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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 12 January 2023

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Environment Agency Budget: Sewage Discharge

1. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency's budget on levels of sewage discharge. [902942]

16. **Kate Osborne** (Jarrow) (Lab): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential effect of a reduction in the Environment Agency's budget on levels of sewage discharge. [902960]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The volume of sewage discharged by water companies is absolutely unacceptable. Improving water quality is a high priority for the Government, which is why we have launched an ambitious plan to reduce sewage discharges from storm sewage overflows in water companies, the biggest in history. It is also why we have increased our monitoring from 5% in 2016 right up to 19% now. It will be 100% next year. Interestingly, one might want to note that under the Labour party there was no monitoring at all, and that the Environment Agency has received £2.2 million each year for the last three years specifically for water company enforcement to ensure that robust action is taken against illegal breaches.

Afzal Khan: I thank the Minister for that explanation. Across the country we are faced with the unprecedented dumping of raw sewage into our waterways, including into the Platt and Gore brooks in my constituency. It is good to hear the Minister's plans to provide more money, because at the end of the day there needs to be sufficient funds for enforcement so that those who pollute our waters are held to account. What further will she be doing to ensure that that happens?

Rebecca Pow: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises the plan we have put into operation, because the like of it has never been seen before. I reiterate that it is our increased monitoring that is bringing to light the fact that permits are being contravened and sewage is going into our rivers. That is why we have cracked

down and put in the biggest programme ever to tackle it, with our targets on storm sewage overflows and £2.2 million for the Environment Agency over the last three years for enforcement. It is taking cases, and the extra funding it got the last time around has enabled it to do more inspections.

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I have raised previously in the House, and in letters to Ofwat, the Environment Agency and Northumbrian Water, the disastrous impact on waterways in my constituency of the continued pollution by Northumbrian Water. Sewage was dumped every four minutes during the Minister's years as a junior Minister, with nearly 3 million hours of sewage discharged into waterways and the sea during her tenure as Minister with responsibility for water. As Environment Minister, will she now take action to stop the pollution? When will she publish the clean water and biodiversity targets, as required by the Environment Act 2021?

Rebecca Pow: I have made it absolutely clear that sewage going into our waters is totally unacceptable. That is why under my tenure as Environment Minister—actually, it began with the previous Environment Minister, now the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey)—we set in motion the monitoring that did not happen under Labour, the storm overflows reduction plan, the targets in the Environment Act and the new direction to Ofwat. We are bringing everything together under one hat to tackle this issue once and for all. Because of the work we have done I launched an investigation, which is being undertaken by Ofwat and the EA—the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is working very closely with them. That is uncovering all these incidents. Trust me, we will be clamping down.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): May I welcome the massive and unprecedented increase in the monitoring of illegal sewage discharges, and in particular the welcome steps taken by some water companies for live monitoring so that people can see in real time where sewage is being put into our rivers illegally?

Rebecca Pow: That is yet another measure that has been put in place. There is a requirement now for water companies to report all discharges from storm sewage overflows with dates and deadlines, but some water companies have gone over and above. They already have that in place and some companies, in particular around the coast, are reporting annually.¹ That is proving extremely useful for anybody who wants to know the condition of our water. All of this will improve.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in thanking the Environment Agency for testing the water around our coast? I know she met South West Water earlier this week. Although I recognise that there is work still to be done, on the beaches around my coastline it has significantly reduced the storm overflow. The superb surf beach of Croyde has seen its water quality raised from good to excellent for the first time. It is important to celebrate those successes and to support the businesses that rely on those bathing waters for their futures.

1. [Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 1MC.]

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend is such a strong advocate for her area. I absolutely love going swimming down there. She is right that the latest statistics show that 72% of our bathing waters are classed as excellent, which is brilliant for our tourism industry, particularly in her area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank you, Mr Speaker, and your officers for allowing the time for this very important session; it is appreciated. When we met here in December, I asked the Environment Secretary if she had met water bosses to tackle the Tory sewage scandal that has had turned Britain into an open sewer. We are facing huge water leaks, drought and sewage pumping out across the country, and not a single English river free of pollution. Yet it was not seen as a priority that she clean up her own mess, because as a previous Environment Minister she literally opened the floodgates. Now she has finally met water bosses, can she say what firm commitments have been secured to finally end the Tory sewage scandal?

Rebecca Pow: I have been meeting regularly with water companies, as has the Secretary of State. In fact, we had a joint meeting just last week with the five poorest performing water companies. That was a very feisty meeting, as can be imagined. The water companies are being held to account. We now have the data we need, thanks to the monitoring and the programmes that this Government are putting in place, which were not in place under all those years of the Labour Government. It is no good standing up there and scaremongering. At the end of last week I met South East Water, and this week it is South West Water.¹

UK100's Clean Air Recommendations

2. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential implications for her policies of the recommendations of UK100's clean air net zero report. [902943]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

I am pleased that air quality is improving across our country. I have not made an assessment of that report, but I expect all local authorities to make full use of the many powers available to improve air quality and meet their statutory obligations. That includes an expectation that local authorities will contribute to delivering the new target on reducing population exposure to PM2.5.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. She will be aware that UK100's report, "Yes We CANZ: Local leaders delivering Clean Air and Net Zero", highlights the importance of bringing together clean air and net zero challenges. Many sources of greenhouse gases are also sources of air pollution. Can she comment on the report's recommendations? Will she agree to meet me and some of the cross-party local authority members of UK100 to discuss how the Government can support the further integration of the clean air and net zero agendas?

Dr Coffey: I will not commit to meet because, as I have said, I have not made an assessment. Let us think about the environment in the long term. That is why five years ago we set out the 25-year environment plan and why, at the end of the month, we will be doing the environmental improvement plan. If we think back, it was in the dash for net zero and reducing carbon emissions that we got diesel cars being touted. That was a Labour initiative—I am not criticising Labour Members because they did not realise the impact that would have on air quality. We want to continue to work together, but it is important to recognise that different Administrations, such as the Northern Ireland Executive when it re-forms, have that responsibility. Local authorities right across the UK already have significant powers to make improvements today.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): Happy new year, Mr Speaker.

This Government's targets under the Environment Act 2021 have finally been announced, more than six weeks after the legal deadline. Sadly, they condemn our children and grandchildren to live, learn and play in toxic levels of pollution for another 18 years. Will the Secretary of State, at the very least, pick up the excellent recommendation in the UK100 report to improve data for national and local action, with a comprehensive monitoring network of air quality sensors?

Dr Coffey: More air quality sensors are being put in place across the country. The hon. Lady will know that it is a devolved matter in Wales, so that is for them. Local authorities are doing this already. What worries me is that too many local authority leaders, particularly in Greater Manchester and London, are dragging their heels about improving air quality. We need to ensure that all our local authorities have a focused plan on how we make that happen.

Food Security

3. **Geraint Davies** (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the UK's food security. [902945]

4. **John Spellar** (Warley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen domestic food security. [902946]

8. **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): What steps she is taking to strengthen domestic food security. [902952]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The first UK food security report was published in December 2021, which showed that the UK has a highly resilient and diverse food supply chain. We produce 61% of the food we need in the UK, complemented by strong trade links, and that figure has changed little over the last 20 years. We also published the Government food strategy last June, setting out a commitment to maintain broadly the current level of food we produce domestically and boost production in sectors with the biggest opportunities.

Geraint Davies: On food security and fish stocks, Newcastle University believes the mass killing of crabs, lobsters and other crustaceans off the north-east coast

1. [Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 2MC.]

is due to dredging ahead of the freeport, but the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has dismissed it as a natural event due to algae bloom and has set up an inquiry, with a secret panel meeting in private, despite the fact that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has asked for an open and transparent inquiry that is done independently. Will the Secretary of State commit to an independent evaluation of the evidence, to protect all our coasts from the massive destruction from toxic emissions ahead of freeports—

Dr Coffey *rose*—

Geraint Davies:—from dredging.

Mr Speaker: Secretary of State, I will decide when you come in.

Dr Coffey: I have already replied to the DEFRA Committee about this. The impact on crabs is under investigation, as the hon. Gentleman is aware, and it makes no difference to the adequacy of the UK's food security, which is the topic of this question.

John Spellar: Is it not clear that secure domestic food production requires consistent orders? A huge amount of food is purchased by the public sector, including Government Departments, especially in Defence, hospitals and local government, and especially schools. What action is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that they prioritise buying British? Is it not time to take back control?

Dr Coffey: I think the right hon. Gentleman voted to stay in the European Union, which stopped us promoting British food procurement. However, there is Government policy to encourage that, and I am confident that local authorities, including his, will continue to do so when considering school meals.

Marco Longhi: Recent events have shown that we need to pay more attention to how resilient we are across a range of core areas—food, water and energy are the obvious ones. Does the Secretary of State agree that producing our own food is key, but that resilience can also be improved with stronger trading relationships with many more countries, such as Brazil, that are friendly and with which we share history and common values?

Dr Coffey: It is important to recognise that there are many foodstuffs we enjoy that we simply cannot produce in this country; it is simply not physically possible. It is important that we continue to have that world trade. My hon. Friend is the trade envoy to Brazil, which is a very important partner for our Government in agrifood, climate and biodiversity, as I learned on my recent trip there.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest challenges to UK food security is the competing demands for the very land needed to produce the food from housing and commercial organisations and the latest scourge of solar farms? Will she therefore join me in welcoming the increased protections for agricultural land in the consultation on the new national planning policy framework?

Dr Coffey: I know that my hon. Friend made the case strongly during the passage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill in this House and was able to meet

my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and secure some changes that are being consulted on. It is critical that we look at the use of land, and that is why we have committed this year to producing a new land use framework, in which the issues he raises are very important.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): In December, the Environment Secretary told the Select Committee that she did not believe it was the role of Government to feed people. All of us want to see a country where work pays fairly and, through that work, families can afford to feed themselves, but that is not the case after 13 years of this Tory Government, with food inflation at a 40-year high, a cost of living crisis and 7.3 million people in food poverty. It is the Secretary of State who is responsible for food security. Her Department has a legal obligation to publish the food security report, and it distributes the FareShare food grant. To show she is not completely out of touch, can she tell the House the price of a loaf of bread and the price of a pint of milk in her local supermarket today?

Dr Coffey: Mr Speaker, it depends on what brand you buy. A pint is 95p, and two pints £1.20. It depends on what type of bread you get, but the last loaf I bought was £1.25 for a seeded one from Tesco—I am sure there are other retailers as well.

It is quite clear to me that the hon. Gentleman probably has not read the food security report published in December 2021. However, I will say that in my time as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions we got more people into work and we provided an exceptional amount of funding through the household support fund, because we recognise that these times are really challenging. That is why we, as a Conservative Government, have made sure that the most vulnerable are protected, and it is why we will continue to do so as we move forward through this challenging time.

Jim McMahon: Is it not the truth that we have a Secretary of State overseeing a sewage scandal who did not believe that meeting water bosses was a priority; a Secretary of State responsible for food security in a cost of living crisis who does not think it is the Government's job to make sure people have access to food; and a Secretary of State who has a lead role in climate change who, frankly, is clocking up more air miles than Father Christmas? Even when she is here, she is missing in action. Can she prove that she is finally getting a grip of this? It seems to the public that this Government have given up, have run out of ideas and have no plan, and in the end it is the people of this country who are paying the price. Is not now the time to just stand aside and let Labour get on with cleaning up their mess?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman is obviously taking lessons from other people on the Front Bench about talking complete and utter garbage. I could use stronger language, but it would be unparliamentary.

Let us just go back and remind ourselves that there was no monitoring of sewage under the Labour Government; that was introduced under a Conservative Government. That is why we have gone to a situation

where we are recording more, and why we are in a position now to be challenging—using the price review we did, using our levers through Ofwat—to open up investment and get the storm overflows discharge reduction plan, so that by the end of this year we will actually have 100% monitoring right across the country. Conservatives do not shy away from problems; we open them up, put a spotlight on them, take action and get stuff done, as opposed to Labour, which just ignored it, did not want to know, looked the other way and now thinks it is all a new issue.

On my being missing in action, far from it: it is the hon. Gentleman. When I came back from Montreal after securing, with many other countries around the world, the global biodiversity framework, where was he for the statement? He was not here. God knows where he was. I then went to represent the United Kingdom at the inauguration of President Lula, and I think it was really important to do so to recognise how critical it is to improve the environment. Frankly, we will carry on to deliver action.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The National Farmers Union of Scotland is calling on the UK Government to recognise the strategic importance of fertiliser amid a worsening food security crisis and a 200% increase in fertiliser costs. It is vital that more support is given to domestic food production. Will the Secretary of State meet me and the NFUS to discuss supporting domestic fertiliser production and building greater transparency in the market to drive resilience and security?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady raises a very important issue, which is why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries and I met the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to discuss this particular issue, and why that Secretary of State then took action by requiring information, so we are in active discussions about it. I am afraid I am not in a position to be able to share any more information, given the aspects of commercial sensitivity, but I can assure her that this Government are on the case.

Patricia Gibson: As well as concerns about fertiliser costs, the Government's expected classification of farming as a non-high energy business in their review of the energy bill relief scheme is another body blow for farmers. It will inevitably push up inflation for food producers and consumers, worsening the disproportionate cost of living impact on rural communities. What steps will the Secretary of State take to mitigate the impact on farmers and rural businesses right now to help tame global inflationary pressures on domestic markets?

Dr Coffey: We have seen support to industry through this Government, recognising the price of energy, which was beyond the control of individual users. We have recently seen that wholesale prices have fallen to what they were before the illegal invasion by Russia of Ukraine. We are trying to get to a situation where we stabilise the support we are giving, focusing particularly on recognised energy-intensive industries such as those represented by Members in the Chamber today.

Environmental Land Management Schemes

5. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of the introduction of environmental land management schemes on farmers' incomes. [902948]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): As my hon. Friend knows, this Government are committed to backing British farmers. Last week I announced that farmers will receive more money for protecting and enhancing nature, and delivering sustainable food production under the environmental land management schemes.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response. He will be aware that some farmers are concerned about moving away from the basic payment scheme to ELMs. Can he assure farmers that it will be in their financial interests to do so, given the complexity and uncertainties of the schemes, and given the high production costs that farmers are facing to produce food, which is of course their basic job?

Mark Spencer: I hope my hon. Friend will have recognised the increase in the payments we are making. Only last week we announced that some of the prices we will pay in countryside stewardship will rise by more than 40%. I encourage his constituents, and farmers up and down the country, to take another look at these schemes, which are a great opportunity for them not only to produce great food, but to enhance the environment and improve our biodiversity.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): We want ELMs to work, but as it stands, the scheme risks going the way of those magnificent elm trees that have so suffered across the English countryside over the past 40 years. The Minister has admitted that the uptake of sustainable farming incentives is low—indeed, the National Farmers Union rightly described last week's announcement as “too little, too late”. Will the Minister come clean and tell the House how many farm businesses he will allow to go to the wall because of this failing agricultural transition process? Will he sit down with us and work out a simpler way forward that keep farmers farming and secures the environmental goals we all share?

Mark Spencer: I am genuinely disappointed by the hon. Gentleman's response, and his negativity is in danger of spreading across the Front Bench. We ran a pilot—that is why the uptake was low; it was because the pilot was small—and we listened to individuals who took part in that pilot. We tweaked those schemes in response to the pilot that we ran. That is good government. The way to organise and run such schemes is to listen to those who are taking part. We have listened, we have improved the payments, and there is now a great opportunity for our farmers across the country to engage in those schemes, improve our environment, improve biodiversity, produce great food, and make a profit.

Farming: Increased Costs

6. Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to help support farmers with increases in the cost of (a) fertiliser, (b) feed and (c) energy. [902949]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): We have taken a number of steps to help mitigate global factors that are increasing farming import costs, in fertiliser, feed, fuel and energy in particular. Those include working with industry and looking to ease restrictions on feed imports, and providing regulatory flexibility where possible. We have increased payment rates on our environmental land management schemes, supporting farmers to lower their import costs.

Alicia Kearns: Opaque fertiliser markets are damaging farmers' confidence and their ability to plan and invest. To put forward a meaningful solution, what steps are the Government taking to establish a trusted gas fertiliser index, as exists with grain and other industries, to improve transparency in fertiliser, including new sources of fertiliser such as that provided by our friends in Jordan?

Mark Spencer: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and pay tribute to her work in this area. DEFRA established the ministerially chaired fertiliser taskforce with key stakeholders, in response to global fertiliser supply pressures. The taskforce identified improving market transparency as an important action to increase farmer confidence. Industry members are currently leading that work, with DEFRA playing a convening role.

Farmers: Mental Health

7. **Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help support farmers' mental health. [902951]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): DEFRA's farmer welfare forum brings together England's largest farming and welfare organisations that provide mental health support, such as Farming Community Network, which I was pleased to join recently at an online meeting. We also recently opened the third phase of the future farming resilience fund, which provides free business advice to farmers, and supports mental health and wellbeing where appropriate.

Sir Jeremy Wright: My right hon. Friend knows that my constituents Andy and Lynda Eadon lost their son as a young farmer to suicide. Will he join me in thanking the Eadons for all the work they have done to raise awareness of mental health challenges, particularly for younger members of the farming community? Does he share my view that we should do much more to ensure that mental health awareness and an understanding of where to go for help when it is needed is built into the education and training received by those going into farming?

Mark Spencer: Of course, I join my right hon. and learned Friend not only in paying tribute to Andy and Lynda Eadon, who have done fantastic work following the tragedy they experienced, but in recognising the importance of this issue and how we should all be able to talk to someone to assist us at moments of great challenge. I met Andy and Lynda at the recent National Farmers Union community farming heroes awards, where they were honoured and paid tribute to for their work. I encourage them to continue that great work.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The wellbeing of farmers in my constituency is a priority, and I work closely with the NFU and other organisations. Last week, I was fortunate enough to go to Swansea Museum, where there is an exhibition called, "Stories of a Changing Landscape". It is hoped that the exhibition will create a point of connection for agricultural workers who are struggling with their mental health and with the issues with which years and generations have suffered. They are the people who feed our country. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Councillor Andrew Stevens, and the DPJ Foundation and Kate Miles, and in supporting them in the future? We need to prioritise our farmers' wellbeing to keep them feeding the nation.

Mark Spencer: I of course join the hon. Lady in congratulating Andrew Stevens, and all the charities doing work in the sector. Farmers work long hours and are often isolated and do not have opportunities to speak to other people. Those charities working with the sector are doing great work, but we all have a responsibility to try to help and support colleagues across our society.

National Food Strategy

9. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): What plans she has to implement the recommendations of Henry Dimbleby's national food strategy review on tackling the junk food cycle. [902953]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The Government food strategy responded to Henry Dimbleby's independent review of the food system, taking on several of the review's recommendations. DEFRA also worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to develop effective policies to deliver healthy, sustainable diets. "The Eatwell Guide" sets out the Government's recommendations on eating healthily and achieving a balanced diet.

Mrs Hodgson: How can the Government be trusted to protect the health of our young people from the cycle of junk food when they are six months late in responding fully to their own national food strategy? I know that the Minister says that he has responded, but the recommendations of the independent body set up under Henry Dimbleby have been subject time and again to hollow promises. The Minister must also recognise the serious risk to our farming communities and to national food security, so when will the Government begin to implement the policies of their own review that they commissioned?

Mark Spencer: As the hon. Lady will be aware, we have responded to that report. The Department of Health and Social Care leads in this area in tackling obesity. The good news is that British farmers are producing great quality food that is healthy as part of a balanced diet, and I encourage them to continue to do so.

Support for Zoos

10. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What recent support her Department has provided to zoos. [902954]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): We are working with the British and Irish Association of Zoos and

Aquariums and the zoo sector so that our zoos can become even more sustainable and conservation-focused. In addition to £16 million of covid support funding, the energy bill relief scheme will help with overheads.

Priti Patel: The Minister will be aware of the incredible work that zoos across the country, and in particular Colchester zoo in my constituency, undertake on conservation, tourism and job creation. Zoos are also doing incredible work internationally, but, as she knows, they have been badly hit by the pandemic. What support are the Government providing to preserve this great international work as well as to help create jobs, boost tourism and boost our local economy? Of course, she is always welcome to come to the Witham constituency and to Colchester zoo.

Trudy Harrison: My right hon. Friend is quite right and is brilliantly championing Colchester zoo. Zoos across this country are working on more than 800 conservation projects with more than 105 countries. Saving endangered species is vital work. We have already announced that zoos will be eligible for higher-tier support under the energy bills discount scheme from April 2023 to March 2024. We also work closely with zoos and their representatives. We have continued to ensure that the updated licensing standards support zoos.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I welcome the support that the Government have given zoos, both through the pandemic and with energy costs. The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) is absolutely right that zoos are at the forefront of conservation and are major employers and generators of income through tourism. When will the Government bring back the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill? It is in danger of running out of time, so can the Minister give us some information today about where the Bill is and when it is coming back?

Trudy Harrison: That is, of course, a matter for business managers. May I suggest that the hon. Gentleman asks that question at business questions?

Flood Defences: Shipley

11. **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of flood defences in the Shipley constituency. [902955]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Bradford Council and the Environment Agency have identified 48 properties at several locations in the Shipley constituency that are at high risk of flooding from the River Aire. An assessment has confirmed that neither upstream storage nor walls or embankments provide viable options to protect those properties, as I am sure my hon. Friend has been made aware. Bradford Council is carrying out some property flood resilience surveys. When the evidence has been gathered, consideration will be given to putting in property flood resilience measures—depending, obviously, on feasibility and funding.

Philip Davies: Fifty properties being flooded 10 times is as bad as 500 properties being flooded once. In fact, I would argue that it is even worse, yet the funding for

flood defences does not reflect that. When he was Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) introduced the frequently flooded allowance to benefit constituencies such as Shipley, which are regularly flooded but do not have the flood defences that they need to protect residents. When will Shipley benefit from the frequently flooded allowance?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue. We realise the difficulties for those few properties that are frequently flooded: as he says, it can be devastating for people who have to experience it time and again. That is why we opened the new frequently flooded fund. Applications have come in, and I am pleased to say that details of who will be awarded funds—I know that Shipley has applied—will be announced at the end of this month.

Affordable Local Food: Newcastle upon Tyne Central

12. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to help ensure the availability of affordable locally produced food in Newcastle upon Tyne Central constituency. [902956]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): DEFRA continues to monitor and work closely with industry to keep abreast of supply, prices and trends. While the Government do not set retail food prices or comment on commercial decisions by companies, we are providing £26 billion in cost of living support in 2023.

Chi Onwurah: Food security is national security, and local food production is an essential part of that. In the north-east we have a fine farming tradition, but our food banks are overwhelmed with demand. West End food bank in Newcastle Central is handing out more than 2,000 food parcels a week, yet donations have halved because of the cost of living crisis. People in the north-east are poorer under this Conservative Government. What we need is a plan to address rising farming costs, to improve and integrate our supply chains and to target public procurement and decent wages for working people, not this absolute lack of any action.

Mark Spencer: The latest national statistics from a survey published in March show that 93% of all households were food-secure in 2020-21—an increase of one percentage point from 92% in 2019-20. I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the great farmers of the north-east, who are doing great work to produce food.

Deposit Return Schemes: Digital Technology

13. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): If her Department will take steps to support trials of digital deposit return scheme technologies. [902957]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We recognise the benefits of a digital DRS. Many trials are being run; I am very encouraged by the results, and my officials and I will be looking closely at them. Once a deposit management organisation has been appointed to run the DRS alongside

industry, it will be decided whether to introduce digital solutions to the scheme in future. We will be watching with a weather eye.

Wera Hobhouse: I am pleased that the Minister recognises the possible advantages of a digital deposit return scheme, which, according to Resource Futures, could reduce the cost of the current scheme by £3.3 billion. We were promised a response to the latest DRS consultation, but it has still not been published. Will the Minister tell us when we can expect a response?

Rebecca Pow: Further details of the deposit return scheme, which will be so important to reducing waste, will be announced and published later this month.¹

VAT: Pet Food

14. **David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on temporarily reducing VAT on pet food in the context of increases in the cost of living. [902958]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Treasury leads on VAT policy, and that includes VAT policy on pet food. The Government are actively considering the impact of the increased cost of living on all aspects of people's lives.

David Linden: I know that you, Mr Speaker, are a particular fan of pets, and we all know that they are very important to people's mental health. I recently visited the Dogs Trust rehoming centre in the Broomhouse area of my constituency, where staff told me of their significant concerns about the cost of living crisis. They said that many pet owners were going without meals themselves in order to feed their pets, and that one couple from Belvedere, also in my constituency, had said that the price of dog food had risen by 12% month on month. Would the Minister be willing to meet me, along with representatives of the Dogs Trust, to discuss this further and see what support we can provide for pet owners?

Mark Spencer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for highlighting that important case. The Government recognise the challenge people are facing with their household bills, which is why the Chancellor of the Exchequer has introduced a huge package providing billions of pounds of support for household incomes. I also pay tribute to Dogs Trust, which is dealing with its own challenges when pets are presented at its centres when families cannot continue to feed them. I will pass the hon. Gentleman's comments to the Treasury and will encourage Treasury Ministers to meet him, but if he has no success in that regard, I shall be happy to continue to work with him to secure the meetings that he requires.

Flood Risk

15. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to protect communities at risk of flooding. [902959]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): We are investing a record £5.2 billion to deliver about 2,000 flood schemes

benefiting every region in England. More than 349,000 properties have already been protected since 2015, and, as my hon. Friend probably knows, the Environment Agency has erected demountable flood barriers in view of recent flood alerts. Flood defences and barriers have also been deployed at other locations along the River Severn, including Ironbridge, Bewdley and Upton upon Severn, and, along with the agency, we will be monitoring the situation closely.

Daniel Kawczynski: Flooding has become an annual occurrence in Shrewsbury, with devastating consequences. I chair the caucus of 40 Conservative Members of Parliament who have the River Severn, Britain's longest river, flowing through their constituencies. I am extremely grateful for the £40 million secured from DEFRA as seed investment for the River Severn Partnership, a consortium of councils representing communities all the way down the river which is trying to find a holistic solution for the management of Britain's longest river. Last year Treasury officials came to Shrewsbury to see for themselves the potential uplift in gross value added for our region if a holistic solution is found. What more can the Minister do to help us to secure—finally—that solution?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he has been doing in his constituency. Since I have been the water Minister, he has done nothing but bend my ear about Shrewsbury and the flood situation. As I have said, flood barriers have been erected, and we are listening: Shrewsbury has already received money for various projects. I also thank my hon. Friend for his work in the River Severn caucus, which brings together Members of Parliament up and down that important region. The River Severn Partnership has already benefited from significant funding for the development of schemes and some very useful pilots, and we will be working closely with it.

Crustacean Deaths: North-east coast

17. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): What progress she has made on establishing an independent panel of experts to investigate the crustacean deaths on the north-east coast in 2021. [902962]

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The independent panel of experts has already been established to look at the available data, and I expect a report from the panel later this month.

Ian Byrne: Following the environmental catastrophe of the mass die-off of marine life in the North sea off Teesside, will the Minister confirm whether capital dredging for the Teesside freeport project, and at other freeports including the planned freeport in Liverpool, will be paused while the Government await the hopefully independent panel's findings about the causes of the disaster that has devastated the ecosystem and ruined livelihoods?

Mark Spencer: It is important that we get the facts as soon as possible, but I want to give the independent panel time to assess the facts. The hon. Gentleman and I have a shared ambition. We want to know the facts of what is causing the die-off in the north-east. We want the panel to look at that independently, without pressure. As soon as we have those facts, we can respond appropriately.

1. [Official Report, 16 January 2023, Vol. 726, c. 2MC.]

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I raised this matter from the Dispatch Box back on 21 June 2022, when the official Government explanation was that the die-off was caused by algal bloom. The Government's position has since shifted due to overwhelming evidence, but even yesterday the Prime Minister said that DEFRA "concluded that natural causes were most likely responsible for some of the things that we saw."—[*Official Report*, 11 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 558.]

He also reiterated that

"an independent panel will be set up to report quickly."

Will the Minister confirm that the independent panel has now been set up? His initial answer was very quick, so can he confirm that the panel will be reporting this month? The fishing industry in the Tees is dying off, and to continue it needs the certainty of that report.

Mark Spencer: The report will be given to the Secretary of State, and I expect it to come this month, in January. We want to get the facts as soon as possible, and to respond to them as they are presented.

Topical Questions

T1. [902967] **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We closed 2022 by agreeing a global treaty to protect and restore nature across the world, and I am delighted that we rang in the new year on 1 January with all public authorities, including national parks, applying the general duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity. As the general duty came into force, I was in Brazil for the inauguration of President Lula. I was pleased to meet Brazil's new Environment and Agriculture Ministers, and to visit the projects we are supporting to make sure that the flora and fauna on which the whole world depends are restored.

Cat Smith: I was contacted by a young farmer in my constituency who, after returning from maternity leave, moved to a new farm and created a new business. She was denied her young farmer's financial support payment by the basic payment scheme because the Rural Payments Agency deemed it to be a continuation of her old business. The BPS rules have no business continuation guidance. Why are the new business questionnaires needed when the RPA determines that a new farm is not a new business? Will the Secretary of State ask the Farming Minister to meet me and my constituent to discuss this case?

Dr Coffey: It would be helpful if the hon. Lady wrote directly to the Farming Minister, who I know is happy to meet her to go through the case. It sounds like quite a complicated, technical situation, so it may take a little time to get a full answer from the RPA.

T2. [902968] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): The Secretary of State has mentioned Brazil a few times today, and we know that she recently visited Brazil for the inauguration of President Lula. While acknowledging her brief time there, does she agree that Brazil represents

a huge export market for our farmers and our food sector, as well as being a potential source of food that we currently import from elsewhere?

Dr Coffey: Brazil already produces a significant amount of foods that are not produced in this country, so we welcome any imports. My hon. Friend highlights the importance of trade and how we can export to Brazil. In any potential future trade agreement with Mercosur, of which Brazil is a member, we would want to make sure that we uphold our standards on food safety, animal welfare and environmental protection.

T3. [902969] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Between 2020 and 2021, there were more than 775,000 sewage spills in England and Wales. The Government have muddied the waters further by scrapping vital indicators of river and stream health, and by omitting water quality from their legally binding environmental targets. The Secretary of State avoided my previous question on this subject, so I ask again: how can our constituents be sure that their water is clean?

Dr Coffey: We will be publishing our environmental improvement plan, but the hon. Lady will be aware of the action already taken by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). As we have highlighted to the House today, thanks to Conservative Government monitoring is now widely available, so that we can tackle that, and we never had it before. That is why we are trying to resolve the issues and I know that the hon. Lady will want us to achieve that as quickly as possible.

T4. [902970] **Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Some people particularly want to buy halal and kosher meat, and some people particularly want to avoid doing so. Is it not time to properly label all these products appropriately, so that consumers, whether they want to buy this or do not want to buy it, can make an informed decision?

The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries (Mark Spencer): The Government have committed to consult on mandatory labelling reforms this year. We want to make it easier for consumers to purchase products aligned with their values. As part of the consultation, we will seek views on labelling products that conform with religious requirements, such as those that are halal and kosher.

T5. [902971] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Earlier this week, I met the Agricultural Industries Confederation Scotland and it echoed what I am hearing in North East Fife about the impact of gas prices on the cost of fertiliser. What assessment has the Minister undertaken of the impact of fertiliser costs on farming and what is he doing to prevent farmers from being forced to roll back agricultural production as a result of it?

Mark Spencer: I am chairing the fertiliser taskforce within DEFRA that is looking at these challenges. We recognise the huge pressure that fertiliser prices are putting on farmers up and down the country. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to assist in

dealing with the challenge we are facing. The good news is that the wholesale price of gas is coming down and some fertiliser prices are reflecting that drop in wholesale gas prices.

T6. [902972] Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The Government require local authorities to assess local air quality, but they only expect and request air quality action plans to be reviewed every five years. Many of those plans are seriously out of date, so will the Government please get a bit tougher with local authorities to make sure that those plans are up to date and are doing what they are supposed to do?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important point, which highlights not only the role of local authorities in air quality, but ensuring that these action plans are reviewed and delivered on time. We have recently updated our local air quality management policy guidance, with a new escalation process for local authorities that do not have an up-to-date plan.

