will he convince us that the Church of England will use its influence to ensure that it remains as such, particularly the anointing, and does not degenerate into a kind of dumbed down, wokefest celebration of so-called modern Britain?

Andrew Selous: I can reassure my right hon. Friend. The anointing of the monarch goes back to biblical times, recognising the outpouring of God's grace on us all, and the sovereign's covenant to give his life in service to his people and his God. That is the foundational principle underlying our constitutional settlement.

Rural Clergy

5. **Chris Loder** (West Dorset) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Church on increasing the numbers of clergy in rural parishes. [R] [902273]

Andrew Selous: Rural clergy play a crucial role at the heart of their communities, for which I know my hon. Friend is, like me, deeply grateful. I regularly raise this issue with the Church. In his diocese of Salisbury more than £1.25 million has been invested to support rural ministry in the Renewing Hope Through Rural Ministry and Mission project.

Chris Loder: Let me say to my hon. Friend that we have a couple of vacancies in my benefice, and I hope he will feed back on that point. I would be particularly interested to understand what proportion of stipendiary clergy goes to long-established small and rural parishes, versus what proportion goes to more resourced churches, fresh expressions, and other new or novel forms of church.

Andrew Selous: I can tell my hon. Friend that 24% of the population live in rural parishes, and are supported by 38% of total stipendiary clergy. The figures he asks for are not held centrally as they are decided at diocesan level. I commend to him the Caleb stream, which often enables self-supporting clergy to serve in rural parishes, and of which many bishops are supportive.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I spoke recently to a priest who serves a number of rural parishes in my constituency. He pointed out that church councils are being asked for their views on the vision for the future of the Church, and they feel that they do not have sufficient resources to do that. If they look for guidance from the centre, they fear that church closures will be the outcome. Will my hon. Friend give additional support to parishes to plan for their future?

Andrew Selous: The Church Commissioners are providing a 30% increase in funding over the next three years. It is important to remember that they provide under 20% of the total funding of the Church, most of which comes from parish giving. In a sense, therefore, it is up to all of us to support our local churches and worshipping communities.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Political Campaigning

7. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent assessment the Committee has made of the potential impact of (a) the Elections Act 2022 and (b) provisions in the Online Safety Bill on the transparency of political campaigning communications. [902275]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): The commission's view is that the digital imprints requirement in the Elections Act 2022 will increase transparency by helping voters to understand who is paying to target them online. It could provide further transparency if the requirement was extended to cover all digital material from unregistered campaigners, regardless of whether they paid to promote it. The commission has said that other changes in the Act relating to non-party campaigners will bring limited additional transparency while increasing the complexity of the law. As currently drafted, the Online Safety Bill would introduce new freedom of speech protections for some campaigning content, but it does not include any provisions that would directly affect the transparency of political campaign activities.

Deidre Brock: Today, openDemocracy and Who Funds You? released an audit showing that the least transparently funded think-tanks raised more than £14 million in the past two years from mystery donors. Those think-tanks appear across the media, such as on the BBC. They have secured hundreds of meetings with Ministers since 2012, and advised the likes of the former Prime Minister on policy choices that were subsequently proven disastrous. What steps is the committee taking to ensure that the funding of such think-tanks is transparent and accountable, and that foreign funding bodies are not able to commandeer our politics?

Cat Smith: The commission regulates the spending of organisations campaigning for or against a political party or candidate during the regulated period ahead of an election, or for a particular outcome ahead of a referendum. It also regulates donations to political parties and candidates. Unless an organisation is engaged in regulated campaigning activity, it will fall outside the commission's area of responsibility. The commission does not have a role in regulating the spending of political activity more generally.

As for foreign money, the commission is committed to ensuring that political funding is transparent and to preventing unlawful foreign money from entering UK politics. It continues to recommend changes to the law to ensure that voters can have greater confidence in political finance in the UK. That includes duties on parties for enhanced due diligence and risk assessments of donations and a requirement for companies to have made enough money in the UK to fund any donations.

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): What concern does the Electoral Commission have about the ability of local councils to administer free voter ID on a short turnaround? Can we be confident that that will deliver clear improvements to the security of polls?

Cat Smith: There is a long-standing understanding between Government and the electoral administrators that legislation on elections should be clear at least six months before it must be implemented. That will also apply to the introduction of voter ID. The Association of Electoral Administrators has said that the timetable for implementation presents significant challenges.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for South Norfolk, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

National Audit Office: NHS Reports

8. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): What plans he has to consider National Audit Office reports on the NHS. [902276]

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk): The majority of National Audit Office reports are considered by the Public Accounts Committee. Earlier this month, the Committee took evidence on the NAO's recent report "Introducing Integrated Care Systems" and will report on that in due course. My hon. Friend may be interested to know that, today, the National Audit Office has published a report on "Managing NHS backlogs and waiting times in England". The PAC expects to take evidence on that on 28 November.

Mr Hollobone: In 2019-20, the NHS England budget was £124 billion, which has increased this year by 23% to £152 billion. Yet, despite that record extra funding, so far this year the NHS has treated 656,000 fewer patients than during the same period in pre-pandemic 2019—a drop of 5%. Is it the National Audit Office's view that the NHS has a productivity problem?

Mr Bacon: Yes, it is. Indeed, the report published by the NAO today states:

> "The NHS now has a problem with reduced productivity."

NHS England has estimated that, in 2021, the NHS was about 16% less productive than before the pandemic. Some of that, of course, relates directly to the pandemic, but NHS England is also examining other potential causes, including reduced willingness to work overtime. Some of NHS England's new initiatives such as surgical hubs and the transformation of out-patient services are intended to produce greater productivity. No doubt the National Audit Office will want to examine that in due course.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Voter Identification

9. **Kirsten Oswald** (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): What recent discussions the Committee has had with the Electoral Commission on the (a) quality of and (b) implementation planning for voter ID in (i) Scotland, (ii) Wales and (iii) England in the event of an early general election. [902278]

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood): The UK Government intend that the voter ID requirement for UK parliamentary general elections will come into force from 5 October 2023. Delays to secondary legislation have impacted implementation planning. However, the commission is working to provide support as quickly as possible, including guidance for electoral administrators in England, Scotland and Wales. It will conduct a public awareness activity in advance of any general election to ensure that voters understand what they need to be able to do in order to take part.

Kirsten Oswald: Scotland did not vote for the voter ID plan, but it has been forced upon us by this out-of-touch Westminster Government. Where general elections fall on the same day as local elections, will voters be required to show ID for some elections but not others? That is in addition to the already significant concerns about disenfranchising so many people. The UK Government do not listen to those concerns. Is that not just another situation where the best thing to do would be to ensure that nobody needs to be falling foul of this chaos and for Scotland to move forward as an independent country?

Cat Smith: The hon. Lady is correct to say that, in the event of a UK general election falling on the same day as, for example, local elections in Scotland, a voter would need to show ID for the general election but not for an election to the Scottish Parliament or for a local government election. Voter ID is not being introduced for any devolved elections in Scotland or in Wales. The commission has highlighted the challenges of different rules being put in place for different elections.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Support over the Winter

10. **Danny Kruger** (Devizes) (Con): What steps the Church is taking to support people facing hardship this winter. [902280]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church Commissioners have provided £15 million to help churches with their energy costs, so that they continue to act as places to worship Jesus but also stay open at other times, if they are able to, to provide practical community support, such as being a warm hub.

Danny Kruger: I thank the Government for ensuring that churches are included in the package of support that businesses receive to pay their energy bills. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the churches across Wiltshire that have opened their spaces to people in the daytime, providing their traditional role as a place for fellowship, community and support? Does he agree that the churches that have found it easier to fulfil this traditional role are those that have ripped out the Victorian pews, which are such an obstacle to the traditional role of fellowship?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for exactly this type of voluntary community action. The Church of England will always be at the centre of such endeavours, which can be facilitated by churches that make possible the type of activity he mentions. I am not yet aware of any warm hubs in Devizes, although I have noticed some in neighbouring towns. I am sure my hon. Friend will be encouraging his local churches to facilitate such schemes in his area.

G20

10.30 am

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): With permission Mr Speaker, I would like to make a brief statement on the G20 summit in Indonesia, but first I want to address Russia's missile attacks on Ukraine this week.

On the very day that I and others confronted the Russian Foreign Minister across the G20 summit table with the brutality of his country's actions, and on the very day that President Zelensky addressed the G20 with a plan to stop the war, Russia launched over 80 separate missile strikes on Ukraine. The targets were innocent people and civilian infrastructure; the aim, to cast the population into darkness and cold. Once again, Russia has shown its barbarity and given the lie to any claim that it is interested in peace.

During the bombardment of Ukraine on Tuesday, an explosion took place in eastern Poland. The investigation into this incident is ongoing and it has our full support. As we have heard the Polish and American Presidents say, it is possible that the explosion was caused by a Ukrainian munition which was deployed in self-defence. Whether or not this proves to be the case, no blame can be placed on a country trying to defend itself against such a barrage. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] The blame belongs solely to Russia.

I spoke to President Duda yesterday to express my sympathy and pledge our solidarity. I also spoke to President Zelensky on a joint call with Prime Minister Trudeau to express our continued support, and I met my G7 and NATO counterparts at the sidelines of the G20. We will help our Polish allies to conclude their investigation and we will continue to stand with Ukraine in the face of Russia's criminal aggression.

The Bali summit took place amidst the worst economic crisis since 2008. The G20 was created to grip challenges like this, but today's crisis is different, because it is being driven by a G20 member. By turning off the gas taps and choking off the Ukrainian grain supply, Russia has severely disrupted global food and energy markets. The economic shockwaves will ripple around the world for years to come. So, together with the other responsible members of the G20, we are delivering a decisive response.

Almost all G20 members joined me in calling out Russia's actions, declaring that

"today's era must not be one of war."

We will work together to uphold international law and the United Nations charter, and we will act to protect our collective economic security. The G20 agreed to use all available tools to support the global economy and ensure financial stability. That means international financial institutions mobilising more resources to support developing countries, it means continuing to call out those who exploit their lending power to create debt traps for emerging economies, and it means tackling the causes of rising inflation head on, including by delivering fiscal sustainability.

We pledged our support for the UN-brokered deal to keep grain shipments moving in the Black sea. I am pleased to say that that deal has now been renewed. Two thirds of Ukraine's wheat goes to developing countries. With famine looming, it is desperately needed and Russia must uphold its part of the deal.

We agreed action to improve energy security by accelerating the transition to clean energy. We launched a new just energy transition partnership with Indonesia, which will unlock billions in private finance for new green energy infrastructure. Finally, we committed to maintain free markets and free trade and to reform the World Trade Organisation.

Yesterday, I held my first meeting with President Biden. We pledged to redouble our support for Ukraine and to continue deepening our co-operation, including on energy security and managing the challenges posed by China. I met Prime Minister Modi, when we reviewed progress on our forthcoming free trade agreement. I discussed our accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership with the Prime Ministers of Japan, Canada and Australia, and I met almost every other leader at the summit, with the exception of Russia.

In each of those discussions, there was a shared determination to restore stability, deliver long-term growth and drive a better future—one where no single country has the power to hold us back. In just a few moments, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will build on those international foundations when he sets out the autumn statement, putting our economy back on to a positive trajectory and restoring our fiscal sustainability.

By being strong abroad, we strengthen our resilience at home. We will continue to support Ukraine, we will continue to stand up for the rule of law and the fundamental principles of sovereignty and self-determination, and we will build a global economy that is more secure, more stable and more resilient, because that is what the gravity of the moment demands and that is how we will ensure that our country emerges from this crisis stronger than it was before. I commend this statement to the House.

10.36 am

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of his statement.

What should have been a summit focused on global economic recovery and delivering clear commitments on climate change was sadly overshadowed by the unjustifiable actions of Russia and its illegal war in Ukraine. Civilian infrastructure was targeted across Ukraine and a war of aggression rumbled on as world leaders tried to reach agreement.

Whatever the outcome of the investigation into the missile incident in Poland, it is a stark reminder of the danger that Russia's unjustifiable war has brought to the border of our NATO allies. We must remain vigilant and united in our opposition to this pointless and brutal conflict. As I have said many times from this Dispatch Box and to the Prime Minister personally, whatever other differences we may have across the House—and there are many—when it comes to the defence of Ukraine, we stand as one.

On behalf of Members across the House, I send our condolences to those killed in Poland. Poland's measured reaction to the incident and the calm heads that have prevailed over the past two days are welcome. I listened carefully to what the Prime Minister said about that and I agree with him that no country can be blamed for defending itself. We need to get to the bottom of this. Obviously, the investigation is ongoing, but when does the Prime Minister expect those investigations to be finalised?

[Keir Starmer]

Russia is losing this war, so I welcome the G20's communiqué, which set out:

"Most members strongly condemned the war in Ukraine".

Has further support for Ukraine been discussed among western allies? What efforts are taking place to open a diplomatic road map to rid Ukraine of Russian troops and bring an end to the conflict?

It is crucial that we work to find international unity to further isolate Putin. That will include working with China. We do not underestimate the challenges that China poses to global security and we must defend the human rights of the Uyghur and democracy in Hong Kong, but our approach must be measured, and it is in our interest to work with China on the climate crisis, trade and, most importantly, isolating Putin. I was glad to see constructive dialogue on those issues between President Biden and President Xi. Does the Prime Minister believe that the summit marks a change in west and China relations, and are his Government now taking a different approach from his predecessor to British-China relations?

After a decade of low growth in this country, it is crucial that we open new trade opportunities. The Prime Minister said that he had met Prime Minister Modi, when a future UK-India trade deal was discussed. That deal has previously been put in doubt by his Home Secretary, who indicated that she would not support it. Labour does support a trade deal with India, which we believe can bring new opportunities to promote and create new jobs here in Britain. Will the Prime Minister tell us when he now expects the deal to be completed, and whether measures on visas will be included in the overall deal? If so, can he guarantee that his whole Cabinet will actually support it? Will he also tell us whether in his meeting with President Biden, the UK-US trade deal was discussed—or can we assume that this deal now has no prospect of being delivered any time soon?

Lastly, may I ask the Prime Minister whether the Northern Ireland protocol was raised by either US or EU colleagues? Failure to make progress is hurting British research, development and trade, all at a time when we need to remove barriers for British business. Fixing this issue could lead to a better relationship with our biggest trading partners, an opportunity for our scientists and exporters, and an end to the past two years of unnecessary fights and division; so when is the Prime Minister going to deliver?

Our international alliances have never been so crucial, for global stability and our own stability. We on the Opposition side of the House know that standing up to Russia's aggression will require further sacrifices, but we must make those sacrifices because taking no action is not an option. The message from all of us must be clear: Ukraine will win and Putin will lose. Democracy and liberty will defeat imperialism again.

The Prime Minister: Let me start by thanking the right hon. and learned Gentleman for his words about the situation in Ukraine and Russia, and for his condemnation of the Russian aggression and steadfast support for the position of the Government and, indeed, the whole House on Ukraine.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman was right to ask about the further support that we will be providing. He will know that we have provided £1.5 billion in economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine, alongside, obviously, the military assistance. We are hosting a reconstruction conference in the UK next year, and there is an ongoing dialogue about what further support the Ukrainian Government need from us and others. In the short term, we are in the process of providing 25,000 pieces of winter equipment for the brave Ukrainian soldiers, but also funds to help restore some of the damage done to Ukraine's energy infrastructure, which I know have been warmly welcomed by President Zelensky.

Let me briefly turn to some of the right hon. and learned Gentleman's other questions. On China, I very much supported President Biden in his meeting with President Xi. President Biden and I discussed that meeting at length. I believe that our approach is entirely aligned with that of the United States, and indeed our other allies such as Canada and Australia. Of course China poses significant challenges to our values, our interests and indeed our economic security. It is right that we take the necessary steps to defend ourselves against those challenges, but it is also right to engage in dialogue when that can make a difference in solving some of the pressing global challenges that we all collectively face.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman asked about Northern Ireland. I have discussed this issue with my European counterparts and, indeed, with the President at various meetings, not just at the G20. I remain committed to finding a solution to the challenges posed by the protocol. It is clearly having an impact on families and businesses on the ground in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland deserve to have a functioning Executive, particularly at a time like this, and that is something that I will devote my energies to bringing about. So far I have had very constructive relationships and discussions about this issue with both the President and our European counterparts, including the Taoiseach last week.

On trade, the broad, overarching comment I would make to the right hon. and learned Gentleman is that when it comes to trade deals, whoever they may be with, what I will not do is sacrifice quality for speed. I think it is important that we take the time to get trade deals right. Of course this Government believe wholeheartedly in the power and the benefits of free trade, which is something that we will champion around the world.

I discussed the free trade agreement with India, and both the Prime Minister of India and I committed our teams to working as quickly as possible to see if we can bring a successful conclusion to the negotiations.

The priorities of the US are in a lot of different areas, but with regard to trade—the President and I discussed this—we are deepening our economic relationship. The United States is already our single largest trading partner. We are doing more with individual states to broaden our trade relationships, and we have seen recent action on tariffs with regard to steel, aluminium and agricultural exports. All of that is good for the UK economy.

Of course, we are in the process of some exciting conversations about joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. That is real evidence of our country's commitment to the Indo-Pacific region, and is supported by the Prime

Ministers of Canada, Australia and Japan. I hope that we can bring those negotiations to a conclusion in the near future.

Lastly, my reflections on the summit and on attending COP are that the United Kingdom is at its best when we are an engaged and active member of the global community —when we are standing up for our values, defending our interests, spreading prosperity, and alleviating poverty and suffering. I am pleased to have had conversations with so many leaders over the past couple of days that confirmed to me that they very much welcome the UK's support in achieving all those objectives, and that is what this Government will set about doing.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Dialogue is never weakness, so will my right hon. Friend tell us when he intends to reschedule his meeting with Xi Jinping? It is not an endorsement of the Chinese Communist party, but an opportunity to set out our red lines, particularly on the hostile actions we have seen on UK soil in the last month. We need shortly to see a strategy from the Prime Minister on China.

Will the Prime Minister also inform the House what progress on isolating Russia was made at the G20 with India and other nations that are not as aligned with us on Ukraine, because they are key to global stability and ending bloodshed?

The Prime Minister: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs for her excellent question. She is absolutely right about the importance of dialogue, and she will have heard what I said to the Leader of the Opposition about dialogue. We are in the process of refreshing our integrated review, and no doubt our approach to China will be a part of that. In the meantime, she is right that dialogue also offers the opportunity for us to raise issues of concern, and to defend our values and interests—particularly with regard to areas such as Hong Kong—which we will continue to do as the opportunity arises.

My hon. Friend is right to point out the position of those non-aligned countries. We should all take enormous comfort from the fact that the G20 communiqué was agreed; it was substantive, comprehensive and contained strong language of condemnation about Russia's aggression. That was by no means assured just a week or so ago, and it speaks to the feeling in the international community —something I saw across the G20 table as many, if not almost all, countries took the opportunity to say something about Russia's actions, and joined us in condemning it. There is always work to do and we will continue to have that dialogue with those partners.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement.

With the Russian military continuing to fire deadly missiles at civilians right across Ukraine, I sincerely hope that Putin's Foreign Minister was made to feel the justified anger and disgust by those attending the G20. With that in mind, may I ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made at the summits to further isolate Putin's regime on the international stage? The whole world must stand together on Russian sanctions, and we must make sure that those responsible for crimes against humanity face justice. What progress has been made to ensure that there is no weakening in the international resolve to stand with Ukraine until it secures victory for its people?

Let me turn to the G20 discussions on the economy. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor keep referring to the global factors to blame for the financial crisis facing families across these islands—it is the excuse they are using to impose austerity 2.0 in today's financial statement—but if this is really all to do with global factors, will the Prime Minister explain why the UK is the only G7 economy that is smaller today than it was before the pandemic? Why is the UK the only G7 country enacting austerity 2.0? The reality is that this is a political choice.

Finally, on the proposed Indo-Pacific trade deal—the latest Brexit fire sale that threatens to sell out our farmers and crofters—the evidence continues to mount that the Brexit effect is reducing our economy by 4%, a factor that is driving Tory austerity. This week, we heard from the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who retrospectively ripped apart the trade deal with Australia and the damaging impact that it will have on our agrifood sector. I remind Government Members that that deal was endorsed by every single Conservative MP. Can the Prime Minister explain to Scotland's food and farming industries why he is so committed to pursuing yet another Brexit deal that will deliver a hammer blow to their businesses?

The Prime Minister: I welcome the right hon. Gentleman's comments about Russia and Ukraine, and I thank him for them. He should be reassured that in Putin's absence the Russian Foreign Minister felt the full assault, from allies including the United Kingdom, of the absolute outrage that the international community feels about what is happening. That will continue when Russia attends these fora.

The Government are an absolute champion of British farming and farmers. That will remain the case. We will continue to find opportunities to put great British produce on the tables of many more families around the world.

I will just briefly address the right hon. Gentleman's comments about the economy. He had a few different stats, but it is worth bearing in mind that we have just come from a G20 summit at which two thirds of the G20 members sitting around the table are experiencing inflation rates north of 7%. The International Monetary Fund predicts that a third of the world's economy is already or will shortly be in recession.

If the right hon. Gentleman takes the time to read the G20 communiqué, he will see that actually the global picture is very clear: countries around the world are grappling with high energy prices, high food prices and rising interest rates. Indeed, many countries around the world, like us, have committed, as does the international community, to ensuring fiscal sustainability as a path to improving those matters. That is absolutely the challenge that we confront, and it is absolutely the challenge that the Chancellor will meet head on. We will make those decisions with fairness and with compassion.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee on Defence.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I strongly welcome the Prime Minister's words at the G20 in condemnation of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. I have just returned with the Defence Committee from Odesa, where there is huge appreciation for British efforts in support of Ukraine at this time, but just one fifth as many grain ships have been able to get out since the war.

With Russia's maritime force severely diminished, Odesa is calling out for a new, more efficient grain deal. Will the Prime Minister meet me to look at securing a UN General Assembly resolution, bypassing the Security Council, to grant Odesa humanitarian safe haven status, along with the formation of a UN-led maritime force so that vital grain ships can be escorted safely out of Odesa?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of the grain shipments through Odesa. I am very pleased that, after concerted efforts on our part and from other allies with the United Nations Secretary-General, the grain deal, which just days ago was in some doubt, has indeed been extended. That demonstrates the pressure put on Russia by the international community. My right hon. Friend knows the importance of the free flow of food and fertilisers to the developing world through those ships. I would be delighted to meet him to see what more we can do, but I think for now we should be very pleased that the grain deal is being extended. It is already leading to a decline in wheat prices, which will bring some alleviation to the food inflation that we are seeing, particularly in the African continent.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Putin's aggression was allowed to prosper for too long—ever since 2008, one could argue—so I completely support what the Prime Minister has said and done in support of Ukraine against the barbarism of the Russian Federation. On China, I understand the realpolitik of the past week, but the concentration camps in the Xinjiang province continue, as does the genocide, and the suppression of human rights in Hong Kong continues. May I ask the Prime Minister to do one thing, which the United States of America has already done: sanction Carrie Lam?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that the United Kingdom has led efforts to hold China to account, including by imposing sanctions on senior Chinese officials and mobilising international support to hold China to account at the United Nations. As hon. Members have heard, we will use dialogue as an opportunity to raise the concerns that we have on Xinjiang and other human rights abuses as we see them.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I commend the Prime Minister for this country's leadership across a range of issues, including on Russia. Does he share my enthusiasm and optimism for our accession to the CPTPP, given this trading bloc represents nearly 15% of the world's GDP and offers so many opportunities for so many export industries, including the Scotch industry, for which tariffs will fall from 100%, in many cases, to zero? I am sure that is something to which even the SNP could raise a glass when we join.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it very well. He is right about the importance of CPTPP, not only for its very significant economic benefits but for the strategic benefits to the United Kingdom of being an engaged member of the Indo-Pacific community. I discussed this with the Prime Ministers of Australia, Japan and Canada, and there is incredible excitement about our joining. We will continue to conclude those negotiations as quickly as possible.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that the last G20 summit agreed to on-lend $100 billion of IMF special drawing rights to help tackle the crisis of food fragility and climate finance in the global south. To date, we have agreed to share much less of our entitlement than both France and China. The crisis is now. Will the Prime Minister look again at how we can increase our on-lending to this multilateral effort, not least to make good the appalling decision to slash our aid budget?

The Prime Minister: As Chancellor, I was pleased to usher through the special drawing rights allocation at the IMF, which is providing enormous relief to countries around the world. I met the IMF's managing director to discuss how we can do more, but remember that the SDR allocation is just one part of our effort to support people around the world. I was recently pleased to announce our £1 billion commitment to the Global Fund, which was warmly welcomed, especially by countries in Africa.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The Prime Minister is to be congratulated on such successful talks with so many world leaders, particularly President Modi. Will he update the House on the matters he discussed with President Modi other than trade, such as granting visas for highly skilled people to fill job needs in this country, the environment and, above all, the issue raised by the Foreign Affairs Committee: India's stance, as the world's biggest democracy, on supporting Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Our relationship and partnership with India is much broader than just a trading relationship. I was pleased to discuss increasing our security co-operation with India. That work began before my tenure, but I am keen to carry it on. We also announced the mobility scheme to enable young people from India to come here and young Brits to go there, which is a sign of what is possible. Such exchanges are positive both for our countries and for the young people who benefit.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): At the G20, the Prime Minister agreed with his Indian counterpart to allow an additional 3,000 Indians into the UK every year, which in the fullness of time will inevitably lead to an increase in immigration. At the same time, the Home Secretary has been busy spouting anti-immigrant and anti-refugee dog-whistle rhetoric, including her incendiary remarks against international students that so incensed people in India. Who exactly is in charge of immigration policy? Is it the Prime Minister or the wannabe Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I am disappointed with the hon. Gentleman's comments, because I know he does not believe that. He can take comfort from the announcement, which is good for both Indian students and British students who want to go back and forth—that is a good thing.

The Home Secretary is rightly focused—there is nothing "dog whistle" about it—on clamping down on illegal migration, which the British people rightly expect and demand, and it is something that she and this Government will deliver.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Leader of the Opposition correctly said that Russia is losing this war. Like a wounded animal, it is now lashing out with weapons from, we believe, Iran and North Korea. Was any consideration given to additional sanctions on those two countries and possibly excluding Russia from membership of the G20?

The Prime Minister: The G20 is not like the G7. It is a broader grouping of countries that works by consensus, so it is not possible to expel Russia in the same way, but my hon. Friend will take comfort from our using the opportunity to unequivocally condemn Russia's actions. With regard to sanctions on Iran and others, he will be aware that we have recently imposed new sanctions on Iran that relate specifically to the treatment of protesters in the recent demonstrations. That is the right thing to do as the behaviour of the Iranian regime is not acceptable and we should hold it to account.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Facing the worst drought in 40 years, tens of millions of people in east Africa are going hungry. Children are dying today of malnutrition and the United Nations expects a famine to be declared before the end of the year. Although the UK has already given humanitarian aid, does the Prime Minister recognise that the international community now needs to do more to save lives, not wait for the formal declaration of famine?

The Prime Minister: The UK is already tackling this issue head on. At the United Nations General Assembly, we announced funding, in particular for famine support in Somalia, and our work on helping to secure an extension to the Black sea grain initiative will make an enormous difference to the people that the right hon. Gentleman rightly cares about, as do I. In addition, countries in Africa were very pleased by our commitment to the Global Fund, because they know that will help to alleviate some of the difficulties they face.

Siobhan Baillie (Stroud) (Con): Multinationalism has never been more important given current global pressures and threats, not least in protecting the people of Ukraine. Despite Twitter mainly having a meltdown over flowery shirts, will my right hon. Friend tell us how useful he found his first G20 meeting for relationship building and consolidating joint international working?

The Prime Minister: Of course these summits are helpful in co-ordinating global action on tackling challenges such as inflation or supporting Ukraine, but they are also helpful in building those relationships with foreign leaders that can deliver tangible benefit for people here at home. We have seen that most recently with the dialogue we are now having with President Macron and the French that has led to a new deal to help us tackle illegal migration. That is an example of why these dialogues and summits matter, and they are delivering real change for people here at home.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Further to his replies about our relationship with India, why are Britons, alone in Europe, currently excluded from the Indian e-visa scheme? That is doing more damage to our hard-pressed travel and tourism sector, as well as creating extreme inconvenience for British families who want to visit relatives in India in the months to come. Did his discussions with Prime Minister Modi give him hope that that ban might be lifted any time soon?

The Prime Minister: That is something that we discussed and raised. Of course I would like to see the United Kingdom included in the e-visa scheme, and the right hon. Gentleman can rest assured that we will continue to raise it with our Indian counterparts.

Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that in his conversations with President Biden of the US and his counterparts in the EU, he has made the UK's intention to preserve the integrity of the Good Friday agreement absolutely clear? Will he also confirm that, in so doing, it is not unreasonable for the UK, an independent and sovereign nation, to be able to maintain its own economic integrity?

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. Of course the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom is important and must be preserved and that is under some stress, as we have seen in Northern Ireland, as he knows well from his previous role. He has my commitment to the Good Friday agreement, which was something I discussed not only with our European counterparts but also the President. We remain committed to delivering all strands of that agreement, and that is what I will work tirelessly to do.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Were there any discussions at the G20 about the situation in Iran? I have heard from a lot of constituents who want to express their solidarity with the protesters and their outrage at the way the regime is cracking down on them. What steps can the G20 take to support progress towards stability and democracy in Iran?

The Prime Minister: The protests send a clear message that the Iranian people are not satisfied with the path that their Government have taken. As I mentioned, we have now sanctioned 24 extra people, both political and security officials, for their role in the crackdown on protesters. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary recently summoned Iran's most senior diplomat in the UK to make it clear that we do not tolerate threats to life and intimidation of any kind.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that Putin was emboldened to attack Ukraine by the continual appeasement from western democracies over many years? Why does he not think that a similar appeasement of the Chinese dictatorship will not result in a similar disaster?

The Prime Minister: Our approach to China is in complete alignment with the United States, Canada and Australia. It is one that is clear-eyed about the challenges that China poses to our values, interests and economic security, which is why it is right that we take

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robust action to defend ourselves against that, as we saw just yesterday with the decision on Chinese investment in a sensitive industry in this country.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): One of the key global challenges facing the G20 is migration and refugees. I know that this country has a proud history of fulfilling our international obligations to the most vulnerable, including children. Can the Prime Minister confirm that no unaccompanied asylum-seeking children under the age of eight are currently being held at Manston? If the Prime Minister does not know the answer, will he write to me as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: I would be happy to write to the right hon. Lady. She will know well that we have different processes and procedures in place for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to make sure that they get extra safeguarding protection as they are rightly due. I will get back to her with an update on where we are.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Russian attacks on Ukrainian energy infrastructure in recent weeks just show the full extent of Putin's complete desperation. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the UK is providing Ukraine with the energy equipment and the support that it needs to help repair its infrastructure, so that it can keep its lights and heat on in the months ahead?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise that particular need of the Ukrainians. It is something that I have discussed a couple of times with President Zelensky, and I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that we are playing our part in providing funding and expertise to help resolve some of the issues. The Ukrainians, I know, are very grateful for that support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The G20 communiqué urged all parties to finalise and adopt the forthcoming COP15 global biodiversity framework in Montreal. At this crisis time for nature, both globally and at home, the Prime Minister will know the importance of leading by example, so, as well as accelerating the UK's domestic environmental agenda, will he ensure that he is not forced into another last-minute U-turn as we saw ahead of COP26? Will he commit now to attending COP15 in person and show that leadership?

The Prime Minister: I do not think that anyone could doubt our commitment to biodiversity and nature. It was something on which the United Kingdom proudly led at Glasgow last year to put it on the agenda. We will have a range of different people attending Montreal. I was very pleased that we ensured that the G20 communiqué reaffirmed the G20's commitments to the targets that were set at COP. We fought very hard for that, and we should all be proud that it is there in the G20 communiqué.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): May I ask the Prime Minister a specific question regarding the conversation that he had with Prime Minister Trudeau? The United Kingdom and Canada have a close relationship through being members of the G7, G20, Five Eyes, NATO and the Commonwealth. Whether it is friendships in Parliament or friendships with world leaders, one needs to know where one stands. Did the Prime Minister ask Prime Minister Trudeau about Canada stepping up to meet the target of 2% of GDP towards NATO, and did the United Kingdom ask Canada to do more in the High North, the Arctic, where we face greater threat from Russia, and where it has specific expertise?

The Prime Minister: I encourage all members of NATO to make their way towards the 2% target—something that we have proudly done in this country for some years. Our co-operation with Canada is deep. Prime Minister Trudeau was pleased to announce an extension of Canadian support for our programme to train Ukrainian soldiers here—something on which we are working closely together. I would be happy to pick up the conversation on the High North. Again, that would be a feature of our refreshed integrated review.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister knows that the energy charter treaty enables fossil fuel companies to sue Governments that pass legislation undermining their future profits in the name of stopping climate change. That is why Germany and France have announced they are withdrawing from it, as are Poland, the Netherlands, Slovenia and Spain. When does he anticipate the UK withdrawing from the energy charter treaty, or does he put fossil fuel profits ahead of climate change? Will he raise that within World Trade Organisation reform?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman mentions a range of other countries in relation to fossil fuels, but it was the United Kingdom that led through COP last year in ensuring that we end climate finance for coal plants—something that other countries need to catch up with us on. We will continue to champion that in all these forums, because it is the right thing to do and it was a commitment we made at Glasgow that needs to be upheld.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Having just returned from Ukraine with the Defence Committee and my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary, I must tell the House how movingly grateful the Ukrainians are for all the support we give, and in particular to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for his outstanding leadership of this country in fighting the Russian aggression. However, there are shortages of food, ammunition and military equipment. While we and the United States are doing our bit, there is concern that other countries are not. Can he inform the House whether, during the "G19" or G20 meeting, he heard any feedback from other countries that they will step up to the plate as we and the Americans are doing?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the need to continue supporting Ukraine for as long as it takes. That remains a feature of all our conversations with allies. There are many different ways that people can play their part—for example, as I mentioned, the Canadians have recently extended their support for training Ukrainians here—but he is right that we need to keep up the pressure. The UK has shown great leadership on this, alongside America, and we will jointly encourage others to follow our lead and ensure Ukraine is in the strongest possible position to bring an end to this awful conflict.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): Does the Prime Minister agree that private citizens in the UK should follow the example of several British businesses and sell any shares they have in businesses that still operate in Russia?

The Prime Minister: The United Kingdom took the lead in imposing some of the most stringent economic sanctions on the Russian economy, Russian businesses and Russian individuals. It is pleasing that other countries have followed. We will continue to push other countries to follow our lead on sanctions and we will continue to tighten them where we think it can make a difference.

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his update on trade talks. In those talks, was there any discussion of extending the arrangements to include our No. 1 industry: finance and professional services?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend knows this area well. It is important that we take our time with trade deals, because services liberalisation, which as he knows is important for our economy, often takes longer to negotiate than simple tariff reductions on goods. Our economy has an incredible services sector; it is important that it benefits from trade deals, and I want to ensure that that happens.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): When the Prime Minister met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman earlier this week, did he challenge him on the way Saudi Arabia has been blocking the proposal at COP27 for the phasing down of all fossil fuels?

The Prime Minister: We had a wide-ranging conversation on a range of topics, including climate change. We are committed to our obligations under the COP agreement and we welcome Saudi Arabia's commitment to be net zero by 2060. There are many different opportunities for Saudi Arabia to play its part as COP president coming up, and we look forward to supporting it in that endeavour.

Ruth Edwards (Rushcliffe) (Con): The last few years have shown us the importance of resilient supply chains. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that a priority for his discussions with allies at the G20 was decoupling our supply chains from authoritarian regimes in key areas such as critical minerals and semiconductors?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I am pleased to tell her that just yesterday the Business Secretary made a decision on semiconductors that should give her and others confidence that we take this matter incredibly seriously. I discussed critical minerals with many of our allies around the world and I am pleased to say that Japan, in its G7 presidency next year, will put economic security at the heart of our collective agenda.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): On Northern Ireland, it is reported today in *The Times* that the Prime Minister promised President Biden that the issues surrounding the Northern Ireland protocol would be solved by next April. Did he give that commitment to President Biden? The people of Northern Ireland face a long hard winter without a Government in place there, so should there not be a greater sense of urgency from the UK Government to sort it out?

The Prime Minister: As I have said publicly and clearly, I want to see a resolution to this issue as soon as possible. That is why I spoke to my counterparts in Ireland and the European Commission, and others, on almost the first day I took office. I am working very hard to try to bring about a negotiated settlement to the challenges we face, but those challenges on the ground are real: businesses, families and communities are suffering as a result of the protocol. I have made that point loudly and clearly to all our counterparts, and I have urged them to show flexibility and pragmatism in their response so that we can get the situation resolved on the ground and get the Executive back up and running, because that is what the people of Northern Ireland deserve.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate members of the G20, and its chair, on their final communiqué and its unanimous condemnation of the continued invasion of Ukraine, and the Prime Minister and other western leaders on their work to de-escalate tensions between the west and China. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, apart from the important work that he is doing multilaterally in the trans-Pacific partnership and bilaterally with India on the free-trade agreement, there are other bilateral opportunities with leading Asian countries? Will he encourage their Heads of Government to undertake working visits to the UK?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely will do that. May I also congratulate my hon. Friend on his reappointment as a trade envoy to Indonesia? It is a region that he knows particularly well. He has done fantastic work in deepening our bilateral relationship with that country, which will play an increasingly important role in the global economy as the third largest democracy, one of the largest Muslim countries in the world, and soon to be a top-five economy. It is right that we have deep relationships within Indonesia, and I thank him for his part in making sure that that is happening.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Water and sanitation are a major global crisis, causing conflict, migration, inequality for women and girls, and poor health outcomes that are easily preventable. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether he had conversations with other G20 members about the water and sanitation crisis, and will he reverse the 80% cuts made by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to water and sanitation projects?

The Prime Minister: The conversations I had with other leaders were incredibly appreciative of the role that the United Kingdom is playing in helping to tackle suffering, poverty and poor sanitation around the world. What was highlighted in particular was our recent commitment of £1 billion to the Global Fund, as well as our track record of supporting countries to alleviate famine. Those are things that everyone in this House should be proud of and this Government will continue to champion them.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): The whole House will welcome the shared commitment to the defence of Ukraine and the rule of law, but my right hon. Friend

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will know that key to that last element is the work of the International Criminal Court, which in March launched its investigation into war crimes, with an aspiration to issue an indictment by the end of the year. Can the Prime Minister confirm that the UK will continue to do all it can to support that work, including in the difficult task that lies ahead of obtaining custody of Russian military generals so they can stand trial?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, this is an area that my hon. Friend knows well, and she is right to highlight it. I am pleased to tell her that the United Kingdom was out in front in providing both technical and financial resources for the efforts to gather the evidence. I know that the Justice Secretary is in touch with the British prosecutor as well, and the team will have our full support.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): When the Prime Minister met Prime Minister Modi, did he raise the case of Jagtar Singh Johal, who has been held in arbitrary detention for 1,840 days? The Sikh community in Scotland is incredibly concerned about the situation. Was it just handshakes and Instagram photographs, or did the Prime Minister raise that case?

The Prime Minister: We have consistently raised our concerns about Mr Johal's case directly with all levels of the Indian Government. I discussed more generally with Prime Minister Modi the issues around extradition, and the Foreign Secretary raised this case with India's Minister of External Affairs just last month on his visit to India.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland) (Con): The Prime Minister made reference to the danger of debt traps for emerging economies. Can he give further information on what steps the United Kingdom has taken to provide emerging economies with alternatives to Chinese money?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the need for sensible alternatives. We tend to work not just bilaterally but multilaterally through things such as special drawing rights recycling at the International Monetary Fund. *[Interruption.]* The new resilience and sustainability trust was established with UK leadership, and indeed the new debt service suspension initiative is something that I championed as Chancellor. We need to make sure that we deliver on it.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister laid out his approach to trade deals in his statement. He will be aware that while he was at the G20 the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) was describing the trade deal with Australia as

"not actually a very good deal for the UK".—[*Official Report*, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]

Does the Prime Minister agree with the right hon. Member, who was formerly the Environment Secretary, and if so what will the Prime Minister do about it? *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before the Prime Minister attempts to answer the question, I should point out that there is far too much noise in the Chamber. One would think that people were anticipating something about to happen and chatting among themselves instead of giving their full attention to the important answers that the Prime Minister is giving to important questions.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Maybe not as important as what is about to come from the Chancellor.

All trade deals involve give and take on both sides. The Australia trade deal will open up new markets for 3 million British jobs, which is fantastic, reduce prices for Australian goods and make it easier for young people to move back and forth between the two countries. Going forward, we will ensure that our trade deals work for the UK. That is what we will deliver.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The Prime Minister has reaffirmed the Government's strong commitment to supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia's illegal and inhumane invasion, and underlined the leadership that we provided to other countries. Can he confirm that our superb armed forces will continue to provide the appropriate support, especially in training Ukraine's brave defenders, to ensure that evil cannot triumph and Putin fails, and did he encourage other G20 members to do likewise?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. It is an issue that he has rightly championed on previous occasions. I can give him that reassurance. The NATO Secretary-General was in the United Kingdom just days ago, visiting the training that we are providing for Ukrainian soldiers. It is looked at favourably by many allies around the world, which is why Prime Minister Trudeau was pleased to confirm when he was with me an extension to Canadian support for that programme. Hopefully many more countries will follow.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): It is not so many months ago that any international conference such as the G20 would have been seized with the situation in Afghanistan. Afghanistan has now gone off the agenda, but the humanitarian crisis there is moving into absolute tragedy as people are facing starvation. Can the Prime Minister tell us what conversations took place about Afghanistan? In any case, will he now reconvene the kind of donor conference that could make a material difference to starvation in that country?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Member is right to highlight that Afghanistan continues to experience one of the world's worst humanitarian crises. That is why earlier this year we co-hosted a UN pledging summit, together with Germany and Qatar, that helped to raise over $2 billion for Afghanistan, but he is right to put it on the agenda. I will make sure that we continue to do what we can to support the people there.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): A free trade deal with India is a tremendous opportunity for both the United Kingdom and India. I agree with my right hon. Friend that we should not sacrifice quality in order to do a deal quickly; however, during his discussions with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, what obstacles did the Prime Minister clear so that we can get on with the free trade deal that we all want to see?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has rightly been a significant champion of this deal and our relationships with India. I am pleased to have his support. Without negotiating all these things in public, I am pleased that the majority of the substantive negotiation conversations were concluded by the end of October. We will now work at pace with the Indian teams to try to resolve the issues and come to a mutually satisfactory conclusion.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Our closest trading partners are still in the EU. Can the Prime Minister update us on what he did during the G20 summit to improve relationships with EU countries, which, to say the least, are still fragile since Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We may have left the EU, but we have not left Europe, and it is important that we maintain strong and positive relationships with our European partners and allies. That is very much what I intend to do, and I am pleased that those conversations have been going well.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con): I am glad that the situation with regard to refugees all over the world was discussed, but no debate on refugees can be complete without a discussion about the plight of the Rohingya. Could my right hon. Friend confirm that world leaders considered and discussed what further support we can provide to Rohingya refugees in the largest refugee camp in the world, which is a great concern for my constituents?

The Prime Minister: I know that this is an issue of concern for my hon. Friend, and it is right that he raises it and champions the case. I am pleased to tell him that we have sanctioned those people responsible, and we will continue to make sure we provide whatever support we can to the people who need our help.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): In the communiqué from the G20, the words "food", "food supply" and "food scarcity" are mentioned 54 times. It is good that Britain is taking part in the global community's fight to make sure that food is properly distributed, but last year, before the Ukraine war, one in nine Britons were driven to use a food bank. Is it not clear that the problem was not disruption of food supply but poverty—poverty driven by No. 10 and No. 11 when the Prime Minister was in the Treasury? Is it not clear that for the poor of Britain, hunger is a nightmare created by Downing Street?

The Prime Minister: The Chancellor is about to deliver a statement that will ensure that our economy is strong, that we support the most vulnerable and that we have a clear platform for growth. I urge the hon. Gentleman to wait for it.

Simon Jupp (East Devon) (Con): Peace on the continent must be restored. It is a fact that no one in Europe is truly safe until Putin fails. Can my right hon. Friend update the House on how we will make that happen alongside our global allies in the G20?

The Prime Minister: What is important is that Russia understands that the global community speaks with one voice in condemning its illegal and barbaric actions. I am pleased that the G20 communiqué expresses that sentiment, as many more countries are joining our efforts to stand up to Russian aggression and support Ukraine.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): During talks on the CPTPP, did the Prime Minister convey the concerns of the UK's fantastic food and farming industries? What assurances was he able to obtain that those industries will be considered and protected as negotiations continue?

The Prime Minister: I stand by our commitment not to compromise the United Kingdom's high environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards and will ensure that our trade deals open up new markets for British farmers.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): The cost of living in the UK is going up mainly because of the war that Russia is conducting, but it is not just affecting us; it is affecting the eurozone, which has average inflation of 10%. What discussions did the Prime Minister have at the G20 about the strategy to deal with inflation, which is clearly a worldwide problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the global nature of the challenges we are facing, caused in part by Russia's aggression. The G20 communiqué is clear on the responsibility of individual countries to ensure financial stability. As it says, that means delivering long-term fiscal sustainability, and that is what this Chancellor will deliver.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for his strong stance on behalf of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The actions of Putin and his regime have driven two thirds of G20 countries into economic distress, raising inflation in this country to 10% or 11%, and talk of a recession is prevalent in many countries. Russia is the enemy within the G20. What is the Prime Minister doing to align with all other G20 countries to ostracise Russia and reduce its influence and, if possible, its membership of the G20?

The Prime Minister: It is not possible in a consensual organisation to expel Russia, but I am pleased to say that we work closely with all partners across the G20 to deliver a strong, unified message that the threat and use of nuclear weapons is inadmissible, and today's era must not be the era for war. I think Russia heard that message loud and clear.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I share my right hon. Friend's view that China presents a systemic challenge to the west. We have just seen, in Russia, how an authoritarian actor can use their role in our supply chains to damage the global economy. Can he confirm that, when we engage with China on global issues such as climate change or public health, we will never do so at the expense of our national or economic security?

The Prime Minister: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that assurance. We will always be robust in defending our values and our interest, and that starts with our national security.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Government's mishandling of the Northern Ireland protocol negotiations is acting as a barrier to trade deals and scientific collaboration. The Prime Minister says that he was much influenced by his time at Stanford, so surely he understands the key role of science and scientific research in driving economic growth, which we sorely need. Will he really exclude British scientists from the world's biggest scientific research programme, Horizon?

The Prime Minister: No one can doubt my commitment personally to ensuring that the UK remains, as it is, a scientific and technological superpower. That is why we have increased the R&D budget. That is why we are deregulating to support innovation. That is why we are reforming our capital markets to get money to all the companies that need it. We will hear more from the Chancellor about that, but I can give the hon. Lady every assurance that innovation is the way we drive growth, and that is what the Government will deliver.