T7. [902973] Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The River Severn and the River Vyrnwy are in flood again, and the Minister will know that this is the fourth year in a row we have seen flooding, with record flooding over the past three years. Obviously, that water originates upstream in Wales. Will she update me as to the conversations she has had with her Welsh colleagues about managing the upper Severn catchment?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady raises the important point that the whole catchment is involved in flooding; this is about not just where the flooding occurs at the bottom, but where it comes from. Not long ago, I visited the Vyrnwy reservoir. Apparently, that was the first time a Minister had ever been there. I held a roundtable with the Welsh equivalent of the Environment Agency and all sorts of other bodies, but the Labour Welsh Environment Minister declined to join us.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Con): Two days before Christmas, thousands of my constituents were left without any mains water after the perfect storm of the big freeze followed by the big thaw and a deluge of water into the Testwood and Otterbourne water supply works. Does the Minister agree that Southern Water, which I met last week, needs to get its explanation, with details of compensation, out to residents this month? Will she place on record her thanks to Winchester scouts, who did amazing work with the local resilience forum in getting bottled water to affected residents?

Rebecca Pow: Yes. I also thank my hon. Friend for his work as the local MP; all our local MPs got involved in this, as did DEFRA's emergency team. I met the chief executive officer of South East Water to talk about how it had to put up better water stations and improve its communications—all the things that he is mentioning. Its feet will be held to the fire to get its comms out to everybody to explain what happened and to improve the situation in future.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Untreated sewage was released from storm overflows for more than 2.6 million hours in 2021, according to The Rivers Trust, and now, according to the Competition and Markets Authority,

customers are paying on average 20% of their water bills on servicing debt and rewarding share-holders. That is billions of pounds that could be spent clearing up our waterways and investing in infrastructure. Does the Minister really think that the current system of regulation is fit for purpose?

Rebecca Pow: Yes, the Minister does think that the current regulation is fit for purpose, but many tweaks and improvements are made to ensure that it is working properly. That is why, under the Environment Act 2021, powers were given to Ofwat to alter the licences, so that what it pays out reflects whether it is improving the environment. That will be a critical step forward, as will our strategic policy statement that we gave it to put tackling storm overflows and improving the environment at the top of the agenda.

Dr Neil Hudson (Penrith and The Border) (Con): Sadly, the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza has been confirmed this week on a poultry premises in Eden in my constituency. My thoughts and prayers are with those affected there and across the country as well. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking everyone on the frontline, including vets and Animal and Plant Health Agency officials, involved in tackling this crisis? Will the Government reassure farmers and producers that they are keeping the avian influenza support and compensation measures constantly under review as we navigate this crisis?

Mark Spencer: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to those people who are working on avian flu, including the chief vet, who was recognised in the new year's honours list. I can assure my hon. Friend that we continue to talk to, and work with, industry to make sure that farmers can be profitable and confident that their business will succeed next year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There have been reports this week that the UK might be about to adopt ludicrous proposals that were, quite rightly, rejected by the EU to ban producers of plant-based products from using terms that are traditionally associated with meat and dairy. I do not think that anyone buying a hot dog actually thinks that it has canine content. Does the Minister think that the British public is so stupid to think that a product called "oat milk" comes from a cow?

Dr Coffey: My advice is not to believe everything that we read in the papers.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Blackpool's historic piers are showing signs of significant deterioration due to sand erosion beneath them. Although the Department is providing £12 million to prevent coastal erosion along my constituency, the measures that we need around the piers are not included within those plans. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how they can be amended to make sure that we have the money to do this within the package that the Government are providing?

Rebecca Pow: Within our budgets, we have the coastal erosion fund, of which my hon. Friend is aware. The pier is a very specific case. Of course, I would be happy to meet him to discuss this.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Research by Material Focus found that at least 1.3 million disposable vapes are thrown away every week. That is two vapes every second, and that includes precious metals such as lithium being improperly disposed of as well as a litter nightmare. Material Focus called for clear recycling advice and for manufacturers and retailers to install collection points in shops. What is the Secretary of State doing to support that, and what work is being done to prevent the huge waste problem that we are currently experiencing?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. We had a recent debate on this subject. It is astounding that these disposable vapes are being literally littered. Measures include our extended producer responsibility scheme, which puts the onus on the manufacturer and the seller of the product to deal with their safe disposal. Repair, restore and recycle will eventually take in all these different sectors that we are having to deal with, and we are starting with packaging.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): What steps is my hon. Friend taking to support the planting of hedgerows to increase hedgerow coverage by 40% by 2040?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Trudy Harrison): Hedgerows are absolutely fantastic, as I saw for myself here in Parliament at the hedgerow showcase of CPRE, the Countryside Charity. As we treble tree planting across this country, I will ensure that we do everything possible to put hedge planting and protection at the forefront of our priorities.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): What discussions have Ministers had with colleagues about monitoring and restricting plants brought into the UK from overseas by the public to protect biodiversity and food production?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady raises an important question. It is critical that we have that information for the public at our borders, as well as the targeted information focused on nurseries. We will continue to inform the public that bringing alien species into this country is bad news for nature in the UK.

T6. [902972] **Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): New year's fireworks celebrations caused the deaths of two horses this year—one in my constituency. The Animal Welfare Act 2006 is very difficult to enforce. May I meet the animal welfare Minister to look at this issue? The numbers are astounding. No fireworks display is ever worth the death of a much-loved family pet or animal.

Dr Coffey: I am conscious of the impact fireworks can have on animals. I will share my hon. Friend's concerns with my noble Friend Lord Benyon, who covers this area, and I expect Lord Benyon will meet with him.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister will be aware of the Northern Ireland protocol and the difficulties that vets in Northern Ireland are experiencing in accessing medicines. It is important that assistance is given on both availability and cost. Vets are reorientating their supply chains with great difficulty. Can I seek the Minister's help for Northern Ireland vets in respect of medicines access, so that we have the same access to treatment as the rest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Dr Coffey: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the status of what is happening with the Northern Ireland protocol. My noble Friend Lord Benyon leads on borders and veterinarians, so I will bring the hon. Gentleman's question to his attention. It is important that we continue to ensure a peaceful solution to what is happening in Northern Ireland and a restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly as quickly as possible.

Business of the House

10.31 am

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Penny Mordaunt): I welcome the hon. Lady to her place, and wish a happy new year to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House.

The business for the week commencing 16 January will include:

MONDAY 16 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill.

TUESDAY 17 JANUARY—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Online Safety Bill.

WEDNESDAY 18 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

THURSDAY 19 JANUARY—General debate on the imprisonment of Jagtar Singh Johal, followed by a general debate on Russian grand strategy. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 20 JANUARY—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 January includes:

MONDAY 23 JANUARY—All stages of the Northern Ireland Budget Bill.

TUESDAY 24 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill (day 1).

WEDNESDAY 25 JANUARY—Remaining stages of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill (day 2).

THURSDAY 26 JANUARY—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 27 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

Jessica Morden: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business and wish everyone across the House a very happy new year.

I apologise for the absence of the shadow Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debonnaire), who is under the weather and, I am afraid to say, has lost her voice. As the Leader of the House will know, it is not often that my hon. Friend finds herself speechless—I put it down to all the times she has had to call out the Government's failing legislative agenda over the past year. I know we all wish her well and look forward to cheering her on when she is back at the Dispatch Box next week, undoubtedly in full voice.

The Leader of the House has announced the next in her Government's long line of unworkable and impractical Bills. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) rightly said, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill does not actually make any mention of public safety. The Government are putting an intolerable burden on employers, unions and workers, and for what? To sweeten some of their own Back Benchers. The Transport Secretary does not think it will work and the Education Secretary has said she does not want it applied to teachers. In fact, the Government's own impact assessment said that there is no need for minimum service levels in other sectors.

If her own Cabinet colleagues do not support the Bill, how on earth does the Leader of the House expect the public to do so?

MPs must be able to scrutinise the Bill properly. We are already concerned about the Government's lack of engagement with key stakeholders. Have they spoken to employers, unions or workers? I understand the Government have not even published their official consultation yet. Why not? What have they got to hide? They have said they will do so "in due course". What does that mean? Can the Leader of the House tell us when the consultation will be published?

The Leader of the House has also scheduled the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. Its Henry VIII clauses represent a huge Government power grab from Parliament. Yet again, they think they can get away with swerving scrutiny. Under that legislation, MPs will have practically no powers to determine what legislation stays or goes. After the chaos the Government have caused in this House over past months and years, on what basis does the Leader of the House think it a good idea to leave it to a Minister's whim to replace 2,400 pieces of legislation with next to no parliamentary scrutiny?

If the Government are set on pressing ahead, will the Leader of the House tell us how they plan to square the practical difficulties? The irresponsible cliff edge they have set—to remove thousands of laws by the end of this year—is creating yet more chaos and uncertainty for British businesses and people, and they could do without it. The Government have not left enough time to produce serious replacements for complex areas of regulation, including environmental protection, food safety, civil aviation codes, health and safety in the workplace, employment law, parental leave, product safety, biosecurity—the list goes on. Does the Leader of the House not think that those important issues deserve to be properly thought through?

We do not even have a full list of the regulations. The Government have introduced a dashboard which, I understand, may not even be complete, so when will they ensure that it is? Will they consider extending the sunset clauses beyond the end of this year so that MPs can give these laws the scrutiny they deserve? It is a real possibility that some will slip through the cracks and be scrapped by accident. The Government must get their act together.

New year, same Government swerving scrutiny—time for change.

Penny Mordaunt: I start by wishing the shadow Leader of the House a speedy recovery. She will be frustrated to have lost her voice. I wish her well and hope she is not feeling too bad.

I shall be charitable to the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), because I do not think she has understood what the strikes Bill is doing. In addition to the powers in the Bill, we will focus on three areas: two blue-light services, and rail. That is because unions have behaved responsibly in other areas, such as nursing, where agreements are in place. We will act where we have concerns about threat to life or huge disruption and misery for the general public, with devastating impacts on their lives. For example, some people are losing their job because they cannot consistently get to work. Labour's London has had nearly 100 public transport strikes, which is unacceptable to the public.

[Penny Mordaunt]

The proposal is modest and proportionate, many other countries do similar, and it will not prevent people from taking strike action should they wish. It will protect the public from the worst impacts on their lives and wellbeing. To dismiss a sensible approach before seeing the legislation and before the consultation that will help us arrive at the safety levels is, frankly, putting dogma before duty to the public.

However, I live in hope of a U-turn, because there have been quite a few from Labour recently. This week, we learned that the Opposition have gone from placing education at the heart of what they do to having nothing to say on the matter, except on the tax status of schools. They said they would defend freedom of movement, but now they are not. They said they would nationalise rail, mail, energy and water, except they are not, but then they might. They said they would not use private sector providers for the NHS; now they would. They said they wanted patients at the heart of healthcare and no more NHS reorganisation, except they now plan to abolish GP practices: the largest possible NHS reorganisation. They said they would abolish tuition fees; now they would not. They said they would restore faith in politics, but then blocked Brexit and now oppose the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which includes good scrutiny measures and, as the hon. Lady knows, flexibility on whether to push out each statutory instrument and on what areas are priorities for Government reform. They said they want local people in the driving seat, except that at every possible opportunity they want to take powers away from communities and give them to regional bodies.

The Leader of the Opposition said he did not want to get out the “big Government chequebook”, but Labour’s current spending commitments say otherwise, with £90 billion of uncoded spending plans. The Opposition say they want to clean up politics and that they are patriotic and on the side of hard-working families, yet some of their largest donors are also backing Just Stop Oil and one has been an agent of the Chinese state. They say that the unions’ demands are unaffordable, but join them on the picket line. So I live in hope that we might have another U-turn from the Opposition and that their position on this important strike legislation will change by Second Reading.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. Over the past three years, the most hideous crime in my constituency has been the theft of catalytic converters, with gangs of thugs arriving at people’s properties and threatening those who own the cars with baseball bats or iron bars while stealing the catalytic converters. Over the Christmas period, we heard that only about 5% of those thefts have been solved. May we have a debate in Government time on action that can be taken to combat this heinous crime and to prevent the thugs who do it from profiting from their thefts?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter, which I know is a concern to many of his constituents. The next Question Time where he could raise it is Transport questions—Home Office questions are not until February—and I encourage him to raise it then.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and bliadhna mhath ùr to everyone. Goodness, where to start this week? Panicked draconian legislation trampling workers’ rights, news that £42 billion in unpaid tax is being lost each year to the UK Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Scotland’s claiming yesterday that there is no desire in Scotland to have membership of the EU, which will be news to the estimated 78% of my constituents who voted to remain.

Following questions on the new Westminster Accounts database, we learned that the Prime Minister supports transparency around political donations and outside interests, although oddly it did not seem high on his agenda when I asked him recently about the influence of opaquely funded think-tanks on Government policy. Nor did it seem high up the agenda of the previous three Prime Ministers when I asked them about meetings with bodies such as the infamous Cambridge Analytica, details of which mysteriously failed to appear on ministerial records.

The Prime Minister was asked whether companies that do not seem to exist should donate to MPs, in relation to hefty donations made to some Labour MPs. He must therefore have been very troubled by openDemocracy reports showing that obscure firms with no listed addresses bankrolled hordes of Tory red wall candidates in the last election. Will the Leader of the House tell us whether she supports calls for an inquiry into the donations system to root out secretive campaign finance from our politics and protect our democracy?

Lastly, I note that *The Press and Journal* yesterday ran an article quoting UK Government sources as saying that Cromarty firth would be one of the sites selected for freeport status, alongside the firth of Forth bid. I have checked with Scottish Government sources, who tell me they have not been consulted on this disclosure ahead of the formal announcement, which is expected on Friday. That is a pretty serious breach of trust when we consider that the Scottish and UK Governments were supposedly working together in partnership on those proposals. It was clearly leaked to the media in yet another pathetic attempt to steal a march on Scotland’s Government. Will the Leader of the House undertake to investigate who decided to bypass protocol in that way? It is no wonder the people of Scotland have so little confidence in Westminster Governments when such infantile games of spin are being played.

Penny Mordaunt: May I say happy new year to the hon. Lady? I admire her very much; she is plucky and brave and she has decided to press me on campaign finance. The SNP is asking questions about campaign finance, so let us start with the Scottish nationalists’ deciding to ignore other private sector firms and give support to bail out a smelting business—to the tune of £5 million per job retained, although they were not retained—that just happened to be a sponsor of the SNP’s party conference. There is so much more material, but I do not want to detain the House. I welcome any investigations into such financial matters.

I had hoped at the start of the new year that the Scottish nationalists might focus on the issues that are of concern to the Scottish people. I wonder what would

happen if they focused on, for example, the tragic situation of addiction in Scotland, which currently has the largest number of drug-related deaths anywhere in Europe and the largest number of alcohol-related deaths anywhere in the UK. Imagine if they made it their mission to sort that out this year, instead of spending so much time—as they did in the first debate they held this year—on independence. Indeed, if that does not appeal to them, how about improving education; reducing the attainment gap, which they have widened; reducing waiting times at A&E departments, which are at record levels; cutting violent crime; or bringing forward their broadband roll-out to rural areas, some of which are having to wait until 2027?

It is my wish for the new year that the SNP starts to focus on those issues. Scotland needs it to.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Happy new year, Mr Speaker. Over Christmas, a 17-year-old boy purchased a two-foot zombie knife online and had it sent straight to his door. Had police officers not had the wherewithal to look for the packaging, they would have been unable to confiscate the knife because there were no violent images on the blade or the handle, as prescribed in the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the sale of such knives and the legislation that covers them, and join me in condemning the reckless retailers cashing in on crime by circumventing the law?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for her diligence in pointing out that loophole. I know that she was busy campaigning on this issue over the Christmas period. I suggest that the swiftest way to address the matter is to raise it at Home Office questions on 6 February, and I am sure that she will.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I wish you and Members across the House a very happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Backbench Business Committee is very much open for business. We would welcome applications for debates in Westminster Hall which are normally on Tuesday mornings and Thursday afternoons, and applications for debates in the main Chamber which are also usually on Thursday afternoons. Applications for date-specific commemoration debates, particularly anniversaries and campaign days, are also welcome, but we ask that Members submit them well in advance so that we can get some planning in and notify the Leader of the House that those debates are coming up. A little note to make is that Thursday 26 January, which the Leader of the House mentioned would be for Backbench business, is the date we propose for the debate on Holocaust Memorial Day, which, of course, follows on 27 January.

Just over the border, in the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), Orchard House Foods on the Team Valley trading estate, which employed many of my constituents, made its workforce of more than 250 people redundant just before Christmas. No workers have received any redundancy pay, and many have been left almost destitute at a very difficult time of the year. Can we have a statement from

the Government on what they intend to do to protect workers from the cavalier actions of rogue employers such as Orchard House Foods?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his notice of the very important debate on Holocaust Memorial Day.

I am very sorry to hear about what has happened in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. Although there is no good time for that to happen, it is a pretty terrible thing for families to endure before Christmas in particular. If he is happy for me to do so, I will write to the relevant Minister and ask them to contact his office to see what can be done. It is quite wrong for people to be left in limbo like that.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Happy new year to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Unfortunately, many of my constituents have not had a happy new year, because we have experienced extensive flooding in parts of my constituency. Nith Inshore Rescue has come to the aid of many people, but in the course of its activities it lost one of its support vehicles. It has made an application to the Department for Transport's rescue boat fund. Will the Leader of the House encourage the Secretary of State for Transport to bring forward an announcement about the allocation of that fund?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my right hon. Friend for raising that point. I am sure that the Secretary of State will have heard it, and I will make sure that he is aware of the matter, which is an immediate issue for my right hon. Friend's constituents. I understand that the results of the next round of funding will be announced shortly. I encourage him to look at central funding and to ensure that the organisation has registered with the particular tool that pulls together all possible other sources of funding, but I will write to the Department and make sure that it knows that this is a very pressing matter for his constituents.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Following this morning's shocking report from Citizens Advice that more and more people are being disconnected from their gas and electricity because they have been moved on to prepayment meters, often without their knowledge, and cannot afford to top them up, when will we have a statement from the Government about their intention to ban this practice so that our constituents do not lose their right to light and warmth?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising this important issue. It is one of a number of issues that have been identified both by the Government and by organisations such as the Centre for Social Justice in its work on what it calls the "poverty premium"—additional costs and obstacles that are causing people to be disproportionately impacted by the cost of living crisis. I shall certainly write to the relevant Department about the specific issue that he raises, and I think it would be a very well supported debate.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I wish the shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), well and hope that she gets better soon. It is good that she has such an able deputy to step in. It is always good to have an able deputy.

[Mr Peter Bone]

I apologise to the Leader of the House, because I gave her notice of the question that I was going to ask but I am not now going to ask that question. This weekend, the Wellingborough, Rushden and Corby taskforce will be out on the streets talking to people about their concerns and delivering the 2023 listening survey. However, it is already clear that one of the major issues they are concerned about is the thousands of people coming across the channel illegally. They want to know when the Government are going to introduce further legislation. Could the Leader of the House tell us when that is going to happen? By the way, if she is free on Saturday, she is welcome to come along and join the taskforce.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend. I reassure him that, even if it is a lone campaign, I am certainly up for having an able deputy, and there would be no more able deputy than him. I am not motivated solely by the fact that it would prevent him from asking business questions.

My hon. Friend raises one of the most pressing issues, which I think all Members of this House are concerned about. We have to stop this racket in human traffic. I can tell him that he will not have long to wait for a piece of legislation that will give us the powers we need to resolve the issue. The Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have been working extremely hard on it, the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Cabinet Committee has had many meetings on the Bill, including this week, and my hon. Friend will not have long to wait for it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): May I wish everybody across the House a happy new year? I am so proud of my Bath constituents' ties to Ukraine. Local fundraising meant that we were able to send 13 generators to the city of Oleksandriia—we received a moving message back from the Mayor of Oleksandriia this week—and we have welcomed 267 refugees into our local authority area with open arms. Unfortunately, Ukrainian refugees still face considerable bureaucratic difficulties. Registering their car in the UK and then reversing the process on their return to Ukraine is proving especially complex and costly. There are already car registration exemptions for overseas students and overseas workers on fixed contracts. Can we please have a statement from the relevant Minister in the Department for Transport on whether the exemption can be extended to Ukrainian refugees?

Penny Mordaunt: May I join the hon. Lady and thank all her constituents, and everyone across this country who is doing so much to support the brave fight of the Ukrainian people, including taking in refugees? People over the Christmas period will have been making extra efforts to have two Christmases in their households to ensure that the Orthodox calendar is acknowledged. I suggest, if she is content, that I write to the relevant Departments. At this point, with refugees usually having been here since May, there will be all sorts of issues coming up because they will be thinking about spending more time here perhaps than they did when they moved, including registering cars and so forth. I will write to her on that matter and see whether there is something we can do to scoop up all those issues, as well as the specifics she raises.

Selaine Saxby (North Devon) (Con): In my North Devon constituency, we have issues with legacy street furniture, such as public phone boxes. These phone boxes are no longer used by the majority of the public, so have become a hub for vandalism, drug taking and antisocial behaviour. Barnstaple is a recipient of the future high streets fund, and we are cleaning up our high street for businesses and residents. The state of these phone boxes has drawn multiple complaints. Despite that, the company that runs the phone boxes refuses to remove them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that local communities should have a say over their public spaces, and can she advise how I might secure their removal?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter, and I suggest that she also raises it on 26 January with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport directly. There are provisions for these boxes to be removed, and that should be straightforward. There is also an alternative, in that the community can buy them for £1 and convert them to another use. I shall certainly flag her concerns with the Secretary of State and ask her, if possible, to contact her office before 26 January.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I give just a gentle reminder that the focus is on parliamentary business, so asking for a debate or when the next questions might be is probably a good idea.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Can we have a debate—[*Laughter.*] I just thought I would get that in sharpish. Can the Leader of the House give the Chamber some idea as to when we might see the White Paper on football governance? The Secretary of State said at the beginning of December that it was imminent. That was not very long ago, and I am not impugning the motives of the Secretary of State, but the Leader of the House knows as well as any of us how urgent this issue is, and many Members from all parts of the House have raised it. Can we see the White Paper in the near future?

Penny Mordaunt: May I start by thanking the hon. Gentleman for convening a meeting in Parliament this week and all the work he has done on the fan-led review? As a Pompey supporter and someone who saw through the community buy-out of that 200-year-old club, which would otherwise have been lost, I know how vital this issue is to many clubs. Many clubs are teetering on the brink as I speak. I will write to DCMS, ask it about the timetable and get it to contact the hon. Gentleman's office.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): My right hon. Friend knows about my bathing water quality campaign for the River Nidd in Knaresborough. Progress is being made, including securing the support of Yorkshire Water, but a point often raised is that rainwater run-off from farmland, which can include animal waste and pesticides, is a big factor affecting the quality of our waterways. It is a complex issue, and local farmers produce some of the highest quality food in our country, so can we have a debate to explore how the Government can support farmers in mitigating this issue?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend will know how to apply for a debate. I know that he has applied for debates on this issue before and secured them. To assist him, I will write to the Secretary of State and ask her to respond to his issues.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Salford Families in Need Meals Project is a charity I support in my constituency, ably led by Antony Edkins and Julie Larkinson with a team of volunteers. Every Wednesday, working with The Bread and Butter Thing, it distributes affordable food to around 70 families from a base at Barton Moss primary school in my constituency for the modest charge of £7.50 for three bags of food. Last year, the charity raised thousands of pounds so that we could distribute the food for free across four weeks around Christmas and new year. We then found that some families would struggle to pay for heating and cooking at Christmas, so we added £10 per household to help pay for energy. This is a serious issue. Projects such as ours and many others can distribute food to families who need it, but many can now not afford to cook the food. I ask the Leader of the House for a debate in Government time on how we can ensure that families still have the means to produce hot meals in the coldest months.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this very important matter. I pay tribute to that organisation and to the many similar organisations that do such fantastic work not just at this time of the year but all year round. She will know about the packages of support stood up by central Government and the funding we have given to local authorities to allow them to have a more tailored response in our constituencies. She will know how to apply for a debate, but I shall make sure the relevant Departments have heard what she has said today.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. This morning, the report into antisemitism in the National Union of Students was published. It is a damning indictment of the failure by that organisation to tackle anti-Jewish racism. Will the Leader of the House urge the NUS to get its act together on this issue, and will she find time for a debate on antisemitism on our campuses?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important and timely matter. As someone who was a representative in the NUS, I know that this issue has plagued that organisation for many, many years. I hope that, having published the report, it will actually do something about it. I am sure that any debate applied for on this matter, whether through the Backbench Business Committee or other means, would be extremely well attended.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Over two years ago, my constituent, a single mother with two young children, was diagnosed with stage 4 terminal cancer. As a result, she subjected herself to punishing treatments to gain more time. Unfortunately, she has not yet been transferred to Social Security Scotland, whose policy is based on dignity, fairness and respect, so she was subjected to a reassessment for her

personal independence payment claim, during which she felt she was having to justify why she was still alive. May we have a debate in Government time to discuss these really important issues for people right across the United Kingdom who are still subject to Department for Work and Pensions rules?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very sorry to hear about the experiences the hon. Lady's constituent and her family have had. She will know that the Department has done a huge amount of work looking at a pathway for people who are terminally ill. There are campaigns at the moment on other asks for people who are terminally ill. We owe it to them and their families to constantly improve the systems they have to deal with. Many of these issues sit in Scotland, both on benefits and the interaction with social care, but if she gives my office the details of this lady's case I will take it up this afternoon with the Department to see whether there is any further advice we can give her.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con): On 20 December last year, a young man in Ashfield, Sean Lynk, sadly took his own life. No one saw it coming, including his parents, Julie and Graham, who are obviously devastated, as are the rest of the community. Male suicide is now one of the biggest killers of men under 40. Graham has promised to dedicate the rest of life to his son and raise awareness of male suicide and suicide across the country. Does my right hon. Friend think it is a good idea to make time in this place for a debate on suicide to represent Sean, his family and all families who are affected by this epidemic?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. I extend my sympathies, and I am sure the whole House would wish to as well, to Julie, Graham and all those affected by that tragic loss. It would be a very good topic for a debate. It is shocking that suicide is the largest killer of young men in this country. He may also wish to raise this issue at equalities questions on 25 January, because we do not tend to focus on matters that affect men.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As a beneficiary of early diagnosis of prostate cancer, it is pretty shocking to see today's Prostate Cancer UK report showing the differences in when men get diagnosed with this disease in the UK: a third in Scotland are diagnosed too late for effective cure and a fifth in parts of England, but only one in eight in London. Can we have a statement from the Government on what they will do to tackle this postcode lottery, not least to give much clearer messages to men about the need to get themselves tested in an area in which contradictory signals are sometimes given about what is the right thing to do? That should be done in conjunction with the devolved Administrations, because this disease affects people right across the UK.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for helping to raise awareness of this matter. I also thank the BBC for the good work that it has been doing to raise awareness that people may experience no symptoms at all, so it is important that they go for regular screening. I was very shocked by the disparity, and particularly the figures in Scotland, as the hon. Gentleman said. One in three are diagnosed too late and the cancer has spread.

[Penny Mordaunt]

We need to address that. I will write to the relevant Department to ensure that it has heard the House's concerns.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): On Monday, the Treasury announced the introduction of the new energy bills discount scheme to assist businesses, charities and the public sector. A substantial level of support will be provided to businesses in the sectors identified as being the most energy and trade intensive, such as the manufacturing industries. Can we have a statement from a Treasury Minister on that scheme? Leisure centres and public swimming pools such as Barnet Copthall in my constituency, which I visited in December, are facing significant financial challenges. It is not in the interests of public health for increased charges to be levied on people who are exercising.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue. I completely agree that it is not in anyone's interest—particularly given all that we are doing to keep people active and healthy—for charges to be hiked enormously for access to swimming pools and other facilities. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is looking at all these issues, including with other Departments, to see what we can do to future-proof such facilities, ensuring that they are the most energy efficient that they can be. I will flag up my hon. Friend's concerns with the Departments involved.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), 600,000 people last year were put on to prepayment meters. It is expected that another 160,000 will be this winter. People in fuel poverty pay a premium for that, and every 10 seconds someone is cut off. A Government statement on prepayment meters is long overdue. Can we please have one urgently, because we need to scrutinise exactly what the Government are doing to protect the most vulnerable people from fuel poverty?

Penny Mordaunt: Further to the answer I gave a little while ago, I will certainly raise this with the Department. There are concerns not just about the practice of putting people on to those payment systems but about some of the billing by companies and the timeliness of Government support being passed on to those people. There is a raft of issues, which I will raise with the Department.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware of the concerns that were expressed across the House a few weeks ago about the curtailment of and changes to BBC local radio. Many of my constituents are concerned about the loss of local coverage on BBC Radio Humberside. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a statement by the appropriate Minister, so that we can hear the response of the BBC to the representations made in this House?

Penny Mordaunt: This is incredibly important. Local media is a vital lifeline; we saw that during the pandemic. It is critical to our national resilience and to our national democracy and our way of life in this country. I shall certainly make sure that the Secretary of State for

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has heard my hon. Friend's concerns, which I know are shared by many Members. The next DCMS questions is on 26 January, and I encourage all Members who are concerned about this to raise it with the Secretary of State then.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Further to the questions from my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the report from Citizens Advice on prepayment meters is urgent. Since November 2021, the courts have allowed 370,000 forced entry warrants—that is 30,000 a month. These companies cannot possibly be doing the right checks on people before the warrants are being sought, and the courts certainly are not questioning them when issuing them—they are issued literally in seconds flat. Can we have a statement from the Government? Next week, the weather will turn freezing again, so this is very urgent indeed, because it is happening now. Some smart meters are switched off without people's knowledge, and they only find out when their electricity goes off. We cannot allow this to happen.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is correct. As he will know, there is huge disparity across the country in how many warrants are issued. In some places it is only a handful, and in others it is many tens of thousands.

Clive Efford: Like Portsmouth.

Penny Mordaunt: Portsmouth is one of them, so I have a particular interest in this. As with all the issues that Members have raised, I will make sure that I speak to the Department this afternoon and ensure that it is aware of the House's concerns and comes forward to update it.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker. Ecclesbourne School in my constituency is threatened with being forced by a Government Minister to join a multi-academy trust following a disappointing Ofsted report. My concern is that while MATs have been successful for some schools, there is no process for leaving a MAT if it does not work out and no democracy involved. Could we have a debate in Government time on the democratisation of the MAT system?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that. She will know that we have Education questions on Monday, and I urge her to raise it with the Secretary of State then. It is important that there are routes to leave a situation that is not working and, perhaps more importantly, that there is the right level of consultation before such agreements are entered into, to cause the least possible disruption to communities and, particularly, the education of children. I encourage her to raise it then, but I shall also raise it on her behalf with the Secretary of State.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): With four prisons in close proximity to my constituency, a large proportion of my constituents are prison officers and members of the Prison Officers' Association trade union. At the last Cabinet Office questions, I had a question about prison officer pensions transferred to the Ministry of Justice just before Question Time, only for the Ministry of

Justice to say that it was the responsibility of Cabinet Office after all. I have since tabled written parliamentary questions asking who is in charge, but both Departments are pointing the finger at one another. Could the Leader of the House help to resolve this confusion and find out who is responsible for the pension age of prison officers, which, at 68, is far too late?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman asks a question that is exactly why we have business questions. I will certainly find out and give him a definitive answer a bit later today.

Nick Fletcher (Don Valley) (Con): Many crimes are carried out in the heat of the moment or in a single lack of judgment. Fly-tipping is not one of them. It is a premeditated crime—no one fly-tips accidentally. It is an issue across the country, including, as you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, in Doncaster. Can we have a debate on fly-tipping, as I believe that minimum fines of £10,000 or immediate custodial sentences are the only way to bring this abhorrent practice to an end?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. He will know that we introduced fixed penalty notices in 2016, which gave councils the means to take swift action, and we have introduced fixed penalties for householders who give their waste to people who then go on to fly-tip. We had DEFRA questions earlier, so I will write to the Department on his behalf to raise this issue and encourage it to get in touch with his office.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): May we have a debate on the proposal by McGill's Buses to withdraw the No. 52 Barrhead circular service? It is a lifeline service for so many people in the town, connecting communities to shops, community organisations, the library, doctors' surgeries and so on. The timing of the withdrawal announcement was deeply disappointing and it lacked any details about why this important and well used service would be withdrawn. In addition, I have presented a parliamentary petition. Does the Leader of the House agree with me that the significant work done by Rena McGuire, a community activist, in securing about 600 signatures to date on that public petition is testament to the way people in Barrhead value this service, and McGill's should listen and change its plans?