Mr Speaker: That completes the statement on the G20.

Autumn Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, I point out that the British Sign Language interpretation of the statement and the Opposition Front Bencher's response will be available to watch on parliamentlive.tv.

11.31 am

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): In the face of unprecedented global headwinds, families, pensioners, businesses, teachers, nurses and many others are worried about the future, so today we deliver a plan to tackle the cost of living crisis and rebuild our economy. Our priorities are stability, growth and public services. We also protect the vulnerable, because to be British is to be compassionate and this is a compassionate Conservative Government.

We are not alone in facing these problems, but today we respond to an international crisis with British values. We are honest about the challenges and we are fair in our solutions. Yes, we take difficult decisions to tackle inflation and keep mortgage rates down, but our plan also leads to a shallower downturn, lower energy bills, higher growth, and a stronger NHS and education system.

There are three priorities then today: stability, growth and public services. I start with stability. High inflation is the enemy of stability. It means higher mortgage rates, more expensive food and fuel bills, businesses failing and unemployment rising. It erodes savings, causes industrial unrest and cuts funding for public services. It hurts the poorest the most and eats away at the trust upon which a strong society is built.

The Office for Budget Responsibility confirms that global factors are the primary cause of current inflation. Most countries are still dealing with the fallout from a once-in-a-century pandemic. The furlough scheme, the vaccine roll-out and the response of the NHS did our country proud, but they all have to be paid for. The lasting impact on supply chains has made goods more expensive and fuelled inflation. This has been worsened by a made-in-Russia energy crisis.

Putin's war in Ukraine has caused wholesale gas and electricity prices to rise to eight times their historic average. Inflation is high here, but higher in Germany, the Netherlands and Italy. Interest rates have risen here, but faster in the US, Canada and New Zealand. Growth forecasts have fallen here, but fallen further in Germany. The International Monetary Fund expects one third of the world's economy to be in recession this year or next.

So the Bank of England, which has done an outstanding job since its independence, now has my wholehearted support in its mission to defeat inflation and I today confirm we will not change its remit. But we need fiscal and monetary policy to work together, and that means the Government and the Bank working in lockstep. It means, in particular, giving the world confidence in our ability to pay our debts. British families make sacrifices every day to live within their means, and so too must their Government because the United Kingdom will always pay its way.

I understand the motivation of my predecessor's mini-Budget and he was correct to identify growth as a priority, but unfunded tax cuts are as risky as unfunded

spending, which is why we reversed the planned measures quickly. As a result, Government borrowing has fallen, the pound has strengthened and the OBR says today that the lower interest rates generated by the Government's actions are already benefiting our economy and public finances. But credibility cannot be taken for granted and yesterday's inflation figures show we must continue a relentless fight to bring it down, including a rock solid commitment to rebuild our public finances.

Richard Hughes and his team at the OBR today lay out starkly the impact of global headwinds on the UK economy, and I am enormously grateful to him and his team for their thorough work. The OBR forecasts the UK's inflation rate to be 9.1% this year and 7.4% next year. It confirms that our actions today help inflation to fall sharply from the middle of next year. It also judges that the UK, like other countries, is now in recession. Overall this year, the economy is still forecast to grow by 4.2%. GDP then falls in 2023 by 1.4%, before rising by 1.3%, 2.6% and 2.7% in the following three years. The OBR says higher energy prices explain the majority of the downward revision in cumulative growth since March. It also expects a rise in unemployment from 3.6% today to 4.9% in 2024, before falling to 4.1%.

Today's decisions mean that, over the next five years, borrowing is more than halved. This year, we are forecast to borrow 7.1% of GDP, or £177 billion; next year, 5.5% of GDP, or £140 billion; then by 2027-28, it falls to 2.4% of GDP, or £69 billion. As a result, underlying debt as a percentage of GDP starts to fall from a peak of 97.6% in 2025-26 to 97.3% in 2027-28.

I also confirm two new fiscal rules. The first is that underlying debt must fall as a percentage of GDP by the fifth year of a rolling five-year period. The second is that public sector borrowing over the same period must be below 3% of GDP. The plan I am announcing today meets both rules.

Today's statement delivers a consolidation of £55 billion, and means inflation and interest rates end up significantly lower. We achieve this in a balanced way. In the short term, as growth slows and unemployment rises, we will use fiscal policy to support the economy. The OBR confirms that, because of our plans, the recession is shallower and inflation is reduced. Unemployment is also lower, with about 70,000 jobs saved as a result of our decisions today. Then, once growth returns, we increase the pace of consolidation to get debt falling. This further reduces the pressure on the Bank to raise interest rates, because as Conservatives we do not leave our debts to the next generation.

So this is a balanced path to stability, tackling inflation to reduce the cost of living and protect pensioner savings, while supporting the economy on a path to growth. But it means taking difficult decisions. Anyone who says there are easy answers is not being straight with the British people. Some argue for spending cuts, but that would not be compatible with high-quality public services. Others say savings should be found by increasing taxes, but Conservatives know that high-tax economies damage enterprise and erode freedom. We want low taxes and sound money, but Conservatives know that sound money has to come first, because inflation eats away at the pound in people's pockets even more insidiously than taxes. So with just under half of the £55 billion consolidation coming from tax, and just over half from spending, this is a balanced plan for stability.

I turn first to our decisions on tax. I have tried to be fair by following two broad principles: first, we ask those with more to contribute more; and secondly, we avoid the tax rises that damage growth. Although my decisions today do lead to a substantial tax increase, we have not raised headline rates of taxation, and tax as a percentage of GDP will increase by just 1% over the next five years.

I start with personal taxes. Asking more from those who have more means that the first difficult decision I take on tax is to reduce the threshold at which the 45p rate becomes payable from £150,000 to £125,140. Those earning £150,000 or more will pay just over £1,200 more in tax every year. We are also taking difficult decisions on tax-free allowances. I am maintaining at current levels the income tax personal allowance, higher rate threshold, main national insurance thresholds and the inheritance tax thresholds for a further two years, taking us to April 2028. Even after that, we will still have the most generous set of tax-free allowances of any G7 country.

I am also reforming allowances on unearned income. The dividend allowance will be cut from £2,000 to £1,000 next year, and then to £500 from April 2024. The annual exempt amount for capital gains tax will be cut from £12,300 to £6,000 next year, and then £3,000 from April 2024. Those changes still leave us with more generous allowances than countries such as Germany, Ireland, France, and Canada.

Because the OBR forecasts that half of all new vehicles will be electric by 2025, to make our motoring tax system fairer, I have decided that from then electric vehicles will no longer be exempt from vehicle excise duty. Company car tax rates will remain lower for electric vehicles, and I have listened to industry bodies and will limit rate increases to 1 percentage point a year for three years from 2025.

The OBR expects housing activity to slow over the next two years, so the stamp duty cuts announced in the mini-Budget will remain in place but only until 31 March 2025. After that, I will sunset the measure, creating an incentive to support the housing market, and the jobs associated with it, by boosting transaction during the period when the economy most needs it.

I now turn to business taxes. Although I have decided to freeze the employers national insurance contributions threshold until April 2028, we will retain the employment allowance at its new higher level of £5,000. That means that 40% of all businesses will pay no NICs at all. The VAT threshold is already more than twice as high as the EU and OECD averages. I will maintain it at that level until March 2026.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister successfully negotiated a landmark international tax deal to make sure that multinational corporations, including big tech companies, pay the right tax in the countries where they operate. I will implement those reforms, making sure that the UK gets our fair share. Alongside further measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, that will raise an additional £2.8 billion by 2027-28.

I have also heard concerning reports of abuse and fraud in research and development tax relief for small and medium-sized enterprises, so I have decided today to cut the deduction rate for the SME scheme to 86% and the credit rate to 10% but increase the rate of the

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separate R&D expenditure credit from 13% to 20%. Despite raising revenue, the OBR has confirmed that those measures will have no detrimental impact on the level of R&D investment in the economy. Ahead of the next Budget, we will work with industry to understand what further support R&D-intensive SMEs may require.

I turn next to windfall taxes. I have no objection to windfall taxes—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"]—if they are genuinely about windfall profits caused by unexpected increases in energy prices. But—*[Interruption.]* I know that Opposition Members are getting excited at the talk of windfall taxes. Can I just say that any such tax should be temporary, not deter investment and recognise the cyclical nature of energy businesses? So, taking account of that, I have decided that from 1 January until March 2028 we will increase the energy profits levy from 25% to 35%. The structure of our energy market also creates windfall profits for low-carbon electricity generation, so we have decided to introduce, from 1 January, a new, temporary 45% levy on electricity generators. Together, those measures will raise £14 billion next year.

Finally, I turn to business rates. It is an important principle that bills should accurately reflect market values, so we will proceed with the revaluation of business properties from April 2023, but I will soften the blow on businesses with a nearly £14 billion tax cut over the next five years. Nearly two thirds of properties will not pay a penny more next year and thousands of pubs, restaurants and small high street shops will benefit. That will include a new Government-funded transitional relief scheme, as called for by the CBI, the British Retail Consortium, the Federation of Small Businesses and others, benefiting around 700,000 businesses.

Our plan for the cost of living delivers lower inflation, lower mortgage rates, a shallower downturn and lower unemployment, but it also involves public spending discipline, so I turn next to how we protect public services through a challenging period. The Prime Minister's vision for the country has at its heart a strong NHS and world-class education. We know that a strong economy depends on strong public services, so we will protect them as much as we can as we deliver our plan for stability and growth.

We do have to take difficult decisions on public finances, so we are going to grow public spending, but we are going to grow it more slowly than growth in the economy. For the remaining two years of the spending review, we will protect the increases in departmental budgets that we have already set out in cash terms and then grow resource spending at 1% a year in real terms in the three years that follow. Although Departments will have to make efficiencies to deal with inflationary pressures in the next two years, this decision means that overall spending in public services will continue to rise in real terms for the next five years.

Before I turn to our plans for schools and the NHS, I start with two other areas of spending. The Department for Work and Pensions has a critical role in supporting people into work, and I am proud to live in a country with one of the most comprehensive safety nets anywhere in the world. But I am also concerned that we have seen a sharp increase in economically inactive working-age adults of about 630,000 people since the start of the pandemic. Employment levels have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, which is bad for businesses who cannot fill vacancies and bad for people missing out on the opportunity to do well for themselves and their families, so the Prime Minister has asked the Work and Pensions Secretary to do a thorough review of issues holding back workforce participation, to conclude early in the new year.

Alongside that, I am also committed to helping people already in work to raise their incomes, progress in work and become financially independent. So we will ask over 600,000 more people on universal credit to meet with a work coach so that they can get the support that they need to increase their hours or earnings. I have also decided to move back the managed transition of people from employment and support allowance on to universal credit to 2028, and will invest an extra £280 million in the DWP to crack down on benefit fraud and error over the next two years. The Government's review of the state pension age will be published in early 2023.

Our security at home depends on our security overseas, so I turn next to defence and other international commitments. The privilege of being this country's Foreign Secretary showed me first-hand the enormous respect in which this country is held, because the United Kingdom is and has always been a force for good in the world. Nothing sums that up more than the courage of our armed forces; men and women risk their lives every day in defence of our territory and our belief in freedom. Alongside them, I salute the citizens of another country right on the frontline of that fight today: the brave people of Ukraine. The United Kingdom has given them military support worth £2.3 billion since the start of Putin's invasion, the second highest contribution in the world after the United States, which demonstrates that our commitment to democracy and open societies remains steadfast. In that context, the Prime Minister and I both recognise the need to increase defence spending. But before we make that commitment, it is necessary to revise and update the integrated review, written as it was before the Ukraine invasion. I have asked for that vital work to be completed ahead of the next Budget and today I confirm that we will continue to maintain the defence budget at at least 2% of GDP to be consistent with our NATO commitment.

Another important international commitment is to overseas aid. The OBR's forecasts show a significant shock to public finances, so it will not be possible to return to the 0.7% target until the fiscal situation allows. We remain fully committed to that target, and the plans I have set out today assume that official development assistance spending will remain around 0.5% for the forecast period. As a percentage of GNI, we were the third highest donor in the G7 last year, and I am proud that our aid commitment has saved thousands of lives around the world. I look forward to working closely with the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell), now rightly back in his place in Cabinet, to make sure that we continue to play a leadership role in tackling global poverty.

The United Kingdom has also been a global leader on climate change, cutting emissions by more than any other G20 country. But with the existential vulnerability we face, now would be the wrong time to step back from our international climate responsibilities, so I also confirm that, despite the economic pressures, we remain fully

committed to the historic Glasgow climate pact agreed at COP26, including a 68% reduction in our own emissions by 2030.

I turn to education. Being pro-education is being pro-growth. But providing our children with a good education is not just an economic mission, it is a moral mission, one to which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has always been deeply committed. Thanks to the efforts of successive Conservative Education Ministers, in particular my right hon. Friends the Members for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) and for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), we have risen nine places in the global league tables for maths and reading in the last seven years.

I still, however, have concerns that not all school leavers get the skills they need for a modern economy. But for the first time ever, this country has a Conservative Education Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who left school at 16 to become an apprentice, and knows first-hand why good skills matter. There are many important initiatives in place, but as Chancellor I want to know the answer to one simple question: will every young person leave the education system with the skills they would get in Japan, Germany or Switzerland? So, I have appointed Sir Michael Barber to advise me and my right hon. Friend the Education Secretary on the implementation of our skills reform programme.

As we raise the skill levels of our school leavers, I want also to ensure that, even in an economic crisis, the improvement in school standards continues to accelerate. Some have suggested putting VAT on independent school fees as a way of increasing core funding for schools, which would raise about £1.7 billion. But according to certain estimates, that would result in up to 90,000 children from the independent sector switching to state schools, giving with one hand only to take away with another.

So instead of being ideological, I am going to be practical: because we want school standards to continue to rise for every single child, we are going to do more than protect the schools budget—we are going to increase it. I can announce today that next year and the year after, we will invest an extra £2.3 billion per annum in our schools. Our message to heads, teachers and classroom assistants is: thank you for your brilliant work. We need it to continue, and in difficult economic circumstances, a Conservative Government are investing more in the public service that defines all our futures.

The service we depend on more than any other is the NHS. As a former Health Secretary, I know how hard people are working on the frontline and how much they are struggling after the pandemic. The biggest issues are workforce shortages and pressures in the social care sector, so today I address them both.

On staff shortages, the former Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee put forward the case for a long-term workforce plan. He even wrote a book about it, which I have read. *[Laughter.]* I have listened carefully to his proposals and I believe that they have merit, so the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS will publish an independently verified plan for the number of doctors, nurses and other professionals we will need in five, 10 and 15 years' time, taking full account of the need for better retention and productivity improvements.

I have also listened to extensive representations about the challenges facing the social care sector. It did a heroic job looking after children, disabled adults and older people during the pandemic. Its 1.6 million employees work incredibly hard, but even outside the pandemic, the increasing number of over-80s is putting massive pressure on their services.

I also heard the very real concerns from local authorities, particularly about their ability to deliver the Dilnot reforms immediately, so I will delay the implementation of this important reform for two years, allocating the funding to allow local authorities to provide more care packages. I also want the social care system to help free up some of the 13,500 hospital beds that are occupied by those who should be at home, so I have decided to allocate for adult social care additional grant funding of £1 billion next year and £1.7 billion the year after. Combined with savings from the delayed Dilnot reforms and more council tax flexibilities, this means an increase in funding available for the social care sector of up to £2.8 billion next year and £4.7 billion the year after. That is a big increase.

How we look after our most vulnerable citizens is not just a practical issue but one that speaks to our values as a society, so today's decision will allow the social care system to deliver an estimated 200,000 more care packages over the next two years—the biggest increase in funding under any Government of any colour in history.

The NHS budget has been increased to record levels to deal with the pandemic, and today I am asking the NHS to join all public services in tackling waste and inefficiency. We want Scandinavian quality alongside Singaporean efficiency, and both better outcomes for citizens and better value for taxpayers. That does not mean asking people on the frontline, often exhausted and burned out, to work harder, which would not be possible or fair, but it does mean asking challenging questions about how to reform all our public services for the better. So with respect to the NHS, I have asked the former Health Secretary and chair of the Norfolk and Waveney integrated care system, Patricia Hewitt, to help me and the Health Secretary to achieve that by advising us on how to make sure that the new integrated care boards, the local NHS bodies, operate efficiently and with appropriate autonomy and accountability. I have also had discussions with NHS England about the inflationary pressures on their budgets.

I recognise that efficiency savings alone will not be enough to deliver the services we all need, so, because of difficult decisions taken elsewhere today, I will increase the NHS budget, in each of the next two years, by £3.3 billion. The chief executive of NHS England, Amanda Pritchard, has said that this should provide sufficient funding for the NHS to fulfil its key priorities. She has said that it shows the Government are serious about their commitment to prioritise our NHS. With £3.3 billion for the NHS and £4.7 billion for social care, there is a record £8 billion package for our health and care system. That is a Conservative Government putting the NHS first.

The NHS and schools in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland face equivalent pressures, so the Barnett consequentials of today's decisions mean an extra £1.5 billion for the Scottish Government, £1.2 billion for the Welsh Government, and £650 million for the Northern Ireland

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Executive. That means more resources for the schools and hospitals in our devolved nations next year, the year after and every year thereafter.

Our support for public services means that despite needing to find £55 billion in savings and tax rises, we are protecting the amount going into public services in real terms over the five-year period; but if we are to sustain our public services and avoid a doom loop of ever higher taxes and ever lower dynamism, we need economic growth, so I now turn—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members have never been interested in growth, but we on this side of the House are. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to get to the end of the autumn statement, like the rest of the people of this country.

Jeremy Hunt: Let us start with a difficult message for the party opposite: you cannot borrow your way to growth. Sound money is the rock upon which long-term prosperity rests; but it is not enough on its own. Our plan is designed to build a high-wage, high-skill economy that leads to long-term prosperity. In his Mais lecture, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister identified the keys to doing that: people, capital and ideas. Today's increase in the education budget demonstrates our commitment to people and skills, and I will now outline three further growth priorities: energy, infrastructure and innovation.

Cheap, low-carbon, reliable energy must sit at the heart of any modern economy, but Putin's weaponisation of international gas prices has helped to drive the cost of our national energy consumption right up. This year we will be spending an extra £150 billion on energy compared to pre-pandemic levels, the equivalent of paying for an entire second NHS through our energy bills.

In 2019, a third of global emissions came from energy supply, so unless we act radically to change our approach, we will both bankrupt our economy and harm our planet. Over the long term, there is only one way to stop ourselves being at the mercy of international gas prices: energy independence combined with energy efficiency—energy independence so neither Putin nor anyone else can use energy to blackmail us, and energy efficiency to reduce demand and climate impact as much as possible.

Britain is a global leader in renewable energy. Last year, nearly 40% of our electricity came from offshore wind, solar and other renewables. Since 2010, our renewable energy production has grown faster than any other large country in Europe. But we need to go even further, with a major acceleration of home-grown technologies like offshore wind, carbon capture and storage, and, above all, nuclear. This will deliver new jobs, industries and export opportunities, and secure the clean, affordable energy we need to power our future economy and reach net zero. So today I can announce the Government will proceed with the new nuclear power plant at Sizewell C.

Subject to final Government approvals, the contracts for the initial investment will be signed with relevant parties, including EDF, in the coming weeks. This will create 10,000 highly skilled jobs and provide reliable, low-carbon power to the equivalent of 6 million homes for 50 years. Our £700 million investment is the first state backing for a nuclear project in over 30 years and represents the biggest step in our journey to energy independence.

But energy efficiency is just as important, so today we set our country a new national ambition: by 2030 we want to reduce energy consumption from buildings and industry by 15%. Reducing demand by this much means, in today's prices, a £28 billion saving from our national energy bill, or £450 off the average household bill. This must be a shared mission, with families and businesses playing their part—but so will the Government play our part.

In this Parliament, we are already planning to invest in energy efficiency a total of £6.6 billion. Today I am announcing new funding, from 2025, of a further £6 billion—doubling our annual investment to deliver this new national ambition. Our commitment to the British people is, over time, to remove this single biggest driver of inflation and volatility facing British businesses and consumers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will publish further details on our energy independence plans and launch a new energy efficiency taskforce shortly.

If a modern economy needs secure, clean and affordable energy, it also needs good roads, rail, broadband and 5G infrastructure. Such connections matter because they allow wealth and opportunity to spread to every corner of the country. That is why infrastructure is our second growth priority. Thanks to decisions by this Conservative Government, right now workers right across the country are building or maintaining thousands of miles of roads and railways, installing mobile masts and broadband cables to connect the remotest parts of rural Britain, building and repairing hospitals, and constructing new wind turbines in the North sea.

When looking for cuts, capital is sometimes seen as an easy option, but doing so limits not our budgets but our future. So today I can announce that I am not cutting a penny from our capital budgets in the next two years, and I am maintaining them at that level in cash terms for the following three years. That means that although we are not growing our capital budget as planned, it will still increase from £63 billion four years ago to £114 billion next year and £115 billion the year after, and will remain at that level—more than double what it was under the last Labour Government.

Smart countries build on their long-term commitments rather than discarding them, so today I confirm that because of this decision, alongside Sizewell C, we will deliver the core Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS2 to Manchester, East West Rail, the new hospitals programme and gigabit broadband roll-out. All these and more will be funded as promised, with over £600 billion of investment over the next five years to connect our country and grow our economy.

Our national Conservative mission is to level up economic opportunity across the country. That, too, needs investment in infrastructure, so I will proceed with round 2 of the levelling-up fund, at least matching the £1.7 billion value of round 1. We will also drive growth across the UK by working with the Scottish Government on the feasibility study for the A75, supporting the advanced technology research centre in Wales and funding a trade and investment event in Northern Ireland next year.

But to unlock growth right across the country, we need to make it easier for local leaders to make things happen without banging on a Whitehall door. Our brilliant Mayors such as Andy Street and Ben Houchen

have shown the power of civic entrepreneurship. We need more of this inspirational local leadership, so today I can announce a new devolution deal that will bring an elected Mayor to Suffolk, and deals to bring Mayors to Cornwall, Norfolk and an area in the north-east to follow shortly. We are also making progress towards trailblazer devolution deals with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the West Midlands Combined Authority, and soon over half of England will be covered by devolution deals. Taken together, that £600 billion investment in our future growth represents the largest investment in public works for 40 years, so our children and grandchildren can be confident that this Conservative Government are investing in their future.

Along with energy and infrastructure, our third growth priority is innovation. We have a national genius for innovation. Britain is the land of Newton, Darwin, Fleming, Faraday, Franklin, Gilbert and Berners-Lee, the home of three of the world's top 10 universities, and the country with the largest life sciences and technology sectors in Europe. Thanks to successive Conservative Governments, we remain a science superpower. I salute the work of the former Chancellor George Osborne, of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) and of the Science Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), for laying the vital foundations to make this possible.

21st-century economies will be defined by new developments in artificial intelligence, quantum technologies and robotics, but we need to be better at turning world-class innovation into world-class companies. As a former entrepreneur—I had to get that in somewhere—I want to combine our technology and science brilliance with our formidable financial services to turn Britain into the world's next silicon valley.

We learned from the success of Nigel Lawson's big bang in 1986 that smart regulatory reform can spur investment from all over the world, so today, using our Brexit freedoms, I confirm the next steps in our supply-side transformation. By the end of next year, we will decide on and announce changes to EU regulations in our five growth industries: digital, life sciences, green industries, financial services and advanced manufacturing. I have asked the chief scientific adviser Sir Patrick Vallance, who did such a brilliant job in the pandemic, to lead our work on how to do this.

The second lesson of Nigel Lawson's big bang is that the most important driver of global success is not tax subsidies but competition, so we will legislate to give the Digital Markets Unit new powers to challenge monopolies and increase the competitive pressure to innovate. To further spur competition, I have listened to requests from businesses, and today I am removing import tariffs on over 100 goods used by UK businesses in their production processes, from car seat parts to bicycle frames.

I will also change our approach to investment zones, which will now focus on leveraging our research strengths by being centred on universities in left-behind areas, to help to build clusters for our new growth industries. My right hon. Friend the Levelling Up Secretary will work with Mayors, devolved Administrations and local partners to achieve this, with the first decisions announced ahead of the spring Budget.

I have heard some speculation that we might cut the research and development budget today, but I believe that that would be a profound mistake. In our 2017 manifesto, we announced a target to invest 2.4% of our GDP in R&D; the latest Office for National Statistics data suggests that the UK is close to meeting that target. I want to go further, so today I am protecting our entire research budget and confirming that we will increase public funding for R&D to £20 billion by 2024-25 as part of our mission to make the United Kingdom a science superpower.

Nigel Lawson's big bang inspires us today, but nearly 40 years on we must stay true to its mission to make the UK the world's most innovative and competitive global financial centre, so to further support investment across our economy, I also announce that we are publishing our decision on Solvency II, which will unlock tens of billions of pounds of investment for our growth-enhancing industries.

Our three priorities for growth are energy security, investment in infrastructure, and a plan to turn the United Kingdom into the world's next silicon valley, transforming British intellectual genius into British commercial success. But alongside British genius, we must remember another great national quality: British compassion. The final part of our plan protects the most vulnerable, and it is to that that I now turn.

Strong public finances are not just to make accountants happy. It is because we took difficult decisions in 2010 that we could afford record funding increases for the NHS, the landmark furlough scheme and now the energy price guarantee. Today, the discipline that we have shown means that we can provide targeted support to help our most vulnerable citizens with the cost of living.

One of the biggest worries for families is energy bills. I pay tribute to my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), and to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), for their leadership in this area. This winter, we will stick with their plan to spend £55 billion to help households and businesses with their energy bills—one of the largest support plans in Europe. From April, we will continue the energy price guarantee for a further 12 months at a higher level of £3,000 per year for the average household. With prices forecast to remain elevated throughout next year, this will mean an average of £500 of support for every household in the country.

At the same time, for the most vulnerable, we will introduce additional cost of living payments next year of £900 to households on means-tested benefits, £300 to pensioner households and £150 for individuals on disability benefit. We will also provide an additional £1 billion of funding to enable a further 12-month extension to the household support fund, helping local authorities to assist those who might otherwise fall through the cracks. For those households that use alternative fuels such as heating oil and liquefied petroleum gas to heat their homes, I am today doubling the support from £100 to £200, which will be delivered as soon as possible this winter. Before the end of this year, we will also bring forward a new targeted approach to support businesses from next April.

But I want to go further to support the people most exposed to high inflation. Around 4 million families live in the social rented sector—almost one fifth of households in England. Their rents are set at 1% above the September inflation rate, which means that on current plans they are set to see rent hikes next year of up to 11%. For many, that would just be unaffordable, so today I can

[Jeremy Hunt]

announce that this Government will cap the increase in social rents at a maximum of 7% in 2023-24. Compared with current plans, that is a saving for the average tenant of £200 next year.

This Government introduced—*[Interruption.]* I thought they cared about the most vulnerable! This Government introduced the national living wage, which has been a giant step in eliminating low pay, so today I am accepting the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission to increase it next year by 9.7%. This means that, from April 2023, the hourly rate will be £10.42, which represents an annual pay rise worth over £1,600 to a full-time worker. It is expected to benefit over 2 million of the lowest-paid workers in our country, and it keeps us on track for our target to reach two thirds of median earnings by 2024. It is the largest increase in the UK's national living wage ever.

There have been some representations on keeping the uplift to working-age and disability benefits below the level of inflation given the financial constraints we face, but that would not be consistent with our commitment to protect the most vulnerable, so today I commit to uprating such benefits by inflation, with an increase of 10.1%. That is an expensive commitment, costing £11 billion, but it means that 10 million working-age families will see a much-needed increase next year, which speaks to our priorities as a Government and our priorities as a nation. On average, a family on universal credit will benefit next year by around £600. To increase the number of households that can benefit from this decision, I will also exceptionally increase the benefit cap by inflation next year.

Finally, I have talked a lot about the British values of compassion, hard work, dignity and fairness, but there is no more British value than our commitment to protect and honour those who built the country we live in, so to support the poorest pensioners I have decided to increase pension credit by 10.1%, which is worth up to £1,470 for a couple and £960 for a single pensioner in our most vulnerable households, but the cost of living crisis is harming not just our poorest pensioners but all pensioners.

Because we have taken difficult decisions elsewhere today, I can also announce that we will fulfil our pledge to the country to protect the pension triple lock. In April, the state pension will increase in line with inflation, an £870 increase, which represents the biggest ever increase in the state pension. To the millions of pensioners who will benefit from this measure, I say: "Now and always, this Government are on your side."

There is a global energy crisis, a global inflation crisis and a global economic crisis, but the British people are tough, inventive and resourceful. We have risen to bigger challenges before. We are not immune to these headwinds but, with this plan for stability, growth and public services, we will face into the storm. There may be a recession made in Russia, but there is a recovery made in Britain, and we commit to our plan today with British resilience and British compassion.

Because of the difficult decisions we take today, we will strengthen our public finances, bring down inflation, protect jobs and build the first state-backed nuclear power station in 30 years. We will continue with the biggest programme of capital investment in 40 years, protect standards in schools, cut NHS waiting times, fund social care, cap energy bills and support those on benefits. We will protect workers with the biggest ever increase in the national living wage, and we will protect our pensioners with the tiple lock and the biggest ever increase in the state pension.

This is a balanced plan for stability, growth and public services. It shows that you do not need to choose either a strong economy or good public services. With the Conservatives, and only with the Conservatives, you get both. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves.

12.24 pm

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): I thank the Chancellor for his statement.

Here we are, the end of 2022. Three Prime Ministers, four Chancellors and four Budgets later, where do we find ourselves? In a worse place than we started the year, with inflation spiralling, growth plunging and living standards falling. Britain is a great country with fantastic strengths but, because of this Government's mistakes, we are being held back. What people will ask themselves at the next election is, "Are me and my family better off with a Conservative Government?" And the answer is no.

The mess we are in is the result of 12 weeks of Conservative chaos and 12 years of Conservative economic failure: growth dismal, investment down, wages squeezed and public services crumbling. And what does the Chancellor have to offer today? More of the same, with working people paying the price for his failure. The Chancellor should have come here today to ask for forgiveness. At the very least, he could have offered an apology but, no, instead he says his predecessor was correct in his analysis at the mini-Budget that put our economy into freefall. All the country got today was an invoice for the economic carnage that this Government have created. Never again can the Conservatives be seen as the party of economic competence.

It has been clear for weeks what the Government want to do. Step one: blame global factors. Step two: pretend the mini-Budget has nothing to do with any of them. Step three: portray the Chancellor and the Prime Minister as the people who can clear up the mess of their party's own making. And step four: attempt to lay some so-called traps for the Labour party. They have even had George Osborne in to advise them on how to party like it is 2010.

But this is not a game. This is about people's lives and livelihoods. This is about people's ability to pay the mortgage, to pay the rent and to pay the bills after 12 years of Conservative stagnation that have left our country so much worse off. It is about the fact that, when the global storm hit, we were uniquely exposed because of the choices that the Conservatives made.

Nobody doubts that the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine have had profound implications, and the whole House is united in its condemnation of Russia's aggression, but Britain's problems started before the covid pandemic and before Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine. The UK has grown by an average of 1.4% a year under the Conservatives, compared with 2.1% a year in the previous Labour years. We are the only G7 economy that is still poorer than before the pandemic.

As the Governor of the Bank of England told the Treasury Committee yesterday, the US has grown by 4.2% since the pandemic and the GDP of eurozone countries is 2.1% higher, yet the UK is 0.7% smaller than at the start of the pandemic. We are not recovering; we are heading into recession, as the OBR confirmed today. The Governor described these differences as dramatic and stark. How does the Chancellor describe them, and how does he explain them?

This is the price of a decade of Tory choices and economic failure, and it is set to continue, with the IMF forecasting that, of the 38 most industrialised economies, the UK will have the slowest growth of any of them in the next two years. The Chancellor is saying today that he will be honest, so let us be honest. No one was talking about cuts to public spending two months ago, and no other advanced economy is cutting spending or increasing taxes on working people as it heads into recession. This Government have forced our economy into a doom loop, where low growth leads to higher taxes, lower investment and squeezed wages, with the running down of public services, all of which hits economic growth again. Instead of learning from the mistakes of the last decade, they are simply repeating them. We need to break free from this vicious cycle of stagnation, with fairer choices and a proper plan for economic growth.

The Chancellor and Prime Minister are trying to convince us that Britain faces problems that are nothing to do with them and that the mini-Budget, which imposed a Tory mortgage premium, put pensions in peril and trashed our reputation around the world, was all just a bad dream. It is their Bobby Ewing strategy, with Downing Street as "Dallas". Old cast members return as if nothing has happened, with tangled plot lines to keep the audience, but the truth is that the series has lost all credibility and everyone knows it is long past time that it was cancelled. The problem for the British people is that this is not a dream. This is the everyday nightmare of Tory Britain.

The Conservatives would have us believe that they are not responsible for the last 12 years of failure. In doing so, they take the British people for fools. Millions are already worried sick about how to make ends meet and now face the added stress of higher mortgage payments, the prospect of home ownership becoming more and more remote, and rents going through the roof.

What does that mean? Family holidays cancelled, savings depleted, hopes for the future replaced by sleepless nights, and all of that on top of the fact that the average worker is earning less today than when the Tories came to power 12 years ago. The Government have presided over the biggest wage squeeze in centuries. This was a crisis made in Downing Street and it is ordinary working people who are paying the price.

As I was coming into Westminster today, I read a timely warning from the police about pickpockets in the area. They warn:

> "You may have an idea of what a pickpocket looks like but they're far less likely to stand out in a crowd than you might think…they may work in teams to distract the target…One of their tactics is…where a thief will appear to be over-friendly…while pickpocketing you."

I must report that in the last hour the Conservatives have picked the pockets, purses and wallets of the entire country, as the Chancellor has deployed a raft of stealth taxes taking billions of pounds from ordinary working people—a Conservative double whammy that sees frozen tax thresholds and double-digit inflation erode the real value of people's wages.

Just one of those freezes in the personal allowance will cost the average earner more than £600, making it even harder to make ends meet. At the same time, the Government are forcing local councils to put up council tax. The Chancellor seems to have confirmed today a council tax bombshell worth £100 for a typical band D property, taking council tax for such properties above £2,000 for the first time. Local people, including those with Conservative councils, will be forced to pay more because of the destruction that the Conservatives have wreaked on our economy.

This comes at a time when councils are already in dire straits because of cuts made by Conservative Governments. They probably sat around the tables in Downing Street thinking that this was some clever trick, but no one is to blame except the Government that have been in power for 12 years—not local authorities, but this Tory Government—for more taxes, more inflation and higher mortgages. Instead of tricks and stealth taxes, why do they not have a proper economic plan for Britain that puts working people at its heart? Why do they refuse to have a real industrial strategy that gives business certainty, unlocks investment and means that Britain can once again lead the world in the industries of the future?

The Chancellor is trying to claim that today's statement is fair, yet we learn that of all the things that he could save from the wreckage of the kamikaze Budget that he chooses to press ahead with, it is their plan to lift the cap on bankers' bonuses. At a time when he is urging wage constraints for everybody else, how can he remotely claim that that is fair?

After weeks of, "Will he? Won't he?", we learn today that the Chancellor will not, after all, be clamping down on non-doms—tax free income for millionaires while millions face frozen tax allowances and council tax highs. How can he possibly claim that this is fair? He refuses to act, and I wonder why. Maybe that was the only policy that he cannot get signed off by No. 10 Downing Street. I say if you make Britain your home, you should pay your taxes here.

What about the private equity managers, earning millions, who benefit from a tax break on their bonuses, which means that they pay far less tax as a proportion of their incomes than ordinary hardworking people? Did the Chancellor close that loophole today and make sure that they pay their fair share of tax? He did not. He made ordinary working people pay the price instead.

Time and again we have seen how quick the Conservatives are to raise taxes on working people. The Chancellor has even compared himself to Scrooge. He is asking working people to take the hit, with less money in their pockets in the run up to Christmas, but also for years to come. But if you are a banker, a non-dom or a private equity manager, do not worry: Scrooge has not cancelled your Christmas. *[Interruption.]* An hon. Member asks from a sedentary position, "What about taxes?" Well, non-doms do not pay taxes—that is the whole point. The Government could close that loophole today.

And that is before we even get on to the energy giants. After months of resistance from this Prime Minister, the Government have finally been dragged, kicking and

[Rachel Reeves]

screaming, to extend the windfall tax that Labour has been calling for since January. Yet they still leave billions of pounds on the table, profits that are the windfalls of war, because they have failed to close a huge loophole that they created that hands out massive tax breaks to those oil and gas giants for doing the things that they were going to do anyway.

For those wondering why some energy giants have paid no windfall tax in the last quarter, despite record profits and eye-watering bills for consumers, the answer is that decisions that this Prime Minister made when he was Chancellor, confirmed by the current Chancellor, let the energy giants off the hook once again.

The Government have announced plans for energy bills next year, but bill payers will still see prices go up next spring, leaving far too many people wondering how they will make ends meet. For every pound of windfall tax left on the table, people are faced with higher prices on their bills. The Tories' failure on energy goes back much further. They closed down gas storage, blocked onshore wind and solar, and slashed support for home insulation.

Today the Chancellor says that he will act on energy efficiency, but I am afraid that is all far too late. We called for the insulation of 2 million homes a year more than 12 months ago. That could cut bills by £1,000 not just for one year, but for every year to come, and they did nothing. Insulation levels in 2021 were 20 times lower than in 2010 because of their neglect, and now he proposes a package, but we have to wait until 2025 for them to act. Why? People are facing a bills crisis now. Years and years will have gone by while he sits back. Millions of families could have been helped and they have not been.

And still the Government block renewable power, such as onshore wind, that could bring energy bills down, create good jobs in all parts of the country, and ensure that Britain can lead the way in the industries of the future. Clean power is the right solution to the energy price crisis, but, yet again, the Conservatives have failed. They have failed to protect us from future shocks, failed to tackle the cost of living crisis, and failed to take the decisions in our country's national interest. It is because they have failed to grow the economy that they are having to bring forward yet another statement with tax rises and spending cuts.

The last Prime Minister and Chancellor embarked on a reckless sugar rush that abandoned fiscal rectitude, and the Conservatives all cheered for it, but the current Prime Minister and Chancellor have given up on growth altogether. How do we know? It is because the Office for Budget Responsibility has seen their plans and downgraded growth in the months and years ahead. Achieving the levels of growth that this country needs is not like flicking on a switch. We need a serious long-term plan to get our economy growing again, powered by the talents and efforts of millions of ordinary working people and thousands of businesses. We need a fairer, greener, more dynamic economy, creating good jobs in every part of the country—in homegrown renewables, in green hydrogen, in carbon capture and storage—with Labour's green prosperity plan and a modern industrial strategy where Government work hand in hand with business, properly fixing business rates so that small businesses and our high street businesses thrive again, fixing the holes in the Government's Brexit deal to help UK businesses to trade and compete in the world, and ensuring that Britain is the best place in which to start and grow a business. That is what a Labour Government will do.

While our public services are struggling and working people are being stretched, the rampant waste and cronyism from this Government continue apace. It does not seem to concern the Chancellor that his Government dished out £3.5 billion of contracts to friends and donors of the Conservative party. The latest Prime Minister spent so much time when he was Chancellor practising his signature for his glossy Instagram graphics that he failed to put in place even the most simple checks on covid support. That is why the former Treasury Minister, Lord Agnew, described the current Prime Minister's fraud failures as "schoolboy errors". The Prime Minister left the doors to the vaults wide open to organised criminals and drugs gangs who helped themselves to £6.7 billion of taxpayers' money—money that the Government are failing to retrieve.

Last month, it was slipped out that the Taxpayer Protection Taskforce, set up to get this money back, is being wound down. The Government have just given up and the Conservatives are turning yet again to our crucial public services to make up the money. The fraudsters may think that they have got away with it, but a Labour Government will hunt them down for everything that they have taken from the taxpayer. The country is sick of being ripped off by the Tories; we want our money back.

It is because of Tory failure that our crumbling public services are set to suffer even more. Ordinary people lose yet again. Never before have people paid so much in tax and yet got so little in return. At the weekend, the Chancellor admitted that the NHS was already on the brink of collapse. With 7 million people on NHS waiting lists, how much longer will that list get? Three in 10 people are leaving education without GCSE English and maths. What will that do to our society and our future economy? Why do the Tories have an ideological objection to putting VAT on school fees, which the Chancellor himself admits would raise £1.7 billion? By their actions it is clear that the Government do not value our public services or the contribution of those working in them. What do we hear today? Reviews on schools, the NHS workforce, social care and waste, but what we need is action. Now is the time for delivery, not more reviews.

The Chancellor had previously said that one of his biggest regrets as Health Secretary was failing to fix social care. Today, he has further delayed the Government's much-promised social care cap. This is yet another broken promise, after 12 years of Tory failure on social care. The Tories have trashed our public services and the statement today has proved that they are doing nothing to turn that around.

The Conservatives have crashed our economy, given up on growth and sent inflation through the roof and, as usual, it is ordinary working people who are paying the price. It is a familiar tune. Every mortgage they raise, every cut they make, every tax they hike, the Conservatives are costing you. What have we heard today? Yet more excuses and unfair choices. They have failed to tackle the cost of living crisis. They have failed to show how they will fix our public services. They have

failed to show how they will deliver growth. They have no plan for the future of our country. After everything we have heard today, and after 12 long years of Tory failure, the conclusion we must come to is that Britain can no long afford a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Hunt: Today, we have announced tax rises and spending cuts of £55 billion. We can debate the reasons, but to govern is to choose and the shadow Chancellor did not answer the simplest of questions: does she back the need for a package of this size to bring down inflation? If Labour cannot answer, it is not fit to govern.

The shadow Chancellor says that it is the Government's fault, but with a made-in-Russia recession, a once-in-a-century pandemic, higher inflation in Europe, bigger cuts to growth in Germany, bigger interest-rate hikes in America, to blame this on a mini-Budget that was cancelled in three weeks is just not credible. Nor are her facts right. She said that the Government are making the recession worse. Well, today, the independent Office for Budget Responsibility says that we are making it shallower, saving 70,000 jobs.

The shadow Chancellor says that this is austerity 2.0, but, in the 2010 Parliament, spending fell about 3% a year. In this Parliament, even in the next two years, it will rise 3% a year. There is £11 billion for the NHS and schools. It is not just more for our public services; it is massively more than she has ever promised. Then she talked about our record over 12 years, so let us do that: growth higher than Germany, France, Italy or Japan; the lowest unemployment for nearly 50 years; good or outstanding schools up by a quarter; and 4 million more patients in good or outstanding hospitals. In other words, growth up, employment up, school standards up and NHS funding up. Because she will not back this package, the British people today know that, under Labour, it is inflation worse, cost of living worse, unemployment worse and competitiveness worse. If we want stability, growth and funding for public services, the choice is plan or no plan. We have a plan. Where is hers?

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is good to see the return of the forecast from the official Office for Budget Responsibility. We all remember why a Conservative Government had to set it up. We will have the OBR in front of our Committee next Tuesday, when we can question the underlying assumptions of the forecast.

I welcome the fact that the Chancellor confirmed today that his announcements go with the grain of what the Bank of England is trying to do in bringing down inflation. That surely is the most important economic challenge for our country at the moment. But can he elaborate a bit more on his thinking? He has tasked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions with helping back into work those who have left the workforce and he has announced welcome support for those on the welfare system of £900 next year. Can he talk us through his thinking on some of those cliff edges and incentives to work?

Jeremy Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend to her chairmanship of the Select Committee; I know she will do a brilliant job. She makes an important point. It is essential that we work hand in glove with the Bank of England to bring down inflation. Today, the OBR confirmed that inflation is lower because of the decisions we take. She is right to focus on the worrying increase in the economically inactive, which is not just causing supply chain problems for businesses, but driving inflation. That is why we are lucky to have an excellent Work and Pensions Secretary who will make this his top priority in the work he is doing for the Prime Minister and who will bring his conclusions to this House as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson, Alison Thewliss.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The current Chancellor comes here today as the seventh Chancellor in seven years, and a mere 55 days after the last Chancellor came to this House to present his chaotic mini-Budget. His predecessor managed to crash the economy in 26 minutes; this Chancellor has spent the past 53 minutes trying to patch up those mistakes. The reality is that we will all be living with the disastrous consequences of Trussonomics for some time to come.

The Chancellor has brought forward new targets because he is failing to meet the old ones. His difficult choices are of nothing compared with what many of our constituents face. The Tories spent the summer squabbling in a leadership contest when they should have been preparing for the difficult winter ahead. Now the UK is £30 billion worse off because of the incompetence of the Conservative party. Scotland is paying a heavy price indeed for being in this Union.

The Tories are attempting to cut their way out of a recession. It will not work. Public sector workers deserve a proper pay rise to face the cost of living crisis that the Tories have created, and the Scottish Government do not have the same flexibility as this Chancellor to borrow or make changes in-year. Their existing budgets have already been squeezed and reprioritised and there is nothing left to cut.

The Chancellor says Scotland will get £1.5 billion in Barnett consequentials, yet the Scottish Government's budget is worth £1.7 billion less than when it was introduced last December. Scotland is being short-changed yet again. Will he listen carefully to what John Swinney has asked for and provide the funding Scotland deserves?

The Chancellor is proposing fiscal tightening on a scale not seen since George Osborne—and we are still living with the real consequences of those poverty-inducing policies: the two-child limit, the rape clause, the brutal benefits sanctions. The Glasgow Centre for Population Health has been clear that the previous round of Tory austerity caused 330,000 excess deaths. More of the same from this Chancellor is a price society cannot afford.

Restoring the triple lock and uprating benefits by inflation is not some victory to be celebrated. Barnardo's has described it as a "minimum first step". The rate of inflation announced by the Chancellor is not the actual rate of inflation now—nor, perhaps, will it be the rate of inflation by the time the measure comes into force. Again, the Government are not keeping step with the cost of living. Any compassionate Government with an ounce of humanity would not have to be dragged to make such a decision.

The Chancellor talks about uprating the benefit cap—he should scrap the benefit cap. In Scotland, we have introduced the groundbreaking Scottish child payment

[Alison Thewliss]

and increased it to £25 per child per week, now up to the age of 16. There is no two-child limit in Scotland, because we value every child and want them all to have the best future. Will he commit to the same?

The Chancellor mentioned nothing in his statement for those struggling on no recourse to public funds, and nothing either for asylum seekers trying to survive on just 40 quid a week. Will he increase that support or, better yet, allow them to work and to contribute, as so many want to do?

Inflation is running at 11.1%, a 41-year high. For those in lower-income households, the Resolution Foundation says it runs at 12.5%, as more of their income goes on the essentials. The price of food is up 16.4% in a year, with basics such as bread, milk and pasta all increasing and squeezing household budgets. Combining that with the soaring cost of energy, households are finding it impossible to make ends meet.

Cornwall Insight has estimated that the energy price cap next year may come in at an eye-watering £3,702. I appreciate what the Chancellor has said about energy support, but his energy support package must be wider and deeper. It must lift those who are stuck on prepayment meters and make sure they can turn the heating on. Will he listen to National Energy Action, which is calling for a targeted energy price guarantee, similar to a social tariff, set at £1,500 annually until October 2024?

National Energy Action says that should be for all households on means-tested benefits and disability benefits, those in receipt of attendance allowance and carers allowance and those who are living on less than two thirds of the median household income, and it should be targeted to people living in areas of multiple deprivation. We all know that energy bills will not be reducing any time soon. The Chancellor must ensure that people get the help they need to stay safe and warm.

Insulation schemes should have happened already. The UK Government cut back dramatically on schemes while the Scottish Government invested. More than 100,000 homes in Scotland have been made more energy efficient, while the UK Government have ignored the problem. Now they say, "Wait until 2025." It is not even jam tomorrow; it is, "Huddle under a blanket for three years until we get to you." It is absolutely ludicrous.

Will the Chancellor consider not a rent cap, but a rent freeze to help renters, as the Scottish Government have done? For those struggling with their mortgages, will he do all he can to encourage banks to support their customers, and will he fix and expand the restrictive support for mortgage interest scheme, to make it more accessible to those who need it?

There is little in this statement to give hope to businesses. Many that managed to survive the pandemic are now struggling to keep going. Increased labour and energy costs, supply chain difficulties and the crash in the pound have all made a difficult situation so much worse.

I have raised many times in this place the impossibly high contracts that companies are having to sign for their energy bills right now, and the Chancellor was not at all clear how he expects them to keep going once the reprieve finishes in the spring. Companies cannot wait any longer for answers, because for too many it will be too much. We know insolvencies are already on the rise, and with companies going bust, rising unemployment will inevitably follow.

We know that recession has a bigger impact on younger workers. When we look at the Chancellor's statement, the minimum wage rates are still lagging behind for younger workers. They are being discriminated against on the basis of their age, and that continues to be unacceptable.

There was also nothing in the Chancellor's statement about carbon capture and storage in the north-east of Scotland. Why not? There was a 45% hike on electricity generators—more than on oil and gas—which will hammer Scotland's renewables sector.

I will give the Chancellor some opportunities to bring some cash into the UK Government's coffers. The London School of Economics says that ending the non-dom status could bring in £3.2 billion of additional tax. Taxing dividends at the same rate as income from work would stand to raise more than £6 billion a year.

For some time now, big companies have been engaging in significant share buybacks. Oil and gas, financial services and other companies are using share buybacks because their mega-profits are more than they know what to do with. Those profits are not being invested in new development; they are simply being creamed off. It is estimated that FTSE 100 firms are now due to return £55.5 billion to their shareholders via share buybacks this year.

The Institute for Public Policy Research estimates that a one-off 25% windfall tax on share buybacks of FTSE-listed companies could raise £11 billion in a single year. Even if companies were discouraged from buying back shares under the scheme, it would lead to higher reinvestment in development rather than profits. Why would the Chancellor pass up such an economic opportunity?

The Chancellor should also grow the tax base by increasing immigration and improving the lot of those who have already done us the significant honour of coming to live, work and study in our communities. We should thank them, not tell them they are not welcome. It is beyond time that the UK had a sensible, grown-up conversation about immigration. We on the SNP Benches are clear that immigration is an economic good. The OBR forecasts that higher net migration reduces pressures on Government debt over time. The Chancellor should consider that.

Finally, I come to the policy that unites all the Unionist parties in this House: Brexit. The Tories, Labour, the Lib Dems—all Brexiteers now, fully committed to this futile project of deliberate self-destruction. Dr Swati Dhingra of the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee told the Treasury Committee yesterday:

> "It's undeniable now that we're seeing a much bigger slowdown in trade in the UK"

than in the rest of the world. Wages are lower, business investment is lower, and the UK is underperforming in both imports and exports. That political choice has brought us here today, to the Chancellor's decisions, which will affect us all but will hit the least well off the very hardest.

The economist Michael Saunders said this week:

> "If we hadn't had Brexit, we probably wouldn't be talking about an austerity budget".

Put that on the side of a bus.

Scotland did not vote for this. We did not choose austerity and we did not choose Brexit. The OBR says that living standards are to fall by 7% over the next two years. It ought to be of no surprise to anybody that just shy of half of Scots think the UK will not exist in its current form in the next five years. This is a UK so weak that no one would wish to join it. Scotland cannot be forced to stay in broke, broken Brexit Britain.

Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. She is complaining about economic instability damaging business in Scotland, but she supports the most destabilising policy of all: separation from the United Kingdom. She complained about Brexit, but 1 million voters in Scotland voted for Brexit, and we are implementing the will of the British people. Behind the sparring in this House, we actually have very good relations with the Scottish Government. My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury has already met John Swinney, the Finance Minister, and we have good co-operation.

I need to correct the hon. Lady on one point. She said that we are not investing in energy efficiency. What I said—if she listened to my words—is that in this Parliament we are spending £6.6 billion in energy efficiency, and a further £6 billion from 2025. I understand that separation means more to her than anything else in politics, but families in Scotland heard other things today. They heard about the £600 million for the Scottish NHS, £385 million for schools and more than £4 billion to help Scottish families with their energy bills, on top of £4 billion to build the latest frigates. That is because we are more than neighbours; we are family, and Conservatives always back families.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I welcome and commend my right hon. Friend's and the Government's commitment to sound money and sound public finances. I also welcome the commitment my right hon. Friend has given to innovation and R&D in developing and rebuilding our economy, but could I ask him to go further and look again at the definition of what qualifies as R&D for tax credits? I think more can be done to boost our economy for the future.

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for the tremendous support she gave to science and innovation when she was Prime Minister. That is very much something we want to build on as we go forward. We are looking at all the taxes around R&D relief, which we want to encourage. There has been a certain amount of abuse, but we particularly want to encourage use of the relief among small companies, which can often be the most innovative, so I will take away her comments and maybe talk to her separately about what can be done better.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor has unveiled large numbers —or numbers that seem large—but let us be clear: that £3.3 billion a year is not even Osbornesque funding for the NHS. It is not enough to keep the NHS standing still. Will he level with us and tell us what percentage of the NHS budget that is?

Jeremy Hunt: I actually remember the Parliament from 2010 to 2015 because I was Health Secretary for quite a big chunk of it. I apologise to the hon. Lady, given the important role she plays in this House, for not being able to do that kind of maths in my head, but I can tell her that in that period, the NHS budget went up by 0.1% a year, and this is a lot more than that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House, Sir Peter Bottomley.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The Chancellor will have noticed that Labour Members laughed when he talked about stability, growth and public services. Those who are watching our proceedings will have noticed, as will he, that when he was making his announcements about how we will ease the burden on the poorest and give opportunities to those who most need them, those Members were silenced. People around the country will give backing to his approach. We may have arguments about details, but the key point is to get stability and growth, and to defend public services.

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend the Father of the House. He is right. What I have discovered in the short time that I have been doing this job is that although one might arrive thinking that decisions about money are about numbers and spreadsheets, they are actually about values. Today, I have tried to express our values not just as a Conservative party but as a country. That means protecting the most vulnerable.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): This cost-of-chaos Budget will cause untold pain for everyone, with soaring mortgages, unfair tax hikes and further cuts to our struggling public services. This Conservative Government have plunged the economy into chaos, and now they are forcing ordinary families to pay for their incompetence. For an average family, it will mean thousands of pounds in increased taxes and bills, yet their local services are being cut while their real-terms pay is decreasing. My question to the Chancellor is simple: who voted for this? It certainly was not the British people.

Jeremy Hunt: I think the hon. Lady must have written her speech before actually listening to what I said. She talked about soaring mortgages, but she might have heard the OBR confirm today that because of the decisions we have taken, inflation will be lower, and that means less pressure on interest rates and less pressure on mortgages. The truth is that the people of this country voted for a Conservative Government because they know that we will take the tough and difficult decisions necessary to deal with a global pandemic, a global energy crisis and a global economic crisis, and that is what we have done today.

Sajid Javid (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Chancellor rightly talked about the importance of global headwinds—we have seen two 100-year events in just the last three years. I commend him on his autumn statement, which has risen to the challenge that he has set out. He said rightly how important growth is; we know that it is the only way to improve opportunity and social mobility in our country in the long term. He has rightly protected investment in skills, capital infrastructure and R&D, but can he say a little more about how he will ensure that such investment is spent wisely and for the maximum possible impact?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my right hon. Friend—I always listen very carefully to what he says because of his enormous experience in economic posts in Government

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and in spending posts. The reason why growth matters is that it is not often something that can be delivered in one or two years—a long-term strategy is needed. I talked about Nigel Lawson's big bang in 1986, but that actually took decades to come to fruition and turn London and the UK into one of the world's great centres for financial services. Every Government have a duty to lay those foundations and make sure that, as far as possible, there is cross-party support for what they do.

Sir Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am puzzled by the Chancellor's position on his predecessor's mini-Budget. He appeared to acknowledge its foolhardiness but then attempt to defend it. I agree with him about the importance of tackling inactivity, and we on the Work and Pensions Committee look forward to discussing that with the Secretary of State on Wednesday week. I am relieved that working-age benefits and pensions are to be uprated in line with inflation, and I welcome—at last—the uprating of the benefit cap, which, logically, should happen every year. Will he also uprate the local housing allowance, which has been frozen since the pandemic at a time when rents have surged?

Jeremy Hunt: I will write to the right hon. Gentleman on the latter point. On the mini-Budget, let me be very clear that I agree with its priority of growth and with the energy price guarantee, which has given relief to thousands of families, but I do not agree with unfunded tax cuts.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): This is one of the most difficult circumstances in memory in which an autumn statement has been delivered, so I congratulate the Chancellor on a remarkably skilful statement. Of course, fiscal responsibility is incredibly important, but one of the risks that goes with it is that of worsening a recession, so it is particularly important that on small businesses, investment and innovation, he came up with a radical new agenda for growth. When he delivers his Budget in the spring—after, I hope, gas prices and financial markets have stabilised—will he reinforce that agenda for growth?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend always speaks wisely on these issues. I think that if we are going to go to the British people as a party that can deliver a plan for our economy, they need to see that we have made progress in the growth agenda, and they need to see where this country is going to excel, not just in the next two years but in the next 20, 30 or 40 years. They will reward the party that demonstrates that it understands how to do that—that is what we do know.

Dame Margaret Hodge (Barking) (Lab): The Chancellor claimed in his statement that he was being fair and protecting the vulnerable. I think that those claims were false and that his measures simply entrench inequality. Freezing income tax bands hurts low earners much more than high earners, and the real-terms cuts to public services hit the poorest and the most vulnerable. He had choices. Why could he not tax income enjoyed from wealth at the same rate as income earned from work? Why could he not reform national insurance so that high earners and people of pensionable age pay a fair contribution? Why did he not address the inequities of the council tax system, whereby a Hartlepool homeowner whose property is valued at £150,000 pays more in council tax than a Westminster homeowner whose property is worth £8 million, and why oh why did he not insist that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs does something about the £14.4 billion that it loses every year through avoidance and evasion? Does the Chancellor accept that his callous cuts and harsh hikes will do nothing to fix our unfair tax system?

Jeremy Hunt: I have enormous respect for the right hon. Lady, but I do not think that those comments really did her justice. These were £11 billion of spending increases for the NHS and schools, which will make an enormous difference to schools and hospitals in her constituency, as they will in mine. On many of her points, I have some agreement with what she said, and we have actually moved in her direction—on wealth taxes, for example. This is, I think, the biggest ever fall in the capital gains tax allowance. It is a very big change. With respect to high earners, we have had a big tax increase for anyone on the 45p rate—£1,000 a year for anyone on over £150,000—and we are publishing distributional analysis that shows the impact of all these decisions, which shows that the biggest gainers are people on low incomes.

Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on walking a tightrope very carefully. I think he has made a positive financial statement, but I ask him to look at energy in particular from the perspective of every family. Individual families need to reduce their own energy bills and energy usage. There is so much that can be done. I commend to him the 1922 Committee's work looking at how individuals can do things such as putting a timer on their Economy 7 boiler and reducing the temperature of their hot water. There are things that families could do for themselves, and the Chancellor could of course require energy suppliers to do much more by going house to house to help people who are really struggling this winter.

Jeremy Hunt: As ever, my right hon. Friend speaks very wisely. Today's statement was long, and I did not have time to go into the details, but my right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will announce a plan very much along the lines that she describes. It is a kind of new contract with families up and down the country. We are giving £106 billion of support to bring down energy bills this year and next. We are helping people, but we are also saying, "We need you to also do things to help improve energy efficiency." That is why the national plan to reduce energy efficiency by 15% is so important. We are asking people to help themselves by taking the kind of measures that she mentions, so that when we are not able to offer sustained support people's energy bills are lower.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Goodness! Here is a surprise. I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): That was a bit of a surprise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I do not think that you carried the House there.

This is really grim. The public finances are in a really difficult situation, and even more importantly the OBR figures show that disposable income for households will fall after what the Chancellor has done today by 7% over the next two years. Will he confirm that that is the biggest fall in our history? That means families not being able to afford things, and that is, in the end, at the doorstep of No. 10, is it not?

Jeremy Hunt: The first part of what the hon. Member said is broadly correct. There will be a very big fall—*[Interruption.]* Would Members like me to answer the question or not? There will be a big fall in disposable income, but the OBR says that the measures that I took today mitigate that, reducing the effect by around 25%. That is very important, but to say that somehow this has nothing to do with a global pandemic and a war in Ukraine—

Chris Bryant: Did I say that?

Jeremy Hunt: Yes. The hon. Member said it was at the doorstep of No. 10. I think that is to ignore the reality staring him in the face.

Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the exceptionally skilful delivery and content of his statement. I point particularly to the work that he was just touching on in response to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) about energy efficiency. He has today set an interim target to reduce energy demand in this country by 15% by 2028. That is the first time that we have done that, as far as the Environmental Audit Committee, which I chair, is aware. It plugs a gap in the energy security strategy, which did not address reducing demand. I urge him, in his discussions with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to ensure that when the work of the energy efficiency taskforce is designed, there is engagement with the industry that has to deliver the reduction—unfortunately, neither the Treasury nor his predecessors in BEIS have done that adequately in previous schemes—to ensure that the scheme will endure, and actually work and deliver reductions at a household level.

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend understands this extremely well, and he has done very good work with his Committee. This is a national ambition, which means that the Government and every family in the country need to work together to reduce our national energy bill by tens of billions of pounds, to meet our climate change commitments, and to reduce the average bill in this country at today's prices by nearly £500. It is really worth doing, and we are putting our money where our mouth is with billions of pounds more investment.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): The Chancellor rightly acknowledged that inflationary pressure on the budgets of public services is severe, and has an impact on the delivery of key services. He announced an additional £1.2 billion for the budget of the Welsh Government. Will he explain whether that is real-terms increase to the budget? If not, how does he expect budgets in Wales to meet the rising cost of living?

Jeremy Hunt: Because of the way the Barnett consequentials work, this is a cash amount that the Welsh Government will receive, but if they do what the English Government are doing with schools and hospitals—*[Interruption.]* If they do what the United Kingdom Government are doing in England with schools and hospitals, there will be a real-terms increase in Welsh schools and hospitals.

Dr Liam Fox (North Somerset) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a balanced and skilful statement prioritising fiscal stability. He will be aware that some of us believe that the Bank of England maintained monetary conditions that were too loose for too long, but that it would also be a mistake to maintain monetary conditions that are too tight for too long. Can he therefore confirm that the anti-inflationary measures that he has taken today will mean that the pressure to raise interest rates will be minimised, and that there is a much greater chance that they will fall earlier than would otherwise have been the case?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on this issue, because every 1% increase in interest rates is about £850 more on the average mortgage, so it is hugely important to families up and down the country. The OBR has said that the measures that we have taken today will mean that inflation is lower than it would otherwise have been. That means that the Bank of England is under less pressure to increase interest rates, which for reasons that he knows are such a worry for so many families.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Governor of the Bank of England said yesterday to the Treasury Committee that the mini-Budget has damaged our reputation internationally. He told us:

> "People have said, 'We did not think the UK would do this.'"

Why does the Chancellor not accept that it is because his party has destroyed our economic credibility and crashed the economy that the British people are now having to pay, in tax rises and public service cuts, the £55 billion of consolidation that he is talking about?

Jeremy Hunt: I have been pretty straightforward about saying that there were mistakes in the mini-Budget, and within three weeks we reversed them. Long-term gilt yields, which are the thing that really drive the cost of borrowing for the country, are down to the levels they were at before the mini-Budget, and to try to say that all the problems we face now are a result of decisions that were reversed in three weeks does not stand any scrutiny at all.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): My right hon. Friend argued for sound money and sound foundations. Would he be good enough to explain how it is that High Speed 2 will continue beyond Birmingham at a verifiable cost of at least £40 billion, when every independent report on HS2 condemns the project and confirms that phase 2 will make rail services to all west coast destinations north of Birmingham much worse? I ask him to make a clear commitment to keep this matter under review at all costs; it is in the national interest.

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is right that the increases in the budget for HS2 are disappointing, but a strong economy needs to have consistency of purpose, and that means saying we will make sure that we are a better connected country. The lack of those connections is one of the fundamental reasons for the differences in wealth

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between north and south, which we are so committed to addressing. There is a bigger issue about the way that we do infrastructure projects: it takes too long, and the budgets therefore get out of control. We are just not very good at it, and we have to sort it out.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): May I take the Chancellor back to the housing issue? Housing is often the canary in the mine when assessing how people are faring in difficult circumstances. Last year, there was a 500% increase in mortgage repossession orders and a 160% increase in repossession orders from private landlords. Will the Chancellor come back with a package of measures that will assist people in getting through this housing crisis? It could include the issue that was raised earlier with regard to benefit caps. Mayors across the country are also asking for rent control powers, and we may need a mortgage interest assistance package as we go through this period.

Jeremy Hunt: I listen carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman says. Despite our political differences, I respect the fact that he is concentrating on a very difficult issue. Local housing allowance rates for 2023-24 will be maintained at the elevated rates agreed for 2020-21. I will continue, as the economic situation deteriorates, to monitor carefully the issues around mortgage repossessions. I have already had a number of discussions internally in the Treasury, and as necessary, I will come back to this House with further measures.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his statement. In particular, I welcome the fact that he listened to his own representations about the need for an NHS workforce plan. I also welcome the increase in money for social care, which is desperately needed. May I urge him to take a leaf out of his own book and start to develop a workforce plan for the social care sector as well, which is equally needed?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend is probably one of the most knowledgeable people in this House when it comes to the social care sector, and he campaigned very hard for it in government. He is absolutely right: we do need a long-term plan for the social care workforce as well, and I will do what I can to turn my attention to that when we have set one up for the NHS.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Two thirds of children living in poverty also live in working households. That is before the drop in income that is being projected, which my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) raised. By the end of this Parliament, will that figure be greater or lower than it is now?

Jeremy Hunt: I would hope it would be lower, but I point out that the needs of people in that situation have been at the front of our mind in making today's decisions. Uprating the national living wage means up to £1,600 extra for people on low incomes. The extra £900 that people on means-tested benefits will receive next year will make a big difference, and the increase in the pension rate by inflation is £870, so we are very much thinking about those people.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome what the Chancellor just said about his focus on mortgages and avoiding repossessions. On the need not to send the wrong signal about defence expenditure, I note that he skilfully linked that to a future defence review. When would that defence review come to fruition, and in the meantime will he guarantee that there would be no real decrease in defence expenditure?

Jeremy Hunt: I would expect my right hon. Friend to look forensically at any comment that I make about defence. I was very clear in my words, first, that the Prime Minister and I recognise the need to increase defence spending, and secondly, that the update to the integrated review needs to happen before the spring Budget. This is not pushing something into the long grass; it is making sure we get the decisions right.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The £650 million of Barnett consequentials announced for Northern Ireland will go some way to plugging the gap that has been left by an inept Finance Minister in Northern Ireland. We welcome that; it only goes some way to plugging that gap, but it recognises that without Westminster firepower, Northern Ireland would be in a considerably worse-off place.

The energy payments are woefully inadequate for a lot of people in Northern Ireland. One thousand litres of oil in Northern Ireland costs over £900 today—£300 will not cut it. For the third time, could the Chancellor outline for us when those payments will actually be made to Northern Ireland? Secondly, with regard to the "next silicon valley" proposal, does he accept that unless the handbrake of the Northern Ireland protocol is replaced, Northern Ireland will not benefit from that proposal?

Jeremy Hunt: First, on the opportunity to be the world's next silicon valley, I want Northern Ireland to be a central part of that. In fact, we have agreed to explore funding a trade and investment event in Northern Ireland, to attract more inward investment into the Province for that very reason. I am aware that when it comes to fuel poverty issues, it is a different situation in Northern Ireland. I have had a number of discussions with my officials, and I am aware that energy consumption patterns are slightly different. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with details on that, and I am happy to engage with him separately.

Greg Clark (Tunbridge Wells) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his meticulous and positive statement, which will be very well received in the science and technology communities. When we invest in research and development, we lay down a path to high-paid jobs, discoveries that change people's lives and export earnings. The commitment that he has made is the biggest increase in R&D funding in the history of this country. Will he work with the Business Secretary to develop a strategy through which businesses can invest alongside the commitment he has made today, so that we can get the most out of that commitment?

Jeremy Hunt: There has been no stronger backer of science and research and development than my right hon. Friend, and I will absolutely make that commitment. There are a lot of elements in the industrial strategy he put together that we can learn from and weave into

what we do next. He is right: this cannot happen with Government money alone. We need to work in partnership with brilliant British innovators and make the most of the incredible opportunity we have.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Instead of shifting the cost on to local authorities and hard-pressed council tax payers, why did the Chancellor not look at the possibility of using the £10 billion that goes on buy to let, for example, to fund much-needed improvements in social care and other public policy areas?

Jeremy Hunt: We did not shift the burden of funding on to local authorities; it has always been a shared responsibility. As the right hon. Gentleman heard from my statement, we are putting £1 billion into social care next year and £1.7 billion the year after. Taken together, that £4.7 billion is the biggest ever increase in the social care budget. I recognise that there are big pressures and a need for reforms in that sector, but this is a very positive start.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for the announcement on schools funding, which, as he knows, is something that I raised with him as being crucial. Can he also confirm that, if current forecasts about economic recovery and inflation prove to be overly pessimistic, we will move more quickly than he has announced today towards delivering a lower-tax economy?

Jeremy Hunt: My right hon. Friend is an immensely experienced colleague. She is right to point out that there is always inaccuracy in any forecast, and there is always variation from fiscal event to fiscal event, so we keep all those decisions under review in the round. I think it is still important to have forecasts—that is better than not to have them—but we keep all those decisions under review.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): May I take the Chancellor back to the issues of housing, which other hon. Members have raised? Raising the local housing allowance merely in line with inflation does not necessarily help many people on benefits living in the private rented sector, particularly in constituencies such as mine where, generally speaking, many of those people end up being exported away from the area in which they live. It is more important to give local authorities the power to introduce rent controls in areas of very high private sector rent. Excessive rent levels are the biggest problem that many people, particularly young people, face in their lives.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities made an interesting and helpful statement on the issues of safety within all housing. His remarks mean that much more inspection will have to be done by local authorities. Will the Chancellor ensure that local authorities are sufficiently funded to increase the levels of public health inspection to provide a safe living environment for people in all housing situations?

Jeremy Hunt: These are very important issues. Obviously, the safety of properties in the private rented sector is extremely important. I am not a fan of rent controls, because I am worried that that would reduce the supply of housing to the private rented sector. I point out to the right hon. Gentleman, however, that we lifted the local housing allowance during the pandemic to help people and we are keeping it at that higher level.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): People will note the trademark calm and decency of my right hon. Friend today in his credible autumn statement. The current Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee agrees with his predecessor, who I am glad agrees with himself, in welcoming the independent verified workforce plan that is, of course, the rock upon which we will build a sustainable future NHS.

I welcome the additional social care funding of £7 billion over the next two years, which, as the Chancellor knows, was a recommendation of the Committee, and the £3.3-billion uplift in the NHS budget for the next three years. I ask him—he knows where I am going to go with this—to work with us to push his colleagues in the Department and in the NHS on the long-promised cancer plan. The sharp rise in cancer waits that we are seeing at the moment have a devastating impact on people's lives, but they also have a domino effect that is understandably having an impact on care across the NHS.

Jeremy Hunt: I welcome my hon. Friend to his role as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. I know that he will do a brilliant job and that he will hold me and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to account strongly and tenaciously on everything to do with cancer and public health. I welcome that, because they are very important areas.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): To come back to social care, in the Chancellor's previous role as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, he will remember arguing for a £7-billion increase in social care funding. Will he confirm that today's package is nothing like that? Will he further confirm that much of it is coming from council tax increases, which give most to the richest councils and take proportionately most from the poorest households? Finally, will not the rest of local government face real-terms cuts to essential services? This is austerity mark 2, with the prospect of financial collapse for many councils up and down the country.

Jeremy Hunt: I have to say that I think local councils are welcoming today's announcement because the biggest item of expenditure that worries them the most is their social care budgets, and this is the biggest-ever increase in the social care budget. I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman has read the report into social care that the Health and Social Care Committee produced when I was the Chair—I sometimes worry whether people actually read the reports—and he is right to point to that £7-billion figure. That was made up of about £5 billion in core funding and £2 billion for the Dilnot reforms. Today, we are delivering nearly that £5 billion of funding and the Dilnot reforms will happen at a later stage, so it is not everything at once, but it is broadly consistent with what I recommended.

Mr Robin Walker (Worcester) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's correct focus on putting education and skills at the heart of his statement. I was one of many Conservative Members who wrote to ask him to protect the schools budget, and he has gone further

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than that with the additional £2 billion over each of the next two years. That is welcome, but can he confirm that it is his assessment and that of the Department for Education that that will allow schools to fund the increase in teaching pay that has been recommended and the increase in non-teaching pay that they will face as a result of a rising living wage?

Jeremy Hunt: Those are details—within the structures we have, we give schools a lot of autonomy as to how they spend their budgets—but I am happy to write to my hon. Friend on those specific issues. Campaign organisations said that schools needed £2 billion a year, and this is £2.3 billion a year, so I think we have met people's concerns.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last year, the then Chancellor raised the universal credit work allowance for low-paid workers, describing it as a "tax cut". Can the Chancellor confirm whether he has frozen the work allowance today?

Jeremy Hunt: What I can confirm is that people on universal credit will see an inflation uplift that will be worth about £600 to the average family; people on benefits will receive £900 of support; pensioners will receive £300; and disabled people will receive £150. There will also be £500 off the average fuel bill. We are thinking about those people front and centre.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on making capital transport projects a central pillar of the future growth strategy. Will he be reprioritising any of the schemes that are in development? He correctly mentioned East West Rail, which would be an excellent choice. As the new Chair of the Transport Committee, it would be useful to have some clarity on which projects he is prioritising. On his other transport announcement about the extension of vehicle excise duty to electric vehicles, will the revenue from that be hypothecated for the roads budget, as is VED on existing vehicles?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend has campaigned hard for East West Rail and I am happy to confirm that, as a result of the difficult decisions that we have taken today in the round, it will proceed. It will make an enormous difference to our country, because of the connectivity that it will provide between two of the greatest universities in the world. It is a very important step forward for the country. With regard to the extension of VED to electric cars, which we are doing at the point at which half of all cars sales in the UK will be of electric cars, it asks people who have electric cars for £165 a year. Given that we have spent £2.5 billion on electric car charging points, I do not think that that is an unreasonable request.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Chancellor said that he would be honest about the challenges we face, so it is frankly extraordinary that he could speak for almost an hour without once acknowledging the economic catastrophe of Brexit. According to the OBR, it will slash productivity by 4%; it has delivered a 15% drop in trade; there will be a 14% drop in investment; it will increase food prices by 6%; and it will deliver lower wages, workforce shortages and the highest inflation in the G7. When will he name the elephant in the room? When will he start to address that and reverse some of the damage that it is doing?

Jeremy Hunt: I do not deny for one second that Brexit will be a change in our economic model, but whether we make a success of it is up to us. This Government will make a success of it and make it a tremendous opportunity.

Anthony Browne (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Chancellor on this carefully crafted and balanced autumn statement, where he managed to fill the fiscal black hole without raising the headline rates of tax, as well as protecting education, the health service and pensioners. All the research institutes in my constituency will very much welcome the commitment to keep R&D funding going up to £20 billion a year. I look forward to grilling him on some of the details when he appears before the Treasury Committee.

My constituency is the life sciences capital of Europe, but it suffers acutely from a shortage of nurses and doctors. I have been working with medical groups to try to push for higher levels of training with up to 15,000 places a year for doctors, so I welcome the fact that the Chancellor agrees with himself and wants to introduce a long-term NHS workforce plan. Can he confirm whether one of its objectives will be to ultimately make the UK self-sufficient in the training of nurses and doctors?

Jeremy Hunt: Absolutely, because the NHS as it stands at the moment would fall over without the brilliant contribution made by doctors and nurses born or trained overseas. I think it is about 24% of doctors in the NHS at the moment. We always welcome international exchanges, but in the end a huge health organisation such as the NHS—the biggest health organisation in the world—should be training the number of doctors and nurses that it needs itself. With a 2 million shortage of doctors worldwide, there is no other alternative.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is funny that the same Tories, who are today congratulating the Chancellor, 55 days ago lined up to congratulate his predecessor on the disastrous mini-Budget of what he correctly described as the "English Government" —a sign of things to come. However, the question that is being asked by people in Lewis, Harris, Uist and Barra is: when exactly are the Government paying the off-grid fuel support for the likes of those with central heating oil? It is now mid-November. We need the dates, and we need this to happen.

Jeremy Hunt: We do, and we are working on that. We will make sure it is paid as quickly as possible.

Darren Henry (Broxtowe) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for his statement today. It is right, of course, that we focus on stabilising the economy and improving growth, while ensuring support is in place for the most vulnerable in our society. This statement has set out to achieve that, but there were two points of particular concern to my constituents in Broxtowe. One was the triple lock, so I was delighted that that remains. The other was investment in infrastructure and transport in the east midlands, and I did not hear anything about that. The east midlands

has the lowest investment in transport infrastructure year on year. Could the Chancellor lay out how the east midlands will benefit from his statement today?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The detailed decisions about what we do with respect to infrastructure in the east midlands will follow, but I want to reassure him that we have not made big cuts in our capital budget. We have protected it at the very high levels it was increased to by a previous Conservative Government. As a result, we will be in a better position to support regions such as the east midlands than we would have been had we made the mistake of mortgaging our future by cutting our capital spend.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After crashing the economy and inflicting on my Slough constituents and others higher mortgages, higher rents and the highest inflation for over 40 years, the latest Prime Minister and his Chancellor have embarked, without any mandate, on austerity 2.0 and they have decided to inflict yet more painful tax rises. In his autumn statement, the Chancellor kept referring to "global factors", so can he point to just one other advanced economy that is raising taxes at the same scale as us here in the UK?

Jeremy Hunt: Yes, the United States is raising taxes by $800 billion.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Chancellor, you have agreed to meet me and other Leicestershire colleagues to discuss the worrying situation that Leicestershire County Council has been facing for years when it comes to its financing. While I greatly welcome your autumn statement today—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): His autumn statement.

Alberto Costa: While I greatly welcome his autumn statement, will the Chancellor tell the House today—and, indeed, those at Leicestershire County Council, who are listening to proceedings—how his autumn statement will help them with their finances?

Jeremy Hunt: I have talked to my hon. Friend on a number of occasions about the problems with Leicestershire County Council's financial situation. What all councils say is that the biggest pressure on their budgets is adult social care, and I think today's announcement will be welcomed by them for that reason. However, I am very aware of the particular issues in Leicestershire, and I am happy to keep engaging with him on them.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): On the NHS point, will the Chancellor expand on whether the increase is in real terms? I spent 17 hours on a hard chair with my father in A&E last week, and I have heard a lot of talk about how the vulnerable are going to be defended by this Government. To follow on from the point about Leicestershire County Council, the vast majority of vulnerable people's funding—such as vulnerable women who are victims of domestic and sexual violence—comes from local authorities, from the Home Office budget and from the Justice budget. Every single one of those budgets has been squeezed today, so will the Chancellor guarantee that those vulnerable people, unlike my father, will actually be looked after, and that there is not a single cutback to an already dreadful service that leaves criminals on our streets and vulnerable people in danger?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Member speaks incredibly powerfully, and I hear every word she says—*[Interruption.]* I heard someone shouting, "12 years". We have actually had the third fastest growth in the G7 over the last 12 years, and that means we are in a better position to fund public services than we would otherwise have been. I will take away what the hon. Member says, and I will write back to her.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, and on the important points he has made about the global challenges we are facing, but also on how support will be provided to those who need it most. Can I ask him about capital budgets? There has been some concern in the infrastructure sector that projects may be halted, so I welcome the focus on infrastructure investment as a driver of economic growth and of social and environmental progress. Will he be supporting these plans with skills programmes and apprenticeship programmes to ensure that the sector will deliver them with efficiency?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend knows these issues extremely well, having been a Transport Minister. We need better transport infrastructure, and what we have said today makes that possible, but he is absolutely right that we also need to improve the skills in our economy. We have had a lot of change in our ambitions for skills, with I think a lot of very positive things such as the Augar review, but we need to make sure we deliver them, and that is why I have asked Sir Michael Barber to advise me and the Education Secretary as to what we need to do.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Today, the Chancellor had an opportunity, which he has missed, like his predecessor—the one before the last one, mind—to enact recommendations from the Transport Committee and to give Bradford a station. Instead, the Government have engaged in an exercise in rebranding, while short-changing the people of Bradford. Why does the Chancellor not just be honest with the people of Bradford, and call this what it actually is? This is not Northern Powerhouse Rail; this is the greatest ever train robbery of the north.

Jeremy Hunt: What I would say to the hon. Lady is that she should think about what we have done for her constituents in Bradford. When it comes to transport, we have protected the capital budgets that in the end will solve the problems she is talking about. We have also found £500 of support for the average household for their fuel bill next year. We have found more money for schools, hospitals and GP surgeries in Bradford. That will make a difference, and she should welcome that.

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Can I say how good it is to see the Chancellor channelling his inner Nigel Lawson by referencing not only the big bang, but his attempt to get the next big bang to happen, particularly with supply-side reforms for five key STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—

[John Penrose]

sectors, plus the much-needed roll-out of the powers for the digital markets unit in the Competition and Markets Authority? May I urge him to provide us with dates as soon as possible for when these are going to take place, because many of them are overdue and much needed? Can I further press him that there is a further supply-side reform to do with open data, which could be at least as big as any of the others he has announced today and transformational across large swathes of the rest of our economy?

Jeremy Hunt: I always listen to my hon. Friend on matters such as supply-side reforms and, indeed, long-term competitiveness. I want to reassure him that, while it is a long-term aspiration to become the world's next silicon valley, we want to put those foundations in place next year. That is why, in those five growth sectors, I said that we will review and decide on changes to all the EU regulations that affect our growth industries in the next calendar year to make sure that we put those foundations in place fast.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Federation of Small Businesses says that business confidence is at its lowest rate since the pandemic, and in the Chancellor's oral statement today there was no mention of energy support for business. All the written statement says is that businesses can expect significantly lower support. I have businesses, including care homes, in North East Fife that are facing closure as a result. In the terms of reference, also published by the Government today, for the review, it says there is a very high bar. The Chancellor must have a fair idea of what that means. Can he share it with us and businesses?

Jeremy Hunt: We absolutely want to think about care homes and small businesses in the hon. Lady's constituency, and in mine, and we are spending roughly £18 billion on the support we are giving this winter. We are doing a lot as a Government, but we want people to have certainty and to know what the support will be next April. We need businesses to help themselves as much as we help them, which is why they need to play their part in important energy efficiency measures. Our intention is to announce that business support before Christmas.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): This Government's commitment to Sizewell C and large-scale nuclear is welcome, and it was noted that Labour's shadow Chancellor failed to mention nuclear. When will the launch of Great British Nuclear be announced, and will its scope include large-scale gigawatt nuclear at sites such as Wylfa in my constituency, as well as small modular reactors?

Jeremy Hunt: There is no more formidable advocate for big nuclear investment on Ynys Môn than my hon. Friend. Indeed, when I went on a family holiday to Ynys Môn this summer, she tried to persuade me to visit the potential site of a nuclear power station with my children. I apologise that I did not take her up on the offer, but it shows her commitment. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary will be making an announcement soon on things such as the launch of Great British Nuclear—I hope before Christmas, but if not just afterwards—because we want to crack on with our nuclear programme.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): For the first time in decades women are leaving the workforce, largely to take up caring responsibilities for their families. In that context, it is astonishing that the Chancellor did not mention childcare once during his statement. Childcare is vital social and economic infrastructure. The status quo is holding back women, and holding back our economy. What will the Chancellor do about it?

Jeremy Hunt: I am very aware of the pressures and issues of childcare. The £4.7 billion increase in the social care budget will make a difference to people with caring responsibilities, with potentially another 200,000 packages, but I want to return to this issue and I take what the hon. Lady says very seriously.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I have huge sympathy for my right hon. Friend. We are facing severe financial challenges for the reasons he explained so well, but Members on both sides of the House are promising to spend billions and billions more pounds. I remind the House that it is the private sector, and hardworking people through their taxes, who pay for Government expenditure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that raising taxes on both risks stifling the growth and productivity that he and I both want, and that would counter the recession we are now in?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is right to make the case for a lightly taxed dynamic economy, and I would like to bring taxes down from their current level. We are faced with the necessity of doing something fast to restore sound money and bring inflation down from 11%, which is why we have made difficult decisions today. But yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: there is no future for this country unless we get back on the path to being a lower taxed economy.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): As we have seen, the Tory party might learn more from its mistakes if it wasn't so busy denying them, and I congratulate the Chancellor on a wonderful, "not me, guv" performance. In the interests of candour, will he confirm that what he told the House today is that after 12 years in power, the Tory plan is to cut around £27 billion from public spending?

Jeremy Hunt: I confirm that what the hon. Gentleman said is wrong. The plans I announced today show that we are protecting public spending in real terms over the next five years.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. I welcome the protection that he has announced for the most vulnerable, Government support for Sizewell C, the announcement of a devolution deal for Suffolk, the appointment of Sir Michael Barber to prepare a skills reform programme so that the many and not the few can participate in the proceeds of growth, and the Chancellor's commitment to a step change in the UK's efficiency programme. May I highlight the enormous potential that the Lowestoft port investment zone can play as a centre of excellence for low-carbon industry, and urge him to give full consideration to the proposal that will be forthcoming ahead of the March Budget?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is a formidable advocate for Lowestoft and the Lowestoft port investment zone. The process for deciding where the investment zones are will be decided by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I will pass on my hon. Friend's comments to him.

Kenny MacAskill (East Lothian) (Alba): The Chancellor rightly spoke a lot about compassion. In that regard, will he write to Ofgem and direct it that the manifest injustice of higher standing charges for those with prepayment meters must be ended and a social tariff invoked? On unregulated fuel, businesses in my constituency are hanging on by their fingertips, and waiting until next year might be too late. Will he undertake to backdate any payment or benefit?

Jeremy Hunt: I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the business support for companies this winter is happening. There is no waiting until Christmas; it is happening now and we have made that clear. We have said we will announce before Christmas the support that will come into place from next April. I am very aware of the issue of standing charges. I am concerned about it, and I will write back to the hon. Gentleman on that.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Chancellor for the announcements on the national health service, and he said that we are committed to our new hospitals programme. May I also thank him for the fantastic work he did when he was Health Secretary to help transform Medway Hospital in my constituency? He visited Medway Hospital, and he knows that Medway and north Kent have some of the highest health inequalities in the country, and Medway had some of the areas hit hardest by covid. We urgently need a new hospital. We are all among equals here and we want a fair allocation of resources. How will those criteria be applied, because under any criteria, Medway urgently needs a new hospital?

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend was an extraordinary advocate for Medway Hospital when I was Health Secretary. That is continuing, and rightly so. I will take away what he says. I am not sure about the exact situation with respect to a new hospital in Medway, but I will write back to him.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): The statement proposes council tax increases to top up social care funding, but the Chancellor must be aware that in Salford, the 18th most deprived local authority, with a current list of 27,000 people accessing council tax reduction support, any increases would raise only nominal funds, and the pain would be felt by residents on a huge scale. How will Salford pay for its social care, and what support will the Chancellor provide to mitigate the impact on those who cannot afford council tax increases?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to raise those concerns. Flexibility on council tax is only part of the way we are funding the £4.7 billion increase in the social care budget. Part of it is coming from the delay in the Dilnot reforms, and part of it—£1 billion and then £1.7 billion—is coming from central Government coffers. We recognise those concerns. This package is designed in its entirety to give maximum possible support to the most vulnerable people, and I hope it will be welcomed in her constituency.

Robbie Moore (Keighley) (Con): Last week I met residents of Moor Help in Long Lee, attended a coffee morning to speak with constituents in Silsden town hall, met Ilkley Good Neighbours, and had several constituency meetings in Keighley. All were asking me for the pensions triple lock to be protected, so I thank the Chancellor on their behalf. Will he confirm that by protecting pensioners with the triple lock, the Government will be providing the biggest ever cash increase to the state pension?

Jeremy Hunt: I absolutely confirm that, and it was the right thing to do. We are also giving lots of other help to pensioners, including £500 off their fuel bills on average across the country, and an extra payment of £300 for all pensioner households to help with cost of living pressures next year. That is on top of existing help such as the winter fuel payment.

Amy Callaghan (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The first round of austerity contributed to more than 300,000 excess deaths. The Government have made a political choice to impose austerity 2.0. Instead of increasing the benefit cap, will the Chancellor scrap the cap on benefits? If not, why not?

Jeremy Hunt: It is lovely to see the hon. Member back in the House. We are doing everything that we can to help people on benefits, including a £900 one-off payment next year to help with cost of living pressures, an average of £500 off their energy bills and, if they are working, the increase in the national living wage, which is worth up to £1,600. That will really help her constituents.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): When the Chancellor was Health Secretary, he kindly visited Kettering General Hospital, which is the No. 1 local issue in the Kettering Constituency. He will understand the importance that local people attach to the promised £396 million redevelopment of the hospital. The first 10% of that investment is now under way. Will he confirm that the bulk of the investment was always going to be in the period from 2025 to 2030 under health infrastructure plan 2 funding, and that Kettering hospital remains in that programme?

Jeremy Hunt: It is not possible to be Health Secretary without visiting Kettering hospital and my hon. Friend is a formidable advocate for it. I remember the visit well, with how crowded the hospital was and why there is such a big need for a new hospital. We are committed to the new hospitals programme, and I will write to him with precise details about where Kettering stands in that process.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): For absolute clarity, is the Chancellor confirming today that Transport for the North's preferred option for Northern Powerhouse Rail with a stop in Bradford is now scrapped under this Conservative Government?

Jeremy Hunt: I am confirming that core Northern Powerhouse Rail will go ahead and that we are protecting our capital budget so that we can make as many other worthwhile additions to our transport infrastructure as possible.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituents in Rugby and Bulkington will not enjoy the tough decisions that the Chancellor has had to make today, but they will understand the need for sound finances after the huge expenditure that the country has made on the pandemic and supporting people with their energy costs as a consequence of the war in Ukraine. They will also want to know that businesses will continue to invest to grow and to create jobs. Will he speak about the incentives that still exist for businesses to do exactly that?

Jeremy Hunt: I am happy to do that. My hon. Friend is quite right to raise those issues. We are doing a lot of short-term things, including help with energy bills as well as business rates. As we move to a new business rates system, we are freezing the levels at which business rates can increase and introducing a 75% discount next year for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses. Fundamentally, as a Conservative Government, we know that we cannot flourish as an economy without flourishing small businesses, and we will back them to the hilt.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The Chancellor mentioned innovation, and a modern steel industry is vital to our future prosperity, so will he earmark the £200 million originally contributed in good faith by steel producers and now returned to the UK Government from the EU research fund for coal and steel to set up a UK steel innovation fund to develop the steel technologies that we need to drive growth and work towards net zero?

Jeremy Hunt: I will happily look into that issue and write to the hon. Member. She will know that one of the growth industries that I identified was advanced manufacturing. There is much that we can do to ensure that the steel industry is competitive in this country, and we want it to have a bright future.

Laura Farris (Newbury) (Con): Nothing corrodes living standards like runaway inflation, so I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the priority that he has given to tackling inflation and bringing it down next year. However, until that moment comes, there is huge pressure on household incomes. I have been working closely with Citizens Advice West Berkshire, and its No. 1 ask was for means-tested benefits to be uprated in line with inflation, so I welcome that announcement as well as the unprecedented equivalent increase in the national living wage. Will he ensure that his Department and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy continue to work hand in glove with HMRC on that small number of rogue employers who try to avoid their statutory wage obligations?

Jeremy Hunt: That is a good question. I will happily write back to my hon. Friend with what we are doing and what we can do. I would like her to pass on my thanks to Citizens Advice West Berkshire for the incredibly important work that it is doing to support people through a difficult period.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This is a Budget of austerity 2.0, is it not? Of course, different decisions could have been made. The Chancellor could have decided to abolish the upper limit on national insurance, raising more than £30 billion and solving adult social care in one fell swoop along with the crisis in council funding. He chose not to do so but instead to burden poorer people and working people. On housing and energy specifically, he has said that he will freeze local housing allowance, which is a freeze at the 30th percentile from two or three years ago—it was last uplifted just at the beginning of the pandemic. Will he please review that decision along with how people living in blocks of flats who receive communal energy have received no support for their energy bills? They need that desperately to come through, and he has promised it before.

Jeremy Hunt: As I have explained, we increased local housing allowance at the start of the pandemic—significantly—and we are keeping it at that higher level. He talks about difficult decisions. I would say that there is one difficult decision on the table today: do we do what is necessary to tackle inflation? On the Government side of the House, the answer is yes.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I welcome the commitment in my right hon. Friend's statement to the new hospital building programme. Given the statement yesterday by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care that he would deal with the concrete cancer that means that the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in my constituency has 3,000 props holding up its roof, will he reassure people in North West Norfolk that the Government will make the urgent decisions to build the new QEH?

Jeremy Hunt: I have visited the QEH and absolutely understand the concerns that my hon. Friend is talking about. I will write to him about what is happening, but we do commit today that we will protect the new hospital programme. We do want to spend very important money in our capital programme in the NHS.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My rural, economically fragile constituency has been battered by a Brexit that we did not vote for resulting in the loss of European markets for our abundant seafood and meat products. What we also have in abundance is wind and water, which lash in from the Atlantic; something that we have learned not just to live with but to harness and benefit from. Why on earth has the Chancellor decided to tax electricity generators at a 10% higher rate than oil and gas producers? If there is a 91% investment allowance for the oil and gas sector, what is the figure for the renewables sector?