Penny Mordaunt: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to her constituent, Rena, who has worked so hard to raise awareness of this important service. I think the answer she is seeking will be with her local authority, and I assume she has already got in contact with it. However, I will take some advice, and see if there are other things the hon. Lady can do to try to ensure that this service is maintained.

Scott Benton (Blackpool South) (Con): Since I was elected, Blackpool has received over £262 million of additional Government investment, and a huge amount of extra money has been spent on a variety of projects. However, being Blackpool, we always want more. That brings me to our £40 million levelling-up fund bid for a new multiversity skills complex, which will help provide the next generation with the jobs for the future. Can my

right hon. Friend update the House on when we can expect either news or a ministerial statement on the levelling-up fund bids?

Penny Mordaunt: I congratulate my hon. Friend on all the work he has done and on what he has managed to secure for his constituents. The bread and butter of an MP's job is, yes, to scrutinise legislation, but it is also to ensure that we are getting new funding and new opportunities into our constituencies, and I know he has made a tangible practical difference to the quality of life of people in his patch. I will certainly raise his interest with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I know this is not the first time he will have campaigned on that bid, and I think decisions on that round of funding are imminent.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Can we have an urgent statement from either the Home Secretary or the Culture Secretary about the shifting focus of online harms to platforms that possibly fall outside the scope of the Online Safety Bill? I have been contacted by the parents of an 11-year-old girl in the Reddish part of my constituency, who was in effect groomed on Spotify. Fake accounts and playlists are being created by groomers, who are then communicating with children to encourage them to send explicit photographs of themselves. Thankfully, this was spotted by her parents, who are appalled, but what can we do, and can we have such a statement to ensure that Spotify and other streaming platforms cannot be abused by groomers?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this important matter. Both for Governments and for parents, I am afraid this is all about continuing to be vigilant and having to adapt what we know to protect our households, and the Government are always going to have to be advancing and adapting the tools we have. He will know that DCMS questions are on 26 January, but I will also raise this matter with the Secretary of State and ask her team to get in touch with his office.

Mark Fletcher (Bolsover) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that there is no post-16 education provision in the Bolsover constituency, so I am sure that she will join me in welcoming the bid for a free school from Redhill Academy Trust, which runs The Bolsover School. She knows that I have a great passion for ensuring that all young people can fulfil their potential, so may we have a debate on the importance of the free schools programme in filling the gaps in our education system, and ensuring that all young people can fulfil their potential, particularly in Bolsover?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend provides another example of the difference that Members of Parliament can make, and the massive difference that that new opportunity would make to children in his constituency is evident. Since we have been in government, 10% more schools are now rated good or outstanding, with a wider variety of educational choice. I think that is incredibly important, and I will certainly encourage the Department for Education to consider my hon. Friend's bid, and stay in touch with him regarding when that might be announced.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Dylan Gibson is a young professional teacher in my constituency, but sadly he has lost his sight due to illness. He is desperate to remain in employment, and his employer is being terribly supportive in that. The issue is that he has no means to access work; he does not have the means to get there. Mr Gibson has applied to the Department for Work and Pensions for the access to work grant, but he has been informed that he will have to wait possibly more than 20 weeks to get it, because the Department is prioritising people who are outside employment, who can get assessments within two weeks. That is pretty unfair. Will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in the House, so that we can debate the issue and come to some sort of resolution, and so that people such as Dylan Gibson do not suffer as a consequence of a failure of the system, and the Government can give the support that people need?

Penny Mordaunt: That is a shocking story. There should be no legislative reason why the hon. Gentleman's constituent should not have that help. The access to work scheme, which unusually is something that Members across the House think is good, has a good track record of being there, able to be utilised when an individual needs it. We want teachers to be able to teach, and I am sure the Secretary of State would also wish that. If the hon. Gentleman gives my office the details of that case, I will take it up with the Department this afternoon.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): Just before the Christmas recess, my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) secured an excellent Westminster Hall debate to discuss the Mayor of London's appalling plan to expand the ultra-low emission zone to outer London. That will do nothing to improve air quality, and it will be economically disastrous for poorer people in outer London constituencies such as Orpington, and for those living outside Greater London. It is simply a cash grab, the Mayor has no mandate to do it, and it is overwhelmingly opposed by people in outer London. Will my right hon. Friend encourage colleagues across Government to consider withholding funds from Transport for London until the Mayor decides to withdraw that insane plan, and may we have a related debate in Government time?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Whatever the merits or otherwise of setting up such a scheme, to do it at a time when businesses are recovering from a pandemic—this obviously affects not only businesses in London, but also those in surrounding areas, with tradesmen and others who will be coming in for materials or to do jobs, and I know it has had a hugely detrimental impact on many firms. I will raise the issue with the Secretary of State, but I encourage my hon. Friend also to raise it at Transport questions on 19 January.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I wonder whether the Leader of the House would consider giving time to a problem that affects many families in my constituency—indeed, in every constituency in the country—but which we have no way of gauging or recording, so we do not know its scale. On the death of a parent, we do not record at any point that there may be a child who is grieving.

I know from personal experience and from my sister's experience that, no matter how stable the family, how supportive the family network and support system or how well the child appears to be coping with that grief, they may need support. Winston's Wish tells me that there is no way of knowing how many children are bereaved at the moment. It would be simple to resolve that if, along with every death, we recorded whether there were dependent children. They will need support. It is not something that goes away with growing up, and they will need the most support at the point at which they are bereaved. Could we find time in the House to consider a way of ensuring that we know where these children are? If they have not previously been in touch with social services, we have no way of ensuring that they get the help they need.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Lady raises a very good idea. I know that other Members of the House have been campaigning on ensuring that people in general have more support and that, whether it is the state or those wonderful organisations in the third sector who support families, we can really tailor support to those people. I encourage her to raise it directly with Ministers, but I will also ensure that they hear what she has said.

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): Access to dentistry continues to be a huge problem for people across Stockton South. Many of us have heard the horror stories of people living on painkillers and undergoing DIY fillings and even DIY extractions. Will my right hon. Friend grant a debate on access to dentistry so that we can have an update on what the Government are doing to ensure that people in Stockton South can access a dentist?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. We spend about £3 billion on these services every year. Of course, at the start of last year we had an uplift in funding to help cope with the backlog and with getting more people access to a dentist. He will know that this depends a great deal on local commissioners using the flexibility that they have, and a debate would be an excellent way to compare performance in different areas. I encourage him to apply for one and to raise that with the Department of Health and Social Care on 24 January.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): My best wishes to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone in the House for 2023. I know that, like me, Mr Speaker is a keen cricket fan. In my constituency we are lucky to have several excellent cricket clubs, including Offerton cricket club, which dates back to 1921, Heaton Mersey cricket club, founded in 1879, and Heaton Mersey Village cricket club. As we approach the cricket season, which is starting in just a few months, I know that so many more people could be budding cricketers, yet sadly even before the pandemic the number of people participating in grassroots cricket was falling. As such, will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on investment in grassroots cricket in Stockport and across England?

Penny Mordaunt: I wish the hon. Gentleman a happy new year too. He will know that, earlier this week, we had a debate on community sport and school sport, where I think many Members took the opportunity to

discuss those issues. If there is further appetite, he knows how to apply for a debate, whether through the Backbench Business Committee or an Adjournment debate.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): At the last estimates from Independent Age, some £5 million in pension credit was not being claimed annually by my Ogmore constituents. At the end of the month, working with Citizens Advice Cymru, I am hosting a pension credit advice day, contacting pensioners and asking them to ensure that they get what they are entitled to. In that vein, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate—or can we have a Work and Pensions Minister make a statement, either written or at the Dispatch Box—on what more Ministers can do to ensure that pension credit take-up is improved? It remains the form of benefit with the lowest take-up that is related to the elderly.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Department takes the matter very seriously and has produced materials and support for Members of Parliament to raise awareness in their constituency. Many Members have taken that up, which has helped to increase the numbers of people who can get access to and make use of the money to which they are entitled. We are always looking at new ways to do that better; if the hon. Gentleman has any feedback for the Department, I know that it will want to hear it. I shall certainly raise the matter with the ministerial team to see whether there are other things that they can do.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I echo the calls for a Minister to come to the House and outline more steps that can be taken to help our constituents to keep warm this winter. Over Christmas, through the Warm this Winter campaign and the Parents for Future campaign, I received cards from young people in Glasgow North with heartbreaking stories about what life is like in cold, damp homes. It should not have to be like this. There is so much more that the Government can do to reduce prices and improve insulation. When will we have a debate on all these issues?

Penny Mordaunt: I shall certainly raise the matter with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The hon. Gentleman will know about the generous support package to help with household costs, but so many of these things are best designed at a local level to ensure that we are reaching people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. A huge amount of support is provided both by the state and by third sector organisations, but as he knows, part of the problem is making sure that everyone who needs that support is aware of it and able to access it.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): We are rapidly approaching the middle of January and what is popularly known as “Blue Monday”. “Blue Monday” has not been proved to be a thing, but it gives us an opportunity to talk about how people are feeling and to talk to one another with the aim of preventing suicide and ending loneliness. May I encourage the Leader of the House and other Members to come to our Brew Monday Portcullis House drop-in with the Samaritans on Monday? May I ask for

a debate in Government time on the national suicide prevention strategy? That is just one element, so we need to look at the whole issue.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her work with the Samaritans and other organisations to raise awareness of this very real phenomenon, which understandably occurs as Christmas credit card bills come in and all sorts of other things exacerbate people’s usual anxieties. It is really important that we acknowledge that and signpost people towards support, so I thank her for doing so. This is an incredibly important issue, which is why we have a national suicide prevention strategy. I shall certainly make sure that the Department has heard her interest in the matter, and I shall ask the ministerial team to get in touch with her office.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): In October, the energy bills support scheme to help with the soaring cost of energy was announced to much fanfare. As we speak, the Government are preparing to wind down the scheme from 1 April, but my North Ayrshire and Arran constituents who happen to live in park homes, be off grid or have no direct energy supplier still have no idea when they will receive any support with their energy bills. It is causing real hardship, so will the Leader of the House make a statement giving a timetable for when that much-needed support will finally be made available to people in those categories?

Penny Mordaunt: I encourage the hon. Lady to raise the matter with the Department on 17 January. In advance of BEIS questions, I will certainly ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what the hon. Lady has said.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): When we had that extremely cold weather just before Christmas, I was inundated with messages from constituents. They were contacting me because they could not speak to a human being at the organisations responsible for dealing with their emergencies. It was not just one sector; it was housing, water and energy. My constituents were often confronted with phone lines that no one was answering or directed to websites with chatbots that could only take very basic information. It felt as if the whole country was falling apart, frankly.

We are talking about people who are very vulnerable, sometimes elderly and often unable to access the internet. A whole range of services simply are not set up to deal with these situations. We need a much better system to ensure that those who are most vulnerable can speak to a human being, get information across about the emergency they face and make sure that someone deals with it. Can we please have a debate about ensuring that these customer-facing organisations are in a much better place to deal with these situations?

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman has raised an extremely important issue, and I think a debate on it would be very well attended. I also think his experiences will be of value to the national resilience teams, which want to ensure that everyone is using good practice. If he writes to either the Cabinet Office or my office with some of his feedback and suggestions, I shall ensure that they are looked at seriously.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): Happy new year, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on liver disease and liver cancer, I am pleased to be able to draw the House's attention to a British Liver Trust FibroScan event in Portcullis House next Tuesday to raise awareness of liver disease. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging all Members to attend this important free event, and perhaps make time to drop by herself?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for what she is doing to raise awareness of this issue. If she will give my office the details I will endeavour to call in, and I shall certainly encourage all Members to do likewise.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As Iran continues its brutal and oppressive crackdown on protesters, there are also increasing pressures on religious minorities. In December two Baha'i women, Mahvash Sabet and Fariba Kamalabadi, regarded as symbols of resilience in Iran after spending 10 years in prison, were sentenced to a second 10-year term of imprisonment. Will the Leader of the House join me, and other Members, in issuing a statement of solidarity with Mahvash, Fariba, and others who have been unjustly imprisoned by this despotic Iranian regime?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for continuing to raise the plight of the incredibly brave people who are standing up to the Iranian regime. This is about having no due legal process, about appalling prison sentences handed out repeatedly, and, most tragically, about executions of young people who just want the freedoms that we all enjoy.

The House takes this matter extremely seriously, and indeed the next business today will be a debate shining a spotlight on it. I know that all Members will never turn their eyes away from what is happening in Iran. We will keep looking, and we will keep doing everything we can—from the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister down—to ensure that those people are supported and their courage does not go unnoticed.

Point of Order

11.37 am

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance on today's hot-off-the-press written ministerial statement on the review of the tier 1 investor route, the so-called golden visas. For years the Government have promised that they will publish that review so that we can understand how Putin's cronies have been exploiting this route to get into our country, and, after a five-year wait, we thought that today would be the day, but a reading of the statement makes it clear that the Government have no intention of publishing the review. All that they have released is a statement about the summary of the findings, and it tells us almost nothing that we did not already know. This comes after repeated assurances from Ministers at the Dispatch Box that they would release the review in full, and it is farcical. The review itself contains fewer than 1,300 words, and it has been 1,300 days since the Government promised to release it.

What we need to know is this. The Government say they have identified a "small minority" of the 6,000 applicants as a risk, but we have no idea how many they are, what nationality they are and what links to Putin they have. How can we hold Ministers to account for what they have said they are going to do? I have submitted an amendment to the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Bill to get them to do it, but they should have done it today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for giving me notice of it. I understand that she was not able to raise the matter during business questions, because the statement was published only after questions had started. However, she said that she had tabled an amendment about it, and the Leader of the House will certainly have heard what she said. The Table Office will be able to advise her on further ways of raising the matter, but she has done so in some detail already, and, as I have said, the Leader of the House will have heard her point of order.

BILLS PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Chris Heaton-Harris, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary James Cleverly, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Alister Jack, Secretary David T. C. Davies, John Glen and Steve Baker, presented a Bill to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources for the years ending 31 March 2023 and 2024 (including, for the year ending 31 March 2023, income); to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland of certain sums for the service of those years; to authorise the use of those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to borrow on the credit of those sums; and to repeal provisions superseded by this Act.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 16 January, and to be printed (Bill 225) with explanatory notes (Bill 225-EN).

INDEPENDENT ANTI-SLAVERY COMMISSIONER
(APPOINTMENT BY PARLIAMENT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Alistair Carmichael, supported by Daisy Cooper, Wendy Chamberlain, Tim Farron, Sarah Green and Christine Jardine, presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment by Parliament of the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner if the post is vacant for 3 months or more; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February, and to be printed (Bill 226).

Backbench Business

Iran

[Relevant documents: e-petition 623572, Maintain sanctions and introduce visa ban on people linked to Iranian regime; and e-petition 623743, Cut diplomatic ties with Iran in support of current nationwide uprisings.]

11.40 am

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House condemns unreservedly the actions of the Government of Iran in suppressing protests in that country; deplores the violent behaviour of Iranian police in regard to those protests; is deeply concerned by reports of threats made to organisations in the UK which support the rights of protesters in Iran; urges His Majesty's Government to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations; and calls upon His Majesty's Government to work with international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for raising the plight of two very brave female individuals who have been unfairly and unjustly imprisoned in Iran. Unfortunately, they are not the only ones.

The House will obviously be aware of the horrific situation in Iran. In September 2022, a young 22-year-old girl was brutally murdered—we should make it clear that she was murdered—by the authorities while in police custody. Her crime, such as it was described, was merely to wear her hijab in a manner that the regime deemed to be too loose.

After several urgent questions, which I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting, I am grateful to have this opportunity of a more extensive debate to urge the Government further to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations and to work with international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): According to Amnesty International, among the hundreds killed are at least 44 children who died after live ammunition was fired at their heads, hearts and other vital organs. That is unimaginable on many levels. I know the hon. Gentleman will share my deep concern about children being wounded or killed as a result of the political unrest. Does he agree that a UN fact-finding mission must be operationalised urgently?

Bob Blackman: The hon. Lady pre-empted what I will say later in my speech. I absolutely agree with what she says.

Mahsa Amini's death has sparked a protest movement that remains extremely strong, five months after the event. It has ignited a voice of public anger and frustration, with the Iranian diaspora taking to the streets across the world to show their anger at the current regime, and at the IRGC in particular. The protests have been huge, and thousands of people from every walk of life, age and status have bravely taken to the streets. Women have been leading the protests against the unfair treatment meted out to them.

[*Bob Blackman*]

In reaction to the protests, the regime has arrested more than 30,000 people, despite nearly all of them being peaceful protesters, and they include men, women, students and children. The suppression of those who speak against the regime is undemocratic and, frankly, dangerous. It mimics the rise of the Nazis, and the country must act before it reaches such levels.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an important and passionate speech, and I am grateful to him, as are many others, that we are able to debate the issue in the House today. I wholeheartedly support his comments about the need for Government support, but Members of Parliament in other countries are offering personal support by sponsoring those who have been imprisoned or face execution. Does he feel that MPs in this place could do something to show our individual support, to back up his calls?

Bob Blackman: Clearly, individuals in this Parliament can demonstrate their support by sponsoring a prisoner and a protester, and I urge colleagues to do that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bob Blackman: Let me continue before taking further interventions.

Those who are arrested are copiously tortured, beaten by the police, refused medication and denied legal representation, and they have minimal access to food and water. Bail is nearly always refused; on the few occasions it is offered, huge sums are demanded that families cannot meet.

Since the protests began, more than 750 protesters have been killed by the regime. As has been said, more than 70 of them were children. I have no doubt that the House will agree that this abomination cannot continue. I urge the Foreign Secretary and Ministers to act as soon as possible to proscribe this merciless regime.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Let me congratulate my hon. Friend on his leadership in this matter in the past few years and on his having obtained this debate.

On proscription—I am co-chair of the all-party group on Magnitsky sanctions—the United States and many other countries have already proscribed and sanctioned the republican guard in Iran, so why are the UK Government dragging their feet over what is clearly a required action, given that the republican guard is so heavily involved in the brutality and murder of people? Will my hon. Friend encourage the Government to move finally on this and do what they are supposed to?

Bob Blackman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. Clearly, we have been constantly asking what else the IRGC must do before the Government proscribe it. There have been positive signs over the Christmas period, with Ministers suggesting that the Government may take the action we would like, and I hope we will get an announcement from the Minister in answer to this debate.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate, and may I add my voice and those of my Liberal

Democrat colleagues to the call for proscription, as that is way past due? The Minister would have support from all parts of the House if he chose to announce that at the Dispatch Box today, and we sincerely hope he does. I also thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for raising the issue of the diaspora, because this affects our communities as much as it affects people in Iran. One constituent contacted me to say that her aunt was arrested and sentenced to eight months in prison and 74 lashes—that makes my skin crawl. Her cousin, who is male, was also arrested, just for travelling to the university to attend a protest; he did not even attend the protest. He was sentenced to five years in prison. There is more we can do, and not just proscription. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should consider a lifeboat scheme—I urge the Minister on this—particularly for brave Iranian women who have been leading these protests across the world? If they can get out, we should be offering sanctuary.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and I agree with her entirely on those aspects.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bob Blackman: Let me make a bit more progress, as I know the Deputy Speaker will be chasing me about time shortly. I will take some more interventions in a moment.

On 15 November, reliable reports reached us that those in custody would now face potential execution. At the time, 15,000 people had been arrested and the IRGC announced that this mass murder would

“serve as a good lesson in the shortest possible time”

in order to crush the protests.

That is incredibly unacceptable and requires further urgent intervention. An overwhelming majority of the 220 Iranian MPs voted in favour of that policy of using executions as punishment for protesters.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): On this point of executions, I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to go down the route of proscription, but does he also agree that a debate such as this should recognise the appalling situation in which LGBT people find themselves in Iran? They are brutalised and tortured and, sadly, too many have been sentenced to death. It is important that we recognise the appalling treatment of that particular group in Iran, too.

Bob Blackman: Clearly, it is an absolute outrage that anyone should be punished for the way that they are—their sexuality or any other regard.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for this debate. I wish to put on record my commitment to women, life and freedom. I condemn all human rights abuses, particularly of those protesting in Iran who are at threat of the death penalty right now. Today, in particular, I wish to plead for the clemency of Mr Akbari. Can the Minister, through this debate, say exactly what his Government are doing—if news of Mr Akbari's death has not already reached us—to stop that death penalty going ahead? The family have been called in for a final visit. Time is short, and action is urgent right now.

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Alireza Akbari, who is not just an Iranian, but a UK-Iranian dual national, is on death row. His family have been called in, as has been said, and he is under imminent threat of execution. That is completely unacceptable, particularly under the circumstances of being denied proper legal representation and a proper trial—it was a show trial in front of a court.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. This very point demonstrates that the Iranian regime does not comply with the rule of law in its own country. If it is prepared to act like that and ignore its own legislation, surely we have a much stronger hand in proscribing the IRGC in its entirety.

Bob Blackman: Indeed. I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bob Blackman: I will, if I may, make a bit of progress. I will take some more interventions in a minute.

On 8 December, the first protester was officially executed. Mohsen Shekari, who was only 23, was executed on grounds of committing “enmity against God”. He faced trial in front of Iran’s revolutionary court and he was found guilty without any due process. An appeal was lodged, but subsequently rejected. At the trial, he could not choose his own lawyer, and visible harm had been inflicted on him, with wounds covering his face. Since his tragic death, his family have reported that the Iranian authorities continue to torture them by refusing to release the body and by providing false information on where the body is. This account is echoed by many other families who have had loved ones executed on similar grounds. Only four days later, on 12 December, another 23-year-old protester, Majidreza Rahnavard, was brutally hanged in public.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I join others in congratulating the hon. Member on securing this debate.

In joining others in applauding the courage of those protesting in Iran, standing up for freedom, justice and the right of women to dress as they wish, does the hon. Member agree that it is a sign of the threat that this brutal regime perceives that it is going to such lengths to murder people who have protested, to hold dual nationals hostage as a matter of state policy and to threaten journalists for simply wanting to do their job, which is to tell the world about what is going on in Iran at the moment?

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Clearly, the whole House offers its admiration to the men and women demonstrating on the streets and bravely standing up to this undemocratic regime. It is quite clear that the regime is becoming more and more desperate, which displays weakness. The persistence of the protests surely means the regime is crumbling.

Unfortunately, the executions I have described are not isolated cases, with more and more cases being unearthed. On Saturday, Mohammad Mehdi Karami, a 21-year-old karate champion, and Seyed Mohammad

Hosseini, a volunteer children’s coach, were executed. Some 41 protesters have received notification of the death penalty and await their murder under this regime.

As has been said, the IRGC is threatening not only the Iranian people, but international communities including the UK. Journalists who have reported on the protests have been repeatedly threatened and found hostile Iranian surveillance teams outside their homes and offices in the UK. I commend British counter-terrorism police for alerting journalists of these potential attacks. One letter from the police to a London-based journalist warned that Iranian journalists working from the UK had been lured back to countries near Iran, then abducted by the Iranian Government and sentenced to death. It also warned that the Iranian Government have been seen to

“direct physical attacks against dissidents in Europe.”

Surely, when these attacks extend so significantly into the United Kingdom, it is time we acted to proscribe this organisation in its entirety.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Bob Blackman: I will just finish my point. Just last weekend, a journalist was arrested and remains detained in Iran.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I recently met a constituent who has had family members executed by the regime. She wanted me to make the point that this is not just an Iran issue—the erosion of human rights and women’s rights reverberates around the world. We have seen with the war in Ukraine what happens when the global community does not intervene quickly and firmly enough. I want to add my voice to that of the hon. Gentleman, and other Members present, in urging the Government to go further with sanctions and other methods to ensure we send the message that this is completely unacceptable and that we stand with all those protesting.

Bob Blackman: It is fair to say that the Government have not been inactive in this regard. On 11 November, the Foreign Secretary summoned Iran’s chargé d’affaires to discuss the threats against journalists living in the UK. However, this has not deterred the Iranian security forces, so we must continue to put international pressure on the regime. It is crucial that we follow up the recent sanctions and lead our partners and allies to proscribe such an organisation.

I was pleased that, on 15 December, the UN General Assembly adopted the 69th UN resolution condemning violations of human rights in Iran.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He has been present for a whole number of Foreign Office questions where, by the luck of the draw, I have been able to pose this question to the Foreign Secretary. The Government have continued not to proscribe the IRGC, as was the case with Hezbollah until finally they had to do so. Is it not now time to proscribe the IRGC, which destabilises the region through terrorist activities and front organisations, operates international gangsterism and is the absolute bedrock of support for this clerical fascist regime? Might the hon. Gentleman give way to the

[John Spellar]

Minister, who could indicate the direction the Government are going in so that we do not have to rely on leaks in newspapers?

Bob Blackman: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I will wait for the Minister to respond to the debate.

I am deeply concerned by reports of threats made to organisations in the UK that support the rights of protesters in Iran, including the recent petrol bombing in outer London of a location affiliated with the National Council of Resistance of Iran. Thankfully, as it was the early hours of the morning, no one was inside, but the situation could have been extremely grave with loss of life.

The mass murders by the IRGC are shocking, but perhaps not surprising. In 1988, the current President of Iran, President Raisi, was responsible for the prosecution of 30,000 political prisoners, all of whom were executed. Of those 30,000, 90% were members or supporters of Iran's main opposition movement, the People's Mujaheddin Organisation of Iran. That indicates that the regime has no qualms whatsoever about executing people who represent a threat. It has made clear that that is what it intends to do. The 1988 massacre holds many similarities to today's uprising, rooted as it was in a fundamental conflict with the people of Iran, who were demanding freedom, democracy, and economic and social development after the overthrow of the Shah.

The IRGC has created, funded and armed a vast network of middle eastern terrorist groups, from Hezbollah in Lebanon to the Houthis in Yemen, all spreading war and violence around the region. Iran has supplied Hezbollah alone with some 150,000 missiles, which are regularly fired at innocent Israeli civilians. Hezbollah's 2012 bomb attack in Bulgaria, which killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian, led the EU to list the organisation's military wing as terrorists, while leaving the political arm of the organisation untouched. In creating that artificial distinction, which even Hezbollah rejected, the EU avoided banning the group in its entirety. It consequently continues to recruit and fundraise in EU member states and the UK, which has not yet banned the group separately.

Furthermore, the IRGC and Hezbollah are at the forefront of Iran's brutal campaign to keep the Syrian Assad regime in power. Since 2015, when Russia joined the fighting, the two regimes have partnered in despicable war crimes that have killed hundreds of thousands and left millions as refugees of war. The growing alliance with Russia has been further strengthened with the current war in Ukraine, with Iran supplying advanced drones to Russia since August.

Iran's people have risen to defeat religious tyranny and its repression and terrorism. They have chosen to pay the price of freedom with their blood. The UK and the whole international community should rise in solidarity by helping the Iranian people realise their democratic aspirations, which the UK Government can do by taking the following necessary steps.

The Government should demand that the Iranian regime immediately halt trials, convictions and executions of protesters in Iran. The UK Government lag behind their European counterparts, who are even sponsoring individual protesters who are in prison and at high risk of execution. We could follow that lead.

We should recognise the legitimacy of the fight of the Iranian people against the evil and terrorist forces of the IRGC and officially recognise the Iranian people's revolution to establish a republic based on democratic values.

We should recognise that the people of Iran have a democratic alternative, the goals of which are enshrined in the 10-point plan articulated by Mrs Maryam Rajavi, the president-elect of the NCRI. The Government should support that Iranian solution, as was recommended by more than 230 Members from across the parties in both the House of Commons and the House of Lords in our joint statement in December 2022.

The Government should refer the appalling dossier of the regime's systematic violations of human rights and crimes against humanity to the United Nations Security Council for the adoption of binding deterrent measures. The regime leaders must be brought to justice to end impunity and prevent the cycle of crime and terror.

Next, we should proscribe the IRGC in its entirety to deny it the funds and resources it needs to crush the nationwide uprising and export terrorism abroad.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): I will make an additional suggestion, if I may. Within 48 hours of every state murder of a protester, the west, our allies and the UK should impose specific sanctions, because otherwise there is no direct response to prevent each individual execution.

To go on for one more moment, there is much discussion on Twitter and the television about whether my hon. Friend is bleeding while giving this speech, which he is not. It would be helpful if he could clarify that he is in a fit state of health, because we in this House would never allow our good friend to go on bleeding while discussing such matters.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am going through a menu of points that I want the Government to follow, and she is absolutely right that I am not bleeding. I had an accident on Monday, and I am very grateful to the wonderful people in the national health service for assisting me at the time.

We must close the regime's embassy and affiliated institutions, as well as expelling diplomats and agents of the regime in the UK who provide support for the violent repression of dissidents and activists in the UK. We must widen sanctions to target the political leadership that is responsible for the conduct of the regime—the supreme leader, the President, the IRGC and everyone within the governing structure—and encourage our allies to do the same.

We must stop any form of negotiation or concessions to the criminal rulers of Iran. In view of the death sentences against protesters detained during the current uprising, we must act immediately, together with international partners, to ensure that the international fact-finding mission created by the UN Human Rights Council visits the prisons in Iran and speaks with the detained protesters and political prisoners as soon as possible.

Jointly with our P3 allies, we must announce a definitive and permanent end to efforts to secure a nuclear deal. Iran's nuclear activity is merely a symptom. We should be tackling the disease: the regime itself. It is not good

enough simply to say, as the United States has done, that the deal is not the focus right now. Iran's protesters want to see a harder line. Deterrence, rather than talks, is the appropriate posture.

I look forward to hearing many powerful and robust arguments made by my colleagues, but as I come to the end of my speech, I leave the House with one final thought. Iran is the country responsible for the second highest number of executions each year, behind only China. It is responsible for the greatest tally of female executions in any country. Whatever people's views on capital punishment, it cannot be acceptable that that position persists.

It is high time we worked together to banish this unlawful regime, to protect innocent protesters and to champion free democratic rights across the world—something we often so easily take for granted. To oppose the Iranian regime is no longer a political calculation, but a simple humanitarian choice. I look forward in particular to the contribution and answers from my hon. Friend the Minister as the debate winds up.

12.7 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): We have all watched in horror for more than 100 days as the Iranian regime has used extreme violence to suppress its own people, particularly women and young people who are expressing legitimate grievances and seeking a better future. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) set out in his powerful opening remarks, Iranian women and girls have led nationwide protests following the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini after her arrest for allegedly failing to comply with Iran's draconian compulsory veiling laws.

People in Nottingham have been deeply moved by the courage of the protesters and their rallying cry of "Woman, Life, Freedom". There have been weekly protests in Nottingham city centre. I speak today on behalf of many constituents, including those of Iranian heritage, who are calling on me, on this Parliament and on the UK Government to stand with the protesters and support their demands for their fundamental freedom to live their lives as they choose.

I know that many right hon. and hon. Members across the House stand in solidarity with those brave protesters who are challenging the abuses of the Iranian regime. I am proud that my Front-Bench colleagues have consistently called on the Government to bring forward new sanctions and to use all our diplomatic efforts to push for human rights to be upheld in Iran.

Margaret Ferrier: Another concern is the use of lethal force by Iranian authorities against oppressed ethnic minorities such as the Kurds. Does the hon. Member agree that the UK Government should use any diplomatic means available to apply pressure on Iran to ensure that minorities in the country do not face further discrimination in protest crackdowns?

Lilian Greenwood: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, who makes an important point about the way in which a number of human rights are being abused in Iran. I hope that the Minister will set out how the Government plan to hold the Iranian regime to account for its gross human rights violations, when they

plan to follow the US and other countries in formally proscribing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as terrorist organisation, and what further targeted sanctions they will take against the Iranian regime, particularly the IRGC support bases on British soil.

The latest reports from human rights groups indicate that more than 19,000 people have been arrested since September last year, and more than 500 people have been killed, including at least 44 children, as the Iranian security forces have responded to the popular uprising with violence and the unwarranted use of lethal force on innocent protesters. That is intolerable. Amnesty International reports that it has documented crimes under international law and serious human rights violations, including not only unlawful killings but mass arbitrary arrests and detentions, enforced disappearances, and torture and ill-treatment.

In recent weeks, the Iranian authorities have entered a new, even more appalling phase, and are now using the death penalty as a tool of political repression. Tragically, as we have heard, four young people have been executed following sham trials in connection with the protests. Amnesty has identified 25 individuals who are at serious risk of execution. According to the latest reports, two of those individuals have recently been moved to solitary confinement, raising fears that they face imminent execution. The UK must stand unequivocally against the death penalty, wherever it is used in the world, and I hope that the Minister will call on the Iranian authorities to quash all death sentences against protesters.