Jeremy Hunt: I have had wonderful holidays in the hon. Member's constituency and can attest to the high levels of wind and water there. It is one of the most beautiful parts of the country. The windfall tax rate on electricity generators is calculated to ensure that we tax only genuine windfall profits. It is reasonable to do that. Overall, these taxes will raise about £54 billion, and this year and next year we will spend more than £100 billion to support people with their energy bills. It will only kick in at £75 a unit, which is a generously high level.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend when he talks about the inflationary pressures coming from the aftershocks of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. We see that at the fuel pumps and, more significantly, our haulage and

logistics sector sees it with the enormous level of taxation on diesel in particular driving inflation to get food and goods on to our shelves. As he prepares for the March Budget, will he look at the inflationary impact of fuel duty on top of the high cost of diesel and see whether we can reduce it?

Jeremy Hunt: I assure my hon. Friend that I will absolutely do that. We have a little time, and I know that fuel duty is an important issue to him and many other colleagues.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Prime Minister said he was going to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail in full. With the Chancellor's announcement this morning, Hull remains excluded from Northern Powerhouse Rail for the next 30 years, in stark contrast to the go-ahead on the Oxford to Cambridge line. Could the Chancellor just explain to me and my constituents why the last areas to see investment in infrastructure are the first areas to have it ruled when this Tory Government crash the economy?

Jeremy Hunt: As the hon. Lady knows, the economy has been growing faster than France, Germany, Italy and Japan over the last 12 years, so that is not a fair characterisation. What I am able to do, because of the difficult decisions we have taken today, is largely protect the capital budget, which means we can do more to improve infrastructure to Hull and other parts of England. That is the right thing to do. I would just say to her that if we did not take the difficult decisions we are taking today, we would never be able to improve our transport infrastructure. We do not want that, which is why we are taking difficult decisions that her party is not supporting.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on his skilful and compassionate autumn statement. I welcome the additional funding of £1.2 billion for Wales. Can the Chancellor reassure vulnerable residents in my constituency that Government assistance with their very high energy bills will continue as long as it is needed, so we protect them to the very best of our ability?

Jeremy Hunt: That is absolutely what we want to do, and that is why today we are announcing that the energy price guarantee will continue, supporting my hon. Friend's constituents in an average household by about £500 during the course of next year. Going forward, because these are multibillion pound programmes, we need people to work together with the Government to also improve their energy efficiency. The other thing the Business Secretary will announce shortly is a long-term energy independence and energy efficiency plan which, if we implement it, will bring down the average fuel bill by another £500.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): In his statement, the Chancellor said that because of difficult decisions in 2010, the Government could then go on to do several things. However, places like Gateshead are still living with the drastically detrimental consequences of those 2010 decisions. The decision to incrementally withdraw revenue support grant from councils means that my own local authority is £179 million per year worse off now than it was in 2010. Many local authorities with a low council tax base are in exactly the same boat. We are worried about austerity 2.0, but we are also very, very worried about the continuing consequences of austerity 2010. So, after 12 years, when will the Government do something about local government finance to prove to people in Gateshead that the words "levelling up" are not just empty rhetoric?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say how important the levelling up programme is. The economic growth we have had since 2010 means we are able to invest in capital projects today. The levelling up round 2 fund will be protected and possibly increased from the £1.7 billion invested in levelling up round 1. We are absolutely committed to connecting areas like Gateshead into the national economy, which means that wealth spreads.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on how skilfully he has handled the toughest budget for 40 years, and thank him for listening to representations which I have made to him directly to protect pensioners and increase school funding for Southend schools. Can he confirm that as a result of restoring the triple lock, all 18,000 pensioners in Southend West will get not only continued help with their energy bills but the biggest cash increase ever in their pensions next April?

Jeremy Hunt: I can. My hon. Friend advocates formidably for pensioners and other constituents in Southend. The inflationary increase in the state pension is worth on average £860. There will also be a £300 payment to pensioners next year to help with cost of living pressures and for an average house a £500 reduction in their fuel bill at today's prices. She can tell her constituents that that package shows a Conservative Government who care about our most vulnerable citizens.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): The Chancellor rightly claimed that education is not just an economic mission but a moral mission, so can he explain to the House why he is still able to find £6.5 billion in tax cuts for the biggest banks over the next five years, but no money to expand free school meal provision, when 800,000 children living in poverty are not even entitled to a hot meal at school? Hungry children cannot learn. So much for his moral mission.

Jeremy Hunt: Where the hon. Lady and I agree is on the importance of education, and the importance of supporting children and lifting families out of poverty. Where we disagree is on the role of banks, which create enormous wealth for this country and actually help to fund our NHS and schools by the corporation taxes they pay.

Paul Holmes (Eastleigh) (Con): I congratulate the Chancellor on bringing forward an autumn statement that focuses on the long-term stability this country needs. My constituency has a large number of park home sites, which rely on communal accounts or individual liquid petroleum gas bottles. Will the Chancellor confirm that LPG used to heat park homes, not just standard-build homes, will be covered by the announcement of the doubling of the payment, and will he make sure that the payments to the constituents who need them most are efficient and delivered as quickly as possible?

Jeremy Hunt: I am very happy to confirm both those points. I have park homes in my own constituency.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): From his time as Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, which we are hearing about plenty in this statement, the Chancellor knows that NHS England spends a ludicrous amount on detaining autistic people and people with learning disabilities in inappropriate and often substandard in-patient care. I know the Chancellor understands this.

Jeremy Hunt *indicated assent.*

Barbara Keeley: He is nodding. He himself said, during the Committee's inquiry into this issue, that the level of community provision is totally inadequate. Will he listen to himself again and commit to looking into this issue with the Health and Social Care Secretary, so that we are no longer throwing money away on substandard care when autistic people and people with learning disabilities could be living happier lives in the community?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady and I have talked about these issues many times and may I just say, across the political divide, that it has been a privilege to work with her on social care issues and to see the concern she has in public and in private about all these issues? I agree that it is a scandal that we have so many people detained in secure accommodation who could be in the community. I absolutely will work with my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary to see what can be done.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, with which I know my right hon. Friend is very familiar, is delaying returning chemotherapy services to the Alex—the Alexandra Hospital in Redditch—even though the pandemic is over. That means really sick cancer patients are having to travel to Kidderminster for their essential therapy. I strongly welcome the £3.3 billion investment he is providing today for the NHS, so can he confirm that there are really no financial or funding reasons for the trust not to return those services to Redditch, where they are so desperately needed?

Jeremy Hunt: Cancer patients in Redditch will have heard loud and clear that they have a formidable advocate in their MP. I will happily look into that specific issue, but the broader point is that the chief executive of NHS England says today that the funding we have found for the NHS is sufficient for it to deliver its core purposes, even despite the inflationary pressures. Of course, cancer services are core services.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Can I ask the Chancellor about his policy on public sector pay, because not much was said about that? Will he first of all look at the nonsensical position that the UK Government—not the English Government—have more than 200 separate pay bargaining units for civil service pay? That seems a nonsensical position. There are far too many civil servants having to utilise food banks to survive month to month. Can he tell us what pay increase those who work for UK Government Departments can expect for the coming year, or will they also pay the price for the mistakes of his predecessor?

Jeremy Hunt: What I can tell the hon. Gentleman is that families in the UK, including families in Scotland and in his own constituency, will get an enormous amount of help this year and next, including if they are on the lowest legal wage, the national living wage, with an increase in their income of up to £1,600. If they are on means-tested benefits, they will get an increase of £900 and if they are a pensioner they will get the triple lock increase of £870. I could go on. The autumn statement knits together as a statement designed to help people on low pay, including in the public sector.

Rob Butler (Aylesbury) (Con): The Chancellor has rightly reminded us that the economic challenges we face are driven primarily by global events, especially Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and that has necessitated the difficult and painful decisions that he has had to make. He emphasised the need to continue to invest in infrastructure. That is especially important in Aylesbury, where there is a massive amount of house building and we desperately need link roads to alleviate traffic congestion and improve air quality. Within the budgets that have been approved, will my right hon. Friend enable Buckinghamshire Council to have as much flexibility as possible to deliver those roads, which are so essential for our town's sustainable growth?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy for Aylesbury. My basic view is that we should give as much flexibility as we can to local authorities to deliver local infrastructure projects, and significantly more than they currently have. I hope to come forward in the months ahead with ways to progress that. I will write to him on the specific issue of a link road.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab): Local authorities all over the country are at breaking point, with Conservative-run Kent and Hampshire County Councils warning this week that they face the very real prospect of bankruptcy. The challenge is especially acute at Wirral Council, which is grappling with a shortfall of nearly £50 million next year, driven in no small part by a drastic cut in central Government grant funding since 2010. Does the Chancellor accept that his proposals to allow local authorities to hike council tax risks forcing people in the most deprived communities, such as Birkenhead, to pay even more in return for ever-diminishing services? Will he commit to providing more direct financial assistance to local authorities so that they can continue to provide those services, which will be so essential in helping local towns such as Birkenhead?

Jeremy Hunt: Local authorities have requested this package, particularly the two-year delay in the Dilnot reforms. Although those reforms are very important, we will not implement them, but we will leave the funding that was set aside for them with local authorities. That will help his council and many other councils.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I welcome the Chancellor's commitment today to the triple lock, public services in general and health and education specifically. On the proposal from the previous Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee for an NHS staffing plan—he may recall that I supported that—will my right hon. Friend work with the Health Secretary to find ways to encourage more home-grown doctors, nurses and nursing

associates to be trained locally, not least in the new University of Gloucestershire health teaching campus? Thanks to the levelling-up fund, that will open before long close to our Gloucestershire Royal Hospital.

Jeremy Hunt: My hon. Friend is a brilliant MP for Gloucester. I do not want to pre-empt what the independently verified workforce review will say, but we will need all the places that are now training doctors and nurses, including Gloucester, to train more in the future.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Is it higher mortgage rates, higher energy bills, higher food bills, higher fuel bills, public sector cuts, a recession or the boorach of Brexit that best represents the strength of the Union?

Jeremy Hunt: What represents the strength of the Union is £4 billion being spent to build the new frigates in Scotland and £4 billion being spent to support Scottish families with the cost of energy bills.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The scale of wage restraint resulting from today's autumn statement will accelerate York's housing crisis. What measures in the statement will secure a greater supply of affordable housing for local people, not investors, in my constituency?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I am in constant discussion with the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about the importance of housing policy creating new houses for people on low incomes. However, on wages overall, the £4.7 billion for the social care sector, for which she advocates, will make a significant difference in that area.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Chancellor's statement is forcing everybody to pay the price for the puncturing of the economy by his Conservative Government, and I put Brexit very much at the core of the problem. Everybody is paying except the big oil and gas companies, because there are still massive tax loopholes for companies drilling for new fossil fuels. Let me ask him this serious question: who is his statement benefiting—the renewable energy companies or the fossil fuel sector?

Jeremy Hunt: The renewable energy companies and people in the traditional energy sector are paying a windfall tax, and as a result, we can have more money for doctors, nurses and people in social care up and down the country. That means that we are investing in the NHS in a way that was not possible when we were in coalition with the Liberal Democrats in 2010.

Paula Barker (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): Will the Chancellor confirm how the living standards of UK households have been forecast to change between this year and next by the Office for Budget Responsibility? Does he think it is acceptable that real household average incomes are set to fall on his watch?

Jeremy Hunt: A fall in household incomes because of the international headwinds will be extremely challenging, and today's statement is designed to address that. The OBR has said that we will help to mitigate the fall in living standards by the actions we are taking today.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): People watching the Chancellor's statement will be very vexed by the fact that he seems to be pretending that the Tories' disastrous mini-Budget and their race-to-the-bottom Brexit have absolutely nothing to do with the problems that people face. That is simply not the case. As we have heard, the OBR forecasts that real household disposable income will fall by more than 7% over the next two years. People are facing a very difficult time, so why is the Chancellor not taking the kind of action that the Scottish Government are to protect families in this difficult situation? Why is he not making the choice to introduce something like the Scottish child payment, which will make such a difference? And why are his political choices so focused on those who least need them?

Jeremy Hunt: My political choices are focused on helping Scottish schools and Scottish hospitals, with £1.5 billion more to support them. I think they need that money, so that is where we have a difference of opinion.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A constituent who is an A&E doctor told me about an elderly lady who was admitted to hospital from a house that she could not afford to heat. She had a temperature of 26°C and died shortly after. I am pleased that the Chancellor has finally extended the windfall tax, but Labour has been calling for that for months. Does he accept that the delay has had very real consequences for people and that the Government should have taken up Labour's stance far sooner?

Jeremy Hunt: I do not accept that for one second, because these are terrible tragedies on which we have acted very quickly, with support worth £62 billion this year to help families deal with fuel price increases and support next year that will save families £500 off their average bill at today's prices. We are doing everything we possibly can, because we do not want to be a country where that kind of thing happens.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD):I recently did a 12-hour shift with west midlands ambulance service. Every paramedic I spoke to told me that the current crisis in response times was because of bed-blocking, which is caused by the problem in social care. Given that the Local Government Association is forecasting a shortfall of £3.4 billion next year and £4.5 billion the year after that just to stand still, does the Chancellor feel confident that he is improving the situation with today's announcements? Will he clarify how much the average council tax payer is expected to put towards that?

Jeremy Hunt: It feels as though the hon. Lady might have written that question before she heard the statement and not changed it. We talked about a £4.7 billion increase in the social care budget, which is targeted at ending the bed-blocking that the paramedics she talked to were so worried about. That is the biggest increase in social care funding in history. As I said, sadly, we were not able to do that when we were in coalition with her party.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Does the Chancellor not have a responsibility to set out all major tax cuts? He seems to have slipped out a tax cut for the banks. Will he confirm that he is cutting the bank surcharge from 8% to 3%?

Jeremy Hunt: We are reducing the bank surcharge because we are increasing corporation tax from 19% to 25%, so banks are contributing to our having more money for the NHS and schools in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): Where in the Chancellor's statement is support for low-paid freelance and self-employed people, particularly those in the arts and creative sectors? Do not difficult times call for innovative solutions, such as the basic income guarantee for artists that is currently being piloted by the Republic of Ireland—which, incidentally, is a small independent member of the European Union?

Jeremy Hunt: We have announced a lot of measures to help people on low incomes. Anyone in receipt of means-tested benefits will receive £900 to help them with the cost of living, along with the inflation-linked uplift in universal credit, which is about £600, and about £500 to help them with their heating costs next year, at today's prices. So there is a lot of help. However, if the hon. Gentleman is saying we should do more to support the creative industries which are so important to this country, I absolutely agree. I used to be the Culture Secretary, and I will do everything I can as Chancellor.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): Four million children live in poverty in our country: that is one in three kids. Today the Chancellor could have tackled that. He could have extended free school meals to all primary schoolchildren, guaranteeing that they would get a decent meal every day. That would cost £1 billion a day, which could be paid three times over by closing the non-dom tax loophole, but the Chancellor did not extend free school meals or close that loophole. He talked about tough choices, so let me ask him this: was it a tough choice to protect this tax-dodging loophole and deny meals to kids living in poverty?

Jeremy Hunt: It was a tough choice to increase taxes by £25 billion, largely for the well-off, so that we could find more money for schools in the hon. Lady's constituency.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Far the best way to take people out of poverty is to pay them a decent wage so that they never get into poverty. I see that the Chancellor is nodding. Why has the nodding Chancellor announced today that the minimum wage will fall behind the cost of living? The Tories' pretendy-kiddy-on living wage is even more pretendy-kiddy-on than it was before—a real-terms pay cut for the 2 million lowest-paid earners in the United Kingdom. What assessment, if any, has the Chancellor made of how long he expects it to be before every single worker in the United Kingdom has a legally guaranteed right to that most basic of employment rights, a decent wage that is enough to live on?

Jeremy Hunt: We may have political disagreements on the Union, but I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that we have made enormous progress with our national living wage. Today's announcement means that for someone working full time it will go up by £1,600, which will help a great many of his constituents—and that is before all the other help that we are giving with heating costs—fuel costs—for people on means-tested benefits. So I think we are doing a lot, and we will continue to look at whether we can do more.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Today, in response to the Chancellor's statement, the Conservative chair of the Local Government Association said:

> "We have been clear that council tax has never been the solution to meeting the long-term pressures facing services—particularly high-demand services like adult social care, child protection and homelessness prevention. It also raises different amounts of money in different parts of the country unrelated to need and adds to the financial burden facing households."

Does the Chancellor agree with that, and will he commit himself to working on a fair funding formula for local authorities, including police and fire services, which we have heard little about today?

Jeremy Hunt: We always keep our funding formula under review, but I am absolutely certain that the person whom the hon. Lady has quoted will have welcomed the fact that there was a £4.7 billion increase in the money for social care, which is the biggest financial pressure for local authorities.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): Thanks to recent Conservative chaos, people are now facing both higher taxes and underfunded local services. More than 150,000 people across Devon are currently on an NHS waiting list. For example, Ann Newbury from Honiton had to wait more than three years for her operation. Can the Chancellor tell me that the Government will recruit enough new NHS staff to ensure that people in Devon will not have to wait so long for operations?

Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Gentleman may have heard me say that we are going to have an independently verified long-term workforce plan to ensure that we are training enough doctors and nurses in Devon and, indeed, all over the country, and I think it is incredibly important for us to do that.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): Poverty is a political choice, and the Chancellor had the opportunity to take millions of children out of poverty with his Budget today, including children in my constituency. That has not happened, and the increase in benefits will not happen until April next year. Can the Chancellor tell the House what families are going to do when they are talking about heating or eating this winter?

Jeremy Hunt: This year we have supported the poorest families with £1,200 to deal with an exceptional increase in the cost of living. We have the household support fund, which we are giving to councils so that they can help to ensure that people do not fall between the cracks, and there is money for the NHS and care system, which is also targeted at the most vulnerable and people living in poverty.

We are doing a great many things today. There is always more that we can consider, but strong public services need a strong economy, and that is what you get with the Conservatives.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): And the prize for patience and perseverance goes—as so often—to Margaret Ferrier.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I thank the Chancellor for his statement, and for remaining in the Chamber to answer all the Members' questions—especially the last question!

I wrote to the Chancellor on behalf of my constituents about the triple lock, and I thank him for listening to their pleas, but a decade of benefit cuts has meant that families are struggling financially. Will the Chancellor consider allowing families to access more of their benefit entitlement in the face of the cost of living crisis, and will he reduce the maximum amount that can be deducted from universal credit for debt repayments at least to 15% of the standard allowance?

Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her patience in waiting all this time to ask her question. The issues that she has raised are going to be looked at by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions in the review that he is conducting for the Prime Minister on the increase in the number of economically inactive adults and what we can do to improve incentives, but today we have announced—exceptionally—an increase in the benefit cap to ensure that the families who depend most on the benefits system are given all the extra help that we are promising today.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Chancellor for his statement, and I thank everyone who, for three hours and five minutes, has held him to account at the Dispatch Box.

Business of the House

2.36 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): The business for the week commencing 21 November will include the following:

Monday 21 November—Debate on the autumn statement and consideration of resolutions (day 1).

Tuesday 22 November—Conclusion of the debate on the autumn statement and consideration of resolutions.

Wednesday 23 November—Remaining stages of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill (day 1).

Thursday 24 November—A general debate on the UN international day of persons with disabilities, followed by a general debate on the independent review of children's social care. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 25 November—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 28 November includes:

Monday 28 November—Remaining stages of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill (day 2).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I call the shadow Leader of the House, Thangam Debbonaire.

2.38 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. As I am supporting the Ask Her To Stand campaign this week, I thought I would dress in the appropriate colours.

It appears that the Government have simply given up listening to Parliament. On Tuesday, Labour gave them the opportunity to start putting right their crashing of the economy, which hiked mortgages and rents, but they did not show up and we won. One would not think that they still had a working of majority of 69. Is the Prime Minister's leadership really so weak that he that he cannot carry his own MPs on a vote?

Labour called for, and Parliament voted for, the former Prime Minister and Chancellor to waive from their severance pay the average monthly £500 mortgage increase that families now face as a result of the Tory economic crash; yet Tory MPs backed their mates getting £35,000 over working people who have been left to pay for the mistakes that they made—a reward for just days in post in which they caused economic meltdown. Can the Leader of the House say with a straight face that they deserve this reward from taxpayers?

Even under their minority Government in 2018, the Government showed up to defeat censure motions. May I remind the Leader of the House that, by convention, censure motions results in MPs' losing salaries or ministerial jobs? Governments have even fallen. The Government cannot just pick and choose which votes they will respect and which they will ignore, so will they uphold the will of this House? Will the right hon. Members for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng) give back from their ministerial severance the £500 average mortgage increase that they caused? The new Prime Minister said he would lead a Government of "integrity, professionalism and accountability", so

[Thangam Debbonaire]

why is he willing to break long-standing parliamentary precedent in his first few weeks? Does the Leader of the House agree that the Prime Minister really needs to hurry up with appointing an ethics adviser? Will she give us a timeframe?

We agree that it is important that Members can hold Ministers to account in this place first, yet the Government briefed out almost every single part of today's statement to the press. That is discourteous to Members and to our constituents, on whose behalf we want to put important questions to the Chancellor. It is not the first time, and it seems to be part of a wider culture of disrespect to Parliament. Has the Leader of the House spoken to Ministers about this issue, as she said she would? If she has, clearly she was not heard or was ignored, so will she remind her colleagues that major policy statements should be made by Ministers in this House first, not briefed to the media?

Labour's green prosperity plan would build industry, create jobs, grow the economy and tackle climate change. Our national wealth fund would give the British public a stake in energy and climate investments. We would insulate millions of cold homes, and invest in onshore and offshore wind, tidal and solar. We would make fairer choices on tax, including by scrapping the non-dom tax status, taxing private schools, and making oil and gas companies pay their fair share, and we have a proper procurement plan to ensure we are buying, selling and making more in Britain. Those are just some of Labour's serious plans for fairer, sustainable, green economic growth.

Where is the Tory plan? Today, non-doms have just kept their tax break. For working people, bills are up, wages are down, and they have just had a massive tax hike. The Chancellor told us that his autumn statement will help Britain face into the storm. Does he not get it? This Government are the storm. They have been the dreadful soaking rain, the howling wind blowing the roofs of, and the puddles drenching us with muddy, cold water with every passing bus—if one ever arrives—for 12 long years. This is a Tory crisis made in Downing Street. They crashed the economy; they hiked mortgages and rents; and they have presided over rising prices, falling wages and rising taxes. This is on them. The British people must be given the opportunity to elect a Labour Government, who would make fair choices and have an actual plan to get our economy firing on all cylinders—and it cannot come soon enough.

Penny Mordaunt: May I congratulate the men's cricket team on their win at the T20, and wish—as I am sure the shadow Leader of the House would want to—England and Wales good luck in their first matches in the World cup?

I compliment the hon. Lady on her suffragette ensemble today, although given what has happened this week, I would caution her against wearing it in the Scottish Parliament.

On a serious note, we had an urgent question earlier this week on the situation in Iran, but may I place on record my concern? My thoughts are with the people of Iran, particularly in the wake of the decision taken by the Iranian Parliament this week. Thank you for allowing me to say that, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Let me turn to the hon. Lady's questions. I am keen that all news is heard by this House first, and will continue to make those representations. She will know that it is really important that embargoes are not broken on events such as the financial statement. I will emphasise that to my colleagues.

The hon. Lady will know that the decision on the appointment of an ethics adviser is with the Prime Minister, and I know he is focusing on it. She will also know that the Prime Minister very much wants me to concentrate on such matters, particularly in this House. We have had some good discussions about how we might join up actions that this House, our respective political parties and the Government are taking to give ourselves the best chance of creating the best possible culture in this place.

We have just heard from the Chancellor. The shadow Leader of the House, like me, was here for much of the statement, but she clearly missed the news that the Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that the chief reason we are facing these issues is the global situation, and in particular Russia's illegal, economic war that is levelled at every household, every business, and every school and hospital in this country. We have set out the fact that we are strengthening the public finances, bringing down inflation, protecting jobs, investing in nuclear power, and putting in place the biggest programme of capital investment in 40 years. There is £1.5 billion more for Scotland, £1.2 billion more for Wales and £600 million more for Northern Ireland. We are protecting standards in schools, cutting NHS waiting times and funding social care. We have committed to the energy bill cap, and to supporting the most vulnerable in our community with regard to pensions, benefits and the national living wage.

In stark contrast, although the hon. Lady talked about 12 years of failure, it is Labour that has failed: it is failing in opposition; it is failing in Scotland; it is failing the people of Wales; it is failing to form a plan, as we heard from the shadow Chancellor today; and it is failing to free itself from its union paymasters, because it refuses to back our legislation on minimum standards. Every single time Labour is in government, it leaves the country in a worse state than when it inherited it. The reverse is true of my party. On this side of the House, we have a clear plan. On the other side of the House, there is no plan.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am extremely concerned to be advised that Serco—the agency responsible for seeking asylum accommodation around the country—is not complying with reasonable requests from Northamptonshire police to provide biometric data and known offending history from asylum seekers' country of origin. Such individuals have no footprints on the police national computer, so Northamptonshire police are reliant solely on information provided by Serco. Despite several requests, Northamptonshire police have been informed that Serco is "too busy" to provide such information. The Leader of the House will be aware that the failings of such information and data transfer could have catastrophic consequences. May I urge her in the strongest possible terms to ensure that we have an urgent statement from the Home Office clarifying that Northamptonshire police will receive full biometric profiles, together with a comprehensive breakdown of any known offending behaviour in their country of origin, before any asylum seekers set foot in Northamptonshire?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this incredibly serious matter. It is not my area of expertise, but I cannot imagine that the situation he describes is compatible with Serco's duty of care, nor its contractual obligations. He has clearly raised the issue with the Department and had no satisfaction, so I will write on his behalf and ask that there is a meeting between him and the relevant official in the Department. I will also suggest that Ministers hold a surgery for colleagues who may face similar situations.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I associate myself with the Leader of the House's comments about the appalling decisions of the Iranian Parliament.

I could raise the financial statement, but so much of it was trailed beforehand that it feels like old news, so I will leave it until next week's debates—except to wonder why extra resources need to go towards cracking down on vanishingly small amounts of benefit fraud but not on rampant tax evasion.

A couple of weeks ago, I asked the Prime Minister about the influence on our politics of opaquely funded think-tanks. That was timely, because an audit published today by openDemocracy and Who Funds You? shows that some of those think-tanks have raised more than £14 million between them in just two years, from donors whose identity is a complete mystery to us. That is important, because these think-tanks appear willy-nilly across media outlets such as the BBC and have had lots of ministerial meetings since 2012. Their policies have helped to inspire disastrous Government experiments such as the former Prime Minister's mini-Budget. I am confident that the Leader of the House joins me in believing that it is only right for the public to know exactly who funds organisations that seem to wield such power in our democratic systems, so she will applaud the fact that I have written to the Prime Minister today to ask him again for an urgent meeting to discuss his position.

I must mention the Leader of the Opposition's successful recent mini-break in Scotland—successful for the SNP's polling figures, that is. Not only did he continue to deny democracy by telling the people of Scotland that on his watch they would never get a chance to decide their future for themselves, but he continued to deny reality by suggesting that he and his party can confound the predictions of almost every economist and trade expert and somehow make the deeply unpopular catastrophe of Brexit work. He is welcome back any time.

Lastly, the all-party parliamentary group on the environment enjoyed a helpful discussion yesterday with Canada's high commissioner about the next COP15 on biodiversity, which is to be hosted in Montreal in December under China's presidency. There is a bit of a fear that COP15 is being a little overshadowed by its better-known cousin COP27. That is a real problem, because it is vital that COP15 goes ahead and that major commitments are made. Will the Leader provide a debate on it in Government time to highlight its crucial messages?

Penny Mordaunt: I look forward—although I am sorry we have to wait until next week for it—to the hon. Lady's welcome for the additional £1.5 billion in funding that was announced today. I am sorry that she did not take the opportunity to welcome the next batch of Type 26 frigates, which will secure jobs at Rosyth. I cannot imagine why the SNP does not want to talk about shipbuilding.

This week, we heard from Professor Keith Hartley, a defence expert, who said that warship construction would grind to a halt and thousands of jobs would be lost if Scotland were to leave the UK. He also warned that it was unlikely that an independent Scotland would have a particularly large navy. Based on the SNP's performance at procuring ferries, I think he is probably right. I have often spoken about the SNP's reality gap: the chasm between what SNP Members continually talk about and the concerns of the Scottish people. The Auditor General for Scotland has now pointed to an "implementation gap": the abyss between the SNP's rhetoric and the reality of its delivery on the ground.

I have been suggesting a bit of homework for the hon. Lady every week. The homework I am setting her today for the debate on Monday is a question to think about: if the SNP is so concerned about balancing the books and the budget of the Scottish Government, why does it not drop the constitution budget, drop the plans for a second referendum and focus on the NHS instead?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we move on, I must say to the SNP spokesman that I did not interrupt her because I do not like to interrupt the flow of this important item of business, but it really ought to be about asking a question concerning next week's business. It is fascinating to know the hon. Lady's views on the Leader of the Opposition, but they do not really have a lot to do with next week's business here in the House of Commons. I am sure that in future she will find a way of asking questions.

Nickie Aiken (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): Historic gas lamp street lights are very precious to many people in Westminster. I have been working closely with the London Gasketeers—a brilliant campaign to save the gas lights—and with Conservative councillors. The Conservative administration before May stopped the plan to replace the gas lights; sadly, the new Labour administration has reintroduced the plan and is now consulting on it. The consultation ends on Sunday. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we do all we can to protect the historic fabric of central London and encourage people to take part in the consultation and send a clear message: "Keep our gas lamps"?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I think the hon. Lady means that she would like to ask the Leader of the House for a debate as part of next week's business. This is business questions, not "Opinion Time". Would the hon. Lady like to ask a business question?

Nickie Aiken: I would like to ask the Leader of the House whether we can send a clear message by having a debate in this House about the importance of protecting the historic fabric of central London and the rest of the United Kingdom, and of protecting our precious gas lamp street lights.

Penny Mordaunt: I am pleased to compliment you on maintaining the proper procedures of the Chamber, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is quite right that we maintain our important heritage, which is not only cherished by residents but a draw for visitors to central London. It is

[Penny Mordaunt]

also nice to talk about gaslighting in its original context, as opposed to the more modern meaning that has become the fashion in this Chamber. I commend my hon. Friend and her councillors on the campaign and wish them luck with it.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing next week's business, and for announcing the Backbench Business for Thursday 24 November. I also thank her for our very pleasant meeting yesterday afternoon, and I thank her member of staff, who I understand hails from Consett, for the treat of a Black Bullet, which are not readily available in this part of the country. It is an import from home that he brought down.

In the aftermath of the autumn statement, can we have a debate in Government time on the impact of Government policy on local government finance? My borough of Gateshead, which prides itself on the development of sport over decades, now faces a situation where, having had almost £200 million cut from its budget in real terms over 10 years, it is now looking for a further £55 million-worth of cuts in the next three years. There is a real possibility of mothballing Gateshead International stadium and closing two of our swimming pools and possibly even our major leisure centre. This is important to people not just in Gateshead but across the whole north-east of England. Can we have a debate in Government time about the impact of Government policy on local government finance?

Penny Mordaunt: I will certainly pass on the hon. Gentleman's gratitude to Kieran, but he will have caused envy among other visitors to my office who did not get confectionery.

I completely understand the importance of the issue raised by the hon. Gentleman. I am sure he will make use of the debates on the autumn statement, and there is also Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions on 21 November. The Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill comes back next week, too, so there will be plenty of Chamber time for him to raise these important issues.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): For too long, residents of villages such as Newton and Blackwell in my constituency have had to live under the cloud of HS2 safeguarding, which is blocking investment and blighting communities. It is about time we moved on. With the planned upgrade to the midland main line, there is no good reason to allow HS2 Ltd to block levelling-up projects along what was the Chesterfield spur. Can we please have a debate in Government time on how we can crack on and let these communities get on with their lives, now they are rid of this stupid project?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for campaigning on this, and what he has said will have been heard by Ministers. There is Transport questions next Thursday, as well as the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill coming back to the Floor of the House next week. I will pass on his concerns to the Minister.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab): This week I met the families and loved ones of prisoners held under the imprisonment for public protection sentence, The Government abolished these sentences in 2012, but not retrospectively. As of September 2022, 2,890 people are still serving an IPP. Seventy-four prisoners have committed suicide, including Donna Mooney's brother Tommy Nicol, who committed suicide in September 2015. He described his sentence as psychological torture. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss this most important issue?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this important point, and I express my sympathies to Donna and her family for what has happened. I am happy to write on the hon. Lady's behalf to both the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office to raise her concern. I encourage her to facilitate a meeting with the relevant Minister.

Simon Baynes (Clwyd South) (Con): Over many years, there have been discussions between the excellent doctor's surgery in Hanmer in my Clwyd South constituency and the Betsi Cadwaladr University health board about building appropriate new surgery premises. Will my right hon. Friend facilitate an opportunity to discuss this in the House, and will she join me in urging the health board and the Welsh Government to expedite these discussions so that the Hanmer surgery can meet the ever-increasing local patient demand?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Clearly, the NHS and healthcare is under tremendous pressure in all parts of the UK, but while one in 20 people in England are waiting over a year for treatment, it is one in four in Wales. I know that primary care and the excellent services he has described are critical for diagnostics and prevention to tackle that issue. He has raised the issue today on the Floor of the House, and I know he is campaigning hard about it. He can gather the support of Ministers by raising it at parliamentary questions on 6 December and, in the meantime, I will ask the Department what more it can do to encourage the Welsh Government and local stakeholders to bring forward the new services his constituents need.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Tomorrow, I will be meeting the Scottish Showmen's Guild in Glasgow. The guild has raised with me its concerns about the rising costs of electricity and gas for both site tenants and landlords, for which they receive no financial assistance or grants. Will the Leader of the House ask the Business Secretary to give a statement to the House and ask him to meet me to discuss energy support for showpeople?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue. The next business questions will be on 29 November, and I know that the hon. Lady will want to raise that issue there, but I will also alert the Department to her concerns.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate in Government time about making sure the NHS is winter ready? Long ambulance queues and handover times have plagued my local hospital, even in summer months, which is why I and colleagues have campaigned so hard for a new ambulance handover unit. That unit arrived last week

and is already easing pressure on our busy A&E and on our ambulances. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the East of England Ambulance Service and Southend University Hospital on these new lifesaving initiatives?

Penny Mordaunt: I am happy to congratulate the East of England Ambulance Service and Southend University Hospital on this achievement, and my hon. Friend, who I know encouraged it. She has campaigned for the hospital and she has also abseiled down it to raise money for the cancer ward, and I congratulate her on all she has achieved. I hope that this new initiative will be welcomed by her local constituents.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am sure the hon. Lady meant to ask for a debate on this issue. I call Ellie Reeves.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Gabriel Stoyanov was stabbed to death in Lewisham two weeks ago. He was just 21 years old. I knew Gabriel and I knew his mum's hopes and dreams for his future—a future that has now been senselessly taken away from him. Will the Home Secretary make a statement about tackling the scourge of knife crime and youth violence?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about this tragic incident. I am sure that all Members of the House will want to send their condolences, thoughts and prayers to Gabriel's family. The hon. Lady will know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary takes the issue very seriously. She is encouraging the Mayor of London to do further things. We have introduced new conditions on knife crime, brought back stop and search measures and increased sentences, but there is clearly more to do. Every community needs to have peace of mind that their young people can go out without fear, and I will certainly pass on the sentiments that she has expressed today to the Home Secretary.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Leader of the House rightly celebrated the men's T20 cricket world cup win on Remembrance Sunday. Will she also join me in celebrating the great performances of our women's rugby team, the Red Roses, who narrowly lost to New Zealand on Saturday. Will my right hon. Friend give time for a debate on women's world cup rugby in the UK in 2025 and the strong case for Gloucester Rugby's Kingsholm Stadium to be a major host venue? She may also be interested to know that there were no less than four players from Gloucester-Hartpury in the Red Roses team, including international women's rugby player of the year, Zoe Aldcroft.

Penny Mordaunt: That is a textbook question. I will certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating the England women's rugby team, who did an incredible job, and only narrowly missed out. I thank him for the work that he is doing to promote this sport and to ensure that his constituents get the credit they deserve for the successes. He will know that Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions will be on 1 December, and I encourage him to take part.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): At next week's debate on the autumn statement, can the Leader of the House ensure that a statement is made by the Government, supporting, committing to and reaffirming their commitment to the hydrogen strategy? I notice that the strategy was glaringly absent from the autumn statement, but I am sure that that was an omission and not intentional. I just hope that the commitment is reaffirmed.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I can make a statement now that the Government are committed to the hydrogen strategy, which was published last year. Since its publication, we have doubled our ambitions for 2030. We have also announced the £240 million net zero hydrogen fund. I hope that that gives him reassurance, but I encourage him to raise the matter at the next questions.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): The Rotary club of Ilkeston is celebrating its centenary this coming weekend. Whether it is the fairs at Ilkeston Community Hospital or the classic car rally on the marketplace, these events and many others would not be the same without the burgers cooked by our rotarians locally. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking Ilkeston Rotary club for all its charitable work, and for raising a huge amount of money for good causes, both locally and internationally, and will he wish it a happy 100th birthday? Can we have a debate in Government time on the contributions that Rotary clubs across the UK make to our communities?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. Whether it is cooking burgers or eradicating polio, we have a huge amount to thank rotarians across the UK for. I certainly join her in congratulating her local Rotary club on meeting its centenary event. I hope that its members will celebrate appropriately, and I thank them for all they have done to support her local community.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Barnsley has the fourth highest level of tooth decay in the country, and 98% of dentistry practices across Yorkshire are not able to accept new patients. Can we have a statement on the Government's strategy to improve dental health?

Penny Mordaunt: At the start of this year, we released some new funding to assist those areas that were not able to provide all of the hon. Lady's constituents with access to dental care. Since that money was released, there has been some more flexibility in commissioning, which will help local commissioners to commission those services. I know as well that we have a catch-up job from the covid pandemic to get through. I encourage her to raise this matter at Health and Social Care questions, but I shall also raise it on her behalf with the Department.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Rugby's Hospital of St Cross is highly valued by residents, who are keen to see it provide more services, especially in A&E. We are looking forward to welcoming the Secretary of State soon on a visit that was promised by his predecessor. One of the hospital success stories is the role played by the Friends of St Cross charity. Long-service badges have just been awarded to 90 volunteers for completing 10 years' service, 35 of whom are still volunteering. With a collective 500 years' service between them, can we have a debate on the very valuable contribution of volunteers within the NHS?

Penny Mordaunt: I put on record my thanks to all of my hon. Friend's constituents who are volunteering for the friends organisation. This is a service that not only is very welcome but can help improve patient outcomes, hospital visiting and so forth. Ten years of service is a tremendous achievement. I congratulate them all and my hon. Friend on ensuring that the Secretary of State will visit his constituency. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Many people are being left with no choice but to suffer against their wishes towards the end of their lives. Office of Health Economics figures show that every year 6,400 terminally ill patients in hospices suffer horrendous deaths. Many of my constituents have told me they want to see a fair and free debate on assisted dying. In nearly three years, the issue has only been debated once. Will the Leader of the House make time in Government time for a debate on assisted dying?

Penny Mordaunt: These matters have always been a free vote. I know over the last few years the House has had several large debates on this issue, including in Westminster Hall. I know that many all-party parliamentary groups in the House are looking at the question from all sides. I encourage the hon. Lady to apply to the Backbench Business Committee if she has support from across the House to revisit this issue.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Today is Social Enterprise Day. Social enterprises play a vital role in creating local jobs and solving local social and economic problems. For example, Parracombe Community Trust in my constituency has raised nearly £145,000 in community shares to transform an old public toilet into a bustling community shop and café, helping to foster renewed civic pride. It is also developing affordable housing via a community land trust for local people. Might my right hon. Friend update the House, and maybe even find time for a debate, on how we plan to support social enterprises as they work to bring community assets back into the hands of local people?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for allowing me to congratulate Parracombe Community Trust on its terrific job creating that community facility. She will know that we recognise the importance of social enterprise. We have made finance available to support it through dormant asset funding, and there is also assistance from the £150 million community ownership fund. I encourage her to apply for a debate on the matter.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Can we have an urgent debate on houses in multiple occupation and their regulation? Unscrupulous companies are targeting communities, buying up home after home on the same street and converting those homes to tiny units not fit for vulnerable adults to live in. Local authorities then have very limited powers or influence over them, and too often we see a consequent rise in antisocial behaviour and other crimes. The legislation is truly a mess. Overnight, people who have felt safe on their streets and lived there in peace for many years suddenly feel unsafe in their own homes. This is a problem we can solve, and Parliament needs to debate it and act on it.

Penny Mordaunt: There are some opportunities next week for the hon. Lady to raise these matters; some elements of the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill would enable her to do so. She could also raise them in questions on 21 November. Councils around the country have dealt with the matter in very different ways, and there is a lot that local authorities can do. I will raise this with the Department on her behalf to see whether it can offer her any advice on how the situation can be resolved in her local area.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Can we have a debate on the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points? Nationally, around one third of households do not have access to off-street parking, but in my mainly rural constituency the number is even greater. We need innovative solutions to allow people to charge their electric vehicles. There is a big focus on rapid chargers, but we need to increase awareness of slower chargers and charging hubs. If we had a debate, we would be able to identify exactly who is responsible in communities for the roll-out of those EV charging points and what role councils can play in delivering accessible, reliable and affordable charging.

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know this is an extremely important part of the move towards more electric vehicles. We have pledged at least £500 million to support local charge point provision, and we will continue to support that roll-out. It might be a topic for an Adjournment debate, and I encourage him to apply for one.

Dave Doogan (Angus) (SNP): We heard a lot in today's autumn statement about the international headwinds of inflation and fuel prices, but we did not hear very much about the 12 years of Conservative mismanagement of the economy in the United Kingdom and the penury that it has heaped on people in Scotland. So many people across these islands are in work, but two thirds of our households living in poverty are working households. Food banks, which were unheard of before this Government came to power, are now a feature in every town, village and city. We did not hear anything about defence—we will hear about that soon—but this Government spent £6.6 billion on the nuclear enterprise alone, so can we have a debate on the role that will have in the future of these islands? Scotland does not want those nuclear weapons, the UK cannot afford them, and Scotland cannot afford the UK.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the opportunity to raise another issue that was not spoken about in the Chancellor's statement: the fact that the SNP has been forced to cut funding to public services by 8% in real terms after its financial mismanagement, which led to it facing a £3.5 billion overspend. With regard to the nuclear enterprise, I will not even attempt to persuade him of its merits. If he cannot see the merits of such an enterprise in the light of what we face at the moment with an aggressive Russia, I think he is a lost cause.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I set up and chair the Anglesey Freeport Bidding Consortium, which includes Stena Line, Anglesey County Council and other stakeholders. Ynys Môn is desperately in need of levelling up, with a gross value added among the lowest

of any constituency. Does the Leader of the House agree that a freeport on Anglesey will bring good-quality jobs and investment? Will she visit the newly launched website angleseyfreeport.co.uk to see for herself how important our freeport bid is for Anglesey? Will she agree to a debate in Government time on Welsh freeport proposals?

Penny Mordaunt: Not only has my hon. Friend asked a textbook question, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you will be pleased to know that she is observing protocol by not bringing props into the Chamber. She has got changed, because earlier today she was wearing a sweatshirt with "angleseyfreeport.co.uk" written across it and could be found walking around the Palace of Westminster campaigning at every opportunity to bring those opportunities to her local community and to help companies such as Rolls-Royce, Bechtel and many others. I congratulate her on her tenacity.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I have been working with a bereaved family in Croydon whose father, Andreas Kassianou, died tragically of legionnaires' disease in hospital in 2020. The NHS triggered an inquest that confirmed that he had died as a result of legionella contracted entirely because of the inadequate flushing of the water in his room by staff. Mr Kassianou's daughters, who are obviously mourning the loss of their father, now face unaffordable legal fees because they did not meet the requirements for legal aid. That seems deeply unfair considering that the trust accepted liability and the family never asked for an inquest in the first place. Will the Government give parliamentary time to discussing the urgent need for reform for bereaved families who face such extortionate legal fees for inquests that they did not initiate into events for which they were not at fault in any way?

Penny Mordaunt: That situation cannot be right, and I am very sorry to hear about the added pain that Mr Kassianou's family are going through. I think the best course of action would be for me to write, on the hon. Lady's behalf, to seek advice from the Department of Health. She will know how to apply for a debate in the usual way.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend understands the real importance of the steel industry not just to my Scunthorpe constituency but to our whole nation. Is she aware of the ongoing talks between British Steel and the Government? If it is needed, would she support a debate in Government time to discuss how we can best protect that vital strategic industry?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend very much understands the importance of this industry, and not just to jobs and the levelling-up agenda; it is a sovereign capability that we have to protect. The Conservative party has, famously, an Iron Lady; it has a Steel Lady too. I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done to help to provide support for that sector; £780 million has been given in support to the industry over the last few years, obviously including the £300 million rescue package. That was put in place prior to her coming to the House, but I know that she campaigned on it. Thanks to her tenacity, we have twice extended steel safeguards to protect the industry. We recognise that this is a strategically important sector. In contrast, under Labour the number of workers employed by the industry halved and production levels fell. I urge her to continue her campaigns.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): In my Blaydon constituency, we have great swimming clubs such as Gateshead synchronised swimming club and Gateshead and Whickham swimming club, which rely on our local leisure facilities to produce great talent. Our local Dunston leisure centre is at threat of closure due to the lack of funding, as are many others across the UK, so can we have a debate in Government time on the importance of keeping public leisure centres and swimming pools available across the UK?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very passionate about this agenda, and have gone to great lengths myself to keep swimming pools open, so I thank the hon. Lady for raising it. I am sure that such a debate would be welcomed by Members on both sides of the House. I encourage her to apply for either a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate in the usual way.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): On Monday, I visited Lauren and the team at Renfrewshire toy bank, which distributes gift packages, including toys, books and clothes, to families who cannot afford to buy their children a present for Christmas morning. They had 2,000 referrals last year but expect around 3,000 this year. Many of those referrals are for families with a parent in work. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Lauren and her team—they are all volunteers—for the work that they do, and make time for a debate on child poverty and why the Government are failing so many families?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate the toy bank that the hon. Gentleman visited. There are many such schemes around the whole of the UK, and they do a tremendous job in plugging those gaps. He will have just heard in the Chancellor's statement about the additional support that is being provided, the fact that we have protected benefits, the household support fund, and of course our commitment to the energy cap, which will help as well. If the hon. Gentleman gets colleagues' support, he can apply for a debate, and I encourage him to do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement, and well done to everybody who actually asked about parliamentary business.