The cousin of one of my constituents is among those facing the death penalty in Iran. I would like to use this opportunity to say a little about him and to ask the Minister to do all he can to support my constituent and her family. Mehdi Mohammadi Fard is just 19 years old—it was his birthday last Thursday. He usually works in a salon as a hair stylist and tattoo artist—his passion since he was a young teenager. Mehdi had been suffering poor mental health and was receiving treatment for it, but three months ago, he was among a group of young people involved in the protests. Ten days later, he was arrested and imprisoned.

Mehdi has been tortured, beaten and kept in solitary confinement in a rat-infested cell, with nothing to lie on and nothing to eat for several days. He has a broken nose now. He has been sexually assaulted and tortured, and has required hospital treatment for his injuries. Three weeks ago, Mehdi was tried in court without legal representation. I have been told that notes from his psychiatrist about his mental state were completely disregarded. He has been sentenced to death for "corruption on earth" and "war against God". Mehdi does have a lawyer now, and an appeal has been lodged, but his family—both in Iran and here in the UK—are, of course, terrified for him and need our help.

I ask the Minister to do everything he can to support my constituent and to try to save the life of that young man. I hope that he will agree to meet me and my constituent to further discuss the case and what the Government can and will do to help Mehdi.

12.13 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Melton) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), whose contribution brought

[*Alicia Kearns*]

such acute awareness of exactly the sort of situation that families across the world face as Iran continues to industrialise hostage taking. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate. We have all, throughout the House, been passionate about raising our voices for those whom the Iranian regime is trying to silence.

It has been almost five months now since an Iranian-Kurdish woman was arrested and severely beaten, and later died in custody. Mahsa Amini is a symbol for what so many women around the world face, and for what women across Iran have faced for too long: denial of their basic rights, subjugation, and the suggestion that they do not deserve to be treated as even the most basic of human individuals, that they are lesser and have no rights, that anything can happen to them, and that men have the right to dole out punishments, as they see fit, for their own joy and fulfilment. That is what this is: misogyny entrenched within an institution and within a Government; the taking of joy from violence against women because we are lesser. We see that across the world, and we have to raise our voices against it. We in Britain can be a leading voice on that.

Mahsa Amini's tragic and needless death has shown the enormous courage of the Iranian people and reminded us of just how repressive the regime is. As we speak, the regime in Tehran continues to act with brazen disregard for life and humanity, whether through state murders, violence on the streets of Iran, or the rape of virgins who are arrested for not wearing head scarves enough and told, "You will now go to Allah sullied, as you deserve to be." That is what is happening in Iranian prisons. Yet we have not sanctioned all the guards at Evin prison. We have sanctioned former guards—who are not there perpetrating crimes currently—but not those who are in the prison now. I ask the Minister to look at that urgently, because it is something that we can change overnight.

The case of the British-Iranian dual national Ali Reza Akbari has also been raised. Last night, we all heard that he was sentenced to death. Like those who have spoken, I hope that he is still alive and that the situation can be changed. But the issue here is that Iran does not recognise British-Iranian dual nationality. There are two questions about why his death sentence has been brought forward. He has been held for a long time—a traditional tactic of the Iranian regime is to hold people, ready for when it needs to use them. As the Iranians are sanctioned—as they should be—they have few cards left to play, so they hold our British nationals in prisons until they need to use them.

Is the Iranian regime bringing forward the death sentence because it wants to prove its point that it is not the Iranian people who are rising up organically against a cruel, evil and repressive regime, but the UK, the US, the west, the Israelis and all those awful people forcing a fake revolution in that country? Iran could be doing it to make that point. It could also be doing it because Akbari used to be a deputy Defence Minister, and the individual for whom he deputised is now secretary-general of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. That individual has been the most moderate voice in the Iranian regime over the last few months, and has been the most likely to call for moderate responses, behaviour

and dialogue. Is this a warning to him? We do not know, but either way, the result is the same: a British-Iranian national is being used as a hostage to negotiate for what the Iranians need, including the domestic headlines. That is absolutely wrong.

I echo the Foreign Secretary, who said that, if Iran does not halt this, there must be consequences. If Akbari is killed, there must be sanctions. We must consider expelling the *chargé d'affaires* here in London and recalling our ambassador. It would be helpful to receive from the Minister an update on what progress our ambassador believes he is making in Tehran. I understand that, more often than not, it is better to keep someone on the ground for the small conversations that can take place, for the small support of civil society that can be provided, for the negotiations that need to take place, and for understanding the dynamics of what is really going on. But I question whether we have seen meaningful results from our embassy in Tehran over the last five months. That is not a criticism of our ambassador and our diplomatic staff there, because what they are doing is impossible, but if they can have no meaningful effect, remaining there sends the message that we support a continued relationship with the Iranian regime, and we have to question whether we wish to send that message.

Iran is detaining hostages en masse. Sixty-six foreign and dual nationals have been detained since 2010, 15 of whom have definite links to the UK. We owe it to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and to the Ashoori family to end the Iranian regime's bartering with human lives. To do so, we need to decide whether we need a special envoy for hostage taking, or a multilateral response, working in some way with the Canadians under their leadership. That is why the Foreign Affairs Committee is holding an inquiry into state hostage taking. I hope that the results will be listened to carefully by the Government.

It is clear that those responsible must be sanctioned. While the regime continues to repress people in Iran, we must also look at its activities in the UK and the west and how they impact on us. We heard last year from the head of MI5 that Iran has plotted the assassination and kidnapping of at least 10 British residents and has crossed over into launching terrorist attacks on British soil, if it can. It has undertaken more assassinations in western Europe in the last five years than any other country. As the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) pointed out, the regime also intimidates British journalists, which is utterly unacceptable.

That comes down to how we make ourselves more resilient to the Iranian state, and that is where the discussion of proscription comes into play. This is by no means a straightforward conversation, and I would like to reflect on some advice by Jonathan Hall, the Government's terrorism adviser. There are challenges to proscribing the IRGC—I do not suggest that it would be easy—but they are not insurmountable. It all comes down to the application of the Terrorism Act 2000.

Modern states, from the Jacobins, have been responsible for the most lethal instances of terrorism, with the term first used around the French revolution. Terrorism is a tactic that we know states use, and it is in its most devastating form when states pursue it. The enduring policy of the UK Government has been to treat terrorism by states as falling outside the Terrorism Act 2000, but that appears to be a policy position rather than an interpretation of the Act, which I suggest gives us some

room for manoeuvre. The best illustration of that is the Salisbury attack by Russia in March 2018. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) was incredibly strong in her response, but the Government were scrupulous in treating the attack as hostile state activity, and no counter-terrorism powers were used.

There is no authoritative ruling by the courts on whether state terrorism can be included within the Terrorism Act. However, the High Court suggested in 2006 that, although the Act's words were,

"taken by themselves, broad enough to cover all lawful acts of war,"

it was a "misconception of the definition" for acts by some states to fall within it.

The effect of proscribing the IRGC would be to accept, contrary to our long-standing policy position, that state forces and therefore states can be "concerned in terrorism" under the Terrorism Act 2000. That requires great consideration, because when a state force uses or threatens violence, it normally complies with the laws of war, known as international humanitarian law. We would therefore have to say that the activities of the IRGC fall outside the definition of terrorism.

Now, I suggest that the House is probably united in believing that the IRGC's actions fall outside international humanitarian law. It follows that, if the IRGC were proscribed on the basis that its violence amounted to terrorism, the argument would be that acts of violence carried out by friendly state forces—any European partner could be named—are not terrorism because they are carried out in accordance with international humanitarian law.

I recognise that Ministers may be receiving all sorts of complex legal guidance from civil servants, but it has been a policy decision, not a legal decision, so far not to proscribe. Although there are profound implications of that decision, state forces are capable of being "concerned in terrorism", so the question is more how the definition of terrorism applies to other state forces. We will have to address that, at the risk of upsetting the meaning of terrorism in domestic law, but I argue that it is absolutely the right thing to do. I hope that sets out that, while there are many reasons to say that proscribing the IRGC is insurmountable, it is actually achievable.

I wish to finish by talking about the UK's commitment to the joint comprehensive plan of action. To all intents and purposes, the JCPOA has failed to deter Iran in any meaningful way. Iran has enriched uranium and is progressing its development of nuclear weapons; all it now falls for it to do is to work out how to put the uranium into a mobile weapons system that it can move and deploy. That is not easy, but Iran has come a long way, and that is because progress is frozen and you might say that the JCPOA is dead.

I get quite frustrated when I hear politicians say that the JCPOA is dead. I ask, "In what way is it dead? What do we do next? Where do we go from here?" That is one of the challenges. If the JCPOA is dead, Britain has to seize the initiative, with its allies, and come up with a new format that rightly calls out human rights abuses, alongside nuclear proliferation, and it must make sure that it finds a new way forward. However, the system currently is not working.

There is an additional problem: while the Government helpfully confirmed over Christmas that the IRGC is sanctioned in its entirety, it is sanctioned only in the context of the JCPOA, which expires in October. That means

that, from October, the IRGC will no longer be sanctioned in British law. I suggest that, given the time it takes to do sanctions, we need to act now if we are to make sure that, in October, we do not end up with the IRGC no longer being sanctioned by the British Government.

When we look at why the IRGC is a terrorist organisation, we should not forget its activities in its immediate region. In Iraq, we have Iranian militia committing massacres against religious minorities, ostracising communities, threatening politicians and making Iraqi politics inherently unstable.

In Syria, the Iranian regime has allowed the country to become a drug superstate. I urge all Members to look at that. The Assad regime is heinous. President Assad paid a photographer to take photos of the people who were tortured and killed in his prisons, because he wanted evidence that his wishes were being carried out. I spent two and a half years of my career having to look through all those images, and I will never forget them. I will never forget meeting the women who were forced to watch their husbands be raped in prisons until they gave up whatever their husband, who was supposedly part of the opposition, knew or did not know.

The Iranian regime is part of the reason Assad is still in power. It was never the intention of the Government to bring down Assad—I never heard that sentiment uttered once in my time working there—but did we think that he could not bring peace, stability or freedom to the people of Syria? Absolutely. Iran has now turned Syria into a drug superstate, with class A drugs—especially things such as fentanyl—produced en masse. Those will make their way to British shores. They may only be in Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and neighbouring countries at the moment, but they will come to Britain if we do not recognise that our Indo-Pacific tilt cannot mean that we forget the middle east. We have historic commitments and promises to those communities, and the Foreign Affairs Committee's recent recommendations for the review of the integrated review make it clear that the middle east has to be a priority.

In Lebanon, Iran is destabilising en masse. We have cholera outbreaks and all sorts of appalling fragilities in that country that should not be there. Hezbollah and Hamas continue to be stood up by Iran.

I argue that Iran is a terrorist regime, whether because of its activities at home, in Europe, in the UK or in its region, and we must act. President Obama's greatest regret about his time as President was that he did not stand up for the green revolution, and that he listened to his civil servants when they said, "If you raise your voice to the protesters, it will give the Iranian regime more evidence that this is an American plot." We must not listen to that advice again. We must heed President Obama's warning. That is why we need sanctions after every single state murder, we must consider recalling our ambassador, we must reconsider whether we are having any meaningful impact in Iran, and we must make sure that we look at a new international, multilateral effort to prevent nuclear war from coming to the middle east and allowing this terrorist state to get those powers.

12.27 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Ind): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who speaks with such passion and authority on this very unpleasant subject.

[*Dr Rupa Huq*]

The wave of popular uprisings that have erupted across Iran have woken the world up to its top-down totalitarian regime at its most inhumane. At the start of last autumn, Mahsa Amini was not a household name, but in the aftermath of her supposed death in custody for mis-wearing a hijab, the 22-year-old has become the rallying cause behind a surge of popular protest. Protesters are often young, and they are often women who publicly remove their enforced headscarves and set them alight, chant for freedom, and cut their hair in defiance of a brutal theocratic regime. Men, too, have taken to the streets. Although the protesters are often just teenagers, the movement cuts across gender, generation and class.

And the regime's response? Violent crackdown—more bloody suppression, killing, sham trials and barbaric public executions, of which there have been four since December and there were two just this weekend. More than 100 are at imminent risk of execution. In addition, there is routine censorship, monitoring and poverty, to the point that lack of water is a concern—predictably, the country's gas and oil profits do not reach the people.

Recent mobilisations have reverberated, with solidarity protests across continents. My constituency has amassed the fourth highest number of signatures to the two petitions that launched this debate. According to 2021 census figures, of all UK local authorities, Ealing has the fourth highest number of people born in Iran and the fourth highest—there is a pattern here—number of Iranian passport holders. I remember an influx of new classmates arriving from Tehran when I was at Montpelier Primary School in 1978, in anticipation of the Iranian revolution of 1979, following unrest. That revolution brought Ayatollah Khomeini and his evil brand of clerical rule to power. Because I was just six at the time, I was not really following the politics of it, but I do remember that England did not qualify for the World cup that year and “Blue Peter” suggested supporting Scotland. In our class, however, Iran was the top choice.

We can contrast those, for me, innocent days with the shame that our diaspora community felt this time round for supporting Iran, and by extension the Iranian regime. When the current team chose not to sing the national anthem in support of the ongoing protests—all 11 of them were in silence as the music played in that flashy stadium in Qatar—it was a massive statement, taking huge courage. It was truly sickening to see just this week the 26-year-old Iranian footballer Amir Nasr-Azadani sentenced to 16 years in prison for taking part in nationwide protests. The offence is sinisterly termed “partaking in enmity against God”, even though the laughably named morality police have been disbanded. We have heard the roll call of other names today.

This debate has sparked great interest among my constituents, and they have furnished me with shocking detail of what is unfolding back home to add to the statistics, were they not shocking enough. Four months after the killing of Mahsa Amini, it is estimated that 516 protesters have been killed in anti-Government protests in Iran. Many more have been maimed and tortured. The Human Rights Activists News Agency has said that the dead include 70 children, and approximately 70% of the population of Iran are under the age of 30. The number arrested is now at 19,200—it

is going up by the minute—and that includes 687 students, and there are scary stories of how food in student canteens has been poisoned.

A lady in Ealing told me:

“My own cousin was abducted, blindfolded with her hands and feet tied, thrown in a van and taken to an unknown location, all for chanting ‘freedom’. She’s 25 and was beaten so severely, then thrown off from the van, and she was so distorted she had no idea where she was. It took my family 24 hours to find her. We were however extremely lucky that she was not raped or killed...My cousins have to burn things such as paper or clothing to be able to breathe as it cancels the gases the regime releases in order to deter the protesters.”

Another constituent—she is ex-Montpelier Primary, like me, although she is a lot younger than me, as everyone seems to be nowadays—highlights how this repression is not new. She said:

“My father was also taken and put in the notorious Evin prison...nine years ago. They accused him of being a spy. He was 69 at the time and he experienced two months of solitary confinement and eventually went into a diabetic coma as they wouldn’t give him his meds. He nearly died.”

Others describe how minority populations, such as the Iranians Kurds and others from Balochistan, are even further at the sharp end of this brutal tyranny.

The Iranian regime does all it can to suppress protest and quell news of it spreading by cutting the internet and spreading a campaign of disinformation on state and social media. While it was reassuring to see our Foreign Secretary summon Iran’s most senior diplomat after the regime executed two more protesters only this weekend, after what the UN labelled as

“unfair trials based on forced confessions”, widespread international condemnation, including from the EU and numerous nation states must be matched with concrete action. We have heard a lot of suggestions today.

Why should women have men dictate what they do or do not wear, putting them in fear of violent reprisals? Iran is a signatory of international treaties and conventions that grant citizens, including women and children, basic rights and freedoms. Given the age of the protesters, these treaties should ensure those rights. The authorities have an obligation to respect freedom of expression and belief. Instead, Iran has hijacked a peaceful global religion with its twisted Shi’a sectarian anti-western worldview, and it calls itself “Islamic Republic”.

What can and should we do to support the Iranian people fighting for freedom? One Iranian-born woman who came to my advice surgery the other day was asking, “Why is my adopted country staying silent and harbouring criminals?” We have not exactly stayed silent, but we could do better. This House should express its solidarity with the “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement. There are five relatively easy steps that we could take immediately.

First, the Prime Minister must condemn the executions. We are talking about the death penalty here. We need to stop the executions. We should be looking into this notion of Members of this House acting as political sponsors—we have all had emails, and I am unsure how it works, and I would like to hear from the Minister about the exact mechanics—of those facing execution and imprisonment for exercising their right to peaceful protest following bogus trials.

Secondly, we should designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. They have done it in the US, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and those are all allies of ours.

Thirdly, there is something we can do even before banning the IRGC, which would be to extend sanctions beyond named IRGC regime officials to their close family members. It is an open secret that many of the regime's family members and oligarchs live, have property and assets and/or operate businesses in the UK. We saw Magnitsky-style sanctions come into action quickly after the invasion of Ukraine. The same thing should be happening with Iran. The Met police and the National Crime Agency could between them set up a unit to identify who these people are and seize their assets.

Fourthly, we must stop supplying anti-riot equipment directly or indirectly to the Iranian regime. It is a matter of shame that there is solid evidence that tear gas made in the UK has been used against protesters despite sanctions. That is shocking.

Fifthly—my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who was a long-time Ealing councillor, is no longer in his place, but he talked about the media—we must stop the closure of the BBC Persian radio service at this critical moment when it is needed more than ever. For Iranians, it is the only independent media source out there. It is unbelievable. The decision is putting hundreds of jobs at risk, and the service is due to have the plug pulled this April, despite having 18 million regular users. This happens as Iran shuts down the internet and imprisons journalists on spurious charges of terrorism, such as the two brave women who broke the Mahsa Amini story. Iran wants to curtail information flow, and we cannot allow that to happen.

Rosa Parks and Emmeline Pankhurst—these women's names are inscribed in our history, and the struggles they fought led to action. Let Mahsa Amini's death be the start of a different, new Iranian revolution towards freedom, justice and democracy. It is time for "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi"—woman, life, freedom.

12.37 pm

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating it.

It is no exaggeration to say that Iran is currently on a knife edge. The protests are growing in intensity and, sadly, the response of the Iranian regime's forces is growing equally, with savagery. As we have heard, the protests stem from the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was arrested on the spurious charge of mal-veiling—of not wearing her hijab properly in the eyes of a member of the morality police. She was arrested and taken into custody. She was by all accounts treated brutally. She died of skull injuries. It is unsurprising that even in a deeply conservative Muslim state, such an event should give rise to such revulsion, but the popular reaction in Iran to Mahsa's death has been nothing short of extraordinary. There are huge waves of anti-Government protests right across the country. By 28 December, it was calculated that the uprising had spread to more than 280 towns and cities across Iran and to all 31 provinces of the country. People have taken to the streets, many of them chanting anti-Government slogans. In itself, that is remarkable given the regime's notorious sensitivity to even the mildest criticism. It is impossible to overstate what is going on at the moment.

Similarly, the response of the security forces has been savage in the extreme. People are losing their lives. It is estimated that in the past four months security forces have killed more than 750 demonstrators, over 70 of whom were young people under the age of 18. So far, more than 600 individuals killed in the protests have been identified by the principal opposition group, the People's Mujahedeen Organization of Iran, which also estimates that over 30,000 protesters have been detained. The regime is executing those protesters. So far, around 40 of them have been sentenced to death, most, as we have heard, on the extraordinary charge of waging war on God. Two young men, Mohsen Shekari and Majidreza Rahnavard, were hanged in December. Just a few days ago, Mohammad Mahdi Karami, aged only 22, and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, aged 39, were also executed. The UN Human Rights Office has, quite properly, condemned the executions, saying, as the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) pointed out, that they followed

"unfair trials based on false confessions".

Even as we speak, a 22-year-old young man, Mohammad Ghobadlou, and several others are awaiting the execution of a sentence of death. Mr Ghobadlou was sentenced to death for "spreading corruption on Earth". According to Amnesty International, the prosecution relied on torture-based evidence, a confession that was relied on to convict him of running over officials with a car, killing one.

Families of the protesters awaiting execution staged protests outside the prison in which they are being held. They continue to protest, even though the security forces fire shots in the air in an attempt to disperse them. There is no doubt that these are exceptionally brave people who are willing to risk their lives to protest against the regime. Despite the harshness of the regime's response, they remain undeterred. It is noticeable that most protesters are young and many are women. They come from all backgrounds: university and high school students, bazaar traders, manual workers, intellectuals, and people of all ethnic backgrounds and social classes. Thousands upon thousands of them continue to take to the streets, calling for the downfall of the regime and its leaders. It is very clear that what we are witnessing is a very active political movement of people who are no longer willing to put up with the medieval theocratic regime under which they have lived for more than 40 years, and who are seeking to replace it with a modern, democratic, secular Government.

These brave people deserve our support. I commend the Government for what they have already done. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has quite properly described the executions as abhorrent. The United Kingdom has been a driving force in securing the establishment of a fact-finding mission by the United Nations Human Rights Council to investigate the numerous allegations of human rights violations during the uprising. The UK also secured the necessary votes to suspend Iran's membership of the UN Commission on the Status of Women. All that is welcome, but there is, as other hon. Members have said, much more to be done. The UK should continue to lead the western response, helping to bring forward more concrete measures to deny the regime the ability to continue its repression, and to help the people of Iranian to realise their democratic aspirations. The UK, as a permanent member of the UN Security

[Mr David Jones]

Council, should lead the pressure for recognition of the rights of the Iranian people to defend themselves by any legitimate means available, given that the authorities have effectively declared war upon their own population.

As other hon. Members have said, it is surely now time for the Government to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety. The IRGC is the regime's principal means of exerting control and repression of the Iranian people. Furthermore, it is one of the world's foremost exporters of terror. I do not expect my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm today that the Government intend to proscribe the IRGC, but I was extremely pleased to read in newspaper reports a few days ago that that is what is going to happen. He may, of course, surprise us and we may learn that from him today.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): What the right hon. Gentleman says about the IRGC is entirely accurate. They are a bunch of clerical fascists who rape, kill and maim their way around Iran and outside Iran's borders. I think there is a consensus across the House that the organisation should be banned, so what does he think is holding the Government up? I think there is sympathy among Ministers to ban the IRGC, but I cannot see what is stopping Ministers from finally making that decision.

Mr Jones: The only conclusion I can come to is that the Government do not want to alert the IRGC on when it will happen. I think we all accept that it will happen and I would be astounded, given the noises we have heard over recent days, if it were not to happen.

The Government should also invoke the global human rights sanctions regulations against officials of the regime, including President Ebrahim Raisi, who, according to Amnesty International among others, was a member of the so-called death commission that extrajudicially executed thousands of political dissidents in secret in 1988—the notorious 1988 massacre of political prisoners. The Government should continue to work with international partners to impose a co-ordinated diplomatic boycott on Iran, and demand the immediate release of political prisoners. They should also work through the UN Security Council to insist on access to Iranian prisons and arrange for human rights officials to meet detained protesters.

To repeat, Iran is now on a knife edge. We are witnessing what may well become, and I hope does become, a transformational change in a country that has endured much over the last few decades. Iran is an important country. It is one of the oldest civilisations in the world. Now, the bravery of the Iranian people is finally presenting the prospect of a return to normality for Iran among the community of nations. We in this country must do everything we can to support them at this crucial time.

12.48 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) and everyone who has already spoken so powerfully today. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing the debate, which is perhaps

slightly overdue, as it gives us the opportunity to show our solidarity with protestors in Iran and debate the various responses that are open to the UK Government.

Constituents in Glasgow North are extremely passionate about global human rights. The constituency has the distinction of having not one but two very active Amnesty International groups—the west end and the daytime groups. I hear regularly from constituents about many different places around the world where human rights are threatened or undermined and many have been in touch recently about the situation in Iran. The hon. Member for Harrow East, in opening the debate, mentioned the two e-petitions. More than 130 signatures to those petitions from residents in Glasgow North have been recorded on Parliament's e-petition site. I have heard first-hand testimony from constituents who are from Iran and still have family there, as many others have mentioned. Such testimony about the reality of the oppression on the ground and the protesters' determination to bring about change is both distressing and inspiring.

As we have heard from other Members, it is difficult to overstate the brutality of the regime in Iran in response to the protests. The story of Dr Aida Rostami is a particularly shocking example. She was treating protesters in the western districts of Tehran—not necessarily protesting herself but delivering first aid and medical care to people injured by security forces during the demonstrations. On 12 December, she disappeared from the hospital where she worked. The next day, her dead body was returned to her family showing signs of torture. The Iranian authorities may claim otherwise, but her family, friends and international experts believe that she was murdered. The principle of medical neutrality—the right of those in battle to receive medical attention and the right of medics to deliver that safely—is protected by the Geneva convention. In other words, the murder of medics who are treating people injured in times of armed conflict and civil unrest is a war crime.

In the face of such brutal repression, the protests continue. Every day since the death in custody of Mahsa Amini on 16 September, people in Iran, led by women and girls, have taken to the streets in support of “Woman, Life, Freedom”—“Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”. The protests are not just about compulsory wearing of the hijab, but a collective cry from the heart for fundamental change to how Iran is governed and how its citizens are allowed to live their lives.

The solidarity of this House and of our constituents with the demonstrators is not in doubt. The need for change in Iran is beyond dispute. The question is: what can we, and the UK Government on our behalf, do to support the cause? The call for the proscription of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has already been made incredibly powerfully. Some of my constituents, particularly those from Iran, have been calling for that for years, and will welcome the now clear support from all sides of the House. Of course the Government have to exercise careful judgment, for the reasons discussed, but that step has already been taken by the United States.

The European Union has also sanctioned Iranian state broadcasters. The UK Government could do likewise. As others have said, they could also ensure that the BBC's Persian service is adequately funded to continue its radio broadcasts so that everyone in the area can hear independent, impartial coverage of what is happening.

They must also make sure that nobody associated with the Iranian regime or linked with the atrocities carried out there is able to visit or live in the UK with impunity. There was an earlier point of order about the golden visa regime. The Government must look carefully at golden visas awarded to Iranians with links to the regime, and question what Magnitsky sanctions can be imposed where appropriate.

Are the Government aware of concerns expressed by Iran International about threats to its UK-based journalists, and the concerns of Justice for Iran regarding the behaviour of former Iranian officials who now live in the UK? The Government must put the strongest diplomatic pressure possible on the Iranian regime to halt the execution of protesters and respect the human rights of those charged with or on trial for a capital offence. Amnesty International and other hon. Members have called for UK officials in Iran, including the ambassador, to attend trials and visit prisons to ensure that at least some kind of due process is taking place. I hope we will hear an update from the Government on the progress of the UN fact-finding mission in the country. I echo the points made about the treatment of UK-Iranian dual nationals in the country, especially Mr Akbari.

Finally, how are the Government working with their international allies both to monitor and disrupt the increasing military co-operation and exchange between Iran and Russia? This is a point of considerable concern for constituents I have heard from. The Defence Secretary himself told us in December of Russian equipment being exchanged for Iranian drones, which are then put to use against the people of Ukraine. As we heard so powerfully from others, the Iranian regime's brutality is clearly not necessarily restricted to its own borders. The UK Government must take action on all those points.

The whole world saw the bravery of the Iranian football team refusing to sing the national anthem at their opening World cup game. Now is the time for the UK Government, their international allies and all of us who believe in freedom and democracy to be brave, too, and not just speak of solidarity but take action in solidarity with the men, women, boys and girls uniting behind women, life and freedom in Iran.

12.54 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve for the first time with you in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate and ensuring that the issue remains on the political agenda. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Iran's Human Rights Activists News Agency has reported that at least 516 protesters have been killed in recent months by Iran's security forces, many of whom have been buried in unmarked graves without families receiving notification. Estimates have reached as high as 30,000 people arrested by the Iranian security forces, with thousands of families unable to contact loved ones who have gone missing and are presumed to be in jail.

Many people—especially women—are opposing the conditions imposed by so-called morality police, but some are protesting about Iran's behaviour around the world. In recent months, media focus has rightly been on Russian atrocities in Ukraine, but the hegemonic

efforts of Iran are spreading death and misery to extended parts of the world. Proxy wars in Yemen and Syria are claiming thousands of lives, while political interference in Lebanon and Gaza causes great concern.

Iranian-made drones have been used in attacks in Ukraine, and also in other areas. On 16 November, there was an Iranian-made drone attack against a tanker off the coast of Oman. The vessel was Liberian-flagged, Singaporean-owned and commissioned by an Israeli business. In response to my written question, the Foreign Office said:

"We remain committed to assuring the safety of shipping in the Middle East region, including through the Gulf of Oman. The UK is a member of the International Maritime Security Construct, along with several Gulf partners, which addresses the threat in the region by providing reassurance to commercial shipping and deterring further threats."

That is a pretty weak response. In contrast, when I attended the Manama Dialogue conference in Bahrain, the US central command chief announced the deployment of over 100 unmanned vessels in the Gulf region's strategic waters to stave off that kind of attack. That tangible action really will deter the kind of behaviour that we have seen.

Iran continues with aggressive tactics, including a cyber-attack on this very Parliament. Iran attempted the same on public services in Albania during an opposition rally. Iran also supports military actions in Yemen and Syria. It has destabilised the political process in Lebanon and Gaza through its active support of Hezbollah. A serving Iranian ambassador co-ordinated and supplied explosives that could have killed hundreds of elected politicians in Paris in 2018, including myself and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East. These acts were co-ordinated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is seeking to spread terrorism around the world. In a statement released by MI5 in November, General Ken McCallum stated:

"Iran projects threat to the UK directly, through its aggressive intelligence services. At its sharpest this includes ambitions to kidnap or even kill British or UK-based individuals perceived as enemies of the regime."

The lives of Iranian-British civilians in the UK have been affected to the extent that many are afraid to live everyday life. In October, Iranian singer Dariush Eghbali's concert in London was cancelled and evacuated after a bomb threat was received by the Metropolitan police. Eghbali is well known for his protest songs and opposition to the Iranian Government. He had been performing at the Eventim Apollo in Hammersmith.

We have to ask what emboldened the Iranian regime to behave as a rogue state. I believe that the answer is in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which released \$100 billion-worth of overseas financial assets to the Iranian regime. At the time, many of us urged the Government to reject that deal—I have to disappoint my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), but there is no doubt that we have been proved correct. That is a view shared by many around the world, including the President of the European Commission, who made her views public at the Manama Dialogue in Bahrain.

I feel that the UK Government have not acted as swiftly or gone as far as they could. There remains confusion on whether the IRGC has been or is to be proscribed in its entirety. The Foreign Secretary announced

[Dr Matthew Offord]

last month that sanctions had been imposed on the IRGC in its entirety, but the Prime Minister failed to confirm that status and only said there was

“a case for proscribing the IRGC”.

Failing to proscribe the IRGC under the Terrorism Act 2000 only emboldens the Iranian Government to continue their suppression of their people. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) explained that the IRGC is proscribed under the terms of the JCPOA and that when the deal expires, so does the proscription. The IRGC is therefore not proscribed under British law and has to be—namely, under the Terrorism Act 2000.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones), I acknowledge that the Government have taken certain actions. They co-sponsored the Human Rights Council resolution to establish a UN investigation into human rights violations committed by the Iranian regime during the recent protests, which passed at a special session of the council on 24 November, and the Government are to be congratulated on that. Ministers also worked with the US Government on removing Iran from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, which was achieved on 14 December.

But we need further action. I want to see a cutting of all political ties and no further negotiations with the Islamic regime of Iran. I want to see the termination of the joint comprehensive plan of action in its entirety. I want to see the invoking of the snapback sanction mechanisms under UN Security Council resolution 2231. I want to see the closure of all Iranian-funded Islamic centres across the United Kingdom. I want to see the recalling of the British ambassador from Iran. I want to see the expelling of the Iranian ambassador and all diplomats from the United Kingdom and the freezing of all assets of Islamic regime officials and their families. Most of all, I want to see a maintaining of the sanctions and visa bans on anyone linked to this wicked regime.

Sometimes I become passionate about this issue, but when my mother tells me how concerned she is on reading in the newspapers that we were targeted by a possible terrorist threat, it raises my passionate voice. I hope that the Government continue to protect not only our people but also our Members of Parliament, who are undergoing their daily business, representing their constituents—I have the largest Iranian-born community in the United Kingdom in my constituency—and defending their interests around the world and their families, some of whom remain in Iran and some of whom continue to face danger on a daily basis. For that reason alone, I ask the Government to proscribe the IRGC in its entirety.