Backbench Business

International Men's Day

3.22 pm

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

It is an honour to lead this year's debate on International Men's Day. I hope that this year's speech gets as much publicity as last year's did. Last year's speech led to much controversy, but I believe the message got over that boys need role models, and positive role models at that. I asked to hold the debate again because I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on issues affecting men and boys, and as such International Men's Day, which we mark on Saturday, is an important date in the diary. It is a time to highlight many issues that men and boys face, and to celebrate many of the wonderful charities out there that are doing such wonderful work—Andy's Man Club, Men's Sheds, Lads Need Dads and the Men and Boys Coalition, to name just a few.

I also want to speak about these issues because I want to help society as a whole. I am a father of both a boy and a girl—well, now young adults—and I want both to do equally well. However, the reason I joined the APPG on issues affecting men and boys is that I see too many issues, at a constituency and national level, that have a negative impact on men and boys, with no concerted action to tackle them. Of course, those issues have a negative impact on women and girls too, whether it be a brother's suicide, a partner dying from prostate cancer, a son who is failing at school, or violence that a man commits against a woman, sometimes in the most horrific ways. Men and women all share lives and society together. My reasoning is therefore this: if we help half the population to become better equipped at handling life and more comfortable being themselves, we in turn help the other half of the population. It is a win-win. With the help of debates such as this, and in my role as chair of the APPG, I hope to do just that.

Much of the work that our APPG has done recently has been on the issue of men's suicide. It is tragic that 13 men each day see this as the only solution to the problems they face. Our evidence sessions discovered that, although getting men to talk and open up is an amazing thing to do for them and helps so much, it is not enough. There are often underlying causes, and if those are discussed but not properly dealt with, men still often see suicide as a genuine way out, regardless of therapy.

Virginia Crosbie (Ynys Môn) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for holding this important debate. My brother sadly took his life recently, so I would like to give a big shout-out to all the community initiatives and charities that support men, particularly the Amlwch Men's Shed and the Amlwch walking football team, who do so much to support men's mental health and wellbeing right across Anglesey.

Nick Fletcher: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and I am ever so sorry to hear that news. I am hoping that, through debates like this, we can reduce that number to zero.

The issues that can cause this include chronic health issues, such as a bad back that stops a man working, money worries through not earning enough or poor financial management, or a sudden bereavement of someone close to them. One of the main issues I have seen in my constituency is the consequences arising from the breakdown of marriages and relationships. Each of those has its own reasons why it can often appear more difficult for men to deal with.

Take the bad back. Like whiplash claims and now mental health issues, men suffering with chronic pain can often be accused of "trying it on". Paid days off work and no obvious visible signs of injury often lead to the opinion that a man must be swinging the lead. I am sure that some have tried it on over the years, but that is what is so dangerous—the fraudsters. They make it so much worse for the genuine cases. Years of chronic pain with no one believing you is no fun. "The man of the house" is a saying that, unfortunately, does not help, when a man is not able to fulfil the role that he believes he should and that, far too often, society believes he should too.

We have two paths: a path of help from someone who listens and then helps, or another path of health problems, depression, anxiety, addiction and loneliness, and some will think about suicide. Talking is good, but practical support is needed too.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con): I am not sure whether my hon. Friend is aware of the TikTok video in which a woman asks, "What do you do as a man when you have a problem?" and then a collection of men say, "Nothing. No one cares. I have no one to speak to." Is that not the biggest problem when it comes to men's mental health—when they talk about it, they feel there is no one there to support them, and they feel forgotten about and ignored? That is the key to getting a policy in place to support men and their mental health.

Nick Fletcher: I could not agree more. This is why Andy's Man Club, Men's Sheds and organisations like that are helping enormously with this issue. The growth of Andy's Man Club over the past year has been phenomenal, so the need is there. I thank my hon. Friend for his comments.

It is the same for a man who has lost his job and feels he has no other job to go to; again, he feels he has no worth and no value. The more he feels like that, the less he values himself, and the less chance he has of getting a job or climbing the ladder to get a better job. He wants to be the breadwinner—another unhelpful word—and wants to have the best for his family; he does not want to say no to his kids. It ends up with an eviction notice, car finance too much, electric metre cutting out, or sometimes with someone in his ear telling him that he is a failed man. Again, we have two paths: a path of help from someone who listens and then helps, or another path of health problems, depression, anxiety, addiction and loneliness, and some will think of suicide. Talking is good, but practical support is needed too.

Marriage breakdown is always a bad time for both individuals. It has a real impact, but even more so when children are involved. When I spoke to a local divorce lawyer, he said that the best outcome that a man can expect from a divorce is 50% of the assets and to see his kids every other weekend. That can lead to other significant problems.

The man should rightly pay his dues, and should want to—he needs to provide for his kids—but he has to have somewhere to live too. He can end up in a situation where he is in a lonely bedsit with noisy neighbours, the heating off and an empty fridge; where there are continual breaches of child arrangements orders with no consequences except more ignored solicitor's letters and legal fees; where there is parental alienation, because their children's heads have been needlessly turned against them by the other parent; and where the weekend with the kids gets postponed for no good reason and the kids are not keen on seeing their dad because the bedsit is cold and he never has any money, so the next weekend is missed too, which means that a solicitor's letter must be sent, only to be ignored—more money spent on legal fees that he does not and should not have to pay.

My mailbox is regularly filled with letters from fathers—and some mothers, to be fair—complaining about the injustice of it all. They are heartbreaking to read and I am sure that other hon. Members receive the same. Again, we have two paths: one of help from someone who listens and then helps, and another of health problems, depression, anxiety, addiction, loneliness and, for some, thoughts of suicide. Talking is good, but practical support is needed too.

The APPG heard that some men believe that suicide is a practical solution to a problem—can we believe that? They cannot see their way through. They cannot cope. They feel that nobody will miss them and they have no value. They think that they got themselves there and that that is not what a man should be like. They have tried to get help, but either no one can help, no one cares, or no one will listen, so that path led nowhere. They think, "This is it. This is my path. Goodbye." No, that cannot be right. We must stop that. We really need a Minister for men who can co-ordinate action and champion issues affecting men and boys, whether that is lower exam results than girls, men sleeping rough, or understanding why 80,000 men are in our prisons. We also need a men's health strategy to help to deliver firm action and break down many of the health barriers that men face.

Dr Luke Evans: I was a GP before I came into the House, so I saw the way in which men present differently from women, and the different ways in which people choose to interact. They are gross generalisations, but in medicine, a generalisation is a useful way to understand patterns, and pattern recognition is important. It is about understanding that the status that a man brings, and the need for status, is important. It is also about vulnerability and building up trust to allow them to speak about the issues that may come in. Equally, men can be transactional. We need a men's health strategy to understand those differences and to balance against the women's health strategy. Does my hon. Friend agree that now is the right time for that?

Nick Fletcher: My hon. Friend is helping enormously with the debate. I have spoken to him before about a men's health strategy and yes, now is the time. There is an old phrase that says, "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The next best time is now." That is exactly where we are with the men's health strategy, and a Minister for men.

We need someone to be accountable across Government, which also means putting pressure and targets on health bodies and the education system. Ensuring that the Government Equalities Office gives equal reference to men as a group that it supports would be a welcome start. Equality means equal and fair treatment. When members of the public, including in so-called red wall seats such as mine, are asked whether it is fair and equal to have a Minister for Women and not a Minister for men, of course they say no. They believe, as I do, that we should have both. Why would anyone who truly believes in equality think differently? Let us stop talking and start doing.

Why do many men get through life and many do not? Is it luck of the draw or is it a solid family upbringing? I do not believe in luck, but I do believe in family and I do believe in good role models—good dads, good mums and good role models—such as the dads and men who put their kids first, not the ones who just say it; those who put their kids before themselves every time; those who help with homework before the football; those who put school shoes and a full fridge before a big TV; those who tuck them into bed, not those going down the pub; those who show them how to treat women properly and how to love their mum; the dads that are good role models, and the mums and wives who let their partner be that good role model, too. That is not luck, just good role models who show boys how to become men, how to cope and how to deal with life's knocks.

We know families do break up, and we know it can be just as much the man's fault as the woman's, but we must remember that, whatever caused the break-up, the kids must come first. Why? Because they need a male role model just as much as a good mum. Equally, however, dads need their kids. They need that value in their life and that part of their life where they are genuinely worth something—not just money or material things, but just the value of being a dad—and when I talk about good dads, I mean good step-dads, too.

By letting this happen, we let the child become a good man, and one who does all the things we want good men to do. So if we see a man struggling in his life, we need to talk to him, find out what has gone wrong and what the real problem is. We need to find out what the solution is, write a plan with him, put our arms around his shoulders and help put the value back in him. He might not have had a good role model himself. He might not know what he is doing wrong and he might not know how to put it right. However, if we help him, we can give him another path, and maybe—just maybe—he will turn into a great role model himself.

I am not sure this speech will get as much publicity as the earlier one today, but I hope it does. I hope that we can all help a man in our life, who in turn will treat the women in our lives well, and show the next generation what a good life can look like and what a good man can look like. Some men do wrong, some men struggle and, sadly, some men take their own life. We should rehabilitate the ones who do wrong, help the ones who struggle, listen and practically support the ones who are desperate, and celebrate the majority of men who are good. Let it not be a competition between men and women; let it be a family and a population working together for good.

I ask, at the end of my speech, that we put in place a Minister for men; someone who can champion their cause, take an overarching look at Government policy and be made accountable for reducing the many sad statistics that will no doubt be repeated throughout this debate. We need a Minister to champion the places

[Nick Fletcher]

where men talk, but also look at the solutions that can and should be put in place to practically help men and boys with their issues. As we said in our latest report, there is no point in listening if no one is acting or doing. We need a Minister who can make sure that boys have the male role models they need away from home so that they grow up to be good men. We need to have local government and community groups in place for those men who have missed out on a good man in their life so far. It is often said that prevention is better than cure, and I applaud that sentiment, but some men have already been let down, so we need both—role models for our boys and help for our men. Let us celebrate International Men's Day 2022 with a Minister for men.

3.37 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing this year's debate and on chairing the APPG so well, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate in the Chamber this year.

International Men's Day is an opportunity to celebrate boys and men, and their contributions to society and their communities. It is also an opportunity to look at the issues facing them in the modern world, raise awareness and, I hope, spark meaningful change. It would be remiss of me not to mention the team behind Movember, who for so many years now have worked hard in successive Novembers to raise awareness of prostate cancer, which is a really important issue to shine a light on for men across the UK. I also want to thank the Samaritans for sharing its briefing with colleagues ahead of today's debate, so that we can address one of the most crucial issues impacting men today and the reasons behind suicide. I want to pass on my sympathy to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) on the loss of her brother.

Some of the darkest statistics we will hear today are around suicide. Men account for three quarters of all suicides, and it is the leading cause of death in men under 50 here in the UK. Each life lost to suicide is devastating. It leaves a hole in the lives of families, friends and communities that can never be filled. Most tragically, almost all suicides could be preventable if the person had access to the right support, and if societal and socio-economic factors could be addressed.

Today's social media age has brought with it new challenges, building on a pressure—the pressure to look good—that has existed for women for centuries. This was not a new phenomenon that came with the birth of Facebook or Instagram, and men will also have been influenced by glossy photos of celebrities and models on magazine stands and in films. That constant pressure has consequences for those of us who do not wake up every day looking like an airbrushed model from a catalogue. The discourse around this issue often focuses on the impact felt by women, and although there are reasons for that—the pressure is ingrained in girls from a much younger age, and much more overtly—the impact that that pressure is having on boys and men is often overlooked. The way such pressure manifests in girls and women might look different, and is perhaps more easily recognised, while men struggling with body image or eating disorders might focus their energy on exercise or the gym. To the naked eye that might seem healthy, because they are bulking up and building muscle.

Dr Luke Evans: I am hugely grateful to the hon. Lady because she brings up such an important point about body image, and especially the male physique. Between 0.5 million to 1 million people are using anabolic steroids to try to get that perfect image, and that is ongoing in the UK without us being aware. Does she think there should be more focus from the Government on those kinds of issues that specifically affect men?

Margaret Ferrier: The hon. Gentleman is an expert in this area, and I absolutely agree with him. It would be good if the Government could look at that issue—hence me raising it in this debate. Societal beauty standards are different for men, and while thinness might be an aspirational expectation set through the media for women, for men it generally is not. For men there is an image of fitness and muscular build, which means that often those signs in men are not recognised.

Eating disorders are indiscriminate when it comes to gender. There are many, and while anorexia is of course devastating, there is also bulimia and compulsive eating. Those disorders can ravage the body, but they also have an extreme detrimental effect on the mind. Although research on eating disorders in men is inconsistent, having only really begun in recent years, there are some figures that might illustrate how much more prevalent such disorders are than many of us realise. A 2021 study by Beat estimated that approximately 1.25 million people in the UK have an eating disorder. The same survey estimated that about 25% of those people are male. That is tens of thousands of men and boys suffering with these conditions, and struggling to access the right support. Some of those males may not even realise that they have an eating disorder.

Two big issues are at play, and both come down to eating disorders being viewed as a "female" problem. First is the social stigma and difficulty that men experience in recognising that they have an eating disorder and in seeking help. Anorexia, for example, is often seen as a problem caused by vanity, which is not only untrue but a simplistic and narrow view of an unbelievably complex disease. The social stigma attached to male mental health is huge, and the less such issues are spoken about, the more isolating and shameful it can feel. Secondly, as a result, men and boys will hide their feelings, and they will not proactively seek help. With the NHS as stretched as it is, and because eating disorders are more commonly recognised in women, health professionals are less likely to spot the signs in men.

I referred to the body ideal for men as being seen as muscular, and I want to touch on muscle dysmorphia, a form of body dysmorphic disorder, which has a higher incidence in men. Sometimes referred to as "reverse anorexia", muscle dysmorphia is defined by being preoccupied by worries that one's body is too small or not muscular enough, despite having a normal build, or in many cases an objectively extremely "buff" physique. It is basically a completely distorted view of their body. Although muscle dysmorphia has some overlap with eating disorders, it is not one, but the fixation on that body type, and the steps men take when pursuing it, can lead to unhealthy eating habits, strict dieting, and develop

into an eating disorder. Media and pop culture, magazines, TV and computer games all perpetuate that imagery and stereotype, which is unnecessary and only feeds into a hyper-masculine cultural ideal that is harmful to men and boys in somany ways.

The occurrence of eating disorders in men and boys is closely linked to a number of other mental health conditions. Risk factors include depression, anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and mood disorders. One study showed that men with eating disorders are twice as likely to have comorbid substance abuse issues, misusing drugs such as cocaine or stimulants for their appetite-suppressing side effects. That is a monumental issue for the men experiencing those problems. It needs better recognition.

Danny Kruger (Devizes) (Con): I am pleased to hear the hon. Member highlighting the terrible crisis and tragedy of male eating disorders. Does she share my concern not only that insufficient attention is given to men and boys who suffer from eating disorders but that we are not generally good as a society at supporting those people who have been through the acute phase of an eating disorder—they may have got their weight back—to recover? We are better at that post-acute rehabilitation phase with girls and young women, but we are terrible at that with boys and men.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Yes, that rehabilitation stage does need to be better and include men and boys, not just women. As I said, this is a monumental issue for the men experiencing these problems. It needs better recognition, and they need better help.

I mentioned obsessive compulsive disorder, which, as with most mental health issues, affected men do not find easy to talk about. Representations of it in the media have often presented it as quirky or comical. It is also trivialised: how many times have we heard someone say light-heartedly, "I'm really OCD about that" when talking about keeping their desk neat or their kitchen clean? However, OCD is a serious mental health concern. Like many others, it has a spectrum of severity, with some people experiencing milder symptoms whereas, for others, the constant intrusive thoughts can really limit quality of life. It is not just rituals like those we see on TV of switching on a light exactly ten times. All these traits are common. It is also about feeling completely unable to control the brain's darkest thoughts and worst fears until they are all-consuming and nothing can be done to stop it.

OCD often has a distinct thought pattern, with obsession, anxiety, compulsive behaviours and temporary relief. It is a cycle that repeats and is commonly comorbid with anxiety, depression and eating disorders. Most people with OCD say that their compulsions are irrational or illogical, but still they feel an overwhelming need to act on them just in case. Because of its perception in the media and more widely, it is another condition that men struggle to admit experiencing. Many see it as shameful or a weakness.

People with OCD and depression will often experience suicidal ideation. I therefore want to reflect on the links to eating disorders, suicide and male mental health in general. There are organisations who can help support those who think they may have an eating disorder. I encourage anyone who thinks that they might—or if they know someone who might—to take a look at Beat's website, where there is lots of good information. Its national helpline is open 365 days a year to offer swift help and advice.

It is so hard for many men to break down the barriers to accessing the right mental health support. As a society, we need to do better at looking at the men in our lives and letting them know that it is okay to need some help. In fact, it is normal.

3.48 pm

Dean Russell (Watford) (Con): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for his work in securing the debate. I must say that I am a little disappointed. I would have hoped that, on a debate about half the nation, the Benches would have been it bit more full. Perhaps that is a sign of what the challenge is, because when we talk about men's issues, we often do not talk about men's issues. I am afraid that in a debate where we should be celebrating all the immense impacts of men across society, my speech, like others', will focus on mental health and suicide and how we should be talking more and encouraging men to talk more about the challenges they face. Men contribute so much to society. I wish I was here with full Benches talking about the immense impact that men have for good in our society, just as we would if this were International Women's Day and we were rightly celebrating the impact of women on us all.

I want to start with a point I have mentioned many times in this place, which is about mental health and the need for greater support. I had a 10-minute rule Bill, which I will try to bring back at some point, which aimed to ensure that mental health first aid awareness is part of physical first aid in the workplace. One challenge is that people, men in particular, do not know how to talk about issues they might be facing. They do not have to wait until the worst time, when it is affecting them in a way that is visible; they should be able to talk at an earlier stage about the challenges they might be facing.

One part of the challenge we have in society is the idea that men are supposed to be all strong. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned the idea of the physical nature that men had to have—the Arnold Schwarzeneggers and the Sylvester Stallones that I grew up with in the 1980s. Ultimately, men had to be strong and not show weakness. As a man it was weak to show weakness. Actually, I say the opposite: that to show a weakness, to talk about a weakness and to ask for help is the greatest strength to have. The challenge for many is that they are not asking and are not looking for support, because they do not always know where to go for it. They do not know who they can trust, who will not mock them or ask them questions about things they do not feel comfortable talking about.

That has been exacerbated—this was mentioned earlier—by social media. Andy Warhol said that in the future everyone would have 15 minutes of fame. I say, sadly, it is now 15 minutes of shame. When you raise a concern, you get mocked for it. If you are not popular, then that is somehow a reason why people can attack you. They can say horrid things to you and move on to the next person. We see it in politics. I call it sniper politics: the idea that you take out one individual,

[Dean Russell]

whether a politician, a celebrity or someone in the community, with a hate pile-on. People are vile to a person in the moment and then move on to the next victim and the next victim. Is it any wonder, then, that men and women—in the context of this debate, men in particular—feel awkward raising concerns and talking to their friends in a way that might be shared or laughed at?

It does not have to be that way. There are a lot of opportunities for men to take control of their lives by asking others to help them. One is by forming stronger networks and by having a society where we help each other and listen to each other. That is why debates like this are so important and why I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley, especially after the pile-on he experienced last year for making comments in this place. From being attacked in such a way, he has come back today, in a place that could have been quite vulnerable and open to attack, to say, "No, I do believe in this. This is a strong place to be in." That is a strength.

Sometimes it is hard to go against the grain. Sometimes it is hard to talk about issues that others do not always agree with. That is why this place is so important. That is why I would have loved the Benches to be full of people talking about the challenges they face. We are, ultimately, whether people like us or not, role models. Within society, we have to look at how role models play a part, whether they are teachers in schools, sports people, doctors, or a nurse down the road working at a care home. All those people, across society, are people that young kids, boys and girls, can look up to and see a career option. That can break down barriers. When people think of nurses, they should think of men and women. When they think of care home workers, they should think of men and women. They should not just think of a particular type of role for a particular type of person.

We can also think about places such as gyms. In my Watford constituency, I visited NRG gym recently and I have visited one called CageFit. I heard amazing stories of people who do mixed martial arts fighting. Thankfully, I did not get in the ring—I do not think I would have fared too well—but people talked about the impact of going to such gyms. One of the gentlemen I was chatting to said that once people learn that they can fight in the ring for money, they do not want to fight on the streets for free. That was really about antisocial behaviour and kids in certain areas or in difficult circumstances perhaps being encouraged to join gangs. By joining a gym, they can be around other positive role models and learn that they have value in other ways, through their physique or mental capacity.

Dr Luke Evans: My hon. Friend has hit on something: we should not be shy of masculinity. It is about how to use that in a positive way, whether we are talking about sport, going to the gym or being a father figure. That is really important and if we try to close that down, it closes status, and that results in bad mental health. Does he support that philosophy after what he saw in his gym?

Dean Russell: Absolutely, and I thank my hon. Friend for the work that he does, especially on physical attributes and ensuring that people do not feel that they should be attacked online because of their body image. I agree—this is not only about surrounding oneself with role models, but about someone feeling as though they can be the best version of themselves. We often see that challenge. We are potentially creating a society, partly through online media, that shapes people to be something that they are not. They can use digital tools to change the way that they look online, but they then compare themselves in the mirror to that unrealistic ideal.

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He is talking about the negative impact of social media and pile-ons online, and so on. Does he agree that the more time that boys, in particular, spend online, the less time they spend offline in the physical presence of other young men and boys, doing things like climbing trees, taking appropriate risks, and doing things that will improve their mental and physical health much more than they will sitting in their bedroom alone on the internet?

Dean Russell: My hon. Friend makes an important point; she understands this area very well and has done incredible work in this space. I agree 100%—there is, of course, a place for digital, social media and the internet, but if that becomes the world in which someone exists, that has to be a bad thing. Girls climb trees, too, and boys can climb trees with girls, but this is about going out into the real world and spending real time with real people, learning social cues and understanding the challenges that one faces. People can learn about rejection in the real world and in the virtual world, but they learn how to deal with it with friends and by talking about that.

To come back to a point that I made in my maiden speech, I often use an acronym HOPE, which stands for Help One Person Everyday. Sometimes that one person has to be ourselves. We sometimes have to be able to say, "Look, I need to go to speak to somebody about how I'm feeling. I need to go to the pub on a Friday night and have a laugh with my friends. I need to chat about stuff that has been challenging me or issues that I have and not feel like I have to keep all that inside."

I will start to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am conscious that there will not be many more speeches, but I will not speak for the full hour that we have left, although you know that I probably could. I want to mention a couple of important points about suicide, which has been discussed. Men are invariably more likely to take their lives than women. That is a saddening statistic and it is the same around the world. In the UK, we have to try to stop this. It is not just about speaking to people, but about making sure that the network exists. Also, for those who have gone through that process and have, sadly, got to the point of perhaps trying to take their lives, it is about making sure that they have long-term support. I ask the Minister to make sure that we have the mental health support for young people and everyone alike, so that people have long-term support to get through the challenging times. I visited the Samaritans in Watford recently, and found that they do incredible work in ensuring that they are at the end of the telephone line for somebody—and, of course, there is anonymity to ensure that they are supported.

I am particularly proud of the fact that this is one of Hertfordshire County Council's top priorities. It wants to create a county that is suicide-free, and I want to create a country that is suicide-free, but we can only do that by talking about it. We can only do it if each one of

us, in each of our constituencies, says that we need to make this a top priority. We need to save lives, we need to change lives, and we need to make sure that the next generation knows this is important.

Let me end by repeating a statement that I made last time I spoke on International Men's Day. I want to remind everyone who is watching the debate that they should ask others if they are OK—not just once, not just twice, but every time they see them. They should also ask themselves, "Am I really OK?" By doing that, we can ensure that we have a society that cares and people can be signposted to the help that they need, but also ensure that we really do deliver a compassionate country that saves lives, changes lives, and gives people the ability to be the best that they can be.

4.1 pm

Miriam Cates (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who made an excellent speech. Let me also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing the debate, and on his phenomenal work—to which other Members have referred—in supporting men and boys. Let me say to him, as one Yorkshire MP to another, that I admire his ability to say it as it is, even if he sometimes gets some stick.

I must declare an interest in this debate. I have a husband, a dad, brothers, nephews and two sons. I was even fortunate enough to reach the age of 40 with both my grandfathers still alive. Sadly one of them passed away recently, at the age of 92, after a long and fulfilling life which included growing churches on the islands of the Torres Strait off North Queensland. The other recently reached the age of 90. He too enjoyed a fulfilling life and an amazing career, and could beat me at table tennis until the age of 80. I am extremely fortunate to have a family full of amazing male role models, including fathers such as my own husband, who at this moment is probably juggling teatime, homework and piano practice. I am very grateful to him for that.

It is a real privilege to speak in this International Men's Day debate to honour all the great things that men contribute to our families, our communities and our nation, and also to discuss some of the unique challenges that are faced by men and boys in this country. Men and women are different—biologically, psychologically and socially. We have evolved to perform very different functions, in society and in families. Men and women are equal, but not the same. I think that one of the mistakes in recent years has been to push for equality between the sexes—which is right—without recognising important differences, and without celebrating male virtues and male roles. We frequently talk—rightly—about how to get more women into engineering or technology, but pay insufficient attention to the decline in the number of young men gaining technical skills, and the fact that boys are falling behind girls in education. When the traditional virtues of masculinity and male identity are portrayed as redundant or negative or not uniquely male, what is left for young men to aspire to? This is certainly a confusing time to be a young man.

Dr Evans: I entirely agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. Toxic masculinity is potentially very dangerous. We set our young boys up to think that there is something innately wrong with them in relation to the way in which they interact with society. Does my hon. Friend feel that that is a problem?

Miriam Cates: Absolutely. I think that the danger of not giving a positive version of masculinity—something that is unique, positive and good for society—is that, sadly, we are driving some young men and boys to the far right. They are given a version of masculinity that none of us here would support, but which offers them something that, at present, some of the discussions that take place in society do not offer. That is why it is so important that we do offer something to young boys.

I think that some of the economic and social changes that have taken place over the last 40 years have had benefits but have also led to significant costs, particularly for working-class men and boys. The decline of industry and hence of skilled, well-paid, secure jobs has caused a drop in wealth, health and status for many men.

The steelworks in the town of Stocksbridge in my constituency used to employ 11,000 men; it now employs 750. Steel jobs still pay 50% more than the average Yorkshire wage. They require skills and they confer status, but they are now few and far between. The economic and social consequences for men of the loss of such jobs have been severe. We need to consider how we can reinvest in British industry, not to go back to the past but to pivot to the skilled, advanced manufacturing jobs of the future, such as those at the specialty steel plant in my constituency. Not only would a revival in manufacturing and industry be good news for men; it would be beneficial for the UK economy, which has a terrible balance of trade—we make nowhere near enough stuff ourselves—and for our security and self-sufficiency in important materials such as steel.

While industrial and manufacturing jobs have declined, the number of young people going to university has soared. Of course, that has brought benefits, but there is no clear relationship between the number of graduates and the nation's GDP, and we now have far more graduates than our economy requires. About 50% of recent graduates are thought to be in jobs that do not require that level of academic education. This focus—I might call it an obsession—on cognitive credentials and degrees over technical or vocational skills has been particularly disadvantageous to working-class young men.

Recent research shows that the median earnings of men who graduated from the bottom 23 universities are less than the median earnings of non-graduates. In other words, a significant number of younger men would be better off not going to university—and that is not to mention the debt they will acquire while there. I am delighted that the Government are pushing a skills agenda, but we must do more to open up apprenticeships to young men. The Chancellor's announcement today that we will move towards a German and Swiss model of skills education is great news, but we should also consider whether some of our enormous higher education budget—I think it is about £14 billion a year—could be better deployed for the benefit of young people and the economy.

Men and boys have also suffered as a result of the decline in family stability over the last few decades. As my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley said, the most stable form of family—and the one with the best outcomes for children—is where the parents are married.

[Miriam Cates]

That is not a value judgment; it is clear from the evidence. Married parents are twice as likely to stay together as non-married parents. By the age of five, 53% of children with cohabiting parents will have experienced their parents' separation, compared to just 15% of those with married parents. Married men live happier, longer, healthier lives, and boys with committed, present fathers have better outcomes than boys in families who do not have that presence.

Marriage is good for men and boys, yet marriage rates have declined significantly over recent years, particularly among lower income groups. Marriage has almost become a middle-class secret. Of the highest earning 20% of white couples, about 85% are married. In the lowest income group—the bottom 20% of white people—only 19% are married, and the divorce rates are much higher. A poor white child is very unlikely to have a father; a rich white child is very likely to have a father. That is how stark the difference is.

There has been a rise in loneliness among middle-aged men as a result of family breakdown. Family breakdown is also contributing to the housing crisis. I think it might have been the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) who pointed out that a second home is needed when families break down. That adds to the housing crisis and creates financial problems for the family.

The UK is an outlier among western nations, in that our policies and our tax system do not recognise families, nor strong couple relationships and marriage. For example, in the UK we are taxed on an individual basis. HMRC sees only our individual income and we pay tax on that, without any account of how many people that income supports. If someone earns slightly more than £50,000 per year, which is considered a high wage—thinking about the tax thresholds—but they support, say, a family of six, they are taxed the same as a single person who earns the same amount but supports no one at all. As people enter the higher tax rate, they also lose their child benefit and there are all kinds of knock-on effects of the tax system. Other countries such as France, Germany, Canada and the US have different systems, in which the household is taxed or in which family policy recognises the benefits of parenting and supports families. We need to reform our taxation system to be much more pro-family and to make it easier for couples to stay together. I am delighted about the Government's family hubs programme; we need to determine how family hubs will support fathers to be involved in the early years of bringing up their children.

Finally, there is an issue affecting the health and wellbeing of men, particularly boys, in a truly alarming way. We have a growing public health crisis as a result of the proliferation of online pornography. In 2020, pornography websites received more traffic than Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Zoom, Pinterest and LinkedIn combined. For too long, society has viewed porn as a private matter, assuming that what people do in the privacy of their own home is their own business, but it is clear that the impacts on society have been significant and negative.

We must wake up to the destructive impacts of internet pornography. There is nothing "mainstream" about the porn now available online. Mainstream pornography platforms host vast quantities—unknown quantities—of filmed crimes: videos of trafficking, rape, non-consensual sexual violence, child sexual abuse material, sexual coercion, abuse and exploitation of vulnerable women and children, intrafamilial rape, humiliation, punishment, torture and pain, all available at the click of a mouse or the touch of an iPhone.

Analysis of 130,000 titles of videos that were recommended to first-time users of Pornhub and other major sites found that one in every eight described sexual activities that constitute sexual violence. "Teen" was the word that occurred most frequently across the dataset; the second most common category was physical aggression and sexual assault. Viewing such videos affects what men, particularly boys, think about sex—what they think is normal and what they think is acceptable.

It is right to think about the impact of pornography on women and girls. It is notable that so many high-profile rapes and murders in recent years, including the tragic murder of Sarah Everard, have been committed by men who were addicted to hardcore pornography. However, children's consumption of online pornography has been associated with the dramatic increase in child-on-child sexual abuse, which now constitutes around a third of all child sexual abuse, so we also need to think about the negative impact on boys.

Approximately 50% of 12-year-olds have seen pornography online, and 1.4 million children in the UK access it each month. A UK survey found that 44% of boys aged between 11 and 16 who regularly viewed pornography reported that it gave them ideas about the type of sex that they wanted to try. We have seen the normalisation of strangulation during sex, and of anal sex among young people. A year or so ago, a case was reported of a boy who raped a girl in school; when the teacher asked him why he had not stopped, he said, "I thought it was normal for girls to cry during sex." How are these boys ever going to enjoy normal, loving, fulfilling intimate relationships?

During puberty, boys' brains develop an erotic imprint in which what they see as normal and appropriate sexual behaviour is laid down. That imprint will stay with them for the rest of their life. How many of these boys will be drawn into serious sex offences? How many will endure broken relationships or broken families, or never form relationships at all?

Pornography also affects boys' health. There has been an increase in erectile dysfunction among teenage boys. At the extreme, the constant use of pornography can quickly lead men not to become aroused by anything other than hardcore online porn. That is why it is so important that we pass the Online Safety Bill when it returns to this House, and that it goes through the House of Lords and becomes an Act of Parliament. We must introduce secure age verification so that no children can access pornographic websites. We must stop children accidentally viewing or deliberately sharing pornographic images with one another online. While children's brains are developing, it is so crucial that they do not have access to extreme material.

At the moment, internet pornography is completely unregulated. I am afraid that people who say it is parents' responsibility to make sure their children do not view it are not living in the real world. Even if a child has no phone and no computer, all it takes is a classmate to put their own phone in front of the child

for them to see this stuff. A child is only as safe as the least protected child in their class. It would be a bit like telling parents to teach their children to cross the road safely if there were no speed limit, no crossing points and no side of the road that we legally had to drive on—it would be completely impossible.

As well as being completely unregulated, internet pornography is a public health disaster. On top of the Online Safety Bill, we need the Department of Health and Social Care to lead a public inquiry into the harms of pornography—not only the harms to women and girls, the harms to the economy and the criminal aspects but the harms to boys and men and to their happiness, fulfilment and physical and mental health. The future social impact of this porn epidemic will be catastrophic if we do not protect our boys and girls. I believe that online pornography is the opiate trade of our age, and we should be outraged by what our children are seeing.

Our families, our communities and our nation need strong, confident, healthy and skilled boys and men. It is therefore in all our interests to invest in skills and industry, to support marriage and families, and to end the destruction caused by online pornography.

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

4.15 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) for opening this debate, all hon. and right hon. Members for their valuable contributions and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for this debate on International Men's Day, when we recognise not only the contribution of men to society but, more importantly, the long-lasting systemic issues faced by many of us.

As an MP sent here from Scotland, and as a representative of the Scottish National party, I stress the importance to me and my party that we persistently address inequality wherever and whenever we find it. As a nation and as a society, we will never truly flourish if we do not allow all our people the opportunities they deserve and the chance to fulfil their potential, whatever their social or economic background. For far too many men across these islands, that chance and those opportunities are not always possible. Indeed, they are becoming increasingly unattainable for many of us.

Far too often, we hear of the consequences of negative mental health for men but little of its factors and root causes. According to studies conducted by the Mental Health Foundation, societal expectations and traditional gender roles and stereotypes contribute to why men are far less likely to open up and discuss or seek support for their mental health problems.

We know that the gender stereotypes faced by women, such as the idea that they should behave, look or dress a certain way, can be hugely damaging not only to them as individuals but to society as a whole, and it is also important to understand that stereotypes and expectations can have a detrimental impact on many men. We find it difficult to talk about our feelings, to open up and to admit we are not coping well with the demands of life—that is to say, the demands that are real and present, but also those we perceive to be upon us.

Men are also more likely to turn to harmful coping methods, such as growing a dependency on drugs, alcohol or other harmful escapes. These actions, of course, serve only to exacerbate and compound poor mental health, leading to a downward spiral that far too often ends in the tragic act of a young man taking his own life. I take this opportunity to call, once again, on the UK Government to devolve drug policy to the Scottish Parliament, which will allow the Scottish Government to properly tackle the root causes of many of the tragic losses of life we see in Scotland week in, week out.

According to the latest figures from Public Health Scotland, 75% of those who died by suicide in 2021 were male, with the highest rate occurring in the 45 to 54-year-old age group. The probable suicide rate was three times higher in the most deprived communities in Scotland than in our most affluent areas. The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) spoke about the impact of that. We know that work pressures, low pay, relationship breakdowns and parental alienation—being separated from our children after a relationship breakdown—are key factors that drive men to think suicide is an option.

The Scottish Government are determined to see a Scotland in which suicide is prevented and where help and support are available to anyone contemplating suicide, with further resources made available to anyone struggling with self-harm or thoughts of suicide. The Scottish Government's new "Creating Hope Together" strategy takes a whole Government and society approach to tackling the social determinants of suicide, so that we take every opportunity to identify and support people who are feeling suicidal.

These kinds of actions and that type of compassion are, regrettably, not always present in this place, and we see that in the treatment of the most vulnerable people in our society. Young men in the UK asylum system are disproportionately impacted by Britain's frankly inhumane system as it currently operates. The vilification from some in the Government and in the mainstream media only serves to add to that. When the Home Secretary uses terminology such as "invasion" to refer to young men asylum seekers, is she doing so with compassion? No, she is not, far from it.

We know the asylum system is broken, but after 12 years of Tory Government rule the onus of responsibility is on those on the Government Benches. They have created the mess and the backlog. It is they who have failed to repair a broken asylum system, and they must recognise the consequences of that for the mental health of men.

Last year, 46 charities dealing with issues of asylum, children and mental health, including the Refugee Council, the Children's Society and Mind, wrote to the Health Minister in charge of suicide prevention and highlighted the dozens of suicides they had discovered among teenage male asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their home countries. Zoe Gardner, former policy advocacy manager at the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, gave these poignant words in response to the UK Government's current asylum policy:

> "You can be a man and a refugee. You can be a man and a victim of trauma, torture and sexual violence. You can be a man with disabilities. You can be a man who has lived closeted or been abused because of their sexuality. The narrative that men somehow are not vulnerable and are not in need of protection is completely false. Men are very often the ones targeted in the first place in refugee producing countries."

[Steven Bonnar]

If the UK Government will not heed the advice on mental health provisions and echo the progressive vision of the Scottish Government to attempt to mitigate the high rate of suicides and poor mental health regulations, then we again call for the devolution of immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament, which is a Parliament that has proven time and again that no matter where people have come from, or their financial background, their wellbeing will always be our priority.

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

4.21 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak on behalf of the Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) on securing the debate and bringing it to the House, as well as the Backbench Business Committee.

I am pleased to take my place here as the shadow Women and Equalities Minister and close the debate for the Labour party. I am incredibly proud to be in this role because it focuses on addressing inequalities in society, wherever we find them. However, the reality is that we will never, as a country or a society, be able to truly flourish if we do not ensure that everyone can fairly access opportunities and fulfil their potential, whatever their background may be.

I want to thank several hon. Members who have spoken in today's debate, starting with the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier). She talked about the overuse of steroids by men complying with societal ideas about what a physically appealing male should look like, and the whole issue of eating disorders.

The hon. Member for Watford (Dean Russell) talked about mental health issues and the use of social media and the internet, which can aggravate such issues. I liked his acronym HOPE, and he talked about the Samaritans. I am originally from Watford and many years ago I was a member of the Samaritans, although I am no longer. I remember times when the same person would ring three or four times with the same problem, and it was clear that they needed someone to listen to them and talk to them—not to give them advice or to guide them but just to listen. It is important to recognise how much loneliness there is in our society, especially for men.

The hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) talked about the men in her life. I had a great father and a brother, both of whom have passed away. It is not fashionable to say this, but I have a great husband as well. The issue of toxic masculinity is pertinent, and she said that it had attracted people to far right politics. She also talked about the issue of pornography, which gives a warped view about issues of sexuality.

Before I continue with the main points of my speech, I wish to thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) for sharing the sad news of her brother's suicide. I am sure the whole House sends its condolences to her and her family and thanks her for speaking out so bravely today.

Today's debate is about mental health in particular, and rightly so. Figures reveal that suicide is the biggest cause of death in men under the age of 50. Around three quarters of deaths from suicide each year are of men. Added to that, data from the Office for National Statistics show that the highest rates of suicide in men have been in mixed and white ethnic groups. Men aged 45 to 49 are at most risk of suicide, and the rate among this group has been persistently high for many years.

Historically, we know that there is often an alpha male archetype, which means many men feel forced to stoically toughen up and get through the bad times, while avoiding opening up, speaking to people or seeking help. We need to do more to address these very outdated stereotypes of masculinity. Equally, we need to do more to support men who are struggling or in crisis.

Dr Luke Evans: Does that mean that Labour supports the idea of having a male health strategy, or a male Minister?

Yasmin Qureshi: I can take that back to our team for discussion.

Currently, 1.6 million people are on an NHS waiting list for specialised mental health treatment. That is about one in 35 people, or roughly the populations of Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield combined. While an additional 8 million would benefit from support, they cannot even get onto a waiting list. The need for greater Government investment in mental health provision could not be more urgent.

My party would take strong action to ensure access to mental health treatment within a month for everyone who needs it. That is, of course, a distant dream for so many men and women across our country. We would hire 8,500 new staff, so that 1 million new people could access treatment by the end of our first term in office. This would be part of our plan for the biggest expansion of the NHS in history, funded by scrapping the non-dom tax status.

Men's physical health is of concern, too, because of the disparities in men's physical health issues. Men have a shorter life expectancy: one in five die before the age of 65. This becomes even more concerning when we compare the life expectancy of men in the most and least deprived areas of the country, because there is a stark gap of 9.5 years. Men are also disproportionately affected by heart disease, and more men than women are overweight or obese, yet despite all this, men are still less inclined to seek help or advice from medical professionals. This lack of engagement can mean that men are often under-supported. Without regular health check-ups, serious issues can go untreated for longer—sometimes when it is too late. This is really concerning; we know just how important early intervention can be in the treatment of male-specific cancers and in overall cancer incidence, which is 24% higher for men than it is for women.

This reminds us how important it is that we have a proper public health strategy for everyone—one that will turn the tide on the rising health inequalities and improve health for men. We need a strategy that is focused on early intervention and ensures that people receive the care and support they need. Instead, we have a Government who have chosen to cut public health budgets substantially across the country. A Labour Government would invest in the biggest-ever expansion of the NHS, as I mentioned earlier. Growing the NHS will also grow our economy and go a long way to rooting out inequalities once and for all.

Of course, one cannot discuss men's health without looking at boys' performance in education, which we have touched on in this debate. In basic terms, boys perform worse than girls by the end of primary school, with 70% of girls reaching the expected standards in maths, reading and writing compared with just over 60% of boys. Boys are three times more likely than girls to be excluded from school, something that I know causes tremendous concern to many working families up and down the country.

That gap persists at GCSEs and A-levels. Young women are more likely to apply to university than young men. Those young men who apply are more likely to drop out and those who complete their courses are less likely to get a good degree. The disparity becomes even more acute among those from disadvantaged backgrounds: young women who were on free school meals are 51% more likely to go into higher education than young men. Disadvantaged white boys are the least likely of all groups to go to university, with just 8.9% continuing their studies.

Children have only one chance at an education. Reducing those disparities requires early and sustained intervention, which must be designed to ensure that all children, whatever their background, circumstances or gender have the opportunity to achieve at school and to access university education. Instead, we have seen this Conservative Government systematically shutting Sure Start centres, which provided early intervention support for so many families. There is no sustained programme of education catch-up, something that is so necessary given how many boys and girls are missing out on the support that they need. We want a proper education plan for that. That is why we say that breakfast clubs must be provided for all children as an element of catch-up, but that has not happened.

Whether we are considering issues around physical or mental health or educational attainment, we know that not all men and boys are affected in the same way. Indeed, those issues are often closely connected with other deep-rooted inequalities. The Government's own suicide prevention strategy from 2012, for example, highlighted that gay and bisexual men are at much higher risk of self-harm and substance misuse. Similarly, a study by the University of Exeter found that men from black and minority ethnic backgrounds experienced a far greater deterioration in their mental health during covid lockdowns than their white British counterparts.

I will wind up in the next minute or so, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will indulge me. Studies show that black men are far more likely than others to be diagnosed with a severe mental health problem. However, up until the age of 11, black boys do not have poorer mental health than others of their age, so it is quite clear that there are systematic reasons why they experience mental health problems far more than others after the age of 11.

We know that there is a stark divide between children from poorer backgrounds and their wealthier peers, with secondary school children on free school meals being 18 months behind by the time they take their GCSEs. There is no avoiding the fact that white working-class underachievement is symptomatic of a much larger social, cultural and economic inequality, and therefore we must take a holistic view.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to remind the House that International Men's Day, which will be marked this Saturday, is just one week ahead of White Ribbon Day, a day on which men across the country are called on to make a promise that they will never commit, excuse, or remain silent about male violence against women. The murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer shocked the whole nation. We thought that would be a turning point, but little has changed, as shown by the recent murder of Sabina Nessa in a public park by somebody she did not know. While men are also victims of violent crime, women are overwhelmingly more likely to be victims of severe domestic abuse, which has doubled over the last five years.

Miriam Cates: The hon. Lady is making an important point about male violence against women. Does she not agree that it is imperative that we end the proliferation of online porn, which normalises violence against women? Of course there are no excuses for violence against women, and men who commit those crimes should be locked up, but we must recognise that online pornography is driving that behaviour.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and agree with her.

At every level, we should all be tackling violence against men and women. We must not consider gender equality to be a zero-sum game or a trade-off. Let me be clear: we can address women's safety as well as serious issues and concerns for men. Indeed, we must do both.

4.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): I am very pleased to be able to join this year's debate to celebrate International Men's Day. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate so that we can join 80 countries around the world in marking this day.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Nick Fletcher) not just for leading the debate, but for his consistent campaigning on the issues that affect men, and for his work as chair of the APPG on issues affecting men and boys, which continues to shine a spotlight on issues from mental health and wellbeing to boys' education. As my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell) pointed out, it is disappointing that so few Labour and Lib Dem Members are in the Chamber, because they have missed a tremendous debate.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Virginia Crosbie) about the tragic suicide of her brother. The hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) spoke so well about the body-image issues that men face, which are rarely talked about enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) spoke about a multitude of issues that affect men, including in particular their roles and importance in family life, and pornography and how it affects young men.

My hon. Friend the Member for Watford made a moving speech on a range of issues, and I will start by addressing some of the points he made about suicide. It is tragic and unacceptable that, on average, 13 male suicides occur every day, and that suicide is the leading cause of death for men under 50. About 75% of all suicides are by men, so it is so important that we tackle the mental health issues that men face.

[Maria Caulfield]

It is no surprise that after a number of years of tackling covid, which raised distress, anxiety and isolation over lockdown, as well as fears about jobs, before going straight into cost of living pressures, everyone—both men and women—has felt an impact on their mental health. However, we know that, for a variety of reasons, men are less likely to seek help. My hon. Friend the Member for Watford pointed out some of those reasons.

It is incumbent on all of us, across the House, to urge all men across our constituencies to reach out to the available support. In recent years, we have seen huge strides forward in the provision of support. We now have the Every Mind Matters campaign, which provides practical help and tips to improve our mental wellbeing. The NHS website supporting Every Mind Matters is easy to access and provides a range of tools that men can use themselves.

Importantly, we now have self-referral to talking therapies, so that men and women—but particularly men who are reluctant to seek help—no longer have to see their GP to get a referral. More than 1 million people have accessed talking therapies through self-referral. We are investing in those services by putting in an extra £2.3 billion a year to grow mental health services and meet demand. It is not enough simply to expect men to seek help themselves, however.

Dean Russell: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for her kind words and feedback. A couple of years ago, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to make mental health first aid part of workplace first aid. Will she take that idea back to her colleagues across Government to see whether we could look at it again? I would like to introduce that again. Ensuring that people in the workplace know that they have someone to go to in the same way as if they had a physical issue could be transformative.

Maria Caulfield: I am very happy to discuss that with my hon. Friend. He might be pleased to know that there are mental health first aiders on the floors of the Department of Health and Social Care offices. They support staff there and do a great job. I am keen to speak to him about that.

We need a whole-systems approach, as the APPG highlighted in its report, which I have read. It makes for interesting reading in terms of how we support men, particularly around their different experiences of health services and how we can improve outcomes. A number of organisations are helping to support mental health for men, such as Men's Sheds, which was mentioned in the debate. Men's Sheds offers new opportunities to learn skills, build friendships and reduce isolation, and is helping men to meet in different ways from traditional settings, and to build relationships where they may feel comfortable to speak out and ask for help.

We also need to look at how different approaches can work in tandem. Earlier this year, we put out a call for evidence to support the development of a new 10-year plan for mental health. I am pleased that groups such as James' Place, Men's Sheds and Andy's Man Club are among the many involved. We want to reduce suicide rates, and to do that we have to support men, who account for 75% of suicides currently. We are looking to bring forward some specific work on that shortly, and I will happily meet my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley to see how we can take it forward.

We are taking significant action in terms of mental health, but a number of illnesses affect men in particular, including heart disease, cancer, smoking, and drug and alcohol addiction. While life expectancy in the UK is lower for men, women spend significantly more time than men in ill health and disability. That is why we have a women's health strategy: because we want to tackle the basis for why women spend so much of their lives in ill health. We can improve life expectancy for men by ensuring that we tackle the illnesses that they face. My hon. Friend has challenged me on that before, because he feels so strongly that there should be a men's health strategy, but I will happily discuss it with him after the debate to see what more we can do.

Not having a men's strategy, or indeed a men's Minister, does not mean that the Government or the NHS take men's health any less seriously. We will continue to look for ways we can support men's health. There are a number of exciting initiatives, such as the Man Van, which is an innovative outreach programme launched this year that provides free health checks for men and aims to boost early diagnosis of prostate and other urological cancers. That mobile health clinic visits workplaces and churches in London to improve healthcare access for men who are less likely either to come forward or to receive regular health checks.

The Man Van was developed by the Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust. I declare an interest, as I have worked for the hospital in the past and still do some shifts there. Its specialty is enabling us to target the men most at risk of developing prostate cancer and who have poorer outcomes if they are diagnosed, particularly those in manual jobs who often struggle to access healthcare. Black men, who have roughly double the risk of developing prostate cancer, and an increased risk of death once diagnosed, are also being encouraged to get checked. If the results of the pilot studies that are being rolled out show that they were successful, we will roll them out across the country.

In the short time that I have, I will touch on stereotypes, which have been raised throughout the debate. Phrases such as "man up" and outdated beliefs about what it means to be a man do not help men to get the help that they need. One issue that was not touched on much is domestic violence that affects men. The recent crime survey for England and Wales suggests that 13.8% of men aged 16 to 74 have experienced domestic abuse behaviours. That is an estimated 2.9 million male victims. While the figure is much higher for women, that is a considerable number of men who are experiencing domestic violence, and we need to ensure that we are reaching out to them and supporting them. The Government have increased funding by 60% for community-based support focused primarily on male survivors, and we will update the supporting male victims statement in August this year to outline the further work that we will do in this area.[1]

In terms of getting equality for men, I think my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley will be happy with the work being done to support fathers, particularly new fathers who want to take on a full role in family life. In terms of the work around shared parental leave, men are still more likely than women to have their requests for flexible working turned down by their employer, and men still struggle to get paternity leave rights. We recognise the vital role that dads play in helping to raise their children—that is why we are establishing the family

1. *[Official Report, 25 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 6MC.]*

hubs and Start for Life programme—and we are committed to ensuring that men get the parental leave they are entitled to.

In conclusion, today's debate has raised some prominent issues that are affecting men, but we have not had much time to celebrate men. We all have dads, grandads, husbands, brothers, friends and colleagues who are men and who do a tremendous job. Men sometimes get a raw deal in terms of criticism. When my mum died, my dad had to take me and my brother on when we were teenagers, at a time when there was no such thing as childcare or support for single fathers. He did an incredible job. He used to take me to the football at the weekend, whether I liked it or not, which is why I am now an Arsenal supporter. He used to have to take me to work as well, where I learned to paint and decorate, because childcare was not available in those days.

All of us in this place who are married to men are thankful for the role they play. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Miriam Cates) said, they support us in our roles, and when we have had a terrible week or the online trolls are particularly active, we are very grateful for them just having that cup of tea with us and making us realise that there is a life outside this place.

The opportunity today to debate the issues that matter to men is important, and I will meet my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley to make sure we pick up on many of the points raised in the debate. It is also an opportunity to celebrate and thank men for all they do for us, not just on International Men's Day but all year round.

4.46 pm

Nick Fletcher: I would like to thank the Backbench Business Committee for letting us hold this debate in the Chamber today; it is really appreciated. I would also like to thank all Members who have stayed on a Thursday afternoon to speak in the debate. It is a hugely important debate, and their support in this place and outside it is really appreciated; I want them all to take that home with them. I would also like to thank Mike Bell and Mark Brooks from the APPG on issues affecting men and boys. They do all the work, and I take a little bit of the glory—that is just the way it works—but I thank them for that. I also thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for letting me wrap up the debate.

We have heard lots of different reasons why we still need a Minister for Men, and I am pleased that the Minister is going to meet me to discuss all the issues. As we have heard, there is lots of help out there. As MPs, it is our job to signpost people to the places where there is help. I ask everybody on International Men's Day, which is Saturday: if you know somebody who is struggling, send them that text or that email, and point them in the right direction for help. Do not underestimate the power of your voice—just as a person, never mind as an MP. People really do need our help, and men especially.

We have to get the number of men committing suicide down. That is a huge issue; 13 men a day is absolutely terrible. I will be coming back next year and looking at those figures, and I will be holding Government to account. I thank the Government for what they are doing, and I thank everybody for attending today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered International Men's Day.

Adoption: Support for Birth Families

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

4.49 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I recognise that the headlines from the House today will be about the Chancellor's autumn statement, but I am afraid that he has only made things worse for those whose lives are the subject of my Adjournment debate. Nevertheless, I am pleased to have secured this debate on a subject that is often overlooked by Chancellors, Prime Ministers and many others. I am talking about the adoption process by which children are removed from their birth parents and placed in the care of, and ultimately adopted by, parents other than their birth parents.

This year's John Lewis Christmas advert gives a moving and positive representation of the adoption and care sector, and has brought welcome attention to the topic. I am not ashamed to say that it also brought tears to my eyes when I watched it on the train to the north-east last week. I commend the work of John Lewis and Action for Children on the advert.

Children are the most vulnerable in our society, so it is imperative that the child's interest is first and foremost in the care and adoption process. Indeed, I would go further and say that the care and adoption process can be successful only if it is child-centred and everyone involved upholds that principle.

That does not mean, however, that birth parents should go without support. For every child adopted, there is a parent or parents who have to go through the process of losing their child. They are often parents in challenging and difficult circumstances, some of whom may not have the social or educational skills to easily navigate the complex adoption process, which is traumatic for many. It is not in the child's interest to leave their parents without help, for the sake of the parents and the child, because a child placed in care and/or adopted may one day want to make contact with their parents, as is their right.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this debate forward; I spoke to her beforehand. Does she agree that, often, when children are not told that they have been adopted, or when information about their birth parents is kept hidden from them, that can be a distressing occurrence for adoptive parents that can cause resentment and, in some cases, even a complete breakdown of the relationship between the adoptive parents and the child?

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and he makes a good point. I would always recommend honesty and transparency in everything and there can obviously be challenges where that is not followed. As I said, everything should be done in the long-term interests of the child.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate on birth parents, because we know that they often experience a lot of trauma, not least in the age of social media where they can have unsupported contact with their

[Rachael Maskell]

birth child and even more trauma can occur as a result. That is why the all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence published a report looking at strengthening families, including the voices of birth parents. Does she not think it is important for those voices to be heard throughout the adoption process?

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and commend the work of the APPG. I called this debate to give more exposure and a greater voice to birth parents, because she is absolutely right that the subject is not discussed enough. She talks about the contact between children and their birth parents, which is likely to be more constructive if birth parents have been supported through the adoption process and beyond.

That is why I want to bring the House's attention to the work of a unique local charity in my constituency that provides invaluable support to birth parents. It is unique because Families in Care is a charity for birth parents that was set up by birth parents. To my knowledge, it is the only charity in the country that offers the services that it offers. It was originally set up in 1986 by birth parents of adopted children as a parent-led support group. It became a charity in 1992 and employed its first part-time worker. Since its beginning, the delivery model has been nurturing, non-judgmental, holistic and, most importantly, done in partnership with birth parents. My hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) had a university placement with this charity. She is unable to be here this evening, but wanted me to pass on that she gained invaluable experience from her time with Families in Care.

Before I say more about Families in Care, I want to discuss the difficult climate in which it operates. Removing a child from their parents should be a last resort, but that last resort is necessary—all too necessary—and it happens all too often. Over 80,000 children are currently in care in England. This is an all-time high, and it means more children who need our support and more birth parents who need support. The erosion in early help for vulnerable families in recent years, particularly since the Conservative Government came into office in 2010, has been shocking. More than 1,300 Sure Start centres across the UK have closed since 2010, a loss that is not nearly matched by the paltry commitment to open family hubs in just 75 locations. I hope the Minister recognises the impact of that on the adoption and care system.

My constituency in Newcastle has been hit particularly hard. Newcastle saw a 20% increase in the number of looked-after children between 2018 and 2021 alone. The North East Child Poverty Commission's report this year shows that the north-east has the highest proportion of looked-after children in England, at 108 per 10,000 children. According to the directors of north-east children's services, this means:

"The North East is in a vicious cycle with levels of demand causing pressure across the system and spiralling costs."

Analysis from the University of Liverpool shows that the rise in cared-for children has coincided with rising child poverty. Given that, under the Conservatives, the north-east has become the child poverty capital of the country, this is particularly concerning for us. We are once again, after today's announcements, faced with real-terms public sector cuts, and local authorities—already under enormous pressure—and working people are being expected to bear the burden. Newcastle City Council will have to make the £25 million it spends on children in care go further, placing yet more pressure on the care system and the parents themselves.

However, this is not the only issue. There are inequalities in adoption rates and the number of children coming into care, both in levels of deprivation and ethnicity. In 2020 in Newcastle, white children left social care settings for adoption at double the rate at which non-white children left social care settings for adoption. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups are also over-represented in the care system, and are more likely to experience low rates of adoption and fostering compared with national averages.

It is for this reason that the work of Families in Care is so important. The charity provides free, independent and specialist advocacy support, counselling and education for birth parents who are involved in child protection and care or adoption proceedings in Newcastle. Families in Care has been supported since its establishment by Newcastle City Council. However, it remains independent of the local authority, working in collaboration with the council's children's services to provide an invaluable mediating service.

I visited Families in Care in October this year, and I was struck by the atmosphere of support, welcome and warmth. I learned of the bespoke care, mediation, wellbeing support and counselling that families receive during all stages of the adoption process before, during and well beyond court proceedings. This bespoke care includes Len, its therapy dog, who I was fortunate to meet. I am told his nickname is Red Len, which is a reference to his beautiful ginger coat and apparently also to his politics, but as I do not speak Husky, I was unable to verify that.

Families in Care also offers learning and development sessions, mediations, therapeutic art, meditation and weekly mental health drop-ins over a cup of tea for parents. I saw one poignant and beautiful work of art, a bright collage of art and craft materials coming together to create a tree wrapped in a rainbow. It carried a powerful message to parents:

"Nothing is impossible, the word itself says I'm possible."

Through being rooted in the community, and having been established by parents going through the adoption process, the charity is well placed to speak up for birth parents.

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Chi Onwurah: Let me share with the House some of the experiences of birth parents, to give them a greater voice. The first story comes from a constituent—a mother, and a survivor of domestic violence and coercive control during pregnancy. I heard how in her case, social workers did not help her mental wellbeing, as she had to re-explain her situation to six different social workers, which she said was retraumatising. She told me how the situation was totally transformed by Families in Care, and said:

"I felt totally alone before meeting Families in Care."

I was also contacted by another mother who felt overwhelmed by the shame and guilt associated with going to court. She felt ostracised even by her own family, but Families in Care gave her someone she could cry with or lean on for support, and someone she felt was truly in her corner.

Parents journey together with Families in Care, and they work on a peer-to-peer basis. Parents who have come through Families in Care often stay and help other parents who are going through the same situation that they were in previously. That is because, as my constituent put it,

"sometimes a social worker doesn't look at things from the same perspective as a parent does."

Families in Care epitomises the value of peer-to-peer mentoring, but much more can still be done to support victims, particularly victims of domestic abuse, through the adoption and care process. One constituent told me that she was refused a picture of her child once the adoption process had been completed. Will the Minister explain why that would be the case, especially when the parent had been subject to domestic abuse and was a victim of coercive behaviour?

What support are the Government planning to introduce to support birth parents through the adoption process? Families in Care provides a unique and vital service to birth parents in Newcastle, and not surprisingly it is overwhelmed by demand in Newcastle and far beyond. Its funding and support is confined to the city of Newcastle, but the demand is not. I know work has been done to explore sharing the expertise of Families in Care with other local authority areas, and it has also been working with a family court judge, Stephen Wildblood, in Avon, North Somerset and Gloucestershire, to see where that model may be best placed to succeed elsewhere, as well as in Newcastle. Families in Care receives consistent and growing demand for its services from across the country. Given the trends in child social care, which I have outlined, will the Minister work proactively with it to identify and assess areas of the UK where its model can be used or adapted to make a real difference to parents? Will her Department work with Families in Care to assess the value of peer-to-peer mentoring for the birth parents of children in care, and take that assessment forward to share across Departments?

When researching for this debate, I found it hard to find robust and nationwide data on birth parents, for example when trying to assess the average education status, or whether the impression that adoptive parents tend to come from the middle classes but birth parents come from the working class has robust data beneath it. I found it hard to find that data. In responding, will the Minister let me know whether that data is available? If it is not, will she put a programme in place to collect it? We need to know more about the reasons for and the likelihood of parents giving up their children or having them taken away from them to be adopted. Most importantly, will she assure me that she will put a support plan in place to ensure that birth parents, wherever they are in our country, receive the peer-to-peer support that they need?

5.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Claire Coutinho): I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing a debate on this important subject as well as the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on their contributions. I also congratulate Families in Care, which sounds like it is doing tremendous work to try to overcome the feelings that birth parents have of isolation and being stigmatised and overwhelmed. I would love to talk to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central about what more I can do with that charity. I will set out a little what the law says at the moment before turning to some of our work in this area. I assure her that I am incredibly passionate about the matter and working keenly on it.

The law is clear that, wherever possible, children should remain in the birth family and that families should be given extra support to help keep them together. We are carefully considering the children's social care review by Josh MacAlister, which talks about early family help and better data as well as some of the other points that the hon. Lady rightly mentioned.

Where a child cannot live with their birth parents, local authorities have a legal duty to give preference to alternative care by family and friends before considering adoption. The decision to put a child forward for adoption should never be taken lightly. The ultimate decision rests with the independent court systems, and courts scrutinise the evidence before them. The hon. Lady rightly mentioned that paramount in the court's consideration is the welfare of the child, with strong checks and balances in the system. Birth parents are supported during the process by having access to legal representation and the opportunity to refute allegations. I very much recognise what she said about birth parents feeling like they sometimes do not have the chance to do those things.

It is essential that we support birth parents and adopted children. My Department funds the Family Rights Group, of which I am sure the hon. Lady is aware. This week, I met a brilliant employee of it who is a passionate advocate for birth parents. It provides independent legal and other advice to families so that, in its own words,

"wherever possible children can live safely and flourish within their family network".

Many birth parents of children in care will be grieving over the loss of their child or may need support to process what has happened. Adoption agencies have legal duties to provide support to birth parents. I accept that provision can often be patchy and variable, but those agencies must provide counselling services to birth parents when adoption of a child is being considered. Such counselling must be made available to them at any time throughout the adoption process, including when that support has previously been rejected. When birth parents reject counselling, agencies should offer to set up counselling for them with another agency, should they prefer that. Birth parents must be given information about the implications of adoption. Adoption agencies must explain the process of adoption and the legal implications, and birth parents should also receive written information on the implications.

The wishes of birth parents about future contact must be asked for by adoption agencies so that the court can take them into account on applications for a placement or adoption order. Agencies must also ask birth parents their wishes about the religion and culture of their child so that their views can be considered if the child does go to live with adopters.

[Claire Coutinho]

Ensuring that adoption agencies are running consistent and high-quality services is a key priority for me and the Government. We published a national adoption strategy in July 2021, and some of our work on regional adoption agencies is to try to test that best practice, including in particular some of the counselling and emotional support that the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for York Central mentioned.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for her response so far, but she will also recognise that, such is the churn of social workers involved in the adoption process, that birth parents often have six or seven social workers over the course of an adoption discussion to the point of adoption. Therefore, they do not get the representation and consistency, which is so important to give them the care the Minister talks about.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady for that important intervention. Yes, I recognise there is retention and churn in the social care worker system. I am looking at that very closely and am happy to talk to her about it further. Consistency means the ability to build a proper relationship. That means so much in terms of trust, but also in terms of access to the services that we all know are important, because it increases the likelihood of someone actually taking them up.

Part of our adoption strategy includes driving improvement for contact services, which was mentioned. Where ongoing contact with an adopted child is agreed, support for birth parents or family members can help to ensure that the contact is a positive experience for the adopted child. We know that having contact with birth parents is really important for a child's sense of their past and identity. I spoke this week to birth parents and care-experienced people who talked about the trauma for children of not really understanding where they come from. We are working very hard with regional adoption agency leaders to ensure that contact services provide better support and are a positive experience for all those who are involved, including birth parents.

On top of that, regional adoption agency leaders have established a birth parent reference group. That is really important, because the group will help to shape plans for developing better information for birth parents and family members. It will create resources for other birth parents around letterbox contact, ensuring it is easier to navigate and ensuring that birth parents are involved during the further development of any adoption services who have some of that co-design.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for the comments she is making and for setting out some of the issues in the adoption process for birth parents. Will she focus on peer-to-peer support, too? The support she references is provided by agencies. As the charity and the parents who contacted me said, peer-to-peer support is particularly important, especially where there is a sense of guilt, trauma or shame associated with engaging with, say, an adoption agency.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the hon. Lady; that is an excellent point. I have seen, in my work in social justice areas over the years, how much of a difference peer-to-peer support makes, particularly in encouraging people to take up services that they sometimes see as the enemy. Having a trusted person saying, "Actually, this is quite good" makes all the difference. I will take that away, but I absolutely agree with her about that.

I will just briefly touch on the independent review of children's social care, which hon. Members will know well. The review sets out recommendations for the care system and, in terms of the topics they have raised, sets a really positive direction. The review staff spoke with a great number of birth parents to understand their needs and their experience of the care system. It includes lots of recommendations to strengthen family help systems, getting them that early help that was spoken about. It also talked about family help and support being available to birth parents when adoption is being considered for a child, after a decision has been made to place a child for adoption and after a child has been adopted as well. The review also made proposals to improve the contact between birth parents and the adopted child. It is important that we get this right for children and families, and we are rapidly working up an ambitious and detailed implementation strategy in response to the review.

I will touch on court proceedings, because I know that birth parents have described those as being particularly adversarial and traumatic. They have described a lack of compassion and kindness, as well as a lack of communication and updates on what is happening. The care review flagged the importance of making the court process more accessible for parents during family law proceedings. I am pleased to say that I have met some of the team on the cross-sector public law working group, who are looking at how they can improve the process. They are building the evidence base and starting to roll that out to make sure the courts are less adversarial, based on some of the problem-solving approaches in the family drug and alcohol courts, about which I am also very passionate.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member—

Chi Onwurah: Will the Minister give way?

Claire Coutinho: I will.

Chi Onwurah: I am keen to keep the Minister on her feet. I thank her for her response. However, on the role of the charity in my constituency and peer-to-peer care, I urge her to agree to a meeting with me or with the charity so that we can take that issue forward.

Claire Coutinho: I would be delighted to, so let me take that away and see what we can do.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing another intervention. The Mockingbird set-up that is used in fostering is another example of a network of support built around foster parents. Could that not also be translated into the adoption process, particularly bearing in mind Rachel de Souza's report on the family and looking at the more extensive family and the opportunity that that brings?

Claire Coutinho: I am very familiar with the Mockingbird programme, which I think is excellent, so I will look at that as well. I also agree with the Children's Commissioner Rachel de Souza's excellent report on family.

Let me bring my comments to a close, despite all the interventions. We have had a very interesting debate. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central

for securing it. I am particularly committed to this area, as are the Government, and to making sure that it works better for birth parents and adopted children.

Question put and agreed to.

5.16 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 17 November 2022

[CLIVE EFFORD *in the Chair*]

War in Ukraine: Illicit Finance

1.30 pm

Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Second Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine, HC 168, and the Government response, HC 688.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. In speaking to the report today, I will outline a series of points made by the Committee in this report and in its 2018 "Moscow's Gold" report. I will also talk about SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—and the case for more action on lawfare.

Our report finds that the UK sanctions response to the war, while ambitious, was initially limited by a lack of resourcing, and the new beneficial owners register still contains loopholes that put some individuals under the threshold for having to declare beneficial ownership. That is against the public interest. The report, which I strongly endorse—I encourage folks to read it should they have time—proposes a number of reforms, including new transatlantic sanctions partnerships, so that London and New York can work more closely together, and the appropriate resourcing of enforcement agencies. Both reports, and the Intelligence and Security Committee, note the lack of funding for the National Crime Agency and other serious crime organisations in the country and that some of them are threatened by the lawyers of oligarchs—potential bad actors. We believe that to be very strongly against our national interest.

In my opinion, and I think also in the opinion of the Committee and many people engaged with this issue, including the right hon. Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) and other hon. Members, the UK and its offshore territories have for too long turned a blind eye to the transfer and concealment of illicit or semi-licit—if that is a word—wealth, and have granted a number of high-risk individuals political and judicial protections that they do not deserve.

We have built a significant industry catering to the needs of some really quite unsavoury characters. To date, vast sums of both illicit and licit finance have been recycled through the UK's bespoke package of the financial services industry, legal services, public relations services, private eyes, estate agents, luxury assets, concierge services, visa and citizenship routes and the private education system.

Transparency International and various other bodies have estimated that the amount of wealth, criminal or otherwise, that has flowed from the former Soviet Union via corrupt German and Scandinavian banks, via UK shell companies, to tax havens—sadly, very often the UK—is probably between £500 billion and £1 trillion. That is one of the greatest flows, probably the greatest flow, of illicit wealth in the history of humanity. The fact that we in London are a core part of that flow is frankly pretty shameful.

I was discussing the issue with the great Bill Browder the other day. One of the problems is that this is not just Colombian drug cartel money; this is money that has come from deeply corrupt, but potentially legal deals. For example, an executive at one of the big state gas or oil firms at some points in the 1990s could, if they had the connections, buy an oilfield or a gasfield equivalent to the North sea, for $100,000.

By borrowing that money off organised crime or other areas, that person would effectively become a billionaire overnight, by the sometimes legal, sometimes not, but deeply unethical transfer of state assets—the privatisation of state assets using organised crime as muscle and bureaucratic connections to facilitate it. That is what has happened in the former Soviet Union—in not only Russia, but also Ukraine back in the day, especially under Yanukovych and others, and Kazakhstan. Clearly, that has enriched a small number of people in the United Kingdom, but I do not believe it has been good for the United Kingdom as a whole. It is not good for our reputation and for London as a service industry—although it is undoubtedly true that it has very considerably enriched a small number of people.

In 2018, the Foreign Affairs Committee published an excellent report under the previous Chairman, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), called "Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK". That report detailed that, despite the Government's crackdown on Russian activity in the wake of the Skripal poisoning, back before the Ukraine war, business simply continued as usual for most of Putin's allies in the United Kingdom.

One of the depressing things for me is that I was saying this before I was an MP, so nobody was listening, and have said it as an MP—and still nobody really listened. In 2007, back in the Munich conference speech, Putin declared a new cold war against the west. We have studiously done our best to turn a blind eye because it was too difficult for western states to get their heads around the fact that, in President Putin, we had an aggressive rival who did not accept the international system, would openly challenge it and would fight wars on his borders to secure what he thought were his vital interests—we can debate that or not. After his speech the invasion of Georgia happened, and then in 2014 there was the invasion of Ukraine through proxy groups that confused some people, but should not have done.

Before, during and after those events we have had a wave of assassinations, imprisonments and arrests. I met with Alexei Navalny's chief of staff. Navalny now may be the most high profile political prisoner in the world; he is in a detention camp in permanent solitary confinement. That is the price for challenging President Putin. Last night, I was chatting to Marina Litvinenko, the wonderful wife of Alexander Litvinenko, who was murdered in Piccadilly back in 2006—he died of radiation poisoning. The problem is that we repeatedly turned a blind eye. Our love of Russian money flowing through the financial and legal systems clouded our moral judgment. That has enabled Putin's regime. We need to learn from those errors and mistakes.

What is the scale of the problem today? From 2008 to 2015, there were no state checks on tier 1 golden visas. At least eight individuals now sanctioned, or under

[Bob Seely]

investigation, are thought to have obtained citizenship through those means. They are citizens like you or me, Mr Efford. How can that be right or in the national interest? The National Crime Agency estimates that money laundering costs the UK £100 billion annually. Serious or organised crime is estimated to have a price tag of £37 billion.

Russians accused of corruption or having close links to the Putin regime have bought at least £1.5 billion worth of property in Great Britain according to Transparency International—that is a vast amount of property. One of the reasons why so many people are struggling with their mortgages is that there are vastly inflated prices for property in London and the south-east. That is in part because it is seen as an easy way to launder money: to pay over the odds for property and then to sell. Even if it is then sold at a loss of 10% or 20%, these people have laundered—legalised—a vast amount of corrupt and criminal, or semi-corrupt and semi-criminal, money.

That £1.5 billion is part of nearly £5.5 billion worth of property in the UK that has been purchased through offshore shell companies. That problem happened under new Labour and the coalition with the Liberal Democrats. What on earth is this country doing allowing offshore shell companies to be vehicles to buy property? It is just wrong. It is wrong that so many people close to Putin own so much property in this country. It is wrong that so many offshore vehicles have been used. What on earth are we doing allowing that to happen, and what on earth are we going to do to stop it? I would love the Minister to reassure us, rather than just saying that we are concerned about it.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech and I congratulate him. I want to be clear that this is not just an issue about Russia. In my constituency and elsewhere, the red princes and princesses of communist China are buying up property and inflating prices. We should not just focus on Russia when we talk about illicit finance.

Bob Seely: I thank the hon. Member for his very sensible point. There is absolutely a wider issue. As well as shell companies, there are vast developments on the south side of the river, around the US embassy, where entire blocks are being bought up as investment options rather than being used to provide housing for Londoners. That is shocking, especially because we have a housing shortage. There is a wider argument on reform of our housing in the UK for giving options first to allow ordinary folks to be buying it, rather than—as much as we love them—Hong Kong, Chinese or Indonesian investors to block buy endless numbers of flat and rent them out or never have them occupied.

I was going to talk a bit about the Azerbaijani laundromat. Between 2012 and 2014, about £3 billion went through UK shell companies as part of the so-called Azerbaijani laundromat; funding was dispersed from Azerbaijani officials to various outlets in this country. As well as that, London's open economic environment has been a key centre for raising finance for companies or individuals over whom there are now very considerable question marks.

In 2017, En+ was floated on the London stock exchange, raising £1.5 billion from international investors in an initial public offering. We now know—well, we knew at the time—that En+ was very closely associated with Oleg Deripaska, despite his ownership of companies linked to supplying Russian military materials and sanctioned Russian shareholders. He himself is now sanctioned, I believe. En+ and Oleg Deripaska were part of a considerable lobbying effort by a former Member of the House of Lords—a former Conservative Minister, as much as it shames me to say it—to separate Deripaska from En+ in frankly pretty questionable circumstances.

Shortly after the Skripal poisoning, Russia continued to sell Russian sovereign debt in London, facilitated by the sanctioned Russian bank VTB. While our financial services provide anonymity to those who wish to invest, many UK legal firms have sought to further silence those who question the origin of investments.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case. I agree with everything he has to say. On sanctions, he will know, not least from the talk he did yesterday afternoon with a group of Ukrainians, that there is a big call in Ukraine at the moment to turn the freezing sanctions into confiscation sanctions, and to use the money we are holding, which would presumably otherwise be given back to the oligarchs, for the reconstruction of Ukraine. Would my hon. Friend comment on that?

Bob Seely: I would love to; we were debating that yesterday at the Henry Jackson Society with Bill Browder and a number of other people. My hon. Friend is welcome to correct me on this, but I think Canada has prepared an Act to enable that frozen money effectively to be given to the Ukrainian authorities or set up in some kind of international fund to help reconstruction in Ukraine.

Mr Djanogly: The Act is quite straightforward. By way of clarification, it takes the existing sanctions legislation, including the Canadian Magnitsky law, and latches on to that the ability to change freezing orders into confiscation orders. It is a relatively simple way of going about what could be a very complicated process.

Bob Seely: Indeed. If it is effective, I look forward to working with my hon. Friend, and potentially other Members, to see how we can bring in such a law in the UK, so that we move from freezing money to taking money and using it for a more moral purpose.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. I am pleased to see this report and the recommendations in it. I have been talking to Ukrainian MPs since the visit that he and I made to Kyiv. One of the biggest issues they have raised is about not just having sanctions but having a sanctions regime that ratchets up internationally. The sanctions partnership is absolutely essential.

Just now in the House, the Prime Minister was congratulating the work done already on sanctions, but we cannot stop there. We need to move on. The ramping up of sanctions and the seizing—not just freezing—of assets are absolutely being called for by Ukrainian politicians and people.

To put into context the sums the hon. Gentleman has been referring to, right now there is a $38 billion budget gap for the running of Ukraine and billions also need to be paid back in reparations. This solution is much needed and would restore the reputation of London as a financial centre, not a money laundering centre.

Bob Seely: That was a brief question!

Clive Efford (in the Chair): I think it was a speech.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Seely: I give way again.

Jim Shannon: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate; I will speak for a wee minute in support of him. My understanding is that in earlier questions in the Chamber, the Government indicated that they were prepared to look at—I am not sure they committed themselves entirely—not just seizing the goods belonging to Russian oligarchs, but using that money for a purpose. The purpose we all asked for in the Chamber that day was for the money to be given to Ukraine. Would there not be some poetic justice if Russian money was used to directly help the Ukrainians?

Bob Seely: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. One of the things we were discussing yesterday was quite how that could happen. The initiative is being led by Bill Browder, who has championed the cause of Sergei Magnitsky ever since he was tortured and murdered 13 years ago yesterday. Ten years ago—a decade ago this month—the late, great John McCain brought in the first Magnitsky laws in the United States, and everyone else across the globe, or at least 35 nations, has followed suit.

The person dealing with this issue in Ukraine is a very powerful Ukrainian politician called Kira Rudik, who was also with us yesterday. She is in London today. She is trying to get a global coalition to do just what we have been discussing. I hope that we will soon have a draft law here that we can send to Government, debate and put down in some form to say, "These are the next steps."

I pay tribute to Kyle Parker, too, who was also in the discussions we had yesterday. He is great man. A senior congressional staffer—these people have much more power in the US than they tend to in the UK—he wrote the Magnitsky Act and worked with Congressmen and Senators to get it through both Houses in the US system. We should be doing the same here.

Strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPPs—it is a bit of a mouthful—are effectively the abuse of law by the rich to intimidate journalists, campaigners and others. SLAPPs are absolutely part and parcel of this system. Imagine the great caravan of wealth that flowed from the former Soviet Union to the tax havens of the Caribbean. It needed facilitators, which were the financial services companies, some of which are corrupt German and Scandinavian banks. I think their names are out there: Deutsche Bank, in Estonia, I think, and one or two others.

The system also needed attack dogs to protect the flow of that vast caravan of sometimes criminal wealth, and those were the legal firms. Those lawyers effectively built a business model of legalised intimidation whereby journalists and campaigners can be threatened. If someone in the Soviet Union, or Russia post the collapse of the Soviet Union, wanted to stop a journalist from trying to investigate them, they would ultimately just kill them. In the UK and the west, that is more difficult—not impossible, but it is more difficult to kill people and get away with it.

People are not physically destroyed in this country; instead, the legal system is used to financially destroy them. That has sadly happened to a number of people, including Charlotte Leslie, a former colleague of ours, and the wonderful journalist Catherine Belton. Various campaign groups have also been targeted. Most recently, Chatham House has been a target. Sadly, I understand it has given in to threats and is having to rewrite some of its reports.

This business model was set up to service the needs of the aggressive rich and powerful, including organised criminals and oligarchs, who did not want their affairs investigated. The three methods were the abuse of libel law, the abuse of privacy law—the right to privacy, meaning no one else can look into someone's affairs—and data protection. The aim in all the cases was to mount up such staggering costs that even a technical victory would destroy the opponent, render them bankrupt or destroy their reputation. If they were a journalist, the aim was to make a newspaper or publishing house invest hundreds of thousands of pounds in defending them against the vast sums that oligarchs were willing to throw at them to make their lives difficult.

A slightly different case is that of the Maltese corruption journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia. It was a great privilege to recently meet her son, who works in the UK media. At the time she was murdered, she was facing 47 libel lawsuits, almost all of which were from UK law firms. That is staggering: before she was physically destroyed, she was being psychologically and financially destroyed.

I have discussed Catherine Belton and the costs of SLAPPs. My final point is that it is extraordinary that, as Spotlight on Corruption and Global Integrity have found, law firms in the UK currently face almost zero risk of criminal prosecution for money laundering, and there is a very limited prospect of their facing any meaningful fines. I was told privately that a number of UK law firms support that criminal money-laundering activity. Yet almost nothing is done, and almost nothing is investigated.

What are the solutions? First, close the loopholes in Companies House. I know that the Government have made strides on that, but there is more to be done. The right hon. Member for Barking is working with a number of Members on both sides of the House to tighten up the regulations. If the Government could be sympathetic, we would be grateful. Secondly, the UK's economic crime enforcement system remains under-resourced. It needs to be better resourced, so that we can fight the bad guys and girls better.

Thirdly, we need to better supervise the so-called professional enablers, so that they cannot effectively operate outside money laundering regulations. Fourthly, as we tighten up regulations here, we need to expand our UK regulations to British overseas territories. It is absolute nonsense that criminal and organised crime and tax havens benefit people in the Caribbean.

[Bob Seely]

We very much welcome the Ministry of Justice's response to the call for evidence on SLAPPs and its proposals for legislative reform. The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) and I—and perhaps others—will present a Bill on SLAPPs, so that a Bill is ready when the Government want to introduce one; we love saving Government time, and increasing the productivity of Government and politicians. We will provide a model for SLAPPs law. It will ensure that SLAPPs are disposed of more quickly in court, that the costs of being attacked by SLAPPs are kept to a minimum, and that the costs for SLAPP filers are higher, which will potentially deter further SLAPPs. There are other measures, but I will not go into them now.

In summary, as a result of the UK's economic permissiveness, we have for too long become a safe haven for kleptocrats. That has to end. The situation is getting better, but it is a shame that it took a major war in eastern Europe for things to change dramatically. We take pride in the openness and transparency of speech, and in the UK's open economic system. However, that freedom of speech and open economic system must be better protected. A laissez-faire, criminalised free-for-all is not an open economic system; it is a corruption of that system. We need to clamp down on the sources of illicit finance coming through the UK. I urge the Government to continue reforming Companies House, to resource our enforcement bodies, and to read and take in the many excellent recommendations in the Foreign Affairs Committee's report.

1.54 pm

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Ind): It is a pleasure to rise with you in the Chair, Mr Efford. I thank the Liaison Committee for providing time for the debate, and congratulate the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) on his excellent opening speech. I also thank the Foreign Affairs Committee Clerks for notes in advance of the debate, and the UK Anti-Corruption Coalition for its excellent briefing. I speak as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and also as someone who is just glad to be reunited with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I knew he would be here today.

The FAC report, "The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine", in October made many recommendations, some of which have been touched on. Those that have not been mentioned include the need to implement beneficial ownership rules and to reform Companies House, including by giving the registrar powers to verify information and to remove corporate entities for wrongdoing and provide robust identity verification mechanisms. It also recommends making enforcement more effective by reforming unexplained wealth orders, or by at least assessing why they have not been as effective as the Government originally intended. The report also suggests making better use of the exchange of notes process in relation to companies incorporated overseas, reforming corporate criminal liability laws and whistleblower legislation, professionalising the sanctions unit of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and making more concerted efforts to seize assets that have been frozen by sanctions.

The Government's response is, at best, tepid. They say that they are aware of the security threat of illicit finance and suggest that the war in Ukraine is the driving political force for action, but that leaves many people who are focused on this issue concerned that no effort was made previously and wondering why it has taken a war in Europe to drive reform and action in this area, when it has been clear to so many that illicit finance has been entering the UK at colossal levels for some time.

The Government's response is largely being taken forward in the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, but there is broad concern that it does not go far enough. For example, the Government have committed to reform of Companies House, but the UK Anti-Corruption Coalition says that they need to go much further to prevent UK-registered companies from providing a veneer of legitimacy for secretive offshore networks, by ensuring transparency over shareholders, partners and members. The Government have acknowledged the risk associated with opaque corporate ownership, but the Bill in its current form does not make the changes that would prohibit private limited companies, limited liability partnerships, limited partnerships or Scottish limited partnerships from having opaque corporate partners, and it must go further.

The UK Anti-Corruption Coalition also asked the Government to improve the register's accuracy by verifying and publishing shareholder information. The information it holds on shareholders needs to be transparent and accurate, including names, company numbers and addresses—all the criteria that we assume is held but is not. The Bill also needs to give Companies House the power to review verification documents provided by third-party agents—usually trust and company service providers—because without that level of work, Companies House's data will simply not be robust enough.

The Government have said that they will undertake a review of whistleblower protections and are assessing time and scope. It would be really good to have an update on that, because there is a lot of concern that, while journalists may be covered, they are not the only people who warrant protection. Journalists rely on whistleblowers inside companies and organisations, and they should be the focus of further and greater protection. I hope, therefore, that the Minister will tell us whether the Government are considering introducing a whistle-blowing Bill to protect those who seek to speak out against or uncover economic crimes and wrongdoing. That is not covered by current Government plans, so I hope the Government will follow through on their commitment to review the UK's whistleblowing framework and present the timeline and scope of that review.

The Government say that they accept the Committee's recommendation to establish a professional and permanent sanctions group within the FCDO. However, the global anti-corruption sanctions regime, which the UK introduced its in April 2021, has been used significantly fewer times than the 30 designations a year that the Government originally envisaged. Why has the performance been so much worse than expected? What steps are being taken to improve it, when will they be implemented, and when will they be put to use?

In response to the Committee's recommendation to grant additional funding for law enforcement, all the Government have offered is money to fund the reform of Companies House, and they have said that the Home Office will set out an annual report to Parliament on unexplained wealth orders. Frankly, that is pathetic, and today's statement means that the uplift in the

Serious Fraud Office's core resources budget is simply not good enough to match the level of crime in this country. The UK spends £850 million a year on funding core national level economic crime enforcement bodies, but economic crime costs the UK £290 billion a year. The National Crime Agency has suffered a 4.2% decrease in its core budget over the past five years, yet fraud has risen dramatically. It accounts for 40% of all recorded crime, yet fraud prosecutions have fallen from 42,000 in 2011 to 13,500 in 2021—a 67% decrease in a decade. The Government are simply lagging far behind the scale of the problem. The NCA needs resourcing to the scale required, and the Minister needs to raise the Government's game.

The Committee has put forward additional asks. Given the speed with which the two economic crime Bills were put before the House, does the Minister anticipate additional legislation to rectify any gaps? Will the Government be reviewing the implementation of the two Acts? When does the Minister expect to see measurable outcomes from changes to resourcing the fight against economic crime? What outcomes is he prioritising? How does the new sustainable funding model support long-term planning to support those goals? How does public-private information sharing feed into those enforcement aims?

It would be good to hear from the Minister what progress is being made on suspicious activity reports reform. The Government have mentioned that they are interested in that, but we have not seen action on it yet. It would also be good to hear from the Minister whether the Government's understanding of the threat of economic crime has changed. Do they see illicit finance as primarily a criminal issue or a security threat?

Golden visas—the tier 1 visa scheme—allowed a recipient to stay in the UK for three years in exchange for a minimum £1 million investment, but they became a vehicle for much laundering of corrupt money in the UK because of a lack of checks. That scheme was shut in February in response to the full-scale invasion—the second invasion—of Ukraine, but a review of the scheme, commissioned by the Home Office in March 2018, has still not been published. The Committee called for the review to be published without delay. The Government have said that they will publish it "in the near future". I really hope that the Minister can tell us what is happening. If the Government are at all serious on this issue, they will be able to tell us today when that report will be published.

The Government did not even bother to respond to the Committee's recommendation that they review visas issued since 2015. Have the Government concluded that none of the outstanding visa holders pose a security threat? Especially given that the Government tell us that they have changed their policy towards both Russia and China in recent weeks, will the Government be reviewing that decision? The Government have not responded to whether they plan to review those granted visas who had gone on to gain residency or citizenship. The Home Office should set out how it will deal with people with corrupt or criminal sources of wealth who have already received indefinite leave to remain or subsequent citizenship through the golden visa route. Those visas may still need to be withdrawn and other measures taken.

It would be good to hear what the Government plan to do, especially in the face of those of us who deal with the Home Office week in, week out, on behalf of constituents desperate to get family members into this country to work here, to contribute here and to care for other family members who are sick here. I have constituents who have had family members pass away while waiting for visa application decisions. I recently saw a constituent who has waited more than a decade for an asylum application to be decided—while corrupt millionaires have been able to gain access under a Government-sponsored programme, which is, frankly, simply despicable.

The UK Anti-Corruption Coalition says that 6,312 tier 1 visas—more than half of all golden visas—are being reviewed for possible national security risks. That is the scale of the problem. The Government opened the door to this. By April 2022, 10 Russian nationals subject to sanctions had previously been granted golden visas. That is what this Government have permitted in this country. In the light of today's news from the director general of MI5 about potential attacks in this country from Iranian agents, could the Minister tell us whether any of these golden visas were issued to Iranian nationals?

How many people got this red-carpet treatment when they should have had the rug pulled from under their feet? And how are the Government now quantifying the level of damage that these visas, and their approach, have caused? The message sent across the globe has been that London and the UK have been open to blood-soaked money from wherever it comes. Frankly, secret meetings with agents of other countries—this goes right to the top of Government under the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson)— have simply not been documented. This is a Government who have undermined national security on so many levels and damaged the UK.

The Government have made some reforms to tier 1 visas since 2015, but there remain glaring loopholes, including one that allowed 100 golden visa applicants to borrow money from a firm owned by Russian nationals in order to make investments that ultimately went back to Russia. How are the Government penalising those involved, and how are they seeking to capture the money that should have been here? Can the Minister give any further clarity on timing for the review of the whistleblower legislation?

I have three final points, which are much wider. The first is on corporate criminal liability. The Committee said that the Foreign Office should work across Government to encourage reform of outdated and ineffective corporate criminal liability laws that mean that it is difficult to hold large companies to account for economic crime. In response, all the Government said was that they had commissioned a report from the Law Commission and were considering further action. The initial call for evidence by the Government concluded in March 2017—five and a half years ago. The Government then reported on this in November two years ago. And the Law Commission's options paper was published in June 2022. I hope the Minister can give us today an update on progress, because frankly it looks like the Government are not even dragging their feet; they have not even got out of bed.

I have already touched on unexplained wealth orders. Since the passage of the emergency legislation this year, only one unexplained wealth order has been applied for by law enforcement. In total, only nine UWOs relating to four cases have been obtained by the NCA since the tool was introduced in January 2018, and just one unsuccessful application for a UWO left the NCA facing

[Neil Coyle]

£1.5 million in legal costs. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight touched on the cost imbalance and the resourcing issue. The problem is much wider, because aid cuts have led to a £3.6 million budget cut for law enforcement bodies tackling illicit finance and doing international corruption work, and have resulted in the target for the use of UWOs based on aid-funded investigations being reduced to zero. I ask the Government to increase their ambition. Through the Government, law enforcement should be able to obtain UWOs, and they should have a boost in resources to fund the expert staff and technical capabilities that they require.

The UK Anti-Corruption Coalition suggests hypothecation to boost resources and capability. It suggests that funds generated through law enforcement activities be reinvested in law enforcement budgets to fund things such as the state-of-the-art IT infrastructure and data analysis capabilities required to do the job. Law enforcement bodies are hamstrung at the moment and are desperate for resources and capability.

Between 2016 and 2021, law enforcement bodies responsible for fighting economic crime in the UK brought in £3.9 billion in confiscation and forfeiture orders and fines. If that money had been reinvested in the agencies on top of their core budgets, an additional £748 million a year would have been provided to help tackle the problem. That is nearly double the resources that the Government currently provide, so I hope the Minister will respond to the UK Anti-Corruption Coalition's recommendation.

SLAPPs allow oligarchs to supress evidence of their corruption and protect their reputation through vexatious litigation, unfortunately and very sadly through British law firms, against those seeking to tell truth to power, including journalists and publishers. The pressure of excessive costs coupled with the personal strain of legal threats hampers the ability of investigative journalists, academics and campaigners to shine a light on evidence of illicit wealth. Between March and May, the Government called for evidence on SLAPPs, and concluded in their report that they intend to pursue legislative reform at the earliest opportunity. That requires significant change, so will the Minister outline how the Government will take forward that well overdue legislation? Will they introduce early dismissal so that courts can dismiss any case that is in the public interest, and cost protection for defendants? I hope the Minister will tell us when the Government will legislate and, more importantly, when those powers will be in place to protect those who seek to shine a light on illicit finance in the UK, which is a growing problem.

2.7 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and to speak about the Foreign Affairs Committee report on illicit finance and the war in Ukraine. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for introducing this important debate. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle).

Illicit finance is not new or geographically isolated, but Putin's war on Ukraine has shone a public light on the massive scale of economic crime. We know that Russian money is being laundered through the UK, and in the view of the report it is more likely than not being used to fund the war in Ukraine. We cannot and must not allow Britain's financial intuitions to continue to be used to house or move dirty money.

The Foreign Affairs Committee report sets out in stark terms that there is a cost of complacency. There is a cost to our global financial standing and our national security, and a cost in lives, when laundered money is used to pay for war. Continuing this complacency and doing nothing is not an option.

Valuing, listening to and protecting those who speak out to uncover corruption is part of the answer. I particularly welcome the Committee's recommendation that:

> "The FCDO should…push for a Whistleblowing Bill to offer protection to those who speak out against, or uncover, economic crimes and other wrongdoing."