1.2 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord); I did not realise he had undergone that experience, and I appreciate the passion with which he speaks. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing the debate.

We have heard devastating accounts today of Iranians subjected to brutality at the hands of not just the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps but the Iranian justice system, tortured into submission and coerced

into confession. We have a responsibility to those being held in jail, awaiting trial, sentence or even execution, that their cries for help do not go unheard.

It has been an excellent debate, and we have to hope that in some small way, the fact that we are here speaking about this makes some difference. In particular, the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) about her constituent's cousin, Mehdi, who is being held, really brought home to me that these are real lives at stake. If we can save the lives of even a few of them by speaking out today, it has to be worth while.

Others have mentioned the image of the Iranian men's football team refusing to sing the national anthem in their World cup game with England. That was an incredibly powerful statement, as they stood united in defiance with the women of Iran in the stands and watching the game at home. Their gesture will have been seen far and wide during the most watched sporting event in the world, yet back at home, the authorities in Iran appear oblivious of the world's gaze. Former Iranian footballer Amir Nasr-Azadani was sentenced to 26 years in prison this week for taking part in the November protests. Standing up for basic women's rights was deemed tantamount to “waging war on God” by the court. Comparatively, Amir got off lightly; the two men sentenced alongside him were executed.

The regime is no stranger to the death penalty. Some 314 people were executed in 2021 for various offences. I would hope that everyone in this place stands united in their opposition to the death penalty, no matter what the circumstances are, but the scale and precision of these verdicts suggests that something more deliberate and more sinister than we have seen previously in the use of the death penalty in Iran is now happening. These executions are being used as yet another tool of oppression, to silence people, instil fear and stop any expression of dissent. By adopting a very liberal definition of which acts warrant the death penalty, the Islamic Republic of Iran is bent on delivering illiberal justice. There is no transparency in the court proceedings. It is simply a case of revenge and retribution by the Iranian authorities.

There has been well-informed discussion about whether we should proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation, and I join calls for the Government to follow suit. I was interested in what the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), had to say about this being a policy position, not a legal one. I also noted what the hon. Member for Hendon said. I hope that we can get some clarity from the Minister about exactly what we are able to do and that he will take the strongest possible action. I also hope he will respond to the points raised about sanctions running out.

Those who have protested peacefully since the killing of Mahsa Amini and continue bravely to speak out despite the risks to their safety have my admiration and full solidarity. It was so inspiring to see young schoolgirls leading the push for change under the rallying call of “Woman, Life, Freedom”. The sanctions and asset freezes outlined by the Foreign Office in response to the violent crackdown are welcome, but the priority now must be stopping the scheduled executions.

The Foreign Secretary said in December:

“We are not passive observers and we should not merely voice our feelings: we will use our country's leverage to make a difference.”

Why, then, did the BBC report on Tuesday that the Foreign Secretary has not directly spoken to Iran's chargé affairs, Mehdi Hosseini Matin, despite instructing the Foreign Office to summon him four times? I appreciate the signal that summoning an official sends, but is it not time we sent an even stronger signal? Is it not time we went further than condemnation and used our leverage to make a difference? I appreciate that it is not in our gift to stop the Iranian regime in their tracks, but what leverage does the Minister think we have? I believe that we can and must do more. That includes securing independent access to trials, trying to secure a moratorium on executions and trying to hold the Iranian regime properly accountable.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The key question is, what can we do? The answer to that is: not very much, honestly. But what we can do is make one hell of a lot of noise about what is happening in Iran, in the UN and in every avenue we can use internationally, because it is absolutely appalling.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I was for four years in the shadow foreign affairs team with the human rights brief, and I often felt I was taking part in debates where there was a lot of hand-wringing and expressing horror at what was going on in the countries we were talking about. It felt so frustrating and futile to be talking about these issues, and there is a certain sense of impotence in terms of what we can achieve, but he is right to say that we should not let that hold us back from speaking out, because it is about joining our voices. It might not make an immediate difference, but we have to continue speaking out, in the hope that one day at least, it will make a difference.

To conclude, if the international community fails to increase pressure on Iran, the executions will continue, and the situation is likely to get worse. If we stand with the protesters, we may secure their freedom, and we will have honoured our commitment to protect human rights everywhere without discrimination.

1.9 pm

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this incredibly important and timely debate. All that it takes for evil to prevail is for good men and women to stay silent, so I am absolutely delighted that this House is not staying silent. I have enjoyed listening to the speeches from around the House, and I particularly enjoyed listening to the learned submissions from my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), who was in her place and is not any longer.

I have a number of refugees living in Southend and Leigh-on-Sea in my constituency who are as horrified as I am at what is happening in their homeland. It is as appalling as it is unlawful. I also have a small personal interest in this matter. My aunt, who is in her 80s, travelled abroad in her 20s, when she got as far as Iran and found the country to be so beautiful and free that she fell in love with an Iranian. She then lived there for at least two very happy decades in a country that is of course one of the most ancient civilisations in the world. Looking at photographs, we see that women were dressed, as we are, in western dress; they were

encouraged to work and were encouraged to be educated. They had to flee in 1979 and come back to this country. It is horrifying how, in 40 years, that country has gone back 400 years. The misery and pain that has been inflicted on the people by turning Iran into a medieval country is simply horrifying.

However, I do believe that, for the first time in 40 years, Iran is on the precipice of a fundamental change towards democracy. We have heard it described as a knife edge, but I always prefer to be optimistic and to look forward. It is a change on behalf of all women that we should support and welcome. Over the past six months, we have seen an incredible uprising against this tyrannical, misogynistic regime in Iran. We have seen the protests erupting across the country, and we have seen the people calling for an end to this medieval, theocratic regime and for the establishment of a new democratic and free country.

As has been said, this popular movement is best summed up with the slogan of the protesters: "Woman, Life, Freedom". It is women who have absolutely been at the heart of this uprising. We have heard how it started with one brave woman, Mahsa Amini, who was arrested in September last year for disobeying Iran's strict Islamic dress code forcing her to wear a headscarf. She was murdered in custody on 16 September, aged just 22. Not surprisingly, and quite rightly, this was a lightning flash across the world, sparking these protests by women. Young people—men and women—want to see a new free Iran, and we have heard in graphic detail the response with which they have met.

Bob Stewart: I thank my good friend for allowing me to intervene. The truth is that, if there was a free vote in Iran, this lot would be swept away, but there will not be a free vote. Iran is governed by people with guns and secret police who terrify the people. They terrify everyone, and if we were there, we might well be terrified as well. We might well be on a tipping point, but the fact is we have been on a tipping point in Iran for at least 10 years, and nothing has happened, because these people have such a grip on the people of Iran, and it is such a shame. For goodness' sake, can we somehow, please God, get that tipping point over and let us have freedom for everyone in Iran, because it is a wonderful country?

Anna Firth: My right hon. Friend sums up perfectly what is needed and how important it is that we in this place encourage the Government to get over that tipping point and take meaningful action.

The brutality meted out on these brave protesters since September is just appalling. More than 19,200 have been detained—nearly 20,000 people—for doing nothing more than exercising the basic human rights that we in the western world take completely for granted, and 500 have been killed. These figures are just unbelievable. There have been four executions of protesters in the past two months. We know from high-profile cases, such as that of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who was falsely imprisoned for over six years, that this regime cares nothing for the rule of law, and I really fear for the protesters who have been imprisoned, especially as the average age of those protesters is just 15. All mothers—all parents and grandparents—around the country will know how it would feel if their 15-year-old was taken against their wishes, imprisoned and executed.

[Anna Firth]

Despite that, the protests show that brave women have had enough. They will no longer put up with being legally and brutally repressed. Women in Iran have been treated as second-class citizens since the revolution of 1979, as is evidenced by how excluded they are from public life. Women make up just 16% of the workforce, but in most European countries, as in the UK, the figure is 60%. It is partly because of the repression of women that Iran is on the UK's list of 31 human rights priority countries. I am sure the Minister will join me in applauding the bravery of the young women standing up against this regime.

This is more than just a movement to secure the removal of forced veiling, valid though that aim is; it is now a movement towards lasting democratic change. When the regime does change, I hope that the tenets set out in the 10-point plan of Mrs Maryam Rajavi, the president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran, are looked at and embodied. Those points call for nothing less than complete gender equality—gender equality in the realms of political, social, cultural and economic rights—as well as equal participation for women in political leadership, the abolition of any form of discrimination against women, the right to choose one's own clothing freely, the right to freely marry, the right to freely divorce, and the right to obtain education and employment. Those are rights that all women in this place and throughout the western world take completely for granted, and quite rightly.

In October last year, I called in this Chamber for the UN to remove Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women. It seemed to me utterly extraordinary that Iran should have any place whatsoever on a body designed to look after women's rights. I was delighted when the UN voted to remove Iran from that commission in December. These political statements, while they may seem like empty words and not real action, are incredibly important, because they show that the international community condemns what is going on.

The UK is no stranger to taking action and disapproving of certain regimes, and I am proud that we have taken some action in relation to Iran. Since the beginning of the latest round of protests, the UK has imposed sanctions against the morality police and other senior figures in the Iranian regime. We now sanction 119 individuals and two entities in Iran, and we have rightly sanctioned the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Since its creation in 1979, the IRGC has been actively oppressing dissidents inside Iran and spreading terrorism abroad. We have heard that the IRGC funds and supports terrorist groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and many other regional proxy groups. It also plays a leading role in the suppression of the rights of women and in violently suppressing protesters.

I believe, however, that we now need to go further. The USA and Canada have gone further, and they are doing more than sanctioning the IRGC, which they now proscribe as a terrorist organisation. I urge the Government to follow suit. Proscribing the group would mean that it would become a criminal offence to belong to the IRGC, attend its meetings, carry its logo in public or encourage its activities. Most importantly, it would put the body on a similar legal footing to al-Qaeda and Daesh, where I believe it belongs. I was encouraged to

read reports in *The Daily Telegraph* last week that the Government are considering taking such action, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

To conclude, proscribing the IRGC would send a strong signal to the Iranian regime that it cannot continue to suppress women. It would send a strong signal to the women of Iran that the UK is on their side. Above all, it would send a signal to the Iranian regime that its time is up. Change is coming. The people of Iran will continue to fight for that, and we in this place will continue to stand with them and support it.

1.20 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I wish to say a few brief words about the workers' movement in Iran.

I was particularly moved, as were others, by the description by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) of the plight of the family she is dealing with. I have 2,000 asylum seekers in hotels in my constituency, and several are from Iran. Listening to their stories is equally moving. When we have debates about asylum seekers in this House, it is sometimes worth recording where those people have come from, and what they endured before they—hopefully—reached safety in this country.

I fully agree with the proscription of the revolutionary guard, which is long overdue, and with the implementation of Magnitsky sanctions. I am surprised—well, shocked really—about the threats to the BBC Persian service, and I agree with other Members about the need to continue its funding. We in this House are committed to diplomacy as much as we possibly can be, but there does come a time when diplomacy is no longer working and when, in some ways, the diplomats who are located here are working against the best interests of our country and our citizens, as well as of their own. I therefore agree with the closure of the Iranian embassy and the expulsion of the diplomats. I believe that is now overdue.

To move on to the workers' movement in Iran, the interesting thing about this uprising, or potential revolution, is that it cuts across all social and economic classes and has brought people together. For those who were engaged at the time, it is worth recalling that when the Shah fell in 1979, it was largely as a result of mass strikes throughout 1978. The workers' movement became the tipping point for the removal of the Shah. It is also important to note that no Iranian I have spoken to so far is calling for the return of a monarchist Government. They are calling for a democratic Government, even though the Iranian regime is seeking to promote the myth of some form of retrieval of a Shah-type regime. That is not what this is; it is a democratic struggle.

The mass strikes that took place in 1978 toppled the Shah. The ayatollahs learned from that and sought to eradicate the trade union movement in Iran. Instead, they imposed state sanctioned organisations, supposedly to represent the workers, although they never did. In addition, they introduced policies of privatisation—almost the creation of a gig economy—to prevent workers from working together in an organised movement. Those who were in the House way back in 2004 will recall that Members across the House—I believe across all parties—strongly supported the heroic struggle of the Tehran bus workers' union when it came out on strike. That was met with repression and the imprisonment of many of those trade unionists, some of whom disappeared.

Nevertheless, the heroic struggle of workers in Iran continued. Some Members will remember that in 2015, we raised what was happening with the teachers' union in Iran, and at that time the general secretary of the trade union, Esmail Abdi was arrested. There was a hunger strike, and the House—again on a cross-party basis—supported that workers' struggle.

What has been interesting about the recent uprisings is the engagement across all social classes, and also the courage demonstrated in the strikes now being organised. In December before Christmas, there was a three-day strike during which the shops, markets and businesses were closed down in opposition to what was happening under the existing regime. In addition, oil workers demonstrated outside their employers' headquarters, thanks to a combination of support for the struggles that have taken place for democracy and a reaction to what is happening to the living standards of workers under the regime, with high inflation, wages suppressed and the inability even to represent each other in negotiations with employers. This is more than just an uprising; this goes way across society, with workers and others coming together in all the social forums they can to demand change.

We in this House have a role in making noise, exposing what is taking place and expressing our condemnation, but we also have a responsibility to show solidarity. In December, a group of Iranian men and women who have a history of trade union and other struggles in Iran, and who currently live in this country as refugees, came together with trade unionists in this country and formed the committee of solidarity with the workers' movement of Iran. The intention of that committee is to engage with trade unions in this country, and with the TUC, to see what solidarity work can be undertaken for the workers' struggles in Iran. Yes, these are expressions of solidarity, but possibly using the international organisations of the trade union movement to express that solidarity more effectively. That committee is now linking up with trade unionists across Europe in particular, and in America, to see what joint actions can be taken.

I simply and briefly ask the House to welcome the formation of that committee for workers' solidarity, to support the work it will be doing to expose what is going on, to support those expressions of support for workers taking action in Iran, and to consider what other practical actions could be taken. I believe that could be one element of supporting the significant breakthrough that is potentially available to Iranians at the moment.

1.27 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate. It has been a powerful debate that will send a strong message to the Iranian regime about our views in this country.

I rise on behalf of my Iranian constituents and in full solidarity with the Iranian people in their fight against their repressive and abusive regime. I speak also on behalf of many constituents in Putney, Roehampton and Southfields who have contacted me about the situation. It is breaking many hearts, as I know from people I have met in my surgeries and on the streets. I bump into people who say how much they would like me to speak out about what is happening in Iran. They have been on

protests in London. They can go to those protests without fear of being kidnapped on the way, being thrown into prison, having a sham trial, and being tortured and abused, which is what so many young people in Iran are facing—even those wrongly thought to be going to a protest. It has been heartbreaking to hear those stories about people going to protests, just as young people in Putney do all the time, and suffering that abuse.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Lady—my hon. Friend—for allowing me to intervene. If any of us were to make a speech such as the one we have made this afternoon in Iran, we would be dead meat very quickly. We are extremely lucky to be able to speak as we do and condemn this awful regime. All I can say is that we have to make as much noise as we can to try to get rid of it.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome that intervention. I really believe that that is what we are doing in the debate today. I am pleased to be able to join Members from across the House who are united in so many ways on this issue.

On 8 January, one person was killed by the regime who had been to visit his parents' gravestones. He was wrongly thought to be part of a protest that was taking place nearby and that resulted in him being murdered by the regime; he was sentenced to death.

The extensive use of force against protesters is horrific. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that more than 300 people have been killed in the latest crackdown by the regime, including 40 children. More than 18,000 people have been arrested and a reported 488 people have been killed. We know that the mistreatment of women has been a brutal reality for Iranian women for many years, both in Iran and overseas. That is state sanction of misogyny and murder of women on a mass scale.

I have previously spoken to support the brave women and girls of Iran in their protests and about the abhorrence of the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini. She was the same age as one of my daughters. That really brings home to me that these young people are being so brave in their protests. They are the same age as my children, who could easily face the same situation as so many in Iran. There is also the online harassment, kidnapping and execution of so many others.

Colleagues raised the 26 individuals at risk of execution without fair trial for made-up offences. I add my voice to those calling for their immediate release. One of those individuals, who has since been hanged, was 22-year-old karate champion Mehdi Karami, who had dreams of one day competing in the Olympics and won numerous medals for Iran in various competitions. Mehdi's last words were:

"Dad, they've reached a verdict. Mine is execution by hanging. Don't tell mum."

He was a proud Iranian patriot who wanted to live a normal life and stand up for his country at home and abroad. It is just heartbreaking.

Another case raised today is that of Alireza Akbari, a dual national UK citizen who has been denied representation, denied legal process and is on death row with an imminent execution fate. His family have been called in for a final meeting. The Foreign Secretary has denounced his treatment as politically motivated. I hope

[*Fleur Anderson*]

to hear from the Minister about what actions have been taken by our diplomats to secure his release and to avoid his murder. We cannot stay silent.

As has been mentioned, the IRGC is destabilising the region. It goes far beyond the context of Iran, and not least to Lebanon, which I visited last year. This week, I spoke to community leaders about its current political disarray and economic collapse, fuelled in part by the actions of Hezbollah under the patronage of Iran. The Government could be doing more in relation to the ongoing abuses of human rights in Iran and the activity of the IRGC on British soil.

What can we do? First, we must continue to stand firmly against the Iranian regime. The Government's announcement of sanctions against certain regime figures is welcome, but they should be the start of more. We must continue to ramp up our sanctions regime, bringing to justice human rights abusers from the bloody 2019 crackdown as well. I hope to hear later that the Minister has been thinking seriously about new sanctions against the regime, sanctions against the families of those already sanctioned, and how we can ratchet those up.

Secondly, we must maximise support for Iranians on the ground. For example, we could consider ensuring that all political prisoners in Iran have political sponsorships in the UK, following similar moves by politicians in Germany, which has saved Iranian lives and overturned death sentences. We need to ensure that Iranians have internet access so that they can facilitate and organise protests, and welcome Iranian refugees here with open arms. The Government should give Iranians who are fighting with their lives the options to flee and issue visas, especially to those people who have been given death sentences in Iran and those women who are leading the protests.

I end by posing five questions to the Government. First, will the Minister confirm today, as has been asked by so many Members across the House, plans to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in full in the coming days? If not now, when? The Government should move quickly to decide whether to follow the US and other countries to formally proscribe the IRGC.

Secondly, what plans does the Minister have to expand the sanctions regime to other Iranian human rights abusers, such as the then technology Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi and the IRGC commander Salar Abnosh? Thirdly, does the Minister agree that now is the time to speak the truth plainly when calling out Tehran's malign behaviour, including being bold enough to label the regime's state hostage-taking policies for what they really are?

Fourthly, there is a large Iranian diaspora in the UK, including in my constituency, who are fearing for their family and friends in Iran and in desperate worry because often they cannot hear from them. However, the community is under threat here, too. Can the Minister set out what the UK is doing to ensure the safety of British-Iranian journalists and to tackle pro-Iranian extremism, which we have seen in the UK? Fifthly, what would it take for the Government to take steps to expel the Iranian diplomats here? I understand that the consequence would be the expulsion of our diplomats from Tehran. Could the Minister outline the benefit of our diplomats staying in Tehran—that would be the reason not to expel the diplomats here—but also what it would really

take: what are the red lines by which we would expel the diplomats here? We cannot continue to say that this is a regime similar to others—as we have heard today, it has gone far beyond that.

The clock is ticking. Since we broke for our last recess, more innocent Iranian citizens have been executed. Every second counts. Feet dragging costs lives. Those brave souls who have stood up against the brutal regime need all the help that we can give them. I end with solidarity for the people of Iran, support for a democratic solution and to stand up for all other victims of oppressive and brutal regimes across the world. “Woman, Life, Freedom.”

1.36 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the Backbench Business Committee for giving the House the opportunity to debate and speak at length on this vital issue. We have heard harrowing and illustrative case studies on the plight of the people in Iran. I also join my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) in welcoming the formation of the committee for solidarity with the workers' movement of Iran.

This is an issue on which many of us have been contacted by constituents with family and friends in Iran, or just by people who are deeply alarmed by the wave of brutal repression under way in Iran. The detention of thousands of people and the killing of many people by the Iranian Government in response to the protests against them, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, have appalled and alarmed us all.

Twenty-two-year-old Mahsa Amini was arbitrarily arrested by the so-called morality police for not complying with the country's compulsory veiling laws. Nothing short of a popular uprising was sparked by her death in custody. About 1,000 separate protests are believed to have taken place across 146 cities and 140 university and college campuses around Iran. That uprising has democracy and civil rights placed at its core. It is right that we stand with pro-democracy and human rights activists in Iran, and that is why I and other hon. Members have signed early-day motion 581. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) on that initiative.

The initial uprising, led by brilliant and brave young women under the rallying cry, “Woman, Life, Freedom” has now widened. For example, I recently heard—we heard this from my right hon. Friend—about how there is now a series of labour movement actions against the Iranian Government. These nationwide protests have been met with lethal and unlawful violence by the Iranian authorities. Amnesty warns:

“Hundreds have been killed with impunity, including at least 44 children.”

Other estimates suggest that more than 16,000 people have been arrested. Today, we offer our solidarity with those who are campaigning for human rights and justice, especially those who are so bravely putting themselves at such great risk by doing so.

The rest of my remarks will focus on the use of the death penalty in Iran. As Amnesty says:

“In a new phase of this crackdown, Iranian authorities are not only continuing to carry out mass killings, arrests, enforced disappearances and torture of dissidents, but are now using the death penalty as a tool of political repression.”

In November, Iran's legislators decreed that the death penalty could be applied to protesters brought before the courts on charges of "serious crimes" against the state. The charges against protesters have included vaguely defined national security charges such as "enmity against God", "corruption on Earth" and "armed rebellion". All those vaguely worded crimes are capital offences.

So far, four young men have faced arbitrary execution, following their sentencing during sham trials in connection with the protests. Majidreza Rahnavard was publicly executed less than two weeks after his only rubber-stamp court hearing. Mohsen Shekari was executed three weeks after Iranian authorities convicted him and sentenced him to death. Tragically, it was reported last week that Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini were also executed.

The Iranian authorities must immediately drop the death sentences handed to other protesters. Amnesty International has identified 25 individuals who remain at serious risk of execution. As part of what needs to be an international campaign to prevent further executions, I wish to put on the record of this House the cases of those 25, who fall under four categories.

The first category is the individuals who have been sentenced to death: Mohammad Boroughani, Mohammad Ghobadlou, Manouchehr Mehman Navaz, Hamid Ghare Hasanlou, Sayed Mohammad Hosseini, Hossein Mohammadi and an unnamed individual in Alborz province. Reports suggest that two of the named individuals, Mohammad Boroughani and Mohammad Ghobadlou, have recently been moved to solitary confinement, raising fears that they may face imminent execution.

The second category is the individuals who have undergone trial on capital charges and who either are at risk of being sentenced to death or may already have been sentenced to death. As of 15 December, there was no publicly available information on the status of their cases. They are Saeed Shirazi, Abolfazl Mehri Hossein Hajilou and Mohsen Rezazadeh Gharegholou.

The third category is the individuals who have been charged with capital offences and may be either awaiting or undergoing trial. Their names are Akbar Ghafari, Toomaj Salehi, Ebarhim Rigi, Amir Nasr Azadani, Saleh Mirhashemi, Saeed Yaghoubi, Farzad Tahazadeh, Farhad Tahazadeh, Karvan Shahiparvaneh, Reza Eslamdoost, Hajar Hamidi and Shahram Marouf-Moula.

The fourth and final category is the individuals who have had their requests for judicial review accepted. Their cases are to be remanded to the lower court for retrial and they may therefore be resented to death. They are Sahand Nourmohammad-Zadeh, Saman Seydi Yasin and Mahan Sedarat Madani, who has a suspended sentence.

I have read out those names because it is very important that we do all we can to raise public awareness and make sure that the Government of Iran know that the international community is watching not only the wider wave of oppression, but the fate of those individuals. I know that the Minister will respond to this debate by explaining everything that the UK Government can do to put pressure on the Iranian Government not only to end the wider wave of oppression, but to ensure that the individuals named do not meet the fate of execution. Amnesty International fears that many others in addition

to those I have named are at risk of facing the death penalty, given the thousands of people who have been arrested and the number of indictments that have been issued by the authorities.

It is very welcome that the House has the opportunity today, on a cross-party basis, to expose the reality for people in Iran who are facing the prospect of execution for nothing other than standing up for human rights and justice. It is really important that a united voice comes from the House today and that the Government explain to us what they can do. The Government can take steps: as colleagues have said, we are under no illusions, but our Government can be part of an international wave of pressure that can save lives in Iran and help to end this wave of repression.

1.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing it and for setting the scene so very well, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have made significant and powerful contributions.

I echo the words of my colleague and friend the hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon). I hope that more will come out of our debate than this, but if nothing else, it will demonstrate that Members of this House stand in solidarity with protesters in Iran. That means a lot, from a distance, to people we may never meet who may be looking to this House for some support and succour in relation to the protests. The people protesting in Iran are doing so not for social media clout or for Instagram posts, as I fear some who protest issues in this country may sometimes do. They are protesting in sheer determination to improve their lot and claim back their right to live with dignity, free from unjust and undue oppression and state overreach.

This is undoubtedly a battle for liberty, for freedom and for democracy. The Iranian regime wants Members of this House and people across the world to believe that the protests are minor and are concentrated in small pockets of Iranian society, but its misinformation must be ignored. The protests are much more than that. The reality of what is happening has to be put on record: the protests are widespread and well organised. As Mrs Maryam Rajavi, the leader of the largest Iranian opposition group, has highlighted, the protests are not limited to the issue of the compulsory hijab. This is a revolution.

The people of Iran are calling for an end to the Islamic Republic in its entirety, rejecting any form of dictatorship. They do not want either the mullahs or the return of the Shah dictatorship. As the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) said, those are not the things they want; they want a free, democratic society, and we support them. They want a democratic and secular republic in which the rights of every individual—every man, every woman and every child—are protected. The National Council of Resistance of Iran's 10-point plan for a future Iran would deliver exactly that. I put on record my support for that 10-point plan.

Only by understanding the true nature of what is going on in Iran can we deliver the support that the Iranian people need. That support must now take a number of forms. We must recognise the Iranian people's

[Jim Shannon]

rights to oppose the Iranian regime's suppressive and despotic forces. We must recognise the revolution that is taking place. Furthermore, we must intensify pressure on the Iranian regime's suppressive forces by listing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. Those are the things that we need to do, and that is the reality of what is happening in Iran today.

We should remember that those who are protesting in Iran are not doing so simply to improve their own situation. They are motivated entirely by the hope of improving the country for their children and for their children's children. Their courageous actions, if successful, will improve human rights and conditions for everyone in Iran, helping all Iranians to live in accordance with their inherent dignity.

The protests in Iran were sparked by the brutal treatment of Mahsa Jina Amini. The protesters are largely advocating for women's rights, which I fully support, but those who protest for their right to live free from oppression help to advance rights for all. They are shedding light on Iran's human rights record on more than just its treatment of women, which is abysmal.

An area of particular concern surrounding these protests is the threat of the death penalty for those who participate in them. As other Members have said, Iran continues to be one of the leading implementers of the death penalty, with devastating implications for some of the protesters there. Human rights groups estimate that between 26 and 100 protesters risk facing the death penalty for their participation in the protests—peaceful protests—not to mention the fact that 516 people have already died during them. Not only does this renew my resolve and, I hope, the resolve of the House to speak up for the Iranian people, but it frames the thousands of protesters in another light, one that we all recognise. Imagine the bravery and courage of these people who risk their lives for basic democracy and human rights. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington spoke of workers' groups coming together, and how strongly we support that.

The death penalty is used to stifle those who dissent from the Iranian regime, or from the majority-held belief of Islam and Iran's interpretation of it. Iranian law considers acts such as “insulting the Prophet” or “apostasy” to be crimes punishable by death. Such grounds for the death penalty pose a clear threat to the free exercise of article 18 of the United Nations' universal declaration of human rights, which is the right to freedom of religion or belief. That is an issue close to my heart, and I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief. I believe absolutely that people's right to have their own religion and to express that belief is an integral part of human rights: the two issues march hand in hand.

Those protesting in Iran face a horrific scale of threat, but for some groups such levels of danger are commonplace and have existed for many years. According to Amnesty International, in 2021 the right to freedom of religion or belief was further undermined in Iran when its Parliament introduced two articles to the penal code that issued up to five years' imprisonment, and sometimes a fine as well, for the ludicrous charges of “insulting Iranian ethnicities, divine religions or Islamic denominations”

or engaging in

“deviant educational or proselytizing activity contradicting...Islam”.

I think of the religious minorities who face entrenched discrimination, violence and systemic, crippling exclusion, including Baha'is—I have spoken to two Baha'i women who face a second 10-year prison sentence just for being Baha'is, which the hon. Member for Harrow East referred to as well—and Christians, Jews and Sunni Muslims, who suffer discrimination under law and in practice. Baha'is are subject to particular hostility from the Iranian regime, suffering from arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearance, the destruction of homes and even cemeteries—the very graves where people's loved ones lie—and prohibition from higher education. They have no opportunity to advance themselves either educationally or in employment.

In view of Iran's abhorrent treatment of such minorities and its utter disregard for human rights across the board, I believe that our Government should continue to apply pressure on the regime through institutions such as the United Nations and its affiliated bodies, but given Iran's selective commitment, or lack of commitment, to upholding international law—as previously concluded by the Foreign Affairs Committee—we should rightly be sceptical about the extent to which our Government can bring compliance through gentle nudging alone. It will take a great deal more than that. It is therefore to be recommended that the UK seek other means to bring positive change in Iran and to support the ambitions and hopes of the protesters there. However, I thank the Minister and the Government for what they are doing. I think they are on the same page as us: we are frustrated about not seeing action with the intensity and urgency that we would like to see.

I welcome the move by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to sanction 10 Iranian officials connected with the regime's judicial and prison systems, but such a response is not enough. Further use of Magnitsky-style sanctions could be made. Moreover, people here in the UK are guilty of calling for protesters to be executed. Seyed Hashem Moosavi, for instance, is here in London, sanction-free, acting as Iran's propaganda mouthpiece. Moosavi is supposedly the head of an Iranian-funded mosque in Maida Vale—the Islamic centre of England—which, it is worth noting, received more than £100,000 of taxpayers' money under the coronavirus furlough scheme. In this role, Moosavi hosted a vigil in memory of Qasem Soleimani, the head of the expeditionary forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, who was killed in Iraq in by the US in January 2020.

The IRGC was proscribed as a foreign terrorist organization by the US in 2019, and it is reported—the Minister may or may not be able to confirm this—that the UK Government intend to do the same within the next few weeks. It would be great if we could send that message from the Chamber today. The Government swiftly sanctioned allies of Putin who resided in London, so—I say this very gently, and it is not meant as a criticism—why the inaction when another hostile nation abuses human rights and exhibits disregard for international law? It should be treated in the same way.

The Foreign Affairs Committee has noted that

“Iran's human rights record and selective commitment to upholding international law is a threat to the rules based international system generally”.

The protests in Iran offer a prime opportunity for this country—our country, our people and our Government—to renew its commitment to defending the rights of all, in the interest of all. The rules-based international system safeguards against corruption and impunity, and safeguards the rights of each person. It is in our Government's interests to bear that in mind, and to choose wisely before they follow the path of inaction. Today the lives of the protesters killed on the streets of Iranian cities, and those executed in Iranian prisons, strengthen the will of the Iranian people. They see the end in sight, and we have a duty in this Parliament to support their will in any way we can.

Let me finally take a moment to recall our colleague Sir David Amess. For many years, Sir David used words in our debates to support the Iranian people's right to bring about change and live in a free and democratic society. 2023 could be the year in which the Iranian people's dreams come true, and I will be doing all I can to ensure that that happens.

1.56 pm

Christian Wakeford (Bury South) (Lab): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and I am delighted to have been called so early in the debate! Let me start by thanking the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for initiating this timely, topical and important debate on not only the treatment of protesters in Iran, but the political situation there. As we know, it is destabilising not just for its own people, but for those across the region and, indeed, the globe.

I want to reiterate some of the comments that have been made, notably those made by the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and the right hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I do not have a problem with Iran the country—its history, its culture and its proud, proud people. What I do have is a problem with the evil, barbaric, tyrannical, murderous regime of the supreme leader and the treatment of his own people.