It is often journalists who investigate and uncover critical evidence of corruption. They frequently rely on informed insiders—whistleblowers—who have usually been frustrated by failed attempts to raise the alarm internally. I welcome the Government's commitment to stop the use of SLAPPs, as has been set out so well by the two previous speakers. It demonstrates the Government's commitment to upholding the fundamental democratic values of free speech and a free press, ending the abuse of the UK legal system and defending investigations in the public interest.

As the report points out, journalists are not the only truth tellers who need protection. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for whistleblowing, I am campaigning for a whistleblowing Bill, and in the previous parliamentary Session I promoted a private Member's Bill to create an office of the whistleblower. I note that in their response to the Committee's report, the Government point to existing legislation designed to protect whistleblowers—the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, known as PIDA—stating that it provides

> "protection to those who speak up in the public interest."

However, PIDA, the UK's current whistleblowing legislation, applies only to some employees, not all workers or anyone else who may reasonably learn of impropriety or criminal activity, such as trustees, volunteers, family members or customers, or others in the supply chain. It is limited. Moreover, a person who speaks out receives only limited protection from the harm or detriment that often arises when they are bullied or harassed out of their work as a result of their whistleblowing. That is no comfort for people considering speaking out where illicit finance, rogue regimes and criminal gangs are involved—the risks are simply too high.

I firmly believe that the way to uncover economic crime and illicit finance is to encourage people to report wrongdoing. Research shows that more than 40% of fraud, for instance, is detected through whistleblowers, but for people to come forward, they must feel safe. Although I was glad that the Government reiterated their commitment to reviewing the whistleblowing framework, I am disappointed that the scope and timing remain under consideration. The Committee report expressed a concern that the Government lack

> "sufficient resources and expertise to ensure the effective implementation and enforcement of these sanctions".

If resources to do that are lacking, they will also be lacking to collect and investigate those whistleblowing tips. That is yet another reason for including whistleblower provisions in our fight against illicit finance.

For those reasons, I am calling for a unified office that will set standards for whistleblowing to which every organisation, industry and Government will comply. It will ensure that they put in place proper mechanisms to receive, examine and escalate reports where appropriate and work with law enforcement where there is evidence of wrongdoing. The Committee recognises the need for a whistleblowing Bill. I am being helpful and urging the Minister and the Government, in the light of this important report, to get behind my whistleblowing Bill, which I promoted in the previous Session, but which fell due to time. It is ready and waiting to be taken up, and I would love the Government to bring it forward as part of their legislative agenda.

2.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I say what a pleasure it is to speak in this debate? I commend the hon. Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson); I am pleased to follow her. I agree wholeheartedly with her comments about whistleblowing and the importance of having that Bill in place. I hope that the Government will look sympathetically on that, because it is a positive step in the right direction. There are many things in this House we would like to do—we have ideas, we bring forward Bills, and they are not always accepted—but that Bill is certainly one that would be worthy of acceptance.

I commend the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for setting the scene so well. He has a vast knowledge, and I mean that genuinely. I very much look forward to his contributions in the Chamber. They are always detailed, informational and evidential, which I think helps us all—it helps me, anyway—to better understand things, and I appreciate that. It is always a pleasure to hear the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) speaking as well. He also has a depth of knowledge on this subject. We have had exceptional contributions today and others will follow, whenever the shadow Ministers speak as well.

I thank the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee for their findings in the second report into illicit finance and the war in Ukraine. Monday's debate was the first on Ukraine that I could not attend, primarily because I was stuck at Belfast City airport and could not get away because of the fog and all the other things that were happening that day. However, I have spoken in nearly every debate involving Ukraine. I had a deep passion and interest in Ukraine long before the Russians invaded, because churches in my constituency have done missionary work and provided humanitarian aid in Ukraine for many years, way back into the 1990s. Indeed, I sponsored a Christian family in Ukraine back then.

It is clear, given the levels of illicit money laundering by the Russian kleptocracy, that the UK's response was somewhat underprepared. This debate has followed a theme: what have we done to respond? In all honesty, the answer is probably, "Not as much as we should have." Ultimately, to combat illicit crime from Russia, we must commit to a transatlantic partnership, so I welcome the findings of the report and the Government's reply. At least they have understood the issue, but I do not think they went far enough. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight referred to that, and I am certainly going to say the same thing.

At the very start of the invasion, Transparency International identified more than £1.5 billion of UK property owned by Russians accused of financial crime or with links to the Kremlin, and that will have increased since then. The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr Djanogly) referred to how Government need to be able to take all the assets they seize and turn them into financial assistance to help the Ukrainians to rebuild their land, their country, their buildings and their infrastructure. In all honesty, I believe that that £1.5 billion—probably more now—would go a long way to helping rebuild Ukraine. It would be poetic justice if those moneys were used for that purpose.

We want calls for action. In 2019, the "Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK" report found the laundering of dirty money from Russia to be an instrumental problem. Until the invasion of Ukraine, there was unfortunately little commitment to tackling the problem. Through many sanctions and Bills brought forward to Parliament, we have learned our lesson about taking lax approaches to corrupt and autocratic regimes. It seems there have never been so many autocratic regimes in the world as today. The report being discussed today also stated:

> "By the Government's own measure, 'there is a realistic possibility that the scale of money laundering impacting the UK annually is hundreds of billions of pounds'."

The £1.5 billion I referred to earlier on is almost just picking the scab of the real corruption.

Unexplained wealth orders were used in 2021 to recover the proceeds of illicit crime. In Northern Ireland, England and Wales, £219 million was recovered. In a debate in the Chamber on that very issue, I referred to a case of money that came from Latvia and right through Germany, France and Belgium into England and it ended up in Northern Ireland. It was a massive amount of money—more than £200 million—and an example of corruption on a very high scale.

While unexplained wealth orders are a welcome move in recovering the proceeds of illicit crime, London has unfortunately become a hub for illicit money. Where does that leave the smaller regions, such as Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, where it will become increasingly attractive for launderers to invest money? The hon. Member for Isle of Wight referred to some of the ways in which that money can be invested in an attempt to legitimise it through a legitimate company, yet that money is still economically and criminally wrong.

The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill has been introduced to fight the flows of dirty money. I previously raised with the Secretary of State the fact that Companies House was identified as taking part in 89 economic crime incidents, which came to a total sum of £137 billion of potential economic damage. The Bill must introduce regulatory objectives to tackle illicit finance across this United Kingdom. I welcome the fact that it introduces new powers for robust verification requirements to ensure that business ownership across the UK is as transparent as possible. That has to be good news. When the Government do something well, I like to give them credit for that.

We must not let it slip our minds that Kremlin-backed oligarchs rely on the western transatlantic system. As I mentioned earlier, we need to protect our good relationships with other western allies to ensure that proactive steps are taken to reprimand the enablers and their proxies to whom illegal wealth is transferred. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight outlined how that is done, the procedures that take place and the ways that people cover their tracks.

[Jim Shannon]

The integrated review named Russia as

"the most acute threat to our security",

and I believe that to be the case. China is undoubtably trying to catch Russia and is biting at its heels. Russia has proceeded to diminish every aspect of Ukraine's domestic security. I am proud of our Government and Ministers'—even in the Chancellor's statement earlier—continued commitment to Ukraine. This great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is leading the way and all the other countries—I say it with great respect to them—have almost been shamed into matching what the United Kingdom is doing. The Foreign Affairs Committee report concluded:

"The Government cannot afford to rely on rhetoric if it is to deliver on its commitment to tackle illicit finance"

so let's get it done. We have been seen to be under-resourced in the past and that has led to our own constituents, including many of mine, losing their hard-earned money.

Our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland prides itself on the rule of law and the protection of our economy and citizens. If we do not put in the necessary means and resources, we allow Putin and his illegal regime to take advantage of the freedoms of the western world. That must stop. Like the hon. Gentleman and others, I call on the FCDO and the Minister to ensure the immediate enactment of this Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill for the betterment of our economy and the protection of our assets from Russian interference. The quicker that happens, the quicker the world will be a better place.

2.22 pm

Alyn Smith (Stirling) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Efford. I am glad to wind up for the SNP in this important debate. I commend the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely)—he is a leading expert in the House on these issues. As ever, he made a powerful contribution and I commend him on his efforts. I thank the Foreign Affairs Committee for this important piece of work. I am here partly on behalf of my good and hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), who is presently engaged in a by-election in Glasgow.

If we boil down my speech to its essence, the SNP supports the report and wants to see it all implemented. I urge the Minister to show a bit more ambition and oomph than we have seen thus far in the official Government response to the report. I appreciate that there is collective responsibility, but I stress to the Minister that this is a cross-party report and these are cross-party recommendations. Where there are serious efforts to tackle this stuff, the SNP will play our part in that coalition. There is a real opportunity for the Government to make meaningful progress on these important matters, because we do have a problem. There has been a triptych of reports from the House: the "Moscow's Gold" report, which has been mentioned; the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament's Russia report; and this report, which sits alongside both of those previous efforts.

The report broadens the point, which has been well made, that we are not just speaking about dirty Russian money. Dirty money is dirty money, wherever it comes from. Dirty money corrodes and hides in the shadows. The fewer shadows we have in our economic governance the better. I speak as a former financial services solicitor in the City, so I am familiar with the ways these rules can be gotten around. We are dealing with some of the most slippery, best-advised and richest people in society who are really good at getting round rules. We need to make sure that there are as few loopholes and grey areas as possible, because, as we have heard, the numbers are vast. The UK's financial and professional services sectors have played a key role in bankrolling the Kremlin regime, and other regimes. That should really shame us all and give us all pause.

Illicit finance needs to be tackled. London is a major international finance centre, but it is also an international dirty finance centre, and I include Edinburgh in that and various other place in the UK, as well. This is a common effort that we need to work upon.

I do not propose to rehearse the points that have already been made, but I will pick out a few things on which I urge the UK Government to act. And I pledge SNP support in this House and the co-operation of the Scottish authorities as well, because much of this matter is reserved as opposed to devolved, and Holyrood cannot touch it.

On the golden visa review, others have called for the review to publish. Yes, the scheme has ended, but important lessons need to be learned and some individuals still give cause for concern. We need to better ventilate that issue and see that review come forward.

On the slightly misnamed Scottish limited partnerships, people should not let the name fool them; the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament cannot regulate these legal vehicles and we need to see much greater transparency about them. The fact that we can see vast tracts of the highlands, including parts of my constituency in Stirling, being owned by opaque trusts, whereby we are not sure who the ultimate beneficial owner is, is absurd. We need to get that system fixed.

I warmly endorse the comments that made about whistleblowers, but I also endorse the recommendations in the report. We need to see greater protection for whistleblowers who bring to light facts that are of public interest. I also warmly endorse the points about SLAPPs and judicial intimidation. If the hon. Member for Isle of Wight is looking for a SNP name for his Bill, count me in; I will happily swing in with those efforts.

Regarding overseas territories, at every point that we have discussed the sanctions regime on Russia after the invasion of Ukraine—I have been involved in all those discussions—I have made the point about ensuring that there is complementarity and that there are no gaps with the overseas territories. I have been assured that there is neither complacency nor such gaps, but I am still not convinced that that is entirely the case. We need a lot more due diligence to ensure that the overseas territories are joined up and in lockstep with what we are trying to achieve because, as I have already said, some of the best-advised and slipperiest people in the world are really good at finding loopholes where they exist, or indeed creating them where they can.

There is also the point about the professional enablers: the public relations professionals; the lawyers; the accountants; and the others who have facilitated malfeasance. We need to see the professional bodies step up as well, but we also need the Government to expect much better of them. As I say, I now speak as a former solicitor, but I am still aware that there are gaps that can be exploited.

We also need to better finance the organs of Government that deal with economic crime. Good work is under way, and a lot of good people are working on this issue, but they need more support and more resources.

In closing, Companies House's role should be that of an active, muscular regulator with teeth. However, it is not that at the moment. That is not a criticism of anybody in Companies House, but it is not doing what it needs to be able to do. It needs more resources and more powers to do it.

I hope that I have struck a consensual note in my contribution. Not much can be gained from a party political bidding war about which party is dirtiest or which party is the most in hock to dirty money. There is a common effort that we need to work upon here; it is in the interests of all our citizens to get this problem fixed. If the Minister here today is going to give these plans a bit more oomph than we have seen to date, he will have the SNP's support in doing so.

2.28 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford. I think it is for the first time and it is lovely to see you in the Chair.

I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who is not currently present, and the other Committee members who have been here today: my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) and, of course, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely), who knows Russia well and has been talking about these issues since before February 2022. I am sure the Committee will be as concerned as I am about the events of recent days. My thoughts and my condolences are with the people of both Poland and Ukraine at this immensely challenging time for both countries.

Labour is unwavering in its commitment to NATO, to Europe's collective security and to providing long-term support to Ukraine and its people as they put everything into the defence of their country and the values of democracy, freedom, peace, security and self-determination. Labour also maintains that the bravery, courage and resolve of Ukrainians must be met with commensurate action, not only in our direct support to President Zelensky and his people but by eradicating Russian influence from our economy and our politics.

The Select Committee report states:

"The Integrated Review named Russia as the 'most acute threat to our security.'"

It should not require a war on our continent for there finally to be the impetus to do something about illicit Russian finance, which has polluted our society and economy for decades. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) have worked consistently on the issue in the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax. I was a member of that group before I became a Front Bencher—or rather, in my time between being a Front Bencher and a Back Bencher.

Years of inaction have seen our capital dubbed "Londongrad". My hon. Friends the Members for Bermondsey and Old Southwark and for Putney (Fleur Anderson) were quite right to talk about the heavy influence that inaction has had on property prices for Londoners trying desperately to get on to the housing ladder, and the way in which prices have rushed up, particularly in the current climate. We are now reaping the impact of hundreds of billions of pounds having been laundered here in the UK, much of which will be being deployed to fund Putin's war machine.

The Labour party has been pressing the Government for action for years and has raised the issue of illicit finance on the Floor of the House dozens of times. At our conference in 2021, prior to the invasion of Ukraine, my hon. Friend the Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), then shadow Foreign Secretary, committed to a specific taskforce to look at the matter in depth.

Even now, it is fair to assert that the measures adopted in the Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022 do not go far enough to tackle the problem. The report says that the steps taken by the Government since February

"are not preventative but rather constitute damage limitation",

brought about by years of apathy. The report catalogues a litany of errors and shortfalls and the Government's unwillingness to bring forward legislation and the culture change required, which could truly stem the flow of dirty money, deal with its enablers and provide sufficient resourcing to enforce any changes in the law.

This challenge did not originate in February 2022; the Opposition have been calling for action on it for years. We have known of Putin's corrupt regime—and the risks that it has posed for our region and globally—since 2008, when he flagrantly broke international law to invade Georgia to retain control over the Caucasus, after brutally repressing the people of Chechnya. He did it again in Crimea in 2014, and later unleashed a brutal attack against the people of Syria. Who can forget the images of blown-out Idlib and how similar many of the bombed-out cities in the east of Ukraine appear now?

As well as Putin's heinous war against Ukraine and his bid to wipe it from the map—the latest manifestation of almost two decades of relentless warmongering at the expense of civilians around the world—we are also aware of the threat posed by Russia as a state of sprawling kleptocracy. Oligarchs have exploited our economic set-up to expand their wealth, protect their assets and further the Kremlin's nefarious intent. As the report highlights, we are still nowhere near where we need to be to remedy years of inaction in rowing back the tides of polluted Russian finance.

On the substance of the report, I am sure that the Minister will cite the 2022 Act, which Labour supported and welcomed earlier this year as a step in the right direction. The hon. Member for Isle of Wight and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking tabled amendments and brought improvements to the Bill. The report rightly asserts that although the legislation makes welcome changes in some areas, it represents only a fraction of the changes needed to address the systemic vulnerability to Russia's illicit finance. It was also lacking in reforms to Companies House, which are still not sorted, and it failed entirely to get to grips with cryptoassets to strengthen anti-money laundering regimes.

To inject a little bit of humour into this rather dry topic, I am sure Members will be interested in the Royal United Services Institute video in which an individual called "Mr Crooked Crook Crook" bowled up to Companies House to register his business and was

[Catherine West]

welcomed with open arms. RUSI being that worried about a dodgy crook trying to register their company with Companies House highlights, with some humour, the issue that we face.

Even the limited progress that the legislation offers is hampered by the fact that the Government are not sufficiently resourcing the UK bodies that are tasked with enforcing the changes. The report finds that only 0.042% of GDP is spent on funding national-level economic crime and enforcement bodies. As a result, money laundering prosecutions have dropped by 35% over the past five years. We have talked about the issue regularly in the House, yet the opposite seems to have occurred in terms of the number of successful money laundering prosecutions.

The existing budget for economic crime law enforcement is £400 million, with only £100 million of that coming from the Treasury. That appears to be entirely inadequate. The National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office and other bodies urgently need more funding to row back years of inactivity in this area, protect legitimate business and safeguard our national security.

We must also do far more to oppose those who seek to use their wealth to avoid scrutiny, skirt the law and remain beyond the reach of those who enforce it. The non-governmental organisation Spotlight on Corruption highlights the fact that money laundering prosecutions have dropped by 35% over the past five years. The UK is by far the most frequent country of origin for SLAPPs, with 31% of cases originating in the UK.

The hon. Member for Isle of Wight mentioned the famous author Catherine Belton; I recommend that everybody goes and buys her book for Christmas. "Putin's People" comes highly recommended by members of the Foreign Affairs Committee. It considers the connections between kleptocracy, the UK and Londongrad, and the serious action that needs to be taken. Unfortunately, the judicial system was used to bully her publisher, as the hon. Member said. That is something we need to stop. It is a waste of court time and we must tighten things up and not allow such disgraceful acts to occur.

Although Labour welcomes changes brought in through the statutory instrument debated in October, which introduced a cap on the damages that oligarchs can win through protracted legal showdowns, we must go further. These oligarchs are concerned with only one thing: retaining their ostentatious wealth of questionable origin. They are litigious and resourceful, many will circumvent any rule to keep what they have and, in many cases, the Government do not have the basics in place to oppose them. Even the former Foreign Secretary—and briefly Prime Minister—the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) slammed the Government's record as a "decade of drift" on Russia.

Labour maintains that, in expanding our regime against Russia, the Government have been taking time that the people of Ukraine simply do not have. We have been sounding the alarm for years and will continue to do so. Today's *Financial Times* reports that the Russian economy has contracted by 4%. It is an interesting percentage because I think it is about the same amount as ours has contracted since 2016. It shows that this is a very slow process and we need to get a wriggle on and get a move on. The report clearly states:

"Last-minute changes to last-minute legislation" are not indicative of an effective or coherent policy, so we need to get moving. Labour will be very happy to hear of further amendments and statutory instruments that will push this further.

On 11 October 2022, the Government were asked in a parliamentary intervention what consideration had been given to sanctioning cryptocurrency mixers Tornado Cash and Blender. I do not expect the Minister to have the answer right now, but perhaps he could write to me with it and put a copy in the Library for members of the Foreign Affairs Committee to look at as well. Mixers such as these obfuscate the origins of transactions, making them virtually untraceable. Indeed, Tornado Cash has been used to launder more than $7 billion-worth of virtual currency since 2019. The US Treasury has sanctioned both; why have we not? Will the Government bring the UK into line with the US Treasury's approach? Putin and his cronies are more than capable of exploiting such gaps in our regime, so why are we so slow and allowing this to persist?

Finally, I put on the record a question for the Minister. Will he assure us that the funding that has enabled an increase in full-time staffing numbers will not quietly be depleted following today's announcements of tax increases for working people and a decrease in public spending? We desperately need excellent Treasury officials to keep on at this and must provide long-term funding for the critical units across both the FCDO and the Treasury. Prior to the war, some countries, such as the US, were well prepared to apply sanctions clearly and efficiently, but the UK was not. The Government have lagged behind and we must close the gaps in export bans to Russia regarding materials that have a potential for internal oppression. Some of that has now been dealt with by statutory instruments, but I would like to see a complete approach and not a colander effect that sees things slipping through.

I conclude by thanking the Select Committee for its challenging and crucial work on illicit finance. I look forward to further action in this regard and further statutory instruments, so that we can increase the pressure on the Kremlin to stop its vile activity in Ukraine.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Efford, and to respond to the debate on the Government's behalf. I thank all Members for a constructive and useful debate.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Bob Seely) for leading the debate. I acknowledge his long-standing interest and expertise in this field. We are grateful to the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee for producing this extremely useful report. I hope the Government response shows that we regard it as a serious and useful piece of work, and that the overall tone of the response shows that we treat it as a grave matter that requires our urgent attention.

I was grateful for the contributions from the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Stirling (Alyn Smith) and for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West). I should say that this topic lies in the portfolio of my departmental colleague, the noble

Lord Ahmad; I am pleased to respond today on his behalf. I will try to cover off as many of the questions raised as possible, while giving some assurance that the Government's response treats the issue extremely gravely and seriously.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green asked about our approach to tackling the use of cryptocurrencies. We recently introduced legislation to tackle their use when it comes to sanctions. I will write to her, or have the noble Lord Ahmad write to her, with an update on that statutory instrument, which sought to ensure that the application of sanctions keeps pace with the developments in financial markets, especially when it comes to the use of cryptocurrencies and platforms such as Blender.

A number of colleagues asked about the use of offshore shell companies to purchase property in London. We are tackling the use of offshore shell companies. We are reforming the role of Companies House and improving transparency over UK companies and properties in order to strengthen our business environment and support our national security, while delivering a more reliable companies register to underpin what is important business activity.

The reforms will bear down on the use of thousands of UK companies and other corporate structures as vehicles for facilitating international money laundering, corruption, terrorist financing and the illegal arms movement. The reforms will include the identity verification of people who manage or control companies and other UK-registered entities; greater powers for Companies House to query and challenge the information it receives; enhanced protection of personal information provided to Companies House to protect individuals from fraud and other harms; more effective investigation and enforcement powers for Companies House; and better cross-checking of data. Those are some of the reforms; that is not the entire list. We are aware of the issue and we are tightening up the relevant legislation.

A number of colleagues mentioned the use of SLAPPs and eloquently painted a picture of how they are hugely detrimental to the fabric of civil life. We are committed to protecting free speech and the rule of law in this country; they are cornerstones of our democracy. We are clear that SLAPPs are an abuse of the legal system. They involve the use of legal threats and litigation to silence journalists, campaigners and public bodies. That is deeply detrimental to a free and fair media and to the freedom of individuals. Addressing SLAPPs is a key part of the Government's work to combat corruption and kleptocracy.

Colleagues will know that earlier this year the Government ran a call for evidence on SLAPPs reform. Our response, published on 20 July, outlined plans for a legislative definition of SLAPPs and an early dismissal process, supported by a formal cost-protection scheme to shield defendants and neutralise the chilling effect of high costs. I am sure colleagues will be reassured to hear that, and we will keep colleagues updated as the process develops.

A number of colleagues mentioned tier 1 investor visas, which they will know are now closed to new entrants. The Home Office lead on visas. We are currently finalising the historical review of the tier 1 provision. We expect the response to be published in the near future. We recognise the interest in the issue, and it is a complex piece of work. The Home Office is of course looking at how to operate a safe and sustainable approach while also attracting investment. We have to get the balance right, but we are clear that any future system must make sure that settlement must be earned and not bought, through applicants actively engaging in the UK economy and delivering job creation and other tangible economic benefits. I hope that information is useful.

Catherine West: Is the Minister aware that just two weeks ago the Home Secretary mentioned in the House of Commons that a number of visas had been sold? She was referring to the change in policy, but I note the difference in the language that the Minister has used today. Will he clarify what the Home Secretary meant when she said that certain visas had been sold?

Leo Docherty: Although I am grateful for the invitation to speak for the Home Secretary, I am going to pass on that opportunity. The hon. Member might seek clarification from the Home Secretary herself.

We are proud that we have sanctioned more than 1,200 individuals and 120 entities since the start of Putin's outrageous invasion of Ukraine. That includes sanctioning Russia's major banks, as well as more than 120 oligarchs with a combined net worth of more than £140 billion. This was made possible due to cross-Government planning months before the Russian invasion. Our planning proved pivotal to the swift designation of individuals and the introduction of new measures within days of the invasion. The legislation enabled the Foreign Secretary to sanction more individuals and entities at a greater pace.

We are taking robust action across Government, and with our international partners, to ensure that sanctions are effectively enforced. That is done through the Russian elites, proxies and oligarchs taskforce, which brings together international partners to ensure the effective enforcement of financial sanctions implemented against Kremlin-linked elites and entities.

Neil Coyle: Ten of the people sanctioned by the Government are Russian nationals who were recipients of tier 1 visas. Does the Minister have any sense of shame at the level of misuse of that system? When will the review of the 6,000 people who took tier 1 visas but were under investigation for being a national security risk conclude? He has not given us any information on that.

Leo Docherty: I repeat that the review will be published in due course. We recognise that there has been a problem, which is why it is under review. It will come forward in good time, I hope.

Let me turn to the resources committed to sanctions. As noted in the Government's response to the report, we agree that the skillset of staff focused on sanctions has been central to our success in bringing those sanctions to bear. In recognition of the central role that sanctions continue to play as a key part of UK foreign policy, our Department has established a permanent sanctions directorate, in line with one of the report's recommendations. As part of this new directorate, our Department has established a cadre of sanctions experts to build the enduring expertise that we need in the long term.

Additionally, I can confirm that the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation will have more than 100 staff by the end of this financial year, with current staffing

[Leo Docherty]

having already more than double compared to last year. That will enable the OFSI to continue to lead the implementation of UK sanctions and ensure that assets in the UK are frozen.

On our approach to asset freezes as opposed to seizures, and getting that balance right—many colleagues have mentioned this and it has come up on the Floor of the House—we are exploring further options to finance the reconstruction of Ukraine using Russian-linked assets. That presents complex legal and policy challenges that officials are considering in detail with other Departments. We are looking at it seriously because we recognise that the scale of assets currently frozen is very significant. I am sure we would all be pleased if there was a route through good legal policy to ensure that that money could be used to make a positive difference.

On overall funding, combatting illicit finance requires the necessary resources to enforce our anti-money laundering laws and bring kleptocrats to justice, which is why the Government have developed a sustainable funding model that demonstrates our commitment to tackling economic crime. We are investing in the National Crime Agency and have increased its budget year on year since 2019. Since February, we have also created a new unit in the NCA, the combating kleptocracy cell, which is focused on targeting corrupt elites and their wealth in the UK. The combination of last year's spending review settlement and private sector contributions through the new economic crime levy will provide funding of £400 million over the spending review period. That includes £63 million for Companies House to implement its transformation programme, which I already mentioned.

On the speed and scale of our response, we have taken robust action over the past decade. We published a landmark economic crime plan in 2019; we increased the number of investigations into corrupt elites; we established the National Economic Crime Centre; we passed the Criminal Finances Act 2017; and we became the first major economy in the world to implement a public register of beneficial ownership of domestic companies.

Earlier this year, the Government took swift action by passing the expedited Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act 2022. The Act is already helping us to crack down on dirty Russian money in the UK. The Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill, which builds on that Act, is currently in Committee. The Bill will help us to bear down on kleptocrats, criminals and terrorists who abuse our open economy, thus strengthening the UK's reputation as a place where legitimate business can thrive while driving dirty money out of the UK.

A number of colleagues, particularly the hon. Member for Stirling, mentioned the role of Crown dependencies and overseas territories. Of course, all Crown dependencies and overseas territories with financial centres are committed to meeting international standards on illicit finance, tax transparency and anti-money laundering, including those set by the OECD and the Financial Action Task Force. All Crown dependencies and inhabited overseas territories have committed to introducing publicly accessible registers of company beneficial ownership. That is a major shift that puts them ahead of most jurisdictions.

I am pleased that significant progress has been made by several of the jurisdictions, including Gibraltar, which I visited recently. Gibraltar's register is already operational. The Cayman Islands is working at pace and is completing a consultation on the details of its register. The British Virgin Islands also recently passed legislation that will enable the framework for regulations to be made for a register, in preparation for 2023. Smaller overseas territories, such as Montserrat and Anguilla, are working with the FCDO to update their systems to enable public access. We have funded Open Ownership, a specialist NGO, to provide technical assistance to each overseas territory.

I reiterate our gratitude to the Foreign Affairs Committee for its detailed and useful report. We hope that the Government's response will assure colleagues that we are gripping the issue at the policy and technical levels. We also hope that it sends the message that London and the UK are no place for dirty Russian money and that our legal framework and institutional strength will deter anyone who thinks that is not true. I also hope it will provide reassurance to our friends and allies, especially Ukraine. We are determined to ensure that we are able to help Ukraine to rebuild its country and defend its sovereignty against outrageous Russian aggression, which all too often has been connected to Kremlin-linked international assets. I hope the Government's response reassures people that we are getting after it.

2.53 pm

Bob Seely: I thank everyone for taking part in the debate and I thank you, Mr Efford, for chairing.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Second Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee, The cost of complacency: illicit finance and the war in Ukraine, HC 168, and the Government response, HC 688.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Persecution of Christians

[Dame Maria Miller *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered persecution of Christians and freedom of religion or belief.

I am pleased to make a contribution in Westminster Hall any time, but I am especially pleased to speak on this matter today. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and I, with the support of other Members, approached the Backbench Business Committee to ask for a debate around this time, because we wanted it to tie in with Red Wednesday, which is next Wednesday. We were pleased to get the debate, and I am pleased to see right hon. and hon. Members here to contribute to it.

I start by declaring an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. In that capacity, I regularly voice, as other Members do in and outside the Chamber, the plight of Christians, those of other faiths and those of no faith who suffer on the grounds of their faith or belief. In my work with the APPG, I am regularly edified and encouraged by seeing all faiths and beliefs work together to advance FORB issues. Whether it is Christians advocating for humanists, humanists advocating for Muslims, or Muslims advocating for Sikhs, cross-belief support is a remarkable driver of change and solidarity in the face of persecution. I believe that human rights and religious belief walk hand in hand—they are married.

However, this debate is specifically about persecution of Christians. We should not shy away from the plight of persecuted Christians. I never will, and others in the Chamber never will. Against a backdrop of deteriorating conditions for many faiths and beliefs, we must not and will not dilute the grave challenges Christians face worldwide. In 2015, the largest religious group was those of a Christian faith, who numbered 2.3 billion, or 31% of the global population. In 2022, 360 million Christians experienced high levels of persecution and discrimination, an increase of some 20 million on 2021. In 2019, religious groups—especially Christians—were persecuted in 190 out of 198 countries.

We often look at stats and just take note of them, but the stats prove the issue. That is why this debate is so important. My remarks and those by others today will show that Christians face extreme levels of violent attacks in places such as Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Mali, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, China, Russia, India and North Korea. I could name another 40; those are just 10 out of the more than 50 countries where Christians suffer for their faith today. The scale of oppression means that it is necessary to focus on one group in particular. That is why I gave the stats that I gave, and that is why the debate is so titled. By advocating freedom of religion for Christians, I can be safe in the knowledge that freedom of religion or belief for all will improve. I am a believer in that, Dame Maria; I believe that expressing myself in this debate on behalf of Christians will ensure that those of other beliefs and faiths have the very same rights.

This debate is especially pertinent because next Wednesday, 23 November, is Red Wednesday. That is a Christian initiative, spearheaded by Aid to the Church in Need, to remember our Christian brothers and sisters around the world who are persecuted for their faith. Buildings will be lit up red—the colour of martyrdom, which illustrates the blood of saints killed across the world. Next Wednesday, I hope that more and more people will be made aware of the persecution of Christians.

Yesterday, Aid to the Church in Need launched its latest report, entitled "Persecuted and Forgotten?" I wish I could have attended that event, but the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) brought me a copy of the report during the Westminster Hall debate on Ethiopia and Tigray. The report highlights cases of Christians persecuted due to their faith over the last three years, and it makes for harrowing reading. Some of the contributions to that debate referred to cases in the report, which are harrowing. I always find it incredibly hard to listen to contributions in the Chamber recounting personal stories of what happens to men, women and children because of their faith.

In 75% of the countries surveyed, oppression or persecution of Christians has increased in recent years. Similarly, the Open Doors "World Watch List" report finds year after year that the persecution of Christians is getting worse, not better—it never seems to get better. Last year, 5,898 Christians were murdered for their faith, and thousands more were maimed or injured, or had their places of worship damaged or destroyed. In the age of technological, social and medical advancements, we should ask ourselves why rights for Christians are not advancing. We are here today to make that point and illustrate it in an evidential way with stories.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has set out the statistics about how many Christians have been persecuted for their faith. Does he agree that, as a Christian country with an established Church, we need to do more to protect Christians in the UK and across the world, and use our global influence, especially in the Commonwealth, to help Christians and people of all faiths so that no one has to die in such horrific ways?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do. I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman is here to participate in the debate. He and I hold similar Christian views and faith.

My party and I first held a debate on the persecution of Christians back in, I think, 2012. The right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) and the hon. Member for Congleton were both there, and there was consensus on both sides of the Chamber. That is when debates on Christianity as a persecuted faith started, and we have continued to hold them. I think they have had a key role.

I am pleased to see the Minister in his place. I spoke to him before the debate and I have great expectations of him, because I know he understands the issue. The hon. Member for Congleton and I were both saying yesterday that we have high expectations of him, and I am sure we will not be disappointed.

[Jim Shannon]

Complacency about the ever-worsening conditions for Christians around the world must stop now. The "Persecuted and Forgotten?" report found that the situation for Christians has worsened in all the countries in Africa that were reviewed: Mali, Sudan, Eritrea, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mozambique. The atrocious conditions are evidenced by a sharp increase in genocidal violence. I use that word on purpose, because it illustrates exactly what is happening: it is genocidal violence from militant non-state actors, including jihadists. It is very clear to me that we need to address this issue.

Over the past two years, I and many other hon. Members have repeatedly highlighted how Christian persecution has only intensified since covid-19. According to the Institute of Development Studies:

"In a significant amount of the nations which have encountered outbreaks of the novel coronavirus, politicians and opinion leaders have openly condemned religious minority populations under the guise of epidemiological containment".

In other words, it is saying that those of the Christian faith are the subject, in this case, of

"hateful messages on social media, public speeches and official policies."

One would have hoped that such a diminished standard of treatment of religious minorities during covid-19 would have abated by now, but, disappointingly, that does not seem to have happened. The deteriorating conditions accelerated by the pandemic have not been fleeting or vaccinated away. Instead, the pandemic facilitated the creeping curtailment of Christians' exercise of their faith. That is now the new normal, with no sign of improvement. That has to be addressed across the world.

There are so many countries I could touch on to exhibit the ever-worsening conditions for Christians around the world, but two in particular stand out to me. I have visited both. I want to speak about Nigeria, which I visited in May 2022, and Pakistan, which I visited in 2018. I hope to go back to Pakistan in February next year, if I am spared until that time. Why do I choose those two countries when so many others are also culprits? It is partly for the sheer scale of their abuses of Christians and other religious groups, but it is also because they are the two largest recipients of UK aid. I want to tie those stories together. I am all for UK aid—I am very supportive of it—but I think there has to be an undertaking from Nigeria and Pakistan to address the issues of Christian persecution, discrimination and abuse.

It is my hope that the UK can make the most difference to those countries, and it has a great responsibility to do so. When this country's taxpayers are contributing to aid going to countries that allow the perpetrators of persecution to escape with immunity, we must ask ourselves whether we are confident that we are not complicit in any abuses taking place. We need to use the aid that we give to those and other countries as an instrument to change what is happening.

To that end, this Government must continue to seek answers about where their aid is going, who it is reaching, and whether religious groups in need are benefiting from that assistance. I ask the question of others on many occasions. Like others, I hear the stories of religious groups not getting the assistance they should when it comes to humanitarian aid and direct UK aid to those countries. Without significant transparency about the aid that is distributed, we cannot be sure that it is not simply fuelling the oppression of Christians. That is a big statement to make, but it is how we feel. Others will illustrate that clearly.

Gender-specific religious-based persecution is a serious problem in Pakistan, with some reports listing it as one of the worst offenders worldwide. When we were in Pakistan back in 2018, we had discussions with the high commissioner about the blasphemy law, which I will comment on later. We chose to adopt a certain attitude on that visit to Pakistan, because we thought that if we condemned the blasphemy law outright, we probably would not get the opportunity to speak to the judges we needed to speak to. Instead, we illustrated to them evidentially that—and it is true—accusations of blasphemy are often malicious, vindictive and untrue. That is what happened in the case of Asia Bibi. Two of the three judges we met agreed; they were of the opinion that it was malicious, vindictive and dishonest, and they said that Asia Bibi would be released. There was an appeal and she was released; she now lives in Canada with her family. But there are other Asia Bibis in Pakistan, and it is very clear from ongoing cases that blasphemy laws are being used in a vindictive fashion.

Aid to the Church in Need's "Hear Her Cries" report recorded that in the Sindh province in 2018 there were more than 1,000 cases of Christian or Hindu women suffering forced conversion—almost three a day. More often than not, they are just young girls. Women also suffer so-called forced marriage, which is not marriage at all—not as you, Dame Maria, and I would see marriage. It is the rape of non-Muslim women, who are often under age, too.

One high-profile case is that of Maira Shahbaz. I am pretty sure that the right hon. Member for Gainsborough will speak about this, too. In 2020, aged just 14, she was abducted, raped, and forced to marry her abductor and convert. Her birth certificate showed that she was under age, but Lahore High Court judged her to be legally wed, even though the law of the land said that that was impossible. Since Maira escaped from her captor, she has been forced to stay in hiding. Despite repeated requests that the Home Office in this country grant her asylum, she is still waiting. I know that that is not the responsibility of this Minister, but I make a plea, as others will, for Maira Shahbaz to have her asylum request processed so that she can settle in this country, with the freedom that she deserves to have. Hers is a worthy asylum case and a very clear one, given the violence and the loss of freedom that she has suffered.

Sadly, gender-specific persecution is not unique to Pakistan. According to gender-specific research released last year, there was a 31% increase in violence, be that sexual, physical or psychological, against Christian women and girls compared with the previous year. The latter two forms of violence saw the biggest increase in incidents. According to Open Doors:

"Sexual violence can be overt, such as Christian women being abducted by Boko Haram and used as sex slaves, or it can be covert, under the guise of forced marriage, for example. Given the honour culture of many societies, sexual violence is often used to intentionally shame and stigmatise victims as well as their families and communities."

The impact on all the families is quite large and quite significant.

Moreover, in honour/shame cultures, such as those found in India, many of the methods used to persecute Christian women and girls result in stigma—indeed, that is often a key reason behind the attacks. For example, rape victims are often viewed by society as sexually impure, making them vulnerable to rejection and limiting their prospects. This only serves to perpetuate a cycle of violence against Christians, making it increasingly taboo to be a follower of Christ in this world, which is something that I and many in this Chamber adhere to.

In Pakistan, gender-specific persecution is not the only challenge that Christians face. The ever present threat of allegations under blasphemy law and subsequent imprisonment or death has been used as a weapon against the Christians in Pakistan. Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws continue to be leveraged to accuse Christians and other non-Muslims of insulting the Prophet Mohammed or the Koran. Those false accusations are slurs, but they are also malicious, vindictive and dishonest, and they are often made in order to target Christians after a non-related dispute. Many of the cases that I have been aware of have had something to do with land disputes, property disputes, or fallouts. Even a false accusation can lead to mob violence. Once again, such allegations can lead to Christians living in hiding for years afterwards—as Maira Shahbaz is—with little hope of escape, and closed avenues of asylum in the UK. Those avenues of asylum should be open and available to those who have been persecuted and discriminated against because of their faith.

I visited Nigeria in May, and I am very sad to say that the situation in Nigeria has not changed at all. We had hoped that it would. We had some indications from Government officials that things were advancing. But the reality is very different. In Nigeria, abductions, particularly of women and girls, are rife. Many of us will know—indeed, we will all know—of the kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014. It made headlines when 276 mostly Christian girls were abducted by Boko Haram from their school. What has not made the headlines is the reality of that. Eight years later, more than 100 of those girls are still missing. How hard that must be on their mums, dads, brothers, sisters and all the family members who want to know what has happened to their sisters and daughters.

Regrettably, there are many cases of similar, albeit smaller-scale, abductions, with girls still missing after years. We think of the wee lady Leah Sharibu as well. She has been missing for four years. We had hoped that something might come out of our visit in May in relation to Leah Sharibu, but it has not been forthcoming as of this moment. As long as these girls remain missing, we must ask our Government—my Government—what they are doing to tackle impunity in Nigeria, and how they can be sure that the aid given to Nigeria does not fall into the wrong hands.

I and others have great concerns that Nigeria is the cockpit of Africa and that if it goes wrong in Nigeria, with its massive population, it can go very wrong for the rest of Africa. I know that is something the Minister takes particular interest in, and I am sure that he will give us an update in his response.

In May, earlier this year, I visited Nigeria along with other members of the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief. A main takeaway was that young people were ripe for radicalisation, facilitated largely by Government corruption and a culture of impunity. If more is not done to stem the spread of jihad, we will, without a doubt, witness genocide in Nigeria.

Earlier, I mentioned that some 5,898 Christians were killed last year, for simply believing that Jesus is their Lord. I find that almost incomprehensible. Of those, 4,650 were in Nigeria. That gives us an idea of the scale of the difficulties in Nigeria; that is why my focus has been on Pakistan and Nigeria. Yet again, that figure means that more Christians were murdered in Nigeria for following Jesus than in the rest of the world combined. That is a big stat to take in.

Yesterday, Bishop Jude, from Ondo State in Nigeria, visited Parliament. He is the bishop in the diocese where earlier this year, on Pentecost Sunday—a mere seven days after we visited the area—Catholics were massacred during a church service at St Francis church. Bishop Jude described how young children were shot through the head by Islamists. The amount of pain and suffering that such attacks inflict upon Nigeria's population is unimaginable, and yet their faith still remains. It is an incredible test of faith, but it also tells of the faith they have.

What of the international community's response? In November 2021, the US removed Nigeria from its list of countries of particular concern, and it has still yet to redesignate it as such. I ask that the Minister has discussions with the United States about reinstating Nigeria on that list, where it should be. The US of all countries should be doing that. The reasons for removing the designation remain somewhat unclear, especially in the light of such severe violations of freedom of religion or belief.

Although this Government condemned the attack, they also expressed the view in response to a written question on the matter that:

> "The root causes of violence are complex, and in the case of intercommunal violence, frequently relate to competition over resources, historical grievances and criminality."

I do not deny for a second that this is a complex issue or that there is a backdrop of compounding difficulties to the insecurity in Nigeria, but we must stop kidding ourselves that competition over resources, commonly attributed to climate change, is a greater cause of such violence and killings than pure unabated, violent hatred of Christians. The Islamic extremists in Nigeria could have massacred people in the street or in a Government building, but they did not. Instead, they shot, killed and maimed Christians, who were specifically targeted. The distinctly religious-based nature of the conflict should not be dismissed. Scarce resources do not shoot worshippers through the head; extremists do.

The rise of extremism is not unique to Nigeria. According to the latest report from Aid to the Church in Need, in June 2021, fighters belonging to Islamic State in the Greater Sahara executed five Christian civilians seized at a roadblock between Gao, Mali and Niamey, Niger. In Mozambique, al-Shabaab stepped up its terror campaign, killing Christians, attacking Christian villages and burning down churches. The group is affiliated to Daesh, which claimed responsibility for the March 2021 attack on Palma in north-east Mozambique. All the while, we as the west seem to do very little in response.

I know the Government are committed to freedom of religion and belief, but we need to perhaps take a more focused approach in relation to aid on where the difficulties

[Jim Shannon]

are and what we can do to help. What can we do to stem the flow of violence, persecution, oppression and even genocide against Christians? I have some suggestions for the Minister, for His Majesty's Government—for my Government. First, the FCDO must continue to affirm FORB issues as a priority concern within its human rights agenda, maintain its focus on gender and sexual violence in conflict and its interplay with FORB issues. In short, a mainstreaming of FORB in the FCDO's approach to other nations would be welcome.

In connection with that, asylum seekers who are fleeing due to being persecuted for their religion or belief must be prioritised, and that is critically important. If that is done, the delayed acceptance of religious minorities from Afghanistan into the resettlement scheme would never be repeated. There are some people in a hotel in North Down who have been there since they were repatriated from Afghanistan. I welcome the scheme—I really do—but they are still there. There needs to be a system where people can get out. They want to work, they want to be settled and have things getting back to some normality as much as possible. Similarly, utmost efforts should be made to enable religious minorities to make asylum applications. Often they face more barriers than others in this process.

The work of the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, currently the hon. Member for Congleton, must be adequately resourced and fully integrated into the FCDO's work. That is another ask through this debate. I know that she will not ask for it, but I will ask for it for her, because I think it is the right thing to do. Amplifying the concerns of Christians worldwide is all well and good, but we need to be sure that the FCDO is listening and taking action in response. If that work was incorporated within the FCDO, that would be a massive positive step.

I also suggest, as developed in a debate only a few weeks ago, that His Majesty's Government do more to encourage the abolishment of the death penalty or life sentences for the charges of blasphemy. That is one small change that could make a tangible difference for so many Christians in multiple countries. Encouraging states to ensure the rule of law and not tyranny by sharia courts is fundamental to that aim. It is wholly unacceptable for a state to constitutionally have no state religion and yet have sharia law prevail among its court system, as it does in Nigeria and in other countries.

Finally, returning to Pakistan and Nigeria, I suggest that foreign and development aid be tied to improving FORB conditions. I have said it before in other debates, but saying that again does not lessen the request. It is a different Minister now, and I am always keen to seek the support and the response of the Minister in post. That proposal would not impact on emergency humanitarian aid. We are not saying that aid should not happen; we are saying it needs to be done to improve FORB conditions across the world. It would not impact on the millions of pounds spent by this Government on general development either. Until our Government can be absolutely certain that the recipients of aid are doing all they can to end the persecution, be it state or non-state actors, we should not be complacent about taxpayers' money going to these countries.

I want to end on a positive note—this is my last word for the moment. In the Gospel of Matthew, it says:

> "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

If we cannot deliver justice for the oppressed in this life, may we be sure in the knowledge that justice will be theirs in the second? I believe we have a duty, as representatives in this House and as Christians ourselves, to speak up for our brothers and sisters across the world. We ask our Government and Minister—my Government and Minister—to respond in a positive fashion.

3.28 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I welcome the Minister to his place, particularly knowing as I do his strong personal commitment to humanitarian aid provision over many years, not least from his time as Secretary of State for International Development, when I was privileged to serve on the International Development Committee, but also from our many summer recesses of volunteering when we both enjoyed the Umubano projects in Rwanda and Burundi. I know his commitment is real, and I look forward to working with him equally constructively in my role as the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief. It is very much with a constructive approach that I look at today's debate.