On 16 September, the brutal death—I would call it a murder—of Mahsa Amini shook the world. Up until that point, we had spoken about Iran numerous times in the Chamber and Westminster Hall, and there had been numerous calls, as there have been today, for the UK to go further, for instance by proscribing Hezbollah and Hamas across the globe and, now, proscribing the IRGC. We have been calling for that for a number of years, and there is cross-party, cross-Chamber and cross-House support for it, yet still we are waiting. That death on 16 September, however, not only shook us in this country, but shook the people of Iran. When there were protests a couple of years ago, they were stamped out very quickly with brutal treatment from the regime.

What we are seeing now from the brave women and men of that country makes it clear that they have had enough. There is now a hope and aspiration for real regime change, because they know what the penalties are. They know of the risks not only to their own safety and their own lives, but to the lives of their families, and they are still prepared to protest. For that, they have not only our thanks and our solidarity, but our support as well.

When we all watched the World Cup there were many things we took from it, but what I took from the England-Iran game were the powerful statements by the

Iranian football team before the match, during the singing of the national anthems, and then after the match. They did not want to stand by and support their regime. They did not want to support what was happening in their country. We see that not only with the football team, as all sportspeople are repressed. They fear not only that they will be murdered if they go back to Iran, but attacks, torture and, ultimately, execution. As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Select Committee, said, we are seeing state-sponsored murder on a brutal scale.

This is not just about Iran's treatment of its own people. Iran has destabilised the region for numerous years in how it treats the Kurds and in its approach to Israel and the entire middle east. More recently, it has provided attack drones for Russia's illegal war in Ukraine.

We have also seen the Iranian regime take a negative approach not only to the state of Israel but to Jewish people across the globe, by propagating antisemitism, including holocaust denial. As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day, it is now more important than ever to call out the evil of holocaust denial. In recent years, we have seen high-profile competitions such as the international holocaust cartoon competition being held in Iran with the Iranian Government's support. The most recent competition was held in 2016, according to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, and it had 150 entries, all depicting holocaust denial and claims of holocaust hoaxes. The competition tries to denigrate one of the worst crimes against humanity the world has ever seen. Despite the denial of Iran's Foreign Minister, the holocaust cartoon competition is linked to the Iranian regime, as confirmed by Iran's Ministry of Culture. Conflicting statements are a recurring theme of the Iranian regime, which produces different messages for domestic and overseas consumption.

Iran has been designated a state sponsor of terrorism. It funds Hamas, Hezbollah and numerous regimes across the middle east, including in Lebanon and, as the Chairman of the Select Committee said, Syria. We need to continue calling this out, because Iran's support for terrorism is a global threat, particularly to Jewish communities, which have been repeatedly targeted. The most notable example is the 1994 Hezbollah bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina building in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people and injured hundreds. This continued threat is a major reason why Jewish communities around the world, including in my constituency, require security outside schools, synagogues, community centres and events.

In 2012, Iran or Hezbollah was connected to incidents targeting Jewish communities or Israeli interests in India, Georgia, Thailand, Singapore, Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Kenya and this country. This continued threat is a major reason why Jewish communities around the world fear for their safety, and it is why we need organisations such as the Community Security Trust to make sure that our Jewish constituents and friends are safe. Again, I pay tribute to the Community Security Trust's work to keep my constituents safe to go about their daily lives.

The UK should continue to monitor the global and domestic threat from Iranian-backed terrorism and take action to limit terrorists' ability to operate domestically, regionally and globally. The Government should be commended for supporting the security of the UK's

[*Christian Wakeford*]

Jewish communities against this threat. The Government took far too long to proscribe Hezbollah, compared with other countries, but we need to have further conversations with the EU and our neighbours and friends to make sure they are also proscribing Hezbollah in its entirety.

I share the international community's concern about a nuclear Iran, as highlighted by the Chairman of the Select Committee. The JCPOA has essentially been dead for three years, yet we have allowed Iran not only to enrich uranium but to develop greater scientific understanding and knowledge so that, if we were to take it away, it would be back in a matter of weeks. We need to do so much more, and I share those concerns.

What do we do now that the JCPOA is dead? I would love to say that we could go back to the negotiating table to find a solution, but I think that moment has passed. The Iranian regime does not care about negotiating. It does not care about the sanctions we might impose on Iran, the IRGC or the police, because so much of its economy is driven by the black market. We need to find new, innovative and meaningful ways to address the situation, but it will also involve our friends and allies in the US, the UN, Germany and France. We need to make sure we are all singing from the same hymn sheet if we are to address the situation, because we need to address not only the threat of a nuclear Iran but the state-sponsored terrorism it is exporting across the globe.

Any future UK relationship with Iran must take into account not only those destabilising factors but what Iran is doing to its own people. As we have seen, the number of murders, arrests and tortures are increasing on a daily basis.

I am sure everyone in this Chamber, in this House and, indeed, in this Parliament sends their support to every single person who is protesting, whether on the streets of Tehran or, as we saw on Sunday, the streets of London. We support their freedom from Iran's tyrannical regime, and we back their cries of "Woman, Life, Freedom".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the SNP spokesperson.

2.5 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a genuine pleasure to speak in this hugely important debate and to follow the many significant and well-informed contributions we have heard from both sides of the House. I thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this debate.

The Scottish National party stands in full solidarity with those incredibly brave Iranian women, men and young people whose desire to see political, economic and social change in their country has brought out the worst in a regime that is well known for its ruthlessness and brutality. The accounts we have heard today have been truly harrowing, none more so than the one we heard from the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood).

The protesters' bravery in standing up to the dictatorship is beyond inspiring, and each and every one of us who believes in freedom and human rights owes it to them not just to stand in solidarity and to unequivocally

condemn the regime but to promise to do everything we can to bring the perpetrators to justice, regardless of how long it takes. There have been a number of questions about what we can do. Although our options may be limited in the short term, we can in the long term commit to ensuring that there will be no impunity and no hiding place for the perpetrators of these awful, awful crimes.

As we have heard, the death of Mahsa Amini has been the catalyst for the largest protests that Iran has witnessed since the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979. As Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe recently wrote:

"Mahsa's death is the latest blow to the people of a country long abused... Women in Iran are desperate. They are furious and restless. They cannot take it anymore."

To the cry of "Woman, Life, Freedom", women and girls are removing their headscarves and, in an act of incredible bravery, defying the regime. But that bravery and defiance comes at a huge personal cost to so many individuals and families.

Hours before she disappeared on 20 September, 16-year-old Nika Shakarami was recorded burning her headscarf at a protest in Tehran. Later that night, she messaged a friend to say that she was being chased by the police, and she was witnessed being bundled into a police van. Shortly afterwards, her Telegram and Instagram accounts were deleted and her phone was turned off. Ten days later, Nika's family were told that she was dead, and they were given only a few seconds to identify her. Her mother says the revolutionary guards told her that Nika had been in their custody for five days before being handed over to the notorious Evin prison.

Tragedy is, all too often, a reality for women who defy the regime. It is a similar story for 23-year-old Hadis Najafi, a social media influencer who disappeared the following night. Before leaving to join the protest, she sent a video to a friend saying, "I would like to think that, when I think about this a few years later, I will be pleased that I joined this protest." Thirty minutes after leaving her house, Hadis was shot dead. She was shot at least six times in the face, neck and heart, although her family believe she was shot 20 times. When we talk about the protests and the protesters, we must do so in human terms. We must remember the 22-year-old Mahsa, the 16-year-old Nika and the 23-year-old Hadis as young women who were killed for demanding the rights that every single one of us in this country takes for granted. To try to understand why Mahsa, Nika, Hadis and tens of thousands of other girls pose such a threat to the regime and its ideology, it is worth remembering the words of Hossein Jalali, an Iranian MP and member of that Parliament's culture committee, who said recently:

"The hijab is the flag of the Islamic Republic. Those who refuse to wear hijab will have to pay a heavy price".

He added:

"Moving away from the hijab means a retreat of the Islamic Republic".

That explains why Professor Azadeh Kian, the French-Iranian director of the centre for gender and feminist studies at the University of Paris, said:

"What these women are doing in Iran is a revolution, at least a cultural revolution".

It seems now that it is not just the women of Iran who cannot take it anymore, as they have been joined by workers, students and minority communities. They are taking to the streets to voice their pent-up anger at this

regime, and it must be concerned. As we have heard, the average age of a protester is 15; young Iranians, male and female, are telling the regime that its time is up, and the regime is responding in the only way it knows how. That grassroots demand for change is not going to go away and at some point the regime will have to accept that its tried and trusted tactic of brutal repression simply will not work any more.

Across this House, Members will stand in solidarity with the brave women, men, and young people of Iran. Similarly, we will fully support the United Nations in the work it is doing and its international fact-finding mission. I echo the calls made for the proscription of the IRGC. If we are not going to proscribe that organisation, the Minister will have to explain why.

Finally, let me echo the words of the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady); there is something quick, meaningful and practical that we can do right now, which is to reverse the decision made to move the BBC World Service Persian language broadcasts from radio to a digital-only platform. The Iranian Government can and do cut the internet easily, thereby denying the Iranian people a trusted source of news from the outside world. As we know, the FCDO partly funds the World Service, but budgetary pressures on the BBC mean that it has chosen to make its Persian language service internet only. It would take only a tiny amount of extra money to reverse this decision and get the Persian language broadcasts back on to the radio: a tiny sum of money that would tell the people of Iran that the world is watching, we are aware of their struggle and they are not alone. I hope that the Minister will take that on board.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front-Bencher.

2.12 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): First, let me thank the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing this important and timely debate. I also thank all those in this House who have expressed their solidarity with the Iranian protesters, who, despite the brutal crackdown by the regime, are still demanding equality for women, their right to live their lives as they wish and their fundamental political freedoms. What is so inspiring is that those protests comprise a mass movement, led by women and girls from across Iranian society, held together by the rallying cry of “Woman, Life, Freedom”. All of us who believe in fundamental freedoms that no one should be denied should be in solidarity with them, and we should rightly deplore the violence the regime has unleashed on protesters.

In December last year, the regime’s brutality escalated; we saw the executions of two young men, Mohsen Shekari, and Majidreza Rahnavard, following unsound trials. On Saturday, we heard of the executions of Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini. More young people are on death row and protesters have gathered outside the prisons where they are held, in an attempt to save their lives. I am sure that the whole House stands unequivocally against the death penalty in all cases. It is fundamentally wrong for any state to take a person’s life, regardless of their crime, but it is even more horrendous in this case. The death penalty is being used to intimidate and suppress the people’s

legitimate anger against their Government. Indeed, the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights has called the executions “state sanctioned killings” and has lambasted the regime for “weaponising the death penalty”.

I want us to think for a moment of Majidreza Rahnavard, who was 23 when he was killed at the hands of his own Government. His execution came just a month after he was arrested during protests in the city of Mashhad. Majidreza was killed for allegedly killing two members of the paramilitary Basij force and for wounding two others. He did not receive a fair trial and activists report that he confessed only after being tortured. Scenes from his trial, which were selectively broadcast on state TV, depict a grossly unfair show trial. Majidreza’s family did not know he was going to be executed. Photos taken in prison the day before he was killed show him and his mother smiling. His mother believed he would soon be home and that her nightmare would be over. She discovered the next morning that her son had been publicly executed and that security forces were burying his body in secret.

Mohsen Shekari was also executed by the regime. His uncle has said he was tortured into admitting attacking Basij forces, following his arrest during protests. Mohammad Mehdi Karami was a karate champion and Seyed Mohammad Hosseini was a children’s sports coach in his free time. They were young men with their lives ahead of them. They are victims of a regime intent on driving fear into the hearts of its population.

Amnesty International reports that many more young people are at risk of being executed. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) of the harrowing story of Mehdi, who is just one example among many who have faced the threat of the death penalty. Each one of them deserves a fair and just trial, but instead they are being used as pawns to terrify ordinary Iranians into giving up their demands for “Woman, Life, Freedom”.

It is more important than ever to show our unequivocal support for those who have been condemned to death by the Iranian regime. The following people are confirmed by Amnesty International to be at risk of execution, but there are likely many more: Mohammad Boroughani, Mohammad Ghobadlou, Manouchehr Mehman Navaz, Hamid Ghare Hasanlou, Seyed Mohammad Hosseini, Hossein Mohammadi, an unnamed individual in Alborz province, Saeed Shirazi, Abolfazl Mehri Hossein Hajilou, Mohsen Rezazadeh Gharegholou, Akbar Ghafari, Toomaj Salehi, Ebrahim Rigi, Amir Nasr Azadani, Saleh Mirhashemi, Saeed Yaghoubi, Farzad Farzin Tahazadeh, Farhad Tahazadeh, Karvan Shahparvaneh, Reza Eslamdoost, Hajar Hamidi, Shahram Marouf-Moula, Sahand Nourmohammad-Zadeh, Saman Seydi Yasin and Mahan Sadrat Sedarat Madani. I have joined Amnesty International’s campaign by writing, on behalf of the Labour party, to the Iranian ambassador and the head of the Iranian judiciary, calling for an end to the use of the death penalty and for fair trials for all accused of legitimate crimes during these protests.

British-Iranian Alireza Akbari, the former deputy defence Minister of Iran, is also facing execution, on the spurious grounds that he is a spy for Britain. That is purely political and a grave human rights abuse. Mr Akbari’s family have announced that he has been moved to solitary confinement, and that they have been called to see him one last time. Iran must urgently call a halt to

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

his execution, which shows an utter disregard for human life and dignity. I ask the Minister to give an urgent update on Mr Akbari's situation.

Let us remember that the Iranian regime poses a threat on British soil too. The IRGC has demonstrated that it is willing to threaten the lives of journalists working in Britain. When an organisation attacks journalists' right to write whatever they wish and when it is reported by the national security services that it is an imminent, credible threat to life, our Government must take urgent action to protect those whose lives are threatened. We have heard that the Government intend to proscribe the IRGC—I think every Member in this debate has called for that—so I ask the Minister to confirm whether that will happen and, if so, when.

The British Iranian diaspora has bravely mobilised to support the demonstrations. They also face risk, so I ask the Minister what assessment he has made of the threat to the Iranian diaspora, who are speaking up for the rights of their brothers and sisters in Iran. The Iranian regime also has its proxies operating in the UK in the form of Islamic cultural centres with charitable status, which are under the direct influence of Ayatollah Khamenei. These centres have expressed hostility towards the protesters and those supporting them. Organisations that I have met, such as the Voice of Iran, have told me of their deep concern about the role of these centres in undermining the protests in the UK. Can the Minister tell us whether the Government are aware of those complaints and whether they will be carrying out an investigation into the activities of those cultural centres? What measures will the Government take if those running the centres are found to be acting with malice against the Iranian diaspora supporting the protests in Iran?

The final tenet of the motion is about sanctions. We welcome the actions of the Government in sanctioning those closest to the regime who have financial assets in the UK, but this seems to be having no effect on the Iranian regime, which seems intent on using violence and executions as it tries to crush the protests. A co-ordinated international approach to sanctions is needed for sanctions to be fully effective, so I ask the Minister what discussions the Government have had with their international counterparts to ensure that the maximum amount of pressure can be applied through the use of sanctions.

While ordinary Iranians struggle against oppression in their fight for freedom, the sons and daughters of the hard-line clerics and the IRGC, known in Farsi as the “aghazadeh” or the “noble born”, are enjoying the freedoms that we in the UK enjoy and take for granted. I ask the Minister whether the Government will set up a taskforce to identify those who are funded by the regime and take action against them.

The courage and bravery of the protesters in Iran, who are fighting for the freedoms that we in the UK enjoy today, is a beacon of hope against tyranny and oppression. We need to show not only that we are on their side, but that we will take actions against the Iranian regime to stop it killing and torturing its own people, so that one day ordinary Iranian people will be free.

2.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Leo Docherty): Colleagues will know that this portfolio lies with the

noble Lord Ahmad, but, with him being in the other place, I am very pleased to stand at the Dispatch Box today to answer this very important debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this debate, and I will seek to answer his questions. He spoke movingly of the plight and the outrageous murder of Mahsa Amini, which initiated the remarkable protests. He gave us some flavour of the scale and importance of the protests, for which we are very grateful. He asked some very direct and relevant questions about a possible proscription of the IRGC. I will come to that in a moment, and we note the calls of many other Members in that regard.

My hon. Friend spoke at great length and very interestingly about the malign activity across the region of the IRGC and Iran, especially in Lebanon and Syria, and now in Russia, with the supply of the Shahed drones, which are currently destroying Ukrainian infrastructure. He also pointed out that Iran has conducted the second highest number of executions globally after China, which is a sobering fact and reflects the cruel nature of the regime.

I wish to speak about the plight of the individual facing execution. Many Members have spoken about Mr Alireza Akbari and it is right that I seek to update the House. We have no news today. We are in touch with the family. Following the scheduling of his forthcoming execution by the Iranian regime, the Foreign Secretary did release a statement and the noble Lord Ahmad called in the Iranian chargé d'affaires to issue a very strong call for clemency and for the release of Mr Akbari. As I have said, we continue to offer support to the family. We have no news today, and it would be wrong of me to speculate on any future activities, but it is right to say that, through our ambassador in Tehran, we of course continue to make extremely strong calls for his release.

On the issue of proscription, the IRGC is, of course, sanctioned as an organisation and its individual members are sanctioned under our current legislation, but it is not proscribed as a terrorist organisation. It would be wrong of me to speculate from the Dispatch Box about the outcome of the Government's current consideration of this issue, which is active, and it would be wrong of me to pre-empt any formal announcement or judgment by the Government. However, I can say that the calls from right across the House and the unity with which those calls have been made will be noted by the Government. This is something that we regard as extremely serious, and the Government will make the judgment as they see fit.

John Spellar: Many of us have been round this block before with the artificial distinction between the military and non-military wings of Hezbollah. Eventually, the Government had to give way, which was the sensible thing to do. Can the Minister not cut to the chase and follow the United States, which has already proscribed the IRGC, and actually deal with this appalling organisation, which is a threat not only to its own citizens, but to stability in the middle east and in wider north Africa as well?

Leo Docherty: We note the approach of the United States, and that will be taken into consideration when the Government form their view and make an announcement.

Let me turn to the contributions of other colleagues. I was very pleased that the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) spoke eloquently of the plight of women protesters under the banner of “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”. She spoke movingly of her constituent’s cousin. Although I cannot comment on that specific case, I am sure that the noble Lord Ahmad would be very pleased to meet her and her constituent to see what action can be taken. I think the House was moved by her reflections on that young man.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns), the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, illustrated very comprehensively the state-sponsored nature of the brutal misogyny and violence that protesters are suffering. She asked a specific question about the guards at Evin. I cannot comment on possible future sanctions, but, following her remarks, the Department will certainly look at whether any more ground should be covered with regard to specific individuals.

My hon. Friend spoke about a number of cases involving the death penalty. She pointed out that these were cynical uses of the death penalty by the regime and that those who are currently held are effectively political hostages held for political effect. She asked about the utility and the progress of our ambassador in Tehran, Simon Shercliff. There is utility in having him there, because he is able to deliver strong messages into the heart of the regime, and he is doing his best to deliver those messages. She spoke interestingly and expertly about the regional contacts, especially in Iraq and Syria. I can give her an assurance—speaking of the view of her Committee—that our Department believes that, absolutely, the middle east does still matter.

Alicia Kearns: One severe activity in the region that I failed to mention during my speech was the heinous attacks by Iran on the people of Kurdistan within the Kurdistan Regional Government. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, I would be very grateful if the Minister would consider meeting the representative of Kurdistan to discuss this matter. Only a few weeks ago, we saw missiles fly in and murder innocent people. That is severely concerning, given that the Kurds continue to hold in their camps Daesh terrorists who would come and hurt the UK. The Kurds were our foremost allies against that terrorist group at the time and should not now be forgotten.

Leo Docherty: I am sure that the noble Lord Ahmad will give that matter consideration, as this is his portfolio.

The hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) spoke about the plight of prisoners in Evin jail and those under the banner of “Zan, Zendegi, Azadi”. However, I must correct her on one thing: there is absolutely no way that the UK is supplying riot equipment to the state of Iran. There may have been some suggestion—fake or not—that British equipment was used. Perhaps it was pre-1979 or perhaps it was fake, but I can give her an absolute and forthright assurance that we do not supply the Iranian regime with riot equipment or, indeed, any other equipment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd West (Mr Jones) spoke interestingly on Iran’s role as an exporter of terror. He made an eloquent call in support of the people of Iran and a strong argument for proscription, which I note.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) added his support to the voices calling for proscription, for which I am grateful. He also spoke interestingly about the impact of the Iranian supply of drones, with which I certainly agree. Drones were also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord), who helpfully put Iran’s activity into a regional context, expressly with regard to the Gulf. I say to my hon. Friend that we should be proud of our forthright stance in the Gulf, especially when it comes to the excellent activities of our Royal Navy minesweepers operating out of our naval base in Bahrain, which, I am sure, is something everyone in this House would celebrate and thank the Navy for. My hon. Friend also made a strong call for IRGC proscription, which is noted.

The hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) spoke of the bravery of protesters and made some very thoughtful remarks about what leverage we have. She is no longer in her place, but she did ask a relevant question about our leverage. It is the case that—*[Interruption.]* Oh, she is there. The hon. Lady has moved, but she is still present. Hers was a good question. Of course, we have huge leverage. The fact that Iran has a crippled economy and is a pariah state is due to the activities of the regime, and Iran really does feel that. The possibility of it being welcomed back with an expanded economy and normalised relations is indeed huge leverage, so we must be confident in our ability to effect an outcome for the good of the Iranian people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Anna Firth) spoke about refugees in her constituency. She also had some interesting reflections in a cultural context from her aunt in Persia, which showed the difference between pre-1979 conditions and now. She made a strong call for proscription, which is duly noted, as did the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). We were grateful for his reflections on the labour system in Iran.

The hon. Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) called strongly for the release of prisoners and mentioned the appalling and very moving case of the young judo champion, Mehdi Karami. We are grateful to her for putting that on the record, as it illustrates the cruelty being carried out in Iran.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Richard Burdon) reflected on the bravery of the protesters and the scale of the protests, which I thought was an interesting angle, as well as the abhorrent use of the death penalty, as did the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for summarising the sheer determination and bravery of the protesters, with which I agree, and for his description of the lack of religious freedom in Iran. His comments as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief were welcome.

The SNP spokesperson, the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), spoke of some of the heroines of the protest who have suffered appalling treatment and murder at the hands of the regime, which I found moving. I reiterate his remarks that they are not alone. I think this debate serves as an opportunity to reiterate that point.

I was grateful to the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), for joining in the condemnation

[*Leo Docherty*]

of the use of the death penalty in Iran. He movingly read out the names of those facing execution, which was a sobering reality check. He raised an interesting question about the safety of the diaspora. Of course, we take all these issues extremely seriously. We continue to monitor and take seriously the activities of cultural centres and anything else in that regard. With regard to sanctions, we strive to exert maximum pressure on anyone associated with the regime through our sanctions regime.

Dr Huq: Could the Minister shed light on the technicality of us as Members of Parliament sponsoring people on death row in Iran? I am confused about the technicalities—maybe some guidance could be issued to us. I am also happy to write to him on the tear gas point.

Leo Docherty: The Department will write to the hon. Lady on the question of sponsorship and whether or not it is a useful path. I cannot answer that now, I do not know, but we will write.

In conclusion, Iran must abide by the international rules and it must be held to account for its destabilising activity in the region and around the world. The UK will continue to work relentlessly with our international partners to ensure that that happens. We do not know what the political future of Iran looks like; of course, that must be for the people of Iran to decide. However, it is clear that the current leaders have got things very badly wrong. By recklessly blaming everyone but themselves for the anger and unrest, they are destroying their legitimacy—what legitimacy they have left—in the eyes of their own people and the world. We should be clear that there is, of course, a place in the international community for a responsible Iran—one that respects the rights and freedoms of its people. However, for the sake of Iran's prosperity, security and its future standing in the world, we urge the regime to listen to our calls to release its political prisoners and end these outrageous, deeply deplorable and cruel executions.

2.35 pm

Bob Blackman: With the leave of the House, I would like to thank the 13 Back Benchers and three Front Benchers who have contributed to this excellent debate. Often, this House is at its best when it speaks together in a united fashion. It is fair to say that today we have had a very united debate, which has sent a strong signal. We may think that it does not matter, but I can tell Members that this debate has been livestreamed into Iran to the brave resistance there. It will give them courage and add to their determination to overcome this theocratic regime.

While we understand that the Minister cannot respond immediately to the clarion calls made by virtually every Member for the IRGC to be proscribed in its entirety, I trust that this House will pass the motion in my name, which will then be the settled view of the House and send a strong message to the Government to carry out that work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) raised the Iranian diplomat who was rightly imprisoned for his part in the terror plot to attack us in 2018. There is a suggestion that the Belgian authorities are being leaned on for a prisoner exchange that would return him to Iran. I would like us to send a strong message to the brave people of Belgium not to allow that diplomat to be returned because, if he is returned, it will be as a hero and we cannot have that.

Finally, our thoughts and prayers must go to all those on death row in Iran—for their release, for them to no longer be held in detention and for them not to be executed. We have no argument with the people of Iran. Our argument is against the regime, which must step back and allow freedom and democracy to flourish.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House condemns unreservedly the actions of the Government of Iran in suppressing protests in that country; deplores the violent behaviour of Iranian police in regard to those protests; is deeply concerned by reports of threats made to organisations in the UK which support the rights of protesters in Iran; urges His Majesty's Government to include Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps on the list of proscribed terrorist organisations; and calls upon His Majesty's Government to work with international counterparts to ensure that further sanctions are placed on Iran without delay.

Landfill Tax Fraud

2.37 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of landfill tax fraud.

I want to say how pleased I am that the Backbench Business Committee agreed to this debate and thank hon. Members from across the House for their support in securing it.

After I secured the debate, a journalist asked me, “What’s landfill tax fraud?” I said, “Yes, I do accept it’s quite a niche subject.” It might be seen as an anorak subject, but it is something that I have been involved with, along with the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), for nearly 10 years now. I think he would agree that we are both proud anorak wearers when it comes to this matter, because it is a serious issue for the UK.

I have dug into the issue. There are solutions to it, but blind eyes have been turned by various Government agencies. There is no political will to really grasp the issue and the devastating effect it is having on our revenue collection, but also in various communities.

Have we made progress? Slightly, but there have been missed opportunities over the years. The right hon. Gentleman, who has been involved in this for as long as I have, and I cannot understand why the problem has not been grasped when there are clear solutions, some provided by the industry and some by me, the right hon. Gentleman and other Members.

Landfill tax was introduced in 1996, with the quite honourable aim of reducing the amount of domestic and other waste going into landfill and of pushing recycling—no one could disagree with that. It could be argued that it has worked in reducing the amount of waste going to landfill, but its effectiveness is questionable, because we do not know what is going into landfill.

The industry is worth some £9 billion a year—not a small part of our economy. Like anything generating large amounts of revenue, it attracts criminals and others who want to exploit the system. I suggest that the way in which the Government have dealt with this area, with a lack of regulation and oversight, has allowed criminals and others to benefit. As the Public Accounts Committee report recently said, waste crime in this country has basically been decriminalised because of the lack of action.

People may ask, “Why is this important?” Well, there is a cost to the public purse through uncollected tax revenue that could support all the things that our constituents want. However, it also funds serious and organised crime gangs, which undercut the legitimate businesses that pay their taxes and follow the regulations. The other factor is the future environmental cost. We do not know what is being disposed of at some sites, so there will be a cost relating to their future degradation, with some requiring remediation. Who will pick up that cost? It will be the taxpayer.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate, because such problems also affect Northern Ireland. I am ever mindful of what he is saying, and I think others will reinforce his points, so is it his intention to ask the

Minister to look at legislative change to ensure that the criminal gangs who break the law face punitive fines and imprisonment at a level commensurate with the activity? In other words, do the punishments need to be increased?

Mr Jones: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for this intervention. The frustration is that we do not need new legislation; we just need Government action to fund and implement the existing powers.

My next point, which will also affect the hon. Gentleman’s part of the United Kingdom, is about the effect on local communities. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden will mention specific examples from their constituencies of where local communities feel powerless to stop the huge environmental damage being done to the area. However, this is not down to any lack of trying by those right hon. and hon. Members, who have campaigned for change for many years.

The PAC report estimates that the cost of landfill tax fraud and waste crime is about £1 billion a year. However, that figure is just like me sticking my finger in the air, because basically no one knows. That is a conservative estimate, and the reason for that, as the report says, is that we have basically given up trying to monitor what is happening.

How does landfill tax fraud work in practice? There are strands to it. The first is the way in which the tax was implemented. There are two rates, and those rates went up between 2008 and 2014. The rate for inert or inactive waste is currently £3.15 a tonne, and the standard for ordinary waste is £98.60 a tonne. The first element of criminality involves saying that waste is inert when it is not. There is no monitoring at all, so people are instantly making a fortune by avoiding taxation. The incentive for misdescription of waste is the huge gap between the two rates. The Environment Agency does not really enforce this, and I am sure that boreholes would reveal that inert-waste only sites will contain other waste. The problem is that we do not know what is in such sites, which is a future environmental problem.

The second strand is illegal sites without a licence, for which there are no real sanctions. People can buy a field or an old quarry and keep filling it, and they do not pay any landfill tax.

The next method is far more sophisticated, whereby criminal elements buy or set themselves up as legitimate waste operators. Is that easy? It is, because there are no restrictions on who can become a waste operator. If someone buys an existing business or a quarry, they can label it and say they are going to collect waste, but who is checking? People can run two scams. They can declare active waste as inert, and they can just declare half of what they are putting in.

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. He is absolutely right that someone with no qualifications can set up or, indeed, take over a site, and there will be no checks as to whether they are fit and proper. They could have a criminal record within the waste sector itself, as was the case at Walleys Quarry in my constituency. The Environment Agency appears powerless to do anything to stop such people operating landfills.

Mr Jones: Yes, and I will come on to such an example in a minute. We only have to look at a company's directors to question the situation, and I know that the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden is aware of such individuals. It would not take a great Google search, or an officer could have a look on the police computer to discover that these people have no interest in waste crime until they understand how lucrative it is.

Waste crime has become a very profitable business. The PAC report of last April, which came off the back of pressure from me, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and others, outlines that of the 60 main organised crime groups in landfill tax fraud, 70% are involved in money laundering and 63% in other illegal activities. Waste crime is a way of washing or hiding drugs money, for example, and generating huge sums of cash—it is a licence to print money if people are not declaring what is going into a site.

People may ask, “Surely someone has noticed this?” People have been screaming about it for years. Are the police on it? Is His Majesty's Revenue and Customs on it? Is the Environment Agency on it? They are not. I offer the House one simple fact: how many successful prosecutions for landfill tax fraud have there been since 1996? Not one.

The example I now come on to is the interestingly named Operation Nosedive—I would love to know why they named it that. Operation Nosedive was focused on the activities of a company called Niramax in Hartlepool in the north-east of England. At least, it operated in the north-east, but also elsewhere, as I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will allude to later on.

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs instigated Operation Nosedive to look into illegal tax fraud. I have been told by individuals in the north-east about this company and what it did. It was set up, bought into the waste management business, had various sites around the north-east and other parts of the country, and I think it was running both scams: not only was it running the inert and active waste scam, but there is a question as to how much landfill tax was actually being paid on stuff it was dumping.

Someone explained it to me this way: looking at what Niramax was charging companies for taking away their waste. There is no way it could have charged that rate if it was paying the full landfill tax charge. Likewise, how could it be economically viable to transport waste from a council in south Wales to the north-east? It was quite a big operation, and certain local companies went out of business because they were being undercut by Niramax.

Three regional police forces, Durham, Cleveland and Northumbria, had contracts with Niramax, which shows how big the business got. If anyone had looked at the directors of the company and seen their backgrounds, I would have thought it would have rung a few alarm bells with those three police authorities and made them ask why on earth they were giving a contract to that company.

After a few years of badgering, HMRC took action and Nosedive was launched, with a great deal of publicity, in 2014 with a raid of Niramax's headquarters in Hartlepool. £250,000 in cash was found under somebody's desk and a lot of documents were taken. To quote the *Teesside Live* newspaper at the time:

“Simon York, Fraud Investigation Service director at HMRC, said: ‘This is the culmination of 18 months’ painstaking investigation into the suspected systematic abuse of the landfill tax system. We believe that over £78m revenue may be involved, money which could be used to fund some of the UK's most vital public services.’”

That is £78 million for one operator. I thought, “Great!” when that happened, and so did people I know in the industry, but six years down the line a journalist rang me and said, “Do you know they've actually dropped the Operation Nosedive prosecution?”. Nothing happened, but HMRC spent £3.5 million of public money on the investigation.

I tried to find out how much that investigation cost; I know my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon tried too, but HMRC would not tell us. We only found out because the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden and I got the National Audit Office to do an investigation into it. There is a fundamental question of accountability here. Before the Minister tells me that we cannot have control over HMRC, I agree with him, but there is a lack of accountability in this situation if I or Parliament cannot ask why public money is being spent in that way.

Operation Nosedive was a complete failure and Niramax got away with the fraud—and that £78 million is just one organisation. The other point is that Niramax was not the only operator using that landfill site or the other sites it owned. Other operators were using them too, which raises the question who else was in on the scam and who else was not paying full landfill tax, because I suspect others were at it as well.

The strange thing is that one of the main directors of Niramax is currently in prison—it has nothing to do with this situation, but rather with a very nasty murder case in Hartlepool. Were people surprised when he was found to have been involved in that situation or found guilty? No, they were not, but why are people with criminal records allowed to run those industries? Because they are making money. That is just one case.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am finding my right hon. Friend's speech very educational. Does he share my concern about the prevalence of modern slavery and trafficking in this sector? I think in 2018 it was found that two thirds of modern slavery victims ended up in the waste sector at some point during their period of exploitation. That is part of the model he is talking about, whereby cowboy or even criminal elements are running the business, cutting costs at every corner and not caring about the cost of human life while they do so.

Mr Jones: I am not suggesting that happened in the Niramax case, but my hon. Friend is right that the individuals involved in these businesses are involved in everything from drugs to prostitution and, no doubt, modern slavery practices. That is why I cannot get my head around the fact that the Government, whether individual Departments or as a whole, just turn a blind eye to this problem, when it is causing so much damage.

There are now promises that the new joint unit for waste crime that has been set up will look at those things, but I ask the question again: it has been up and running for three years now, and has it prosecuted anybody yet? No, it has not. There is a sense of frustration at Nosedive and at the fact that HMRC does not seem

to think these crimes are important. I hate to think how many billions—and it is billions—of taxpayers' money has been lost over the years because of this process.

HMRC does not seem to be bothered. I remember when I first contacted HMRC about this situation, and they said, "If it's not worth more than £20 million a year, we're not really bothered." Well, it reckons Nosedive was worth £78 million, and when I asked in a parliamentary question whether the individual quoted was giving his private estimate or HMRC's, I got no answer, because HMRC hides behind a wall of secrecy. There is a serious issue with holding these organisations to account.

The other side to this issue is the environmental cost. We have lost revenue, we have funded organised crime and modern slavery and other things, but there will also be a cost to the environmental clean-up, and I am sure the three other Members who want to speak in this debate will highlight cases in their constituency. Not only will this activity be harmful for those various sites, but the cost will fall on the taxpayer.

My other point is about what communities can do when they have an illegal landfill site or someone who is operating a so-called legal site but is completely ignoring the regulations. It is very frustrating; people feel powerless, and I am sure we will have some good examples of that later in the debate. I know the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme has some good examples of where, even as a parliamentarian, he feels powerless when raising these issues. If he feels powerless, certainly his constituents do too, living next door to piles of rotting waste and quite rightly worrying about the environmental effect that will have on their community. I think that the PAC has done fantastic work to highlight the lack of regulation. The main thing is whether that has got any better since I have been involved, and I would argue that it has got worse. There are a lot of good and sound words, but there is not a great deal of action.

One issue is enforcement. The Environment Agency—another arm's length quango—does not have the enforcement culture that it needs. It mainly issues guidance notes or warning letters. Frankly, giving guidance notes and sending warning letters to the types of people we are dealing with is a complete waste of time. I mentioned the joint unit for waste crime, which I have met. To their credit, the individuals in that unit are well meaning—they certainly come from an enforcement scope—but unless we see prosecutions taking down some of the big operators soon, this will just carry on. I am quite sceptical, frankly, about whether there is a will, certainly in HMRC, to grasp this. The Environment Agency has had its budget cut, and I accept that it does not have an enforcement culture—one of my hon. Friends refers to that agency as "newt lovers", which they possibly are—but we need a certain culture to tackle what is a bigger problem.

I come back to a point that I cannot get my head around. We need a political lead from the Government to grasp the matter and ensure that the regulations are enforced and targets operated on. I, the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden met the National Crime Agency a few months ago to talk about that, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) said, the money generated from such activity goes into a host of things that cost our society dearly.

The new joint unit for waste crime is a step in the right direction, but unless it starts delivering, a lot of us will be sceptical. The Minister needs to grasp this through HMRC, and there needs to be a politically led focus in Government, with someone who can say, "Right, where are you up to with this? What are you doing? What is needed?" Personally—others may think differently—I do not think we need more legislation. What we need is enforcement of the existing legislation, not just to ensure proper waste management to prevent environmental devastation, but to support the existing waste management industry, which is playing by the rules. That is an important point.

I raise this in the debate, as I am sure other hon. Members will, in the hope that someone will grasp the matter and take it forward. If they do not, we hon. Members present will not go away.

3.1 pm

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): As we have come to expect, the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) made a wise, insightful and pretty comprehensive speech. He is right to say that we have both struggled, over more than a decade, to get the Government and their agencies to take this issue seriously. He has covered ground thoroughly, but let me see if I can reinforce his points without too much repetition.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke of the Public Accounts Committee's estimate of the near billion-pound cost to the Exchequer each year—he quite rightly referred to it as a finger-in-the-ear exercise. I have been a PAC Chairman, and I know how that sometimes happens. That is an under-estimate. We have signals all over the place of how big this really is. Last weekend's *Sunday Express* said that £200 million in landfill tax had gone uncollected in 2019-20 alone—that is, again, an under-estimate, even in HMRC's own figures.

The right hon. Gentleman said pretty plainly—and I agree—that HMRC does not want to big up this issue and make a big thing out of it, but it admits that at least £850 million has not been collected in five years. It has gone straight into the pockets of some of our most dangerous criminals. If £1 billion was not collected from, let us say, the bankers, legal people or some other such group, there would be uproar. But here, it is not being collected from criminals, and the matter just goes by.

The right hon. Gentleman made the point about the money being funnelled into criminal enterprises, and he was quite measured in his language. He referred to the type of criminals we are talking about—the Niramax directors and associate directors, one of whom, as he said, was jailed for 15 years for manslaughter. Frankly, I was quite surprised that the charge was not murder, because it was a man behaving in a random way over a personal argument and deciding to kill the other person who was involved. That is the sort of character we are talking about. An associate director went to prison first for a machete attack and then later on for drugs. That reinforces the point that the right hon. Gentleman made about drugs, prostitution and all the nasty underbelly of society—all the nasty criminal activity—being funded and supported by the problem we are talking about. We need to bear in mind more generally when we discuss waste crime that these are not just small-time wheelers and dealers. They are not the Harold Steptoes of today; they are very big wheels, in criminal terms, and very nasty people indeed.

[Mr David Davis]

Waste crime has blighted many of our constituencies—it has certainly blighted Haltemprice and Howden—for many years. That is where the concern first came from in my case, as I think it did in most others. Some time ago, in the middle of battles over the Gilberdyke site in my constituency, one of the sites that Niramax has an interest in, someone from south-west England involved in legitimate waste disposal asked to see me. Since it was such a big and recurrent issue, I said, “Yes, okay, come to see me.” He came to my home and, in essence, told me that the north-east of England was rife with waste crime and was known for it. That was what he argued to me. He did not know whether it was an accident of history or whether it was because the Environment Agency was somehow corrupt or involved, or for whatever reason not doing its job.

That was five years or more ago. To be frank, the story was so extraordinary that I thought it was an exaggeration. I am sorry to say that I was wrong. That person was describing pretty accurately what we have discovered in our joint endeavours over time. For too long, the Environment Agency has not been meeting its legal and community obligations, and HMRC has not been enforcing its. I must be clear that not all operators in the waste industry are criminal enterprises—that is anything but the case—but the clear inaction of our agencies has emboldened the dangerous individuals that do run such criminal enterprises.

Mr Kevan Jones: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman that not all operators involved in the sector are criminals, but there is evidence that in some cases—that of Niramax and others—contracts were procured by using threats and intimidation after people had signed up to contracts to freeze out legitimate operators and lock in people who were perpetrating waste crime.

Mr David Davis: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and I will come back to the incentives—both criminal and legal—that are built in against legal operators.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about the powerlessness of communities. Again, I can exemplify that point. We thought we had scored a victory by taking the Niramax associate Transwaste to court over the Gilberdyke site and winning our case that it had breached a whole load of conditions. We won the case, but did my constituents see any improvements? No. Were the problems addressed in court fixed or enforced by the agencies? No. Did the behaviour of the operators improve? No. The courts proved powerless and so the community certainly felt powerless, again because there was no proper enforcement. That goes back to the point that the right hon. Gentleman made in response to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) that this is not primarily about changing the regulations or the law, but about changing the mode of operation of the agencies involved.

Precisely because they cheat and evade payment of landfill tax, criminal companies can undercut other businesses, picking up waste and charging a pittance for it, knowing they will make up for it in illegal returns. In the case of Gilberdyke, locals reported that lorries were flooding the area from Wembley, south Wales, south-west Scotland and Manchester. It is expensive to transport this stuff. Why would it be transported that far unless

there were some enormous unfair—not to mention illegal—advantage for the operators? That is what is going on there.

Some of my constituents who are very qualified people monitored that site and estimated that between £50 million and £60 million in landfill tax was being evaded while those lorries were flooding the area. That is at one site alone. This activity involves the destruction of my constituents’ quality of life and the destruction of the local environment, all in pursuit of illegal profits, yet so little action is being taken.

The right hon. Member for North Durham quoted the Public Accounts Committee saying about the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in October last year that

“the approach to large parts of waste crime is closer to decriminalisation.”

I make the point, as a past Chairman of the PAC, that the PAC is careful about what it says about Government operations. It is careful that it is factually based, and it bases everything on the National Audit Office reports and so on. For the PAC to accuse an agency or Department of effectively decriminalising something as serious as this is in itself an enormously powerful and worrying statement. That quote will strike a chord with those of us who have had to observe the appalling weak record of enforcement of the Environment Agency, even with legal operators, frankly. We are not talking about legal operators today, but even with legal operators, the Environment Agency is weak, let alone those who need to be cracked down on. That fact, again, is reinforced by the data. The number of prosecutions for waste crime generally—not tax evasion, but waste crime generally—have fallen by more than 90% since 2007-08. As the right hon. Gentleman said, there have been no prosecutions whatever for landfill tax fraud.

With Operation Nosedive—like the right hon. Gentleman, I wondered about the name, where it came from, and whether it was making a prediction about its own success—I have to say that its failure was written in from the beginning. It was a failure from the start. HMRC, the Environment Agency and the Crown Prosecution Service were simply not working together properly to investigate and prosecute the gangsters. They simply were not doing the job as a coherent group of people. The NAO told me that HMRC and the CPS admitted as much, and that is why no prosecutions were taken forward. The problem is that this failure and the ongoing increases in the rate of landfill tax mean that illegal profits are only increasing. Given how landfill tax is structured, if evasion is not stopped, then every time landfill tax goes up to improve the environment, the criminal is actually incentivised more by a bigger comparative advantage against the legitimate operators.

Aaron Bell: The story of Niramax seems to foreshadow much of my experience in Newcastle. The Minister will appreciate, as an economist, that Gresham’s law says that bad money drives out good, and is that not exactly what is happening in the waste sector? Legitimate firms are being driven out of the sector, with the result that more and more criminals are acting in the sector, making it harder for people to dispose of their waste legitimately, even if they want to.

Mr Davis: That is absolutely correct. I am sure Gresham did not have in mind blackmail and threats as well, which also come into it when the operation becomes

criminal rather than legal. The joint failure of HMRC and the Environment Agency led to theft from the public purse—it is as simple as that—the devastation of public spaces, and the undermining of public confidence in this whole policy area. Ostensibly, the issue is that HMRC is focused on the collection of tax, while the Environment Agency is following a remit to manage waste. That is the excuse given, if you like. Frankly, it is extraordinary that the Environment Agency would not collect data on a tax designed to incentivise good waste operation. That is its purpose, so why on earth is the Environment Agency not monitoring that carefully? If it is not working, it is a failure of its own remit.

Kerry McCarthy: I am finding what the right hon. Gentleman has to say very interesting. In the past, I have asked questions about the Environment Agency's role. It is meant to have a role in enforcing the waste hierarchy, in which things going to landfill should be at the bottom. The Environment Agency should be incentivising recycling, reuse or not creating waste in the first place. Does he agree that we need a fundamental overhaul so that the Environment Agency is properly resourced and there are incentives and disincentives so that the waste hierarchy is properly observed?

Mr Davis: I agree with the aims the hon. Lady describes, but I am not sure whether this is a resource issue for the Environment Agency—I think there is a resource issue in other areas. If the Environment Agency does its job right first time, that is it dealt with. To bring it down to the microcosm of a single waste tip, if it does not enforce the first, second or third complaint, it will have hundreds and thousands of complaints, and its time will be sucked into dealing with them. To some extent there may be a resource issue, but a bigger issue is, straightforwardly, to do with management and the determination to make the industry obey the rules and to spot such things as tax evasion. If tax evasion takes place, the whole structure she describes disappears. The cheap operator who is not paying taxes gets all the business, and therefore nothing is pushed to a better waste outcome. I take her point, but in many ways management is more important.

Mr Kevan Jones: On that point, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the big disconnect is between the policy that everyone wants to support—more recycling—and not only how it is enforced but how it is monitored? The best example is Scotland's zero waste strategy. It sounds great, but waste is being shipped across the border to the north-east of England and other sites in the UK, and there is no monitoring of that. Exporting waste from Scotland to landfill sites in the rest of the UK will not meet the environmental standards that the policy aims to achieve.

Mr Davis: I agree. Exporting from Scotland to England will not help at all, so the right hon. Gentleman is exactly right.

We have a ridiculous co-ordination problem in the midst of all this. The NAO told me that Operation Nosedive failed for a variety of reasons, but ultimately it was felt that defence lawyers for the criminals would be able to exploit all the weaknesses of co-ordination and data in the system. Frankly, it is galling that criminal charges could have been held back by the bureaucracy

and box-ticking approach of Government Departments effectively, which were stepping on each other's toes rather than working together.

Waste crime and landfill tax fraud are cheating the taxpayer out of hundreds of millions of pounds a year, and it is time we got serious about that. Thanks to the NAO, we know that every single year, waste crime in general costs £900 million—the PAC said £1 billion—which is a very, very large number. We should not lose track of the fact that that is an annual cost. And that is without, as it turns out, the costs in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We do not have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in his place to raise a point about Northern Ireland, but there are costs there, too. In the current climate, I can only imagine the uproar if that occurred in any other situation.

The right hon. Member for North Durham touched on the importance of HMRC's joint unit for waste crime. The Government would like to claim it has been a success—indeed, after the first year they said it was a success—but I have to tell Members that I cannot see a single sign of success. It is shameful, frankly. This is where I agree with the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) that this is a resource issue. We absolutely need to ensure that, unlike at HMRC before, there is the right legal advice at every stage, the right data at every stage and the right investigative capability at every stage, so that, rather than saving £10,000 here and £10,000 there only to lose £3.5 million on a failed case or £1 billion a year on the system as it is, we actually deal with the issue. The current strategy is penny wise and pound foolish, and in that respect she and I agree.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the same principle applies—on a much smaller scale, admittedly—to local authorities, which are often inundated with nuisance fly-tipping? I realise that that is on a different scale to the issues he is describing, but it can nevertheless be very distressing for residents and small businesses across many parts of England.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is right. There is almost a generic problem with local authorities. They very often face problems that look intimidatingly large to them, and the temptation always is to penny-pinch—to spend just a little money to see if they can stop it. They fail, and the problem invariably grows. We see that time and again, particularly in this area. This is a separate issue really, but concerns about fly-tipping among the public are as great as they are about waste crime in general. The hon. Gentleman is dead right. My advice to local authorities is always to try and nip it in the bud, because if they are seen as a weak responder, the crime will come to them. That is what will happen.

Matt Rodda: I was not seeking to be overly critical of local authorities. I was trying to illustrate the wider point about the Government's funding of them and some of their powers. We have had an issue with waste on many plots of land in the areas that I represent. Some of that is deposited by people just passing through. The powers seem to be a real challenge for local authorities. Perhaps he will say something about that.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is reaching beyond my level of expertise, frankly. My view is that this clearly is a systemic problem. There is either a funding shortage or a power or capability shortage. One or the other needs to be corrected, because the current system is not working. Anyone who lives in a rural area will see that we are dealing with a permanent nightmare—a running sore. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about its being systemic.

To come back to the waste crime issue, there is not just lack of funding or joined-up Government, but a lack of understanding of the problem. The NAO found that DEFRA and the Environment Agency are simply not collecting the data. They need to fully realise the extent of waste crime across the board. The NAO said:

“the waste crime data they currently collect do not give an accurate picture of actual incidence of waste crime because of under-reporting”.

That comes back to the finger-in-the-air guess of £1 billion. It is obviously bigger than that because the issues are being undermeasured. I cannot see how our agencies can get a grip of the problem if they do not even measure the size of it.

When I told one of my constituents about this debate, he told me how little faith he has in the Environment Agency. Frankly, I share his concerns. Before I came into the Chamber, I was sitting outside talking to colleagues. Four colleagues in a row said, “Yes, we have the same problem.” They are not here now, as they are off back to their constituencies, but they all have the same systemic problem that comes back time and again.

For too long, waste crime has gone unnoticed by Environment Agency officers. That begs the question, what is going on? Are they indolent? Are they incompetent? Are they involved? Are they being bribed? No. The simple truth is that they do not have the tools they need to do the job. We have created a system where our agencies are prevented from acting for fear of that action making the problem worse. If they want to take action on a company, they are terrified that they will bankrupt it and suddenly the taxpayer will be left funding the clean-up. There will either not be a clean-up or they will have to find millions upon millions of pounds. None of that needs to happen.

In summary, what we need is for the warrants, or the reserves required on the balance sheets of new waste operators, to be big enough to cover the cost of a clean-up in the event that they go bankrupt. Whether that is an insurance system, a reserve system or a warranty system, I do not know, but it has to be something like 10 times as big as what we currently have. The new joint waste crime unit needs dedicated funding from central Government of sufficient size.

We have a perfect environment. We have had the failure of Nosedive. We can see all the points of failure: unusually for HMRC, they are identified in the public domain, so we can design what is required for the joint unit. We need the Environment Agency to get out on the ground and collect the data it needs to help HMRC prosecute these gangsters. We need to ensure that they all get proper legal advice. One of the reasons Nosedive failed was that, if I remember correctly, three different lawyers were given to them by the Crown Prosecution Service over time. Eventually, when they hired a private lawyer, they got proper advice and decided they could not pursue it. That is saving tens of thousands to lose

£3.5 million and to lose billions—it is penny wise and pound foolish. If the Government think this costs too much, they should just think of the consequences of failure.

I appreciate that the Minister will not be able to give instant answers today, but I ask him to go back to his Department and simply ask, why not? The right hon. Member for North Durham and I have proposed a variety of measures that will pay for themselves 1,000 times over, so why not take the action necessary? Why not save the taxpayer money and, most importantly of all, save our constituents from the disasters these people visit on us?

3.25 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprece and Howden (Mr Davis) on securing the debate and on their commitment to exposing this issue over the last decade.

Let us start by stating the obvious: living near a landfill site is not pleasant. In fact, it is very unpleasant, and no one wants to do it. Our ultimate aim through the waste hierarchy must be to ensure that we do away with landfill sites, but the mismanagement of existing landfill sites is an issue that has affected my constituents a great deal over many years.

In 2019, I secured an Adjournment debate to raise the issue of the Blaydon Quarry landfill site, which was then located in the village of Greenside and surrounded by the communities of Winlaton, Barlow, Stargate, Ryton and Blaydon Burn. The site was, thankfully, closed to waste deposits in September 2021, but not before these proud former mining communities had endured years of foul odours, and litter and dust from the site scattered over our fields and trees. It would be a challenge to overstate the sheer amount of correspondence that I and my predecessor received about the site and the persistent upset caused to communities who were unable to enjoy and take pride in the beautiful environment surrounding the site.

Before the site's closure, multiple enforcement notices concerning management of the site had been given, following repeated breaches of regulations on planning and environmental grounds. A particularly nasty breach in 2015 involved a huge escape of litter from the site during a period of high winds, which amounted to nothing less than environmental vandalism. Despite the scale of the devastation, the Environment Agency legal team told us that it would not be possible to make a prosecution, and we saw that pattern several times over the years. I can only thank the Environment Agency officers who worked on the site in my constituency for the great efforts they made, pushed continually by the community and by ourselves, but there were still no prosecutions.

The site has had a number of operators, all with different problems. The most recent was Octagon Green Solutions; previously it was Niramax, and before that it was Premier Waste.

In 2015, there was huge coverage in our local newspapers and broadcast media of the HMRC-instigated co-ordinated raids on a number of sites across the north-east, including the Blaydon landfill site, as part of the ill-fated Operation Nosedive. The raid involved 180 HMRC officers and many others, and it was widely publicised—trumpeted,

even—across the region, with HMRC estimating an alleged fraud of £78 million. I reviewed some of the media reporting on it as I prepared for this debate. Everyone was there in full gear, and there were photos from the site and television reports, all because of HMRC trumpeting this great investigation. Although different from the environmental issues, it was welcomed by people in the community, who were fed up with the operation of these sites.

Given the damage that these companies inflicted on our local communities, my constituents took great interest in Operation Nosedive and did not forget about it over the years. They took great interest in the alleged potential landfill tax fraud, and they continued to write to me throughout the period to inquire about the outcome of the investigation, until HMRC quietly—very quietly—slipped out the news that Operation Nosedive had not resulted in any prosecutions after six and a half years and what we now know was £3.5 million of public costs.

These families invested faith in HMRC to bring about justice. Having worked fastidiously with our local landfill liaison committee, Gateshead Council and the Environment Agency to hold the companies to account on waste management issues, we hoped that HMRC's lengthy criminal investigation would deliver on the issue of alleged financial crime, if it was found. But we have heard that six and a half years produced nothing, at a huge cost.

When HMRC revealed that no prosecutions would be brought after that time, I wrote to the chief executive—twice—asking for an explanation. I was told that this could not be given and nor would there be any clarification on whether civil action would be taken. I wrote first in April 2021 and the response was:

“Unfortunately, I am...unable to provide details of the costs incurred in this specific operation as HMRC does not report the costs of individual cases.”

I wrote back on that and a number of other issues about the failed action, and again the response was:

“As per my response dated 30 April 2021, I am unable to provide details of the costs incurred in this specific operation as HMRC does not report the costs of individual cases.

I hope this helps you to respond to your constituent's enquiries and explain why we are unable to provide more details.”

Well, frankly, no, it did not—it did not help me at all.

So I really congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden on proceeding with their efforts to get this issue investigated and to reveal the true costs. This is public money—it is taxpayers' money—and people are entitled to know what has happened to it and why this six-and-a-half-year operation has failed. I think we are now clearer, as we have heard about what happened with the lack of co-ordination and the lack of joint work, but, frankly, it just is not good enough for my constituents.

I am pleased that the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have looked at this and reported on the financial aspect of Operation Nosedive, but it remains absolutely vital that the Government take decisive action to address the issues it raises. We have to take the necessary steps to tackle the ongoing abuse of the landfill tax system—and other waste crime—which is estimated by the Environmental Services Association to have cost the taxpayer about £120 million in 2021.

Mr Kevan Jones: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has been pursuing this for many years and we have had lots of discussion as parliamentary neighbours. Would she say that her communities are worried about the future? Although the site she refers to—I know it well—is now closed and possibly the initial blowing of rubbish and so on has stopped, because we do not actually know what is in that site, there could be a ticking timebomb of environmental damage. Ultimately, if it has to get cleaned up, it will come back to the taxpayer to do it.

Liz Twist: I most certainly agree with my right hon. Friend. Of course, we have had a history of such sites in previous years; we have no idea what is in them. It is vital that we do know what is in those sites, and it is vital that efforts are made and action is taken to ensure that landfill operators behave responsibly. I hesitated before saying “responsibly”: they need to behave in accordance with the law, treat waste properly and respect the local communities and our environment.

As I was saying, I am pleased that the Public Accounts Committee published its report on waste crime in October 2022. In their response, the Government acknowledged the slow progress on the wider issues of waste crime. I believe we are now awaiting the outcome of the landfill tax call for evidence, which we have not yet seen.

Of particular concern are reports of serious and organised crime in the waste sector. The establishment of the Joint Unit for Waste Crime in 2020 suggests progress on that issue, and we have heard reassurances that the unit will promote co-ordination between HMRC, the Environment Agency and other bodies. I am glad that Members have been able to speak to and meet that body. I will certainly be keeping an eye on its progress. That is a positive move. That co-ordination would go some way to remedy the difficulties in discharging responsibilities between different bodies that have been held responsible for the failure of Operation Nosedive.

However, the National Audit Office reported in April 2022 that the unit does not receive any dedicated funding from Government, and that the Environment Agency's previously ring-fenced funding for waste crime will be incorporated into its core funding from 2022-23. Furthermore, the report highlights the need for improved data on waste crime, as we have heard, so that resources can be targeted more effectively and progress more accurately assessed. It is vital that resources are available to make that co-ordinating work effective and to protect communities.

If we are to learn lessons from the failure of Operation Nosedive—I cannot imagine who thought up that name, which in itself has caused a lot of issues—and make a difference, the Government must establish a more stable footing for the investigations. Our environment is precious to local communities and waste management is a vital part of its preservation. It must not be placed in the hands of criminals or fraudsters. It must be managed to the highest standards.

3.36 pm

Aaron Bell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), whose constituents experienced many of the same problems mine have, albeit a few years before, and to follow two excellent contributions from my right

[Aaron Bell]

hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) and the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). I was pleased to go with them to the National Crime Agency last year to try to get these issues taken more seriously. I pay tribute to all the work the three Members who have spoken today have done over the years, before I was a Member of this place, to try to get this issue taken more seriously.

It is a serious issue. It is not just the cost to the public purse—that has been spoken about many times already—but the cost to our constituents, and to their lives and physical and mental health. That is what people in Newcastle-under-Lyme have been suffering, as I have repeatedly brought to the House's attention over many years.

The failure of the investigations and of the ill-named Operation Nosedive only emboldens the people in this space. The firm that operates Walleys Quarry, Red Industries Ltd, had a failed prosecution against them, regarding a separate site of theirs, by the Environment Agency over an incident in which cyanide leaked into the River Trent in October 2009. After many years, the Environment Agency conceded the flaws in its case, which were probably caused by insufficiently advanced legal advice, to which the right hon. Member for North Durham referred. That only emboldened the firm—we can see that if we look at the press releases crowing over the failure of the EA's prosecution—to think that it can get away with things and that it will not be held to account by those who should hold it to account.

We need to learn all the lessons of Operation Nosedive, the incident in the Trent, and all the other occasions where we have failed to prosecute landfill tax fraud, or other forms of waste crime. The fact that there has never been a successful conviction for landfill tax fraud is astounding when we consider the depth of criminality that we have exposed in the waste industry. I exposed some of it in the Westminster Hall debate that I led on 1 February last year—the right hon. Member for North Durham and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden both spoke in that debate and referred to it in their speeches.

Perhaps I can briefly update the House on where we are with Walleys Quarry, because it is germane to the debate—I will not repeat the full history, Mr Deputy Speaker, having already secured Adjournment debates, multiple Westminster Hall debates, a ten-minute rule Bill and all the rest of it. What my right hon. Friend said about the Environment Agency's fear that action might make the problem worse is well founded. It did monitor and said, "Nothing to see here." It was reluctant to do further monitoring until eventually it was forced into it by a combination of me and the council leader, Simon Tagg. Once it conceded there was a problem, the idea that we might take the permit away from these people, who continually fail, was barely even discussed, because it wanted to ensure that the company managed the site. I understand that as a strategy, but it sticks in the craw of all the local residents, who can see what is happening. They can see the trucks coming from hundreds of miles away—from Scotland and the Lake district—to bring waste to Walleys Quarry. They are monitoring trucks going in at the wrong times of the day, dumping before they are supposed to. There are so

many little breaches along the way that stick in the craw of people. They know that the site is under investigation, yet the company is continuing to make money from its operations. I know how painful that is for my constituents, who have suffered with living with the odour. Walleys Quarry is particularly notorious for its odour. We have had by far the single worst odour problem in recorded history—I believe that the previous record belonged to a site in Chorley, Mr Speaker's constituency. Our site has broken all records. We have had four Environment Agency monitoring stations ringed around the site for the last couple of years.

I am pleased to report that the odour is diminishing. That is because of the work that the Environment Agency has compelled the operator to do. As far as it goes, that strategy is fine. However, the second part of the strategy needs to be to throw the book at the operator. It has been issued with multiple breaches in the last few years, all of which have required it to do work and said, "We reserve the right to take further punishment action later." We are waiting for that punishment action to happen.

In fact, in Newcastle-under-Lyme, we have two investigations going on into Walleys Quarry. There is the criminal investigation, which was announced in December 2021. I understand that that will take a long time because it is complex and many counterparties are involved. It is all about misdescription of waste, which is a much wider problem and investigation for the EA. There is also the regulatory investigation announced in September, which I raised with the Secretary of State at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions shortly before Christmas. We need to get some results on that more quickly because regulation should be the EA's bread and butter. It needs to start holding the company to account for the failures.

The odour problem has been getting better. We are catching more than twice as much gas as we were—we have the figures—and the EA has mandated capping in additional wells. That is not to say that it never smells. It did smell a bit in December, particularly when the temperature fell below zero; those are the conditions where the odour gets a lot worse.

I congratulate Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council, under the leadership of Councillor Tagg and chief executive Martin Hamilton, who took the bold step—it was almost unprecedented for a local authority—of pursuing an abatement notice against the operator. It is difficult to do that because prosecuting an abatement notice needs the consent of the Secretary of State; it is a regulated site and it has the permit with the EA. However, the impact on our residents in Newcastle was so severe that the council felt it had to do that. It was able to bring that to a successful conclusion with the operator, who initially appealed but ultimately accepted the decision, following consultation and discussion. I think that was the first proper concession that Walleys Quarry Ltd and its parent company Red Industries has made that its site has been responsible for the unacceptable odour.

We need to get those investigations pursued with all deliberate speed. I am grateful to the EA for giving me a briefing on them on Monday. I appreciate that the Minister is from the Treasury and not from DEFRA, but we do need to see all pressure put on the Environment Agency to get those investigations brought to a conclusion as soon as possible so that my constituents can start to see some justice, some accountability and potentially

some compensation, whether through Government or through the class action lawsuit that a number of them are considering, because of the impact on people's quality of life and health, exacerbating pre-existing conditions such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma and exacerbating pre-existing mental health conditions of anxiety and depression. It has been phenomenal. I laid all that out in the Adjournment debate, so I will do not so again today. However, even in the most recent month, there have been more breaches of the permit.

Matt Rodda: Does the hon. Gentleman want to say a little about the disruption and concern caused by heavy vehicle movements near the site? That is of huge concern around the country. In my area, we recently had planning permission granted for an incinerator in West Berkshire. The road access is likely to be through Reading town centre. Many of my residents are concerned about that. I would be interested to learn how his colleagues have helped to tackle the problem in Staffordshire.

Aaron Bell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. That has been a significant problem in Newcastle. There have been accidents on the road outside the landfill caused by lorries backing up along the road. Firms opposite have complained that people have had problems accessing their businesses. An arrangement has been recently made through a variation to the planning permission to allow vehicles on to the site before the 7 am opening time so that they can at least queue on the site rather than on the road. There is also state of the road and the mud that some vehicles have left on it. There is a wheel wash that vehicles are supposed to go through when they leave. It is clear that it has not always been working. The county council has had to write on more than one occasion to the operator demanding that it cleans up the local roads as well. Traffic and the state of the roads are significant issues, and I wish the hon. Gentleman well with his efforts to represent the people of Reading in the situation with the incinerator to which he refers. The impact is not just about odour; it is about the whole operation and its interference with people's quality of life in the surrounding villages.