My mandate, as stated on the Foreign Office website, is threefold: to bring together UK efforts to promote freedom of religion or belief; to work with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to raise awareness of cases of persecuted individuals; and to support the implementation of the Bishop of Truro's recommendations, which support not just Christians persecuted for their faith, but freedom of religion or belief for all.

It is always with mixed sentiments that I speak at the annual Red Wednesday debate on the persecution of Christians. It is a privilege to thank the dedicated non-governmental organisations that support those who are suffering simply on account of what they believe. However, year on year, global persecution is rising across faiths and beliefs, and Christians are no exception, as we have heard. The report published yesterday by Aid to the Church in Need, "Persecuted and Forgotten?", highlights the increase in persecution and notes that Christians are the most widely persecuted faith group in the world.

It is encouraging, however, that Governments across the world increasingly recognise the importance of engaging with freedom of religion or belief as a means of promoting world stability and security, and that across the world, more and more people and organisations are working together. Newly appointed envoys from different countries, ambassadors for freedom of religion or belief, academics, experts, NGOs, countries, people at the UN and the special rapporteur are working collaboratively together globally.

For example, this month the countries in the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance are campaigning against blasphemy laws—some involve the death penalty—which penalise people simply for practising their faith. We have timed that to reinforce work at the UN General Assembly on a global moratorium on the death penalty. It is also encouraging that the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance, which I have the privilege of chairing this year, has grown to 42 countries. It started formally only in spring 2020, with a handful of countries,

and now countries are joining almost every other month. Our collective voice is far louder than each individual voice alone.

It is increasingly recognised that religious differences are the cause of much violence and terror across the world, and in turn of insecurity and poverty. I hope that the Minister, who is new to his post, will also recognise that fact, not least with regard to what is happening in Nigeria today. We must engage with that, including in decisions on humanitarian aid spend.

This week, Bishop Jude Arogundade is visiting the UK from Owo in Nigeria. It was at the church in his diocese, St Francis Xavier, where 40 were killed on Pentecost Sunday. The youngest was two years old. Yesterday, he described for us the scene of carnage that met him as he entered his church. Tragically, however, that was not an isolated incident. Right across many states in Nigeria today, Fulani jihadists—Islamic extremists—are kidnapping, ransoming and killing clergy, abducting school students, forcibly converting, raping and marrying Christian girls, seizing land and obliterating villages. They are killing whole communities and then renaming their land. They are dispossessing thousands, who flee to live in informal camps for internally displaced people. Those are not camps with UN support; they are often camps supported by NGOs. Hunger, thirst, fear and lack of shelter are rife there. I heard just this week of how two teenage boys who were hungry risked leaving the IDP camp to try to fish for food. Their bodies were returned; their heads had been split open like melons with machetes.

Time precludes me from providing more accounts of the multiple atrocities happening in Nigeria. I will send the Minister documentation that I have received for this debate, including from Dr Richard Ikiebe of the Pan-Atlantic University, ACN, Baroness Cox, Open Doors and the director of advocacy at Open Doors, Dr David Landrum, who visited just two weeks ago. He tells me that atrocities are happening not just daily but hourly. That cannot just be explained by climate change and a fight over grazing land. As Dr Landrum told me, it is happening now in the forests and the jungles. The kidnapping of the Chibok schoolgirls in 2014 had nothing to do with the fight over land, and nor did the abduction, ransoming or disappearance of thousands of school children, such as Leah Sharibu. Bishop Jude told us:

> "The massacre at St Francis Catholic Church Owo has nothing to do with climate change."

We need to recognise—I implore the Minister to do so today—that religious differences have everything to do with this violence and, indeed, are the key root cause of the atrocities occurring in so many states across Nigeria. Aid to the Church in Need states:

> "In Africa the state of Christians has worsened in all countries reviewed amid a sharp rise in genocidal violence from militant non-state actors, including Jihadists."

Will the Minister meet me and others to discuss how we can address that? Addressing religious differences now needs to be a priority in our decision making. The bilateral official development assistance spend in Nigeria in 2021-22 was more than £100 million.

Other Governments are recognising the importance of promoting religious cohesion and putting real funds behind their commitment. That is why I say that I want to be constructive in making some suggestions. The Netherlands, for example, is funding projects in Nigeria's Kaduna and Plateau states, whereby young Christians and Muslims have worked collaboratively on projects such as one to get more electricity into their communities—and it has worked. Not only has that joint working promoted understanding and cohesion, but the women and young people who use sewing machines to produce clothes for their livelihoods can now work longer hours because of the available electricity. That is just one of many projects where joint working across religious communities can build trust.

How can the UK engage in such a way? That is vital, because Nigeria is a huge country with more than 200 million people. As a result of the violence there, many young people feel increasingly disengaged and futureless. Time and again, I have warned that if the UK—Bishop Jude tells me that our voice still commands huge respect in Nigeria; indeed, more than that of any other country—does not engage, millions of young people who feel they have no future in Nigeria will seek to travel here. The devastating impact of that flood of potentially millions of migrants will overwhelm the countries in between, such as Niger. That point cannot be overstated, and it was mentioned to me strongly by a Member of Parliament from Niger when I met him here last month.

Providing better understanding between faith and belief groups, and between young people in a young country, as Nigeria is, is just as critical as providing education for them. Projects similar to the one I described involving young people and engaging them on FORB have been funded in other countries in many parts of the world. There are FORB-related projects in Somalia, the Philippines, South Sudan, Kenya and Mali. One project I heard of, which I understand is proving successful, is in the Central African Republic, bringing youth and religious leaders together to reduce hate speech in the digital sphere. Will the Minister discuss with me how the UK can play its part in supporting similar projects? Addressing the importance of freedom of religion or belief is vital today if we are to maintain our leadership role in tackling poverty and improving security across the world.

We cannot start too young. The alliance that I chair is taking forward a project from the London ministerial conference to produce materials for primary schools to help teachers to educate the very youngest children that it is just as important not to discriminate against someone on account of their beliefs as it is if they are disabled. I am delighted that one of the schools piloting this project—it was recently welcomed with interest by the Minister with responsibility for schools, the Minister of State, Department for Education, the right hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb)—is in my own constituency. Our alliance's aim is to roll out these teaching materials, once they have been piloted, across the 42 countries in our alliance, an idea initiated by one of vice-chairs of the alliance, ambassador Robert Řehák of the Czech Republic. We cannot start too young to help people across the world to understand how critical it is to live peaceably with others of different beliefs, particularly as there is so much friction leading to violence in the world today.

If the Minister is still unpersuaded by reports from NGOs that the root cause of the current horrendous conflict in Nigeria is not climate change but attacks by religious extremists who are intent on genocidal destruction,

[Fiona Bruce]

would he perhaps support an impartial evaluation of what is currently going on in Nigeria and press for a UN commission of inquiry on Nigeria? Will he consider how addressing such freedom of religion or belief issues can be included more strongly in the wording of the revised integrated review, which was announced by the Chancellor today?

The current integrated review commits as a priority action:

"To promote freedom of religion or belief…overseas, taking forward the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's 2019 independent review and raising awareness of cases of particular concern - including through collaboration with the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance. In 2022, we will host an international ministerial conference to agree steps to advance FoRB for all."

The ministerial conference was held in London in July. No fewer than 88 countries sent official delegates, with over 1,000 delegates attending from over 100 countries in total. The Truro review is a manifesto commitment and there are still outstanding elements to be fulfilled. I hope that the Minister will concur with me—indeed, it is in accordance with the Prime Minister's determination to address outstanding manifesto commitments—that work on the Truro review should be completed. It is about promoting not just freedom of religion for Christians, but freedom of religion or belief for all.

As required under the Truro review, an independent review of progress of the Truro work was carried out this year, commissioned by the FCDO. That independent review was led by three freedom of religion or belief experts, including the UN special rapporteur on FoRB, and it was published in April. Its recommendations were fully accepted by the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), in a written statement, and it highlighted that there is outstanding Truro work to be done. It included as a key recommendation the production of a comprehensive operational action plan to aid

"a more integrated policy approach to mainstreaming FoRB"

in the FCDO, and

"informing multilateral and bilateral level engagement."

That is much needed. The experts highlighted that work on FORB in the FCDO would benefit from

"more connectivity amongst those in the FCDO pursuing FoRB activities".

I agree with that. It is now well over six months since that expert review was completed, and action on the comprehensive operational action plan needs to be taken forward. A lack of joined-up working within the FCDO on FORB means that resources are not being used as efficiently as they could be, and that needs to change.

I would welcome an opportunity to discuss this matter with the Minister, but that is not to disparage the strong commitment to FORB of our parliamentary colleague, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon. It is about making the best use of FCDO resources in support of our mutual roles, and indeed in support of the Minister who is here today.

You will be pleased to hear, Dame Maria, that I will be concluding shortly. We also need to be bolder and better at raising awareness of specific cases of concern. The whole point of advancing freedom of religion or belief is to make lives better. Where individuals are suffering and there is an opportunity for us to make their lives better, we should, in my view, be braver. Of course, this complies with my own mandate, which I touched on at the start of my speech.

We should be braver in raising particular cases of concern, so I will close by highlighting two. In the debate on this topic two years ago, I highlighted the case of Maira Shahbaz. Will the Minister look at how the UK can give safe haven to that poor girl? Two years on, she remains in hiding and in fear of oppressors, and she is living in one room with a sink. Will the Minister meet me to discuss not only her case, but the case of Sawan Masih, who is also from Pakistan? That case, which the hon. Member for Strangford has mentioned previously, involves a man who lives in hiding with his family because he fears being killed by the mob, having been acquitted by the court after being sentenced to death for blasphemy. I look forward to the Minister's response.

Dame Maria Miller (in the Chair): Order. I plan to move to the Front-Bench winding-up speeches at 3.58 pm, so if the final two speakers split the remaining time between them, we will get both of you in. You have about five or six minutes each.

3.45 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (Ind): I was trying to do the maths in my head, Dame Maria, so you have helped me out. I congratulate the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, which is becoming something of an annual tie-in with the Red Wednesday commemorations. That is extremely fitting and a real tribute to their work. It is so important to so many of our constituents that we speak up for people who are being denied their right to freedom of religion or belief all around the world, regardless of whether they are Christian, are practising any other belief, or are of no belief.

As the title of the debate suggests, we are focusing on Christians. As the hon. Member for Strangford said, Christians remain one of the most persecuted—in fact, probably the most persecuted and discriminated against—religious group in the world. Perhaps that is to some extent because Christians remain the largest community group in the world, but the statistics demonstrate the significance of their persecution. It is worth bearing in mind, though, that the vast majority of human beings in the world adhere to some kind of religion and profess a belief in a creator god. The majority of them believe in the God revealed to the patriarch Abraham, and most believe in the same God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. On a global scale, religion is therefore not a minority sport, and neither is Christianity.

I pay tribute to organisations, such as Open Doors, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Aid to the Church in Need, that do so much work to draw attention to these issues. Red Wednesday is a way for everybody to become more aware of the challenges faced by Christians and others who are persecuted for their religious beliefs.

I will briefly echo some of what has been said about specific countries. Nigeria is seventh on the Open Doors 2022 world watch list of the 50 countries where it is

most difficult to live as a Christian, but the statistics show that if it were only measuring violence, Nigeria would be at the top of the list, and we have heard some very powerful and, frankly, horrific testimony from the hon. Members for Strangford and for Congleton. The call to bring to justice those responsible for genocidal attacks, such as the Pentecost Sunday 2022 massacre in Nigeria, is the focus of Aid to the Church in Need's petition this year, and I hope that there are things the Government can do and that they will listen to the calls that have been made—for example, to address the question of designating Nigeria as a country of concern.

The Christian community in Iran is not always spoken of, but it is a very real and persecuted minority. The Open Doors world watch list says:

> "It is risky for Christians, especially converts, to express their faith publicly (such as in blogs or on social media) since the internet is monitored and this can be used as evidence prior to an arrest."

When the Prime Minister gave his statement on the G20 earlier today, I asked him what support the UK, the G20 and the global community more widely are offering to everyone in Iran who is now campaigning for democracy and freedom. Perhaps the Minister can address some of that as well.

Then there is the situation in China, where members of many religious minorities—not least the Uyghur Muslims—face persecution on a daily basis, but I want to draw particular attention to the situation of Cardinal Joseph Zen, who is one of Asia's highest-ranking Catholic clerics. In May, he and fellow campaigners were arrested in Hong Kong for what the Government said was collusion with foreign forces, because they were trustees of a humanitarian relief fund. Together with the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), several of us raised our concerns with the Government in early-day motion 36 on 12 May, in which we agreed with Human Rights Watch's comments that the arrest of the 90-year-old Cardinal for peaceful activities was a shocking new low for the Hong Kong Administration, and that it illustrates the city's freefall in human rights over the past couple of years.

The Government must continue to work to tackle those issues in different countries around the world, as they have committed to. They also have to ensure that they are doing what they can on a domestic level to protect freedom of religion and belief and promote tolerance at home. In my part of world, Glasgow and the west of Scotland, we are not immune to religious intolerance. Sectarianism is still a real challenge. The root of it is, ironically, a divide between different Christian denominations; the golden rule of that religion is to "love one another as you love yourself".

I want to pay tribute to the late Archbishop Mario Conti, the emeritus Archbishop of Glasgow, because among his many achievements was a renewed dedication to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue. Just yesterday, the Catholic Church in Scotland and the Presbyterian Church of Scotland signed the St Margaret declaration, a statement of ecumenical friendship. It was signed by the moderator of the Church of Scotland and the Archbishop of Edinburgh in the presence of the Princess Royal at Dunfermline Abbey. That is a very good example of what is possible from dialogue and the search for common ground. Hopefully it is the kind of thing that elsewhere in the world can learn from.

Many people who come to the United Kingdom seeking asylum do so because of religious persecution, whether they are Christian or otherwise. The language demonising people arriving on these shores in small boats in extremely unhelpful, and not a way to promote tolerance. The Government need to bear that in mind. I am still aware of ongoing challenges for very simple things, such as access to visas for supply ministers and religious leaders when they want to come to the United Kingdom in the summer to supply for Christian parishes or other faith communities. None of that necessarily speaks to a welcoming attitude.

The Government have to take all of that into account, and, if they are going to continue to cut the aid budget, they have to explain how they are going to make that work smarter and harder, so that progress can be continued in those areas, particularly towards the Truro report recommendations, as the hon. Member for Congleton said. She has been the Prime Minister's envoy under three Prime Ministers, which shows how seriously she takes her role. We all support her in taking that role seriously, and I hope the Government will continue to do so too.

3.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I hope these debates make some difference. I think I have spoken in all of them over the years, and the situation just seems to get worse and worse, but I suppose we cannot keep silent. The situation in Nigeria that we have heard so much about is truly appalling. Within the period we have been talking about, perhaps 7,000 Christians have been murdered. We keep referring to it, and I suppose there is a degree of hopelessness about what we can do, but should we feel hopeless? We have a Minister here who has spent a lifetime committed to helping people in the developing world. We do have influence because of our very large aid budget. I sometimes wonder whether we are using that influence to the greatest effect, particularly with countries such as Nigeria.

There is a suspicion that the Nigerian authorities are not as zealous as they should be in cracking down on this violence, which is little less than genocide. There is very little publicity about the loss of black lives in Africa, but black lives matter everywhere. They do not just matter in the west; as I have said before, they matter equally in Africa. When people are being murdered simply for their faith, we should call that out, and our Government should call it out in their relations with Nigeria. I am sure the Minister will say that we do that, but we must use our influence.

There are a couple of new countries that we have not talked about before where things are getting very difficult. For instance, in Nicaragua, President Daniel Ortega's Sandinista National Liberation Front is increasingly cracking down on civil society and local churches. Bishop Declan Lang commented:

> "Over recent years the people of Nicaragua have endured deepening repression and violations of human dignity. Many have been unjustly imprisoned…or killed for defending their basic rights. Others have been forced to flee… Among them, bishops, priests, seminarians."

Another country we have not dealt with much in these debates in the past is Myanmar, where civil society is under threat. Cardinal Maung Bo, the Archbishop of Yangon, is pleading for protection from violence by

[Sir Edward Leigh]

military junta troops. In November 2021, 200 troops invaded the Christ the King Cathedral in Loikaw and evicted health workers. The bishops of Myanmar have appealed for humanitarian corridors and sanctuary for their places of worship.

In these debates I and others have repeated referred to the case of Maira Shahbaz, who was raped and is still virtually under house arrest. We have a Foreign Office Minister here now, and I do not understand why we cannot do more to get this girl out. We have had meetings with the Home Secretary, as have other colleagues. What is the Foreign Office doing about this case? Is there something we are not being told? Many, many migrants are coming to this country, and many of them are not genuine asylum seekers, but Maira Shahbaz is obviously a genuine asylum seeker. We have repeatedly raised her case, but she is still stuck in Pakistan.

The truth is that the position of Christians is very dangerous indeed. What is so sad is the decline of Christianity in the middle east, the home—or first home—of Christianity. It is most marked in Syria where, within a decade, numbers of Christians have plummeted from 1.5 million—10% of the population in 2011 before the war began—to 300,000, which is less than 2% of the population. In the aftermath of the 4 August 2020 Beirut explosions, where the greatest impact was felt in the Christian quarter, Lebanon's church leaders questioned the community's long-term survival. In Iraq, the rate of exodus is much slower, with the community down from some 300,000 before the 2014 Daesh invasion to as few as 150,000 today in 2022.

It is so sad that the original home of Christianity is seeing a mass exodus of Christians. The situation is not much better in the west bank of Palestine, Israel. Nearly 75 years on from the creation of the state of Israel, Christians in the west bank have declined from 18% to less than 1% of the population today.

We have heard lots about China and new approaches to China in recent days. I want to comment on the false accusations against Cardinal Zen. Here is a man who is 90 years old, and he has been accused of colluding with foreign forces. It is an absolutely ridiculous allegation. He was associated with the now-defunct 612 humanitarian relief fund, which helped protestors in financial need. This is an old man who has done absolutely nothing wrong. Hong Kong is a place where we have a long history. We made a treaty with China to try to ensure freedom of expression. I raised this matter when we went to Rome with Cardinal Gallagher recently, who is the Foreign Minister of the Holy See. He expressed hope that the Hong Kong authorities would draw back from the most serious charges, which unbelievably carry the possibility of life imprisonment. If we have any influence with the Chinese authorities, can we please raise the case of Cardinal Zen and the totally unjust persecution of this very old, very distinguished and very holy man?

3.58 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to once again participate in a debate on the freedom of religion or belief, specifically the persecution of Christians and the importance of people being allowed to worship their God, however they perceive Him or Her to be. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this debate. I know that he cares very much about this issue and often raises it in the Chamber. As others have said, it is important that this issue continues to be on the radar of not only this House but the international community.

It is a fundamental, basic freedom to worship your God, however you perceive Him or Her to be. The freedom to choose who you worship and how you worship is a fundamental human right. We have to remember that those nations that persecute Christians and anyone else who follows a religion to which their leaders are hostile—nations that turn a blind eye to the persecution of a number of their citizens based on their faith—also tend to impose and sanction other breaches of human rights.

Persecution on the basis of faith does not happen in isolation, but it is insidious, cruel, repressive and unacceptable. It often goes hand in hand with the repression and subjugation of women. Forcing people to adhere to a particular set of religious beliefs is often little more than a means of control, which is why those who choose to subscribe to a minority religion in repressive states are considered by those leaders to be dangerous and are subject to persecution—if not carried out by the state directly, then sanctioned by the state.

The means of control often include forcing people to subscribe—even if only outwardly—to a particular religion; making it an offence to insult the dominant religion, as we have heard happens in Nigeria; and making blasphemy a crime punishable by death. The days of preaching to convert people the old-fashioned way is clearly not used in such states. As the hon. Member told us, blasphemy laws are too often manipulated to settle petty scores. Alternatively, people are forced to subscribe and defer to a particular religion or die as a result of some perceived act of blasphemy. That seems to be the choice that many face in such regimes.

In this day and age, we can scarcely imagine from the comfort of the west how horrific living in such a place must be if you are a Christian—the most persecuted religion in the world. The US Commission on International Religious Freedom reported 732 blasphemy-related incidents across 41 countries in the short time between 2014 and 2018. Four of the 41 countries accounted for nearly 80% of all reported incidents of mob activity: Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria and Egypt. Any international engagement by the west with such states takes place under the shadow of the violence and oppression that they perpetrate. It is on that basis that free nations must make it clear that they will not tolerate religious oppression of any kind, and they must use every lever at their disposal—diplomatic or otherwise—to challenge and counter persecution wherever it exists.

I note the comments made by others that Nigeria tops the list of countries with the most violent persecution of Christians. All free and democratic members of the international community must have that information in the forefront of their mind in any dealings with Nigeria or any such state. They must take concentrated and concerted action to challenge and tackle this matter, because hand-wringing and finger-wagging is not working. From Myanmar to Nigeria, Kashmir to Ethiopia, Afghanistan to Somalia, India to Pakistan, and from Saudi Arabia to Iran, at least 360 million Christians have

experienced high levels of persecution and discrimination this year alone—20 million more than in 2021. Persecution of Christians is growing, not decreasing.

Every day, around 13 Christians are killed because of their faith. Every day, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked. Every day, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another five are abducted. The problem is getting worse. I pay particular tribute to the hugely important work of the charity Open Doors, which works tirelessly to support persecuted Christians around the world. It shines a much-needed light on this persecution on the international stage, so that this horror is not forgotten by members of the international community who value freedom. Open Doors reminds us that its world watch list—the annual accounting of countries that are guilty of most persecution of Christians—is not a compilation list of oppression. Perhaps upliftingly, it lists the resilience of those who hold true to their faith in the face of the greatest and gravest of danger.

Freedom of religion or belief is codified in international law: 41 years ago, in 1981, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the declaration on the elimination of all forms of intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief. Despite that declaration, much more needs to be done by the whole international community—of course, I include the UK Government in that—to support freedom of religion or belief around the world. There must be no more important missed opportunities. Sadly, the 2022 international ministerial conference on freedom of religion or belief, which took place in July in London, has a legacy of diplomatic fall-outs but not much more than that on what we have been pushing for today.

Fiona Bruce: I talked about the project of creating education materials for primary schools, which was one of the issues talked about at the ministerial conference. That is actually one of about seven streams of works that the alliance is taking forward following ministerial conference, after we analysed the ideas and suggestions. Obviously, it will take some time to bring forward the fruit of that work, but I hope that in 2023 it will become apparent.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Lady for pointing that out.

The push for greater recognition of the freedom of religion or belief will never be solved by one conference—we all recognise that the problem is too ingrained and too great—but it could have been a more significant step on that important path. But I take the hon. Lady's point: small steps are steps, none the less.

To make sustained and meaningful progress on this important issue, we need the international community in the west, where we believe in freedom, to engage in an ongoing and evolving mission. We need to be braver about challenging repressive nations that persecute their own people for worshipping their own God. We need to be willing to confront them on the international stage at every opportunity. It is unacceptable for any state, any Government or any person to attempt to interfere with someone or persecute them on the basis of what God they choose to worship. Every nation that believes in freedom should say so and be unafraid to stand up for those who are oppressed. That is their moral obligation and duty. If we do not stand up for freedom, what will we stand up for?

4.8 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. We have had an excellent debate, as always. This very important debate has drawn attention to the persecution of not just Christians but other minorities. Today we are concentrating on the world's largest faith, the Christian community. The contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was, as always, excellent and very well informed. He is passionate about this subject.

We also heard from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She and I have worked on many causes relating to international development and freedom of religion or belief over the years, and she is a champion for Christian beliefs and freedom of religion. She does an excellent job. I hope that if there is ever a change of Government, she can serve under the Labour Government, because she is so good at what she does. That is not a job offer, by the way—I do not have the right to do that—but she really is a credit to this institution.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) made a typically excellent contribution. We also heard from the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who is a champion for this cause, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) for winding up on behalf of the Scottish National party.

As always, it is excellent that the hon. Member for Strangford has secured this timely debate. I also praise his tireless work on the issue. The persecution of Christians contributes a huge amount to the overall religious oppression that we sadly still see across the world today.

Some 360 million Christians—at least, that is the number that I retrieved—face extreme levels of persecution. That is the greatest ever number on record, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out. While that oppression impacts on everyone in Christian communities, it also includes gender-specific religious persecution—as the SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran, and, indeed, the hon. Member for Congleton pointed out—because the persecutors often particularly target women from Christian minorities in a bid to destabilise the whole of their community.

As we approach White Ribbon Day, which aims to draw attention to the ongoing violence against women and girls, it is vital that we work within the international community, using our diplomatic influence, to tackle those countries that view Christian women and girls simply as sexual objects and vehicles of shame. It is also deeply disturbing that incidents of sexual violence against Christian women and girls were reported in 90% of countries in the top 50 of the Open Doors world watch list in 2022. Will the Minister tell us what the UK is doing on the international stage to tackle such vile persecution?

Fiona Bruce: London will host a conference of the preventing sexual violence in conflict initiative on 28 and 29 November, and I hope that it will highlight the

[Fiona Bruce]

double jeopardy for women who are persecuted for their gender as well as their faith or belief. Does the hon. Member agree that that is very important?

Fabian Hamilton: Yes, and I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I absolutely agree, because the two are not separable. It is tragic that that should be the case.

Today, we have heard of many horrific experiences of Christians across the world. However, I would like to turn my attention to another case study of persecution against Christians, which the right hon. Member for Gainsborough mentioned. As my regional brief on Labour's Front Bench covers Latin America, I am well aware of the issues facing democracy and the freedom of expression in Nicaragua. Sadly, as the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, that has had a huge impact on Christians who do not fully conform to the will of the Ortega regime—or should I say dictatorship?

In August, a Roman Catholic bishop was put under house arrest, and four priests, two seminarians and a cameraman were also imprisoned. In the middle of the night, Nicaraguan security forces stormed the property where Bishop Rolando Álvarez and 11 others had been confined for 15 days. Bishop Álvarez was forcibly taken and placed under house arrest while the other priests, seminarians and the cameraman were held in detention.

In addition to those shocking and unjustified arrests, the Nicaraguan Government shut down all radio stations associated with the bishop that were critical of the Ortega regime. Everyone arrested should be released and the persecution of Roman Catholics' freedom of expression in Nicaragua must be brought to an end. What are the Government doing to challenge the Nicaraguan Government, and have they considered further sanctions against that country?

On a more positive note, I visited Colombia in May, six months ago, to look at the election situation and to consider the attacks on trade unionists and religious and indigenous people in that country. I saw the brilliant work of the Roman Catholic Church's Justice and Peace Commission, which took me to the suburb of Usme to meet the youth collective there. The commission sponsored and supported them, helped to build the community centre, and underpinned the security of that organisation, which was, at the time, under attack from the police.

Red Wednesday, on 23 November, is an opportunity for all of us across this House to reaffirm our support for Christians as well as freedom of religious belief across the world, just as we have done during this debate. Christians contribute so much to our society, but they must be allowed to contribute as much in the many other countries where they are still being targeted solely for their faith and their belief.

I am proud to represent Leeds North East, where we have an extremely diverse community, made up of Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus and atheists, as well as other minority religions. We are culturally, morally and spiritually richer for this mix, so it is only right that we play our part in trying to ensure that communities in other countries across the world can exist in such great harmony.

4.15 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Maria. I should tell you that in the 35 years I have been in this House and in my three stints in Government, this is only the second time I have responded to a debate in this Chamber—but it is the second time in two days. It is a bit like buses: I wait for 35 years and then two come along almost immediately.

I am in effect standing in for Lord Ahmad—it is obvious why—who, as a number of people said, is the Minister who has considerable knowledge of this issue and worked extremely hard on it. He will read our debate with the greatest possible interest.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate and I commend him for his long-standing commitment to freedom of religion or belief for all. His speech today was littered with the wisdom and authority that he commands in the House. He is much respected across the House for what he has to say. He ended his remarks by looking at the Gospel according to St Matthew, and our debate was enriched by that contribution.

I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, which continues to raise awareness of this human right among parliamentarians and the public alike. The shared passion across the House to protect freedom of religion or belief is clear, warranted and to be warmly welcomed. I will try to respond to the various points that have been made during the debate and to highlight the UK action in respect of that.

I will come to the comments of the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) later in my remarks, but I thought he spoke for the entire House today. He praised my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce)—he did not quite offer her a job, but he nearly did—and saluted her ecumenical approach politically. The whole House will agree with that. He urged us to use our diplomatic influence to stop persecution—we most certainly are, and will—and on his point about Colombia, one of the other Foreign Office Ministers will shortly be there to amplify and emphasise the cross-party approach that we are taking.

It is fitting that this debate falls just ahead of Red Wednesday, a day to stand in solidarity with persecuted Christians. The Foreign Office will demonstrate our support by lighting our building in red. We have noted the report from Aid to the Church in Need, released yesterday, and we will study its findings closely.

I pay particular tribute to Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, for his work standing up for persecuted minorities and on development. He speaks with unique authority about our moral duty to the poorest and least well-off. In the same spirit as the hon. Member for Leeds North East, I express my admiration and praise for the faith communities across Birmingham who work so impressively together and to great effect and success. The royal town of Sutton Coldfield makes an enormously constructive contribution to such important issues. In the royal town, we have the Bishop of Aston, who makes a great contribution and resides in my constituency.

Like this House, the Government believe that violence against any person because of their religion or belief is wholly unacceptable. Although this debate particularly

highlights the plight of persecuted Christians, we do not forget or in any way diminish the experience of those persecuted for holding other religions, beliefs or no religious beliefs at all. The Government are committed to championing freedom of religion or belief for everyone—something enshrined in the universal declaration of human rights and in our own organisational values. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad, the Minister responsible for human rights, continues to work closely with the Prime Minister's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, to deliver precisely on that commitment.

We demonstrated the depth of our commitment this summer by hosting an international ministerial conference that brought together more than 800 faith and belief leaders and human rights actors and 100 Government delegations to agree action to promote and protect these fundamental rights. As a result of the conference, 47 Governments, international organisations and other entities made pledges to take action in support of freedom of religion or belief.

In addition, we are pursuing three broad strands to advance freedom of religion or belief and tackle the associated human rights concerns: first, working through multilateral bodies; secondly, working with states directly to encourage and support them to uphold their human rights obligations; and thirdly, through our continuing work to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's 2019 review.

On multilateral action—the first strand—we work with organisations such as the United Nations, Council of Europe, G7 and the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance to promote and protect freedom of religion or belief. Again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for her dedicated work as the UK representative and chair of the alliance. Under her leadership, participation has grown to 42 countries. I welcome the joint statements recently issued by the alliance on concerns related to Ahmadi Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Ukraine, Nicaragua and Nigeria—on which I will say more in a minute, if time permits.

In September, my noble Friend Lord Ahmad spoke at the United Nations and urged the international community to call out Iran for systematically targeting members of minority communities, to press Afghanistan to protect minorities targeted for their beliefs, to challenge the discriminatory provisions in Myanmar's citizenship laws and to hold China to account for its egregious human rights violations in Xinjiang.

In our bilateral work, we regularly raise specific issues with other Governments, both in public and in private, where that may result in better outcomes. My noble Friend Lord Ahmad met Pakistan's Minister for Human Rights in October to raise the persecution of minorities, including the forced conversion of young Christian and Hindu girls. In Iraq, religious and ethnic minority populations have significantly declined since 2003 due to exclusion, sectarianism and conflict. Many of these minority communities continue to face extreme challenges in 2022. We regularly raise the need to protect ethnic and religious minorities with the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government—most recently in July 2022, again, by my noble Friend Lord Ahmad with the Kurdistan Regional Government Minister for Religious Affairs.

I am also grateful to those who have raised the issue of Nigeria, where both Christians and Muslims have suffered devastating harm at the hands of violent extremist groups, and separately as a result of intercommunal violence and criminality. We remain committed to supporting peacebuilding initiatives across Nigeria to address the root causes of violence, protect human rights and promote dialogue and respect between different ethnic and religious communities.

Finally, the Bishop of Truro's review set out the gravity of the issue of Christian persecution, along with practical recommendations for an enhanced Government response to the plight of persecuted Christians and people persecuted for holding other religions, beliefs or no religious belief at all. We welcome the findings of the independent review of our work to take forward the recommendations. That assessment earlier this year concluded that the majority of the recommendations are either at an advanced stage of delivery or in the process of being delivered, while noting that more can always be done.

We will continue to ensure that the changes we have made are embedded, and we will look for opportunities to ensure that freedom of religion or belief is central to wider human rights work. To provide a few examples, we have sent a clear message through our global human rights sanctions regime that the international community will not turn a blind eye to serious and systematic violations of human rights. In December 2021, we sanctioned Furqan Bangalzai for his role in orchestrating the 2017 bombing of a Sufi shrine in Pakistan, which killed over 70 people. In March 2021, Lord Ahmad hosted a meeting at the UN Security Council to raise awareness of persecution of religious minorities in conflict zones. Religion for international engagement training is now available to all civil servants to enhance their understanding of the role of religion and belief in a wide variety of contexts, in order to deliver the UK's international objectives more effectively.

I now turn to some of the specific contributions, starting with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. She does so much good work and speaks so eloquently, as she demonstrated so well today. Across our country, many people in the faith communities will be grateful to her for her leadership. She is going to send information on Nigeria and share it with Lord Ahmad. Of course, it will be a pleasure to have the meeting that she requested. I will look carefully and write if I miss any of her other points. In particular, she raised the issue of the attack on St Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo state. I want her to know that we condemn that horrific attack and we extend our sympathies to all those affected. We condemn attacks on places of worship. Everybody should be free to practise their religion or belief without fear.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) spoke about a number of organisations that do so much to help. I want to echo his thanks to them. He also raised Iran, whose human rights record continues to be of serious concern to the UK; the Foreign Office has designated it as one of its human rights priority countries. The continued use of the death penalty, weak rule of law and restrictions on freedom of expression and religion or belief are deeply worrying.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) spoke with his great experience, but lugubriously. He asked us to use our influence to greater

[Mr Andrew Mitchell]

effect in Nigeria. I will be going there before long, and I will raise directly the points that he made. He also raised the issue of Nicaragua, as did the hon. Member for Leeds North East. Reports of harassment and detention of members of the Catholic Church in Nicaragua are of enormous concern. Freedom of religion or belief is a universal human right, and we have made it clear there that they must be protected.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough also raised the Aid to the Church in Need petition to grant Maira Shahbaz asylum. I am very conscious of that case. I know my right hon. Friend will accept that I must be careful when commenting in public on individual cases where individuals' or their families' lives could be put at risk, but I want him to know that I am deeply conscious of his point.

My right hon. Friend also raised a point about Cardinal Zen. We will certainly continue to make representations. We are closely following the cases of pro-democracy figures who face charges in Hong Kong, including Cardinal Zen. Officials from the British consulate general in Hong Kong attend local court hearings related to a number of rights and freedoms issues and will continue to do so. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) addressed in forthright terms the evil of persecution and the various ways in which that evil is pursued and delivered. She spoke about Open Doors, for which we are extremely grateful.

To conclude, as a long-standing champion of human rights and freedoms, the United Kingdom has not only a duty but a deep desire to promote and defend our values of equality, inclusion and respect at home and abroad. I assure Members here today that the Government will do just that. We will continue to raise awareness of all persecution and we will defend the right to freedom of religion or belief for everyone, everywhere.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered persecution of Christians and freedom of religion or belief.

4.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 17 November 2022

TREASURY

Autumn Statement: Charter for Budget Responsibility

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Jeremy Hunt): Today I have published a draft updated charter for budget responsibility, a copy of which has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. Copies are also available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office. The draft sets out the new fiscal framework announced at autumn statement 2022.

The updated charter will be laid before Parliament, and a debate and vote scheduled, in due course.

[HCWS371]

Tax Credits and Child Benefit: Review of Rates

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Tax Credits Act 2002 and the Social Security Administration Act 1992 place a statutory duty on His Majesty's Treasury to review the rates of tax credits and child benefit each year in line with the general level of prices. There is a further statutory duty on the Treasury to increase guardian's allowance in line with price growth. I have now concluded the review for the tax year 2023-24.

I have decided to increase tax credits and child benefit rates in line with the consumer price index (CPI) for the year to September 2022. Guardian's allowance will also increase by the same rate. This means that:

> The majority of elements and thresholds in working tax credit and child tax credit, including all disability elements, will increase by 10.1% from 6 April 2023. This means, for example, that the basic element of working tax credit will increase from £2,070 to £2,280 per year. In line with established practice and the Office for Budget Responsibility's expectations in their welfare forecast, the maximum rate of the childcare element, the family element, the withdrawal rate and disregards in tax credits will remain unchanged.
>
> All rates of child benefit, plus guardian's allowance, will increase by 10.1 % from 10 April 2023. This means, for example, that the child benefit rate for the eldest child will increase from £21.80 to £24 per week.

The new rates will apply across the United Kingdom. I will deposit the full list of these rates in the Libraries of both Houses shortly.

[HCWS372]

EDUCATION

Higher Education Investigations

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): Today I am laying regulations under section 71 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. These regulations will enable the Office for Students (OfS) to charge a fee for the investigation of providers' compliance with quality and other requirements, where the investigation results in certain regulatory action or specified outcomes. These regulations will come into effect on 8 December 2022.

Improving the quality of higher education is a manifesto commitment, and one of my highest priorities. This Government are committed to ensuring that students and the taxpayer see returns on their investment and receive value for money. Accordingly, my Department is working with the OfS to implement a rigorous regime of investigations and in-person inspections that ensures robust action is taken where quality conditions of registration have been breached, or are at risk of being breached. I am also committed to ensuring the majority of providers, which are not in breach of the regulatory conditions, experience minimal regulatory burden.

The OfS will identify providers for investigation using a range of information sources, including outcomes data, student notifications, and other monitoring. My predecessor asked the OfS to put "boots on the ground" where necessary, and investigate universities where there are concerns about the quality of provision. These investigations will examine a range of quality matters, including whether courses are sufficiently up to date and academically challenging; whether students receive enough face-to-face engagement; and the extent to which providers secure positive outcomes for students.

Where the OfS finds that a provider's performance just is not good enough, it may choose to take enforcement action. This could involve a sanction such as a monetary penalty or, if necessary, even go as far as the removal of a provider from the register. This work will effectively tackle pockets of poor-quality provision, and ensure all students, regardless of their background, can benefit from high-quality, world-leading higher education.

In order to fund this regime sustainably, as well as deter against the growth of poor-quality provision, these regulations will allow the OfS to charge a fee for the investigation of providers' compliance with quality and other requirements, where the investigation results in certain regulatory action or specified outcomes, such as the imposition of a specific ongoing condition of registration. Doing so will help to ensure that the costs of investigations will fall on those responsible for their necessity, and that those in good standing face a more proportionate regulatory burden than would be the case if we did not lay these regulations.

[HCWS373]

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): The Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill contains important powers to drive local growth, empower local leaders to regenerate their areas and ensure that everyone can share in the United Kingdom's success. It underscores this Government's continuing commitment to levelling up and securing better outcomes for communities. Yesterday I tabled a number of Government amendments which strengthen the Bill and deliver on our manifesto commitments.

Strengthening devolution within England is a key component of levelling up. The amendments make it clear that there is no possibility of district councils in

two-tier authorities having their functions taken away from them and given to combined county authorities. The amendments also enhance powers for mayors to manage their key routes networks to increase transport connectivity, and will enable stronger partnership working between police and crime commissioners and local government by removing a perceived barrier to commissioners participating in local government committee meetings.

Levelling up also means improving access to high-quality and affordable homes across the country, and doing so in ways which meet the needs and expectations of local people. The planning reforms in the Bill will give communities more control over what is built, where it is built, and what new buildings look like, as well as greater assurance that the infrastructure needed will be provided. These reforms create stronger incentives to support development where it is needed.

The reforms are based on five key principles. First, delivering high-quality and beautiful buildings, restoring a sense of community and pride in place. Secondly, enabling the right infrastructure to come forward, boosting productivity and spreading opportunities. Thirdly, enhancing local democracy and engagement by empowering local leaders, increasing accountability and giving communities a stronger say over development. Fourthly, fostering better environmental outcomes. And fifthly, allowing neighbourhoods to shape their surroundings, empowering communities to restore local pride in place.

It is vital that the places we build are beautiful, durable and sustainable. I am already taking steps through the Bill to ensure that every local authority has a design code which can set high standards that reflect local views. National policy has also been strengthened to make it clear that development which is not well designed should be refused. I will announce more details shortly about how the Office for Place—our new body which will uphold high aesthetic standards in architecture—will support authorities in this important work.

Development must also be accompanied by the infrastructure needed to support it. Alongside the proposals for a more streamlined and non-negotiable infrastructure levy which are already contained in the Bill, our amendments will introduce powers to allow piloting of community land auctions. These would give local planning authorities new powers to capture value from land when it is allocated for development, which can then be used to enhance local infrastructure and services.

Strengthening local democracy is central to levelling up, and local communities rightly expect that permissions which they have democratically approved should be delivered. The amendments that I have laid add to the tools that local planning authorities can use to monitor and challenge slow delivery: by requiring developers to report annually on build-out of housing permissions, and giving them the power to decide whether to entertain future applications made by developers who have previously failed to build out existing planning permissions.

I am also firmly committed to enhancing our natural environment while enabling sustainable growth—and will further update the House on my plans to do so in due course. We are also creating a power for the Secretary of State to give new charging powers to certain statutory consultees so that they have greater resources to engage more quickly with nationally significant infrastructure projects.

We are giving local people more opportunity to shape their neighbourhoods by introducing an amendment setting out the full range of powers needed for street votes, giving residents the ability to vote for additional housing where they feel it is appropriate on their street. I have also tabled an amendment implementing a recommendation from Richard Bacon's review into the self and custom-build sector, removing an ambiguity around the statutory duty to permission land for self and custom-built housing; providing further opportunities for those who wish to build or commission their own home, and for the small and medium-sized builders who are often part of this process, enabling communities to deliver the homes they want.

Levelling up and restoring pride in place means we want to make communities feel safe where they live. That is why our commitment to repeal the Vagrancy Act has always been dependent on the simultaneous introduction of modern replacement legislation to ensure police and other agencies continue to have the powers they need to keep communities safe and protect vulnerable individuals. The responses to the consultation provide a useful basis to inform the shape of future replacement legislation, and we will publish the Government response to the consultation in due course. For now, we will remove the placeholder clause from the Bill and we will not be bringing forward replacement legislation in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill. In the meantime, this Government have made the unprecedented commitment to end rough sleeping within this Parliament. We remain steadfastly committed to that goal.

Other amendments which have been laid make a number of technical improvements to the Bill. This includes making sure that development corporations can, where they are designated, take on certain supplementary planning functions where appropriate, so that their powers to drive regeneration and development are effective and up to date. The amendments also clarify the powers introducing high-street rental auctions, to make it harder for those landlords who are sitting on empty premises to avoid their property being subject to an auction, and make sure these powers can address the blight of empty high street shops. We will also make sure that regulations for the compulsory purchase regime in clause 150, which require authorities to comply with data standards, will be subject to the negative parliamentary procedure. The amendments also add a "pre-consolidation" clause to the Bill. This technical measure will enable the future consolidation of over 40 different Acts relating to planning and compulsory purchase law, making it much easier to access and understand for all users of the system.

This Bill represents a significant opportunity to give local leaders new powers to reinvigorate their communities and spread opportunity across our country. I look forward to the further discussions that will take place as we take it forward.

[HCWS375]

WORK AND PENSIONS

State Pensions and Benefits: Review of Rates

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mel Stride): The Social Security Administration Act 1992 places an annual statutory duty on the Secretary of

State to review the rates of state pensions and benefits after consideration of trends in price and earnings growth in the preceding year. I have now concluded this review for the tax year 2023-24.

I have decided that state pension and benefit rates should increase in line with the consumer prices index (CPI) for the year to September 2022. This means that they will increase by 10.1% from 10 April 2023.

I will deposit the full list of the new rates in the Libraries of both Houses in due course, but I am pleased to announce here the increases to some of the largest benefits. The full rate of the new state pension will increase from £185.15 to £203.85 a week. The basic state pension will increase from £141.85 to £156.20 a week. The standard minimum guarantee for a couple in pension credit will increase from £278.70 to £306.85 a week. The enhanced rate of the daily living component of personal independence payment will increase from £92.40 to £101.75 a week. The universal credit standard allowance for a couple where one or both are over 25 will increase from £525.72 to £578.82 a month; the limited capability for work and work-related activity amount will increase from £354.28 to £390.06 a month; and the child element for those born on or after 6 April 2017 will increase from £244.58 to £269.58 a month.

This decision will increase expenditure on state pensions and pensioner benefits by £13 billion in 2023-24 compared to no change in these rates for the same period. It will meet the Government's manifesto commitment to apply the triple lock to the new and basic state pensions. It will also extend CPI protection to those who rely on the standard minimum guarantee in pension credit at a cost of £700 million above the statutory minimum requirement.

The decision will also increase expenditure on reserved non-pensioner benefits by £9 billion in 2023-24 compared to no change in these rates for the same period. This includes benefits for those with additional disability or care needs and increases to universal credit which provides essential support to people on the lowest incomes while they seek work, seek progression in work, or are unable to work.

In view of the exceptional situation that currently pertains with respect to fuel costs, I have also decided to freeze the standard fuel cost deductions in housing benefit, rather than increase them in line with the normal convention of the fuel element of CPI.

I can also confirm that the local housing allowance rates for 2023-24 will be maintained in cash terms at the elevated rates agreed for 2020-21.

I have also completed my periodic statutory review of the levels of the benefit cap which, since 24 March 2022 and under Section 96A of the Welfare Reform Act 2012, I am obliged to undertake at least once every five years. I have concluded that each of the four benefit cap levels should be increased in line with CPI for the year to September 2022. This means that they will increase by 10.1% from April 2023. The annual benefit cap levels will therefore increase as follows:

to £25,323 for couples and lone parents in London and £22,020 for the rest of Great Britain

to £16,967 for single people without children in London and £14,753 for the rest of Great Britain.

Social security is a transferred matter in Northern Ireland.

[HCWS374]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 17 November 2022

DEFENCE

Ukraine

The following is an extract from the general debate on Ukraine on 14 November 2022.

James Heappey: UK Export Finance has committed £3.5 billion of cover to Ukraine for priority projects across the infrastructure, healthcare, clean energy and security sectors, and the UK is supporting the HALO Trust, which so far has de-mined over 16,000 square miles of land in Kyiv oblast so that people will be able to return safely to their homes, agricultural land and businesses.

[Official Report, 14 November 2022, Vol. 722, c. 457.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Armed Forces, the right hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey).

An error has been identified in my speech in the general debate on Ukraine.

The correct statement should have been:

James Heappey: UK Export Finance has committed £3.5 billion of cover to Ukraine for priority projects across the infrastructure, healthcare, clean energy and security sectors, and the UK is supporting the HALO Trust, which so far has de-mined over **16,000 square metres** of land in Kyiv oblast so that people will be able to return safely to their homes, agricultural land and businesses.

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