As I was saying, there have been far too many breaches and they are still ongoing. Even under intense scrutiny, with four monitoring stations and regular Environment Agency visits—including unannounced visits, which I welcome—the operator is still being found responsible for more and more breaches. I pay particular tribute to Stop the Stink campaigner Dr Mick Salt, who has brought several such breaches to the public's attention via freedom of information requests.

The operator's continual failure to comply with the conditions of its permit, even under such intense scrutiny, is staggering. It surely only strengthens the case for stripping it of the permit altogether when the investigation concludes. I will continue to fight for my constituents and fight to ensure that the operator and the EA are both fully held to account and that we get some appropriate action in response to the misery that the landfill has visited on Newcastle-under-Lyme residents, particularly those who live closest.

Let me turn more specifically to the subject of today's debate: landfill tax fraud, to which I referred in the Westminster Hall last February. The problem, as I said in my intervention on my right hon. Friend the Member

for Haltemprice and Howden, is that bad firms are driving good ones out of the industry. I have spoken to legitimate operators in Stoke-on-Trent who are upset that they are trying to do an honest job but cannot compete with the firms undercutting them.

Fundamentally, most people will take assurances from firms that say, "Of course we'll handle your waste legitimately, don't worry about that—and here's a nice price for you." A lot of people will be guided by that, so the regulator needs to step in. People need confidence that a regulated firm will be regulated. They should not need incentives to go to one firm or another because of ethical considerations; they should be able to trust that any firm in a regulated space is operating honestly and ethically.

As we heard from the right hon. Member for North Durham, the landfill tax differential has gone up to more than £95 per tonne. When the charge was first introduced in 1996, there was only a £5 differential; the rates were £2 and £7. I welcome the fact that landfill tax has reduced the overall amount of waste going to landfill, but it has obviously created strong incentives for misdescription.

Not only is standard waste being misdescribed as inert, but waste is going to landfill that should not be there at all. In the debate last February, we heard examples from a journalist's research that included cavity wax, arsenic, zinc and even rat poison going into Walleys Quarry. I know that those allegations have been put to the Environment Agency and I am sure that they will be part of the criminal investigation, so I do not want to comment further on them today, but the problem is that charging £100 a tonne for waste is increasingly incentivising misdescription.

Mr Kevan Jones: It never ceases to amaze me that these things happen even when the Environment Agency understands the problem. I referred earlier—I was racking my brains for the figures—to fires at waste transfer stations and landfill sites, which are another way in which operators get round the regulations. Burning waste to get rid of it is a common practice, but the Environment Agency just seems to turn a blind eye. Not only is there an effect on the environment when operators burn what they should not be burning, but they avoid landfill tax.

Aaron Bell: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. With illegal landfill sites in particular, we can almost rely on there being a suspicious arson attack. Getting the fire services involved is often the quickest way to get these problems resolved, because operators know that they and not the Environment Agency will ultimately be the ones involved in cleaning up. My constituency also has a notorious illegal waste dump at Doddlespool farm; I do not want to detain the House for too long, but we have seen all these things going on, with all sorts of impacts on the environment from vermin and all the rest of it.

Fly-tipping is forecast to have probably the greatest overall financial impact, although it is very difficult to get the numbers. The national tax gap for HMRC overall is estimated at 5.1%, but the landfill tax gap was 17.1% in 2020-21 and in previous years it has been more than 20%. That is equivalent to £125 million, which is only a part of the overall billion-pound estimate of the

[Aaron Bell]

cost of waste crime. That does not even really take into account the cost of fly-tipping; it is about tax that should have been collected but has not. Things that are completely illegal fall somewhat outside the tax gap calculations, as I understand it.

Mr David Davis: My hon. Friend has talked of perverse incentives. As far as I am aware—and, as I have said, I served as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee for five years—this is the clearest example of a strong incentive for good policy turning into a strong perverse incentive against that good policy, off the back of enforcement. When the Treasury assesses how much it puts into enforcement, ought it not to take that full spectrum of effect into account?

Aaron Bell: I could not agree more. I cannot remember who it was who mentioned the Environment Agency earlier, but there has been a cultural problem with enforcement, and I should like to see HMRC step up and assist. There is a long tradition of the taxman being the man who catches perpetrators of organised and serious crime in the end, but it is not happening with waste crime. I shall say more about that later.

In a statement to the House on the 18th report of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) said that Jim Harra had assured the Committee that the tax gap was so large because the scope of landfill tax had been widened to include illegal waste sites. However, if fly-tipping were taken into account, it might be even larger. The summary of the report stated:

“Waste crime is known to be greatly under-reported, so the true scale and impact of the problem are even larger than official data suggest.”

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden just pointed out, that is just the financial cost; we are not remotely taking into account the cost in terms of the impact on people’s quality of life. Perhaps if we do get a class action lawsuit, some financial numbers will be attributed to that in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Mr Kevan Jones: Another area in which some action is belatedly being taken is the export of waste, which not only avoids tax but causes environmental disasters in some developing countries.

Aaron Bell: The right hon. Gentleman is entirely correct. Indeed, as I mentioned last February in connection with Walleys Quarry, there was a suggestion that waste that should have been exported for treatment in, I believe, the Netherlands was actually going straight into landfill. Export adds an extra layer of complexity for the Environment Agency and HMRC to get on top of, but get on top of it they must, because these operators are using all the tricks in the book to get their waste dealt with as cheaply as possible and maximise their profits.

When it comes to social cost, misclassified waste is, according to the EA, the most likely result of the smell at Walleys Quarry landfill, driven primarily by hydrogen sulphide created by the biodegradation of gypsum. The awful impact of that has been experienced by my constituents time and again. It was exacerbated during lockdown, when the smell was at its worst, but when we

opened up again, people did not want to come into the town centre and use our pubs, bars and cafes, or even just do their shopping, because of the awful odour.

I have mentioned the health impacts, but there is also the long-term environmental unknown risk of waste going into landfill. We do not know exactly what is in Walleys Quarry; if the reports from journalists are to be believed, there could be all sorts of things in there. I have been given assurances that it is unlikely to cause any risk, given that it is all capped off, but not knowing what is in the ground is not a great state of affairs. The site should have been properly regulated ever since the permission was granted by John Prescott back in 1998.

I am conscious that I have been speaking for a while, so I will end my speech shortly. We need to look at what is being done, but also at what more needs to be done. The Public Accounts Committee report stated that action was being taken, but I believe it is taking place too slowly. We have seen the establishment of the joint waste crime unit, but we have not seen enough activity on the back of it. We have also seen helpful reports from the National Audit Office highlighting the severity of the problem. I understand that the Government accepted all the recommendations of the PAC report and will implement them, but we need to see a response to the HMRC landfill tax call for evidence. We do not know yet what will happen with that, but it needs to be structured in such a way that it achieves its legitimate aim of reducing the amount of waste going to landfill without incentivising people to take shortcuts.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the EA and HMRC clearly need to work with relevant bodies within the criminal justice system to develop a plan for making enforcement more effective across the full spectrum of waste crime. That must include speeding the process up and—this is very important—consideration of whether the sentencing guidance needs to be strengthened. The inadequacy of the fines issued to companies and individuals is all too apparent. People who are doing tens or hundreds of pounds’ worth of damage—and that does not even allow for the social cost—are being hit with only hundreds of thousands of pounds-worth of fines, and there are very few cases in which people go to prison.

On top of that, we need to consider whether the bonds put up by operators are sufficient. The Environment Agency is worried about operators walking away precisely because it knows that the money put up in bonds is not sufficient for a local authority to ameliorate a site. We have had that exact discussion in Staffordshire about what would happen if the operator walked away from Walleys Quarry. Who would be on the hook for it, and how would we manage it? I pay tribute to the work done by councils to prepare for that potential eventuality, but it should not have to be like that. There should be enough money in the bond to fund the amelioration, if necessary.

It is clear from my many discussions with the Environment Agency that many of its officers agree there is a fundamental lack of deterrence. I am critical of the Environmental Agency’s culture, and I think it was far too slow to react when the problem got worse, but there is a feeling that people are getting away with it because they do not feel deterred by the sanctions. We need to look at that, too.

We need much tougher fines and the prospect of lengthy prison terms, and there needs to be a fit and proper person test for people seeking to operate landfills,

whether they are setting one up or taking over a licence. All the agencies need to work together to deter waste crime and landfill tax fraud. I have often spoken to DEFRA Ministers about this, and I appreciate that a Treasury Minister is here because this debate is an HMRC issue, but I look forward to what he has to say about tackling landfill tax fraud, and waste crime more generally.

Given HMRC's case load, it might look like there is more to be gained by working elsewhere, but we are losing out on hundreds of millions of pounds of tax, and on millions or billions of pounds of additional social cost. It is an incalculable loss that ordinary people who want to dispose of their waste cannot trust the sector, because they do not know whether their waste will be disposed of legally or illegally.

Some blue chip names deposited of their waste at Walleys Quarry. They were appalled to be identified as having done so by the reporting of journalists, and they stopped sending their waste there. No blame necessarily attaches to them, but it shows that, overall, the sector cannot be trusted.

There is a tradition, going back to Al Capone, of the taxman being the one who finally holds serious organised criminals to account. HMRC must step up and give the Environment Agency a helping hand, because the crimes with which HMRC can charge people carry much more serious financial consequences and, potentially, jail time. If HMRC learned the lessons of Operation Nosedive and looked to prosecute people for waste crime, it would be greatly appreciated by me, by my constituents and, I am sure, by the constituents of all hon. Members here today.

3.57 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis). They make a formidable partnership, and I suspect they have been talking about this subject for quite a long time. My right hon. Friend described himself as an anorak, but I would say he is very persistent and determined. He should keep on going.

We have had well-informed and passionate contributions from everyone who has spoken in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) outlined the problems that her constituents have faced over many years through the unfortunately named Operation Nosedive, and I say to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) that the shadow DEFRA team is well aware of the dismal saga of Walleys Quarry.

I suspect there is considerable agreement on both sides of the Chamber on these issues, and I am sure all Members will be disappointed to hear that I am duty bound to reprise some of the arguments that have already been made. I gently say to Conservative Members that, although it is not in my remit to defend the Environment Agency, there will inevitably be consequences to cutting the agency's funding by half over a decade. Although it is not just a question of resource, that might have played a part.

Landfill tax fraud is a blight on communities across the country. It causes lasting damage to the environment and, of course, deprives the Exchequer of revenue. Back in 1996, when I was a councillor, landfill tax was much talked about as an innovative policy instrument

that aimed to divert waste away from landfill and towards more environmentally friendly management options, including recycling, reuse and recovery, but specific issues of concern were identified right from the beginning, including the potential cost to local authorities, the tax's impact on fly-tipping and the whole issue of perverse unintended consequences.

Over my seven years in the House, I have been struck by our complete failure to follow through with enforcement on the legislation we pass, which is a source of endless frustration to us and, more importantly, to our constituents.

Clearly, the issues we are discussing today are not a new phenomenon. According to the Office for National Statistics, although this tax has had a positive effect of a 65% reduction in recorded waste reaching landfill sites—I emphasise “recorded”—between 1997 and 2014, it is clear that the regulatory framework needed to protect those positive environmental objectives has been piecemeal, slow and unable to react to the changing circumstances.

In October 2021, the Environment Agency estimated that waste crime costs the English economy more than £900 million a year alone, with its 2021 national waste crime survey describing waste crime in England as endemic. As we have heard, this crime is also associated with other criminal acts, including offences against persons. I want briefly to quote a traumatic account referred to by the Environment Agency's chief executive last year from an anonymous victim:

“Last Wednesday, they invaded our home. A peaceful night shattered by the roar of engines and the glare of headlights. I opened the front door and was confronted by a large group of men who declared they now lived here. We were harassed. Our safe was smashed. Our keys were stolen, and a new lock was put on the gate, trapping us. They dumped piles of waste and trash. We were threatened: ‘I’ll smash your face in.’ By midday they were gone, leaving behind tonnes of rubbish, boasting it would cost £50,000 to remove.”

That shocking account from a victim demonstrates not only how unpleasant these people are, but the lengths that some criminals will resort to. Illegal methods of evasion include the misdescription of waste; the operation of illegal waste sites; the burning and burying of waste; fly-tipping; illegal exports; offences relating to producer responsibility obligations; and abuse of exemptions to the requirements for waste permits, to name just a few.

In response to a Treasury call for evidence last year, the misclassification of waste was described by the Chartered Institution of Wastes Management as “an environmental catastrophe waiting to happen.”

As we have heard, it also said that the differential between the lower and standard rate of tax was a “massive incentive to misclassify” waste. According to HMRC's most recent annual estimate of the tax gap, the gap between landfill tax due in the tax year 2020-2021 and the revenue collected in that same year is a staggering £125 million; that is a gap of 17.1%; which is much higher than the overall tax gap for this year. According to HMRC's own report, the uncertainty rating for the landfill tax gap estimate is “high”. Again, as has been said, it is therefore reasonable to conclude that the actual tax gap is even greater; other things could have been included, for example, fly tipping. That is reported by local authorities to have risen year on year to more than 1.13 million incidents reported in 2020-21, which is an increase of 16% from the 2019-20 figure, according to the ONS. So to give us a sense of the real scale of the problem, will the Minister indicate whether the Government

[Daniel Zeichner]

have any plans to include other categories of tax fraud into future estimations of the landfill tax gap? On that £125 million tax gap identified in 2020-21, will the Minister tell the House exactly how much of the due tax has been recovered by HMRC and what resources have been allocated specifically for its recovery?

We heard earlier about the joint unit for waste crime, which brings together law enforcement agencies, environmental regulators, HMRC and the National Crime Agency to tackle waste crime, but the National Audit Office has suggested that the Government still do not have the data they require to assess the true scale of waste crime. The NAO reported that 60 organised crime groups monitored by the JUWC have extensive involvement in other types of crime, with 70% involved in specialist money laundering. We have heard that issue raised here, particularly by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham. Given the scale of the tax evasion, it would be helpful if the Government could tell us about the actions being taken to address the prevalence of money laundering, and publish specific revenue recovery figures and detail the number of investigations being undertaken. Frankly, the Government need to get a grip on this. Last year, as my right hon. Friend quoted, a Public Accounts Committee report concluded that the regulatory regime for waste crime is considered to be close to decriminalisation, with fines seen as a mere business expense for waste criminals. The Committee's report went on to outline that, over recent years, the landfill tax regime has

"increased the incentive to commit waste crime"—

that is a strong charge—

"with HMRC being too slow to prosecute offenders."

That highlights the lack of a deterrence posed by the current sanctions regime and rate of prosecution.

As confirmed by the Committee and in response to written questions to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham, it is extraordinary that there has still not been a single successful prosecution into landfill tax fraud. We have heard about the huge, staggering cost to the public purse of Operation Nosedive. We have heard also about the fact that sanctions are not nearly punitive enough to be a real deterrent against future offending.

According to findings from the National Audit Office in 2022, the most common action taken is to issue advice and guidance. I rather share my right hon. Friend's view about how likely that would be to be effective. There was advice and guidance in 52% of cases, and warning letters to 37%—that is hardly likely to be a major deterrent to some of the criminal operations that we have been hearing about. It is important that all relevant Government agencies work together to develop a proper plan for making enforcement more effective.

The Committee recommended that DEFRA work with the Treasury and HMRC to ensure that the ongoing review of landfill tax

"takes account of the incentives that the tax as currently designed creates to commit waste crime."

We heard a number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), refer to Treasury minutes from December 2022 confirming that the Government largely agree with that recommendation and highlighting that, as part of their review into landfill

tax, the structure of the tax will be considered. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed that this is the case.

To conclude, the Government need to do much more to get a grip on waste crime, which is endemic, and ensure that the tax system does not lose revenue to criminality and deception. At a time when working people are facing the highest tax burden in 70 years, the Government need urgently to close the tax gap and reclaim the missing revenues owed to the Exchequer by those engaged in landfill tax fraud. Waste crime lays waste to the environment and damages people's lives. It makes it much more difficult for legitimate operators working in the waste sector, and, at the same time, undermines investment, jobs and growth. As on so many other issues, it is time for DEFRA in particular, and the Government in general, to get a grip.

4.7 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Cartlidge):

It is a real privilege to respond to today's Backbench Business debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) on calling this debate. I have only responded to one of these Backbench Business debates before, and it was when I was a Justice Minister, and, sure enough, one of the proponents was my right hon. Friend. It was on the subject of strategic lawsuits against public participation, so he does cover a diverse range of issues, but that is a credit to him.

The shadow Minister, my regional neighbour, referred to the fact that the right hon. Member for North Durham had called himself an anorak on this subject. I agree with the shadow Minister that, what the right hon. Gentleman has shown—as have the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell)—was a clear passion for this subject. He raised some very serious and important constituency matters.

I want to assure all hon. and right hon. Members that we do agree that landfill tax fraud and wider waste crime is an important concern in itself, but it also has a distortive effect on legitimate waste management businesses and the waste management sector, causes significant environmental damage and seriously impacts on local communities. Every single Member who has spoken today—with an emphasis, it should be said, on quality rather than quantity of colleagues participating—has clearly emphasised, above all else, the impact on their communities. I totally understand and sympathise with that point.

I will just canter through the history, as the shadow Minister did, because it is very important. We had a long established habit of landfilling our waste. As recently as the 1990s, more than 90% of household waste went to landfill, with only 5% of household waste being recycled. As he said, a landfill tax was introduced in October 1996 to help remedy that. The idea was to encourage the diversion of waste away from landfill and towards more environmentally friendly waste management options, such as recycling, reuse and recovery.

Having introduced the tax, it is also true, as the right hon. Member for North Durham pointed out, that successive Governments have applied escalators to that standard rate. These escalators increased the rate but

also provided lead-in time and certainty that was welcomed by the sector, which was looking to invest in more sustainable waste management options. The tax has been widely recognised as being successful in contributing to the fall in landfill waste.

Where are we now? Since 2000, local authority waste sent to landfill in England has fallen by 90% and household recycling rates are now at around 45%. The tax collected in the last financial year was £667 million, which is in many ways a successful tax. Obviously, I am speaking primarily from the Exchequer's point of view, but we have achieved a substantial policy goal there. We should think of a parallel universe in which we did not achieve that reduction in landfill—imagine how many square miles of our wonderful countryside would now be taken up by landfill. It is a striking thought.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I do not want to intrude too much on this debate, but the Minister is right when he talks about the importance of moving more towards recycling and less to landfill. Will he join me in calling on Glasgow City Council to reject the planning application from Patersons of Greenoakhill, a landfill site that blights communities in Mount Vernon, Carmyle, Baillieston and Broomhouse?

James Cartlidge: It is fair to say that the hon. Gentleman has got that on the record, but he will appreciate that I am not going to comment—it is devolved, but beyond that it is a planning matter and not a matter for the Exchequer. He has got it on the record, though.

It is true that landfill tax has inevitably been relatively difficult to enforce, and non-compliance is high. The right hon. Member for North Durham is absolutely right that this is partly due to increases in the standard rate but, obviously, as the tax has increased, it has become more effective at incentivising disposal other than landfill. In parallel, there has inevitably been an increase in abuse and non-compliance.

Mr Jones: Listen, as I said in my contribution, I have no problem with the actual policy. It has been effective. I question the figures because, frankly, nobody knows what they are. The Environment Agency does not know what they are. What I cannot get my head around is this: the Minister says the tax has been difficult to enforce. Talk to people in the industry—they have known that for years. They have known every scam that has been going on for the past 27 years, and nothing has been done. That is what I just do not understand.

James Cartlidge: I was just being frank with the right hon. Gentleman. It is a relatively difficult tax to enforce, compared with others, but that does not mean we are not determined to do everything possible to deal with non-compliance. Let me turn to some of the specific points that he and other colleagues raised.

Mr Jones: Will the Minister give way?

James Cartlidge: I will make a bit of progress first and turn to Operation Nosedive, which I think every single colleague raised. First of all, I have no information whatsoever on the etymology—it is fair to say it is striking. As right hon. and hon. Members know, the legal obligations in relation to taxpayer confidentiality

mean that it would be inappropriate for me to discuss the specific details of Operation Nosedive. However, the Public Accounts Committee acknowledged in its report that HMRC had been frank about the challenges associated with investigating these types of cases and that a high standard must be met for any criminal investigation to reach the prosecution stage.

The right hon. Gentleman for North Durham mentioned the operational independence of HMRC, to which I would just add—perhaps referring back to my previous role as Justice Minister—that perhaps the most fundamentally independent institutions under our constitution are the judiciary and, of course, the Crown Prosecution Service as independent prosecutors. It is ultimately its decision whether to prosecute, based on the evidential threshold.

Liz Twist: Of course I will ask why it happened and ask for details, and of course I got the reply about confidentiality. But does the Minister not accept that after this period of time—six and a half years that we know about, and time before that—it is just not reasonable to say, “We can’t tell you how much it costs”, because that is a matter of public interest.

James Cartlidge: As I understand it, the figure is public—[HON. MEMBERS: “It is now!”]—following robust campaigning by colleagues present in the Chamber.

Turning to the linked point about decriminalisation, I emphasise that most of HMRC's work to tackle fraud makes use of civil powers. HMRC does use criminal powers selectively to focus on criminal investigations at the top end of the highest harm and the most complex organised crime and serious fraud. Just to underline that, in 2021 HMRC closed 700 illegal waste sites, including 200 high-risk sites—I say HMRC, but it might have involved the Environment Agency as well. Significant action was taken, but it was primarily civil in nature.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme continues to raise Walleys Quarry—

Mr David Davis: Will the Minister give way before he moves on?

James Cartlidge: I am now on Walleys Quarry, so I will stick with that. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme will have anticipated that I cannot comment on ongoing investigations, but I can confirm that, as I understand it, the Environment Agency continues to regulate the operator closely and to consider appropriate action, in accordance with its enforcement and sanctions policy. While it sounds like there has been some progress, my hon. Friend is being a stalwart constituency MP and is a credit to his constituents. It is difficult for Ministers to go into the data at the Dispatch Box. He made points about the mental health impact and so on, and I sympathise with those who have experienced the impact at first hand.

I will now give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mr Davis: In a way, the Minister's comments on Walleys Quarry reinforce the point. He says it is a difficult area to enforce in tax terms. I do not actually agree. I think a great deal more could have been done on the ground with Operation Nosedive in terms of physical

[Mr David Davis]

investigation. Such things would not normally be undertaken, but that should have happened for something as big as this.

I reiterate the point I made earlier to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell). The costs of the failure to enforce are financially enormous and socially disastrous, and serve to completely invert the purpose of the policy. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) quoted the industry association and talked about an environmental catastrophe waiting to happen. No, it is an environmental catastrophe waiting to be discovered, because much of it lies underground in our constituencies. This is an area where a huge amount of resource is at play, and a huge amount of effort should be put into dealing with it.

James Cartlidge: I understand where my right hon. Friend is coming from. Speaking generally about all these cases and issues—I will go through all the points that have been raised as best I can, because he also talked about joint working and co-ordination—there is point of principle that we have to accept. We have a tax with a rate that incentivises a behaviour that is a positive policy goal, and that has been achieved to an extraordinary degree in the substantial reduction in waste going to landfill. Precisely because of that mechanism of a financial disincentive, there are some rogue actors—there will always be some—who want to take advantage.

All right hon. and hon. Members raised the point about data. I can confirm that the Government are committed to publishing an annual framework of indicators to track progress towards the objectives set out in the resource and waste strategy, including indicators of illegal waste sites, fly-tipping and littering.

The right hon. Member for North Durham and my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme both made points about what constitutes a fit and proper person. DEFRA recently consulted on reforms to the carrier, broker, dealer regime, and those transporting or making decisions about waste must demonstrate that they are competent to make those decisions. DEFRA anticipates phased implementation of the reforms from 2023-24.

Liz Twist: It is good to hear that there will be some progress, but the issue lies with the operators and permit holders of landfill sites. Will there be any action on the fit and proper person test?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady will appreciate that that is a DEFRA consultation, but I strongly encourage her to engage with it. She is an assiduous campaigner and contributor to these debates—I think she has been at every debate I have attended—so I pay tribute to her for that. I am sure she will pursue that consultation with interest.

I will talk briefly about the tax gap. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme made the point that there was a spike with the inclusion of unauthorised sites. The latest figures we have, which are for 2020-21, show a gap of 17.1%. That was a fall, but that was partly because the year before was impacted by covid and the year before that we had the spike because of the inclusion of unauthorised sites.

Of course we want to make progress on that, but I speak for the Treasury as a whole when I say that we should be judged as a Government on the totality of the tax gap, because it will vary between taxes; some taxes are fundamentally easier to collect and some are easier to evade. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme said, the total tax gap was 5.1% in the last year for which we have figures available—a fall from about 7.5% in 2005-06. That is one of the lowest published tax gaps in the world and it has been in decline, which is very positive and shows that overall we are making effective progress, although I agree that we need to make more progress specifically in relation to landfill tax.

Matt Rodda: Will the Minister write to me on the related matter of trying to quantify the scale of fly-tipping costs to local authorities, residents and businesses? I appreciate that it is not the subject under discussion, but it is of enormous concern to many people across the country. In my area of Reading, we have huge problems in the town centre and on other sites, often on private land, with enormous cost to neighbouring properties.

James Cartlidge: The hon. Gentleman is right that it is not within my bailiwick, but I am happy for my officials to get in touch with him and let him know who is the appropriate Minister.

On waste incinerators, we should acknowledge that energy-from-waste plants have made an enormous contribution: the biggest factor in the reduction in landfill is the use of energy-from-waste plants. In my county of Suffolk, we have a very successful operation. When what would have been landfill is burned, it is used to create energy for homes. That is a joined-up operation and it has made a massive difference.

On joint working, I think it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden who made the point that there was a failure of co-ordination. As he knows, in 2020 we established the joint unit for waste crime in the Environment Agency, in partnership with HMRC, the National Crime Agency and others, to tackle organised waste crime. Through shared intelligence and enforcement, the joint unit is identifying, disrupting and deterring criminals, and I can confirm that between April 2020 and November 2022, the joint unit worked with more than 100 partner agencies and engaged in 175 multi-agency days of action, resulting in 51 arrests by other agencies.

I turn to the report by the Public Accounts Committee, which all colleagues have mentioned. As right hon. and hon. Members know, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee last year published reports on Government efforts to combat waste crime. Despite the work done to date, the Government are not complacent and recognise that more needs to be done. That is why we accepted and are implementing all the recommendations in the Public Accounts Committee report, "Government actions to combat waste crime". Importantly, we are not going from a standing start; there are, as I have just demonstrated, a host of multi-agency efforts already under way.

The hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned the landfill tax review. I can confirm that we launched the landfill tax review in 2021 to explore how the tax's design can continue to support environmental goals. The Government are considering responses to the review's call for evidence,

which closed in February 2022, and we hope to issue a response in due course. The Public Accounts Committee has recommended that DEFRA should work with HMT and HMRC to ensure that the review of landfill tax takes into account the incentives that the tax, as currently designated, creates to commit waste crime. We agree with that specific recommendation and we will look at that factor.

Mr Kevan Jones: This question is within the Minister's bailiwick: as colleagues have said, the higher rates have incentivised waste crime, so will he engage with the Environment Agency to look at the test for labelling waste as inert and the way it is enforced? Frankly, it is frankly a farce. Operators are allowed to do the test themselves and put it forward as a bulk of waste. There might be some inert waste on the top, but under it there will be active waste. This is about enforcement, but it is also about whether we should just abolish it altogether.

James Cartledge: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. He will appreciate that I am not going to predetermine our review, but it is important that we look at those precise points. That is why we have established the review. As I say, we will respond in due course to the responses we have received to the call for evidence.

I turn finally to HMRC, which lots of colleagues have mentioned. A further recommendation from the PAC was for HMRC to respond on how it has improved its approach to landfill tax prosecutions. It did that in December. Briefly, HMRC's approach to landfill tax compliance aims to collect the right amount of tax and support the Government's aim to create a better environment. Most of its work to tackle tax fraud makes use of civil powers, as I said earlier, but it also uses criminal powers selectively.

HMRC has learned lessons from previous operational activity and is developing a number of criminal investigations into those involved in waste crime—*[Interruption.]* Yes, there are ongoing investigations to confirm that for the right hon. Member for North Durham, who is chuntering away in his invisible anorak on the Labour Back Bench. The investigations are at an early stage of development, and the House will understand that it is not appropriate to provide further detail at this point.

Lastly, colleagues on both sides of the House have raised the point about resourcing, including the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner). HMRC has deployed more resources to increase the number of civil investigations of landfill tax non-compliance. Actions between 2018 and 2021 have already secured £110 million of additional tax revenue, and in future we expect at least £50 million of extra tax to be paid annually. HMRC increased the operational compliance resource dedicated to landfill tax in 2017 and 2018, doubling capacity to 50 people. It is deploying a further 10% more resource specifically to increase the number of civil investigations of landfill tax non-compliance. That was funded in the spring Budget of 2022.

To conclude, I thank the "Landfill Four" for their excellent contributions, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden and the right hon. Member for North Durham for securing the debate. Landfill tax has helped to transform the approach to waste and resource management, with reductions in waste to landfill and increases in recycling rates. However, there is and will always be more work to tackle criminals looking to take advantage of the system. Finding that balance and achieving both those things is crucial, and I am determined that we will.

4.27 pm

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist); the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis); and the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Aaron Bell) for their contributions.

What outcome do we want from the debate? I have to say that the statement from HMRC that the Minister just read out did not fill me with a great deal of confidence. It was great, flowery civil service language, but there are some asks for the Minister to take away. The first is dedicated funding for the joint unit for waste crime, which I think we all agree is the way forward. The other is the use of existing powers, and not just for criminal enforcement of landfill tax fraud. With or without the National Crime Agency and others, the bodies involved could use legislation in the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Some people have become very wealthy from all this, and that raises questions about where the money has come from. That is possibly because, as the Minister said, this policy area has perhaps been successful, but it has also created a problem, not just in terms of lost revenue, but by funding criminality in this country. That is partly because it has fallen between two Departments in the Treasury and DEFRA, and two arm's length organisations in HMRC and the Environment Agency.

I ask the Minister to take a personal interest in the matter and to have a meeting with his opposite number at DEFRA to co-ordinate and drive this agenda forward. My fear is that, despite all the good words we have heard today from officials about the joint crime unit and everything else, without political muscle behind it and somebody watching over it, things will not move forward. I warn the Minister that I and the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden will not be looking the other way and we will be back on to this. That is one way to drive forward the agenda, which definitely needs a political lead. I accept that that would involve two Ministers, but if those two individual Ministers came together, it could make a difference.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of landfill tax fraud.

Retained EU Law: Trading Standards

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Before I call David Linden, I inform the House that at 5 pm I will shout “Order” to whoever is on their feet in order that the Whip can move the Adjournment motion again.

4.30 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I hope to be on my way to Euston station at 5 pm.

I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this Adjournment debate, which allows me to raise a number of points initially brought to my attention by my Garrowhill constituent, Michelle McKenna. As a trading standards officer, Michelle is passionate about her job and ensuring safety and high standards for our fellow citizens. Without her knowledge and expertise, I would never have had the opportunity to learn much more about this policy area, so it is important that I place on the record my sincere thanks to her for raising it to me.

Throughout the 2016 referendum campaign, one of the main debating points was the notion that the European Union imposed onerous and exhaustive regulations on us. Campaign adverts included fearmongering talking points about the endless EU regulations that controlled our everyday lives. Indeed, the former Prime Minister but one, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), was key in perpetuating this utter fantasy, among many others, in his various newspaper columns. The idea that “scary EU diplomats are here with their red tape to curtail your freedoms” was used to persuade the electorate to vote leave, under the slogan “Take back control”, which the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has now shamefully fished out of the political dustbin.

The Conservative party leaned in on its supposed freedom-loving libertarian principles and called for Britain to be freed from these constricting EU regulations, but the reality is that the regulations are not meaningless or frivolous. They are vital to protecting food and product safety and consumer rights, as well as environmental protections and workers’ rights, for people across these islands and the wider European Union—and now they are under threat yet again, which is why I called this debate.

The UK’s decision to leave the European Union in 2016 has left a vacuum for regulations and consumer protections, which I argue is threatening people’s safety and consumer rights. I have significant concerns about the British Government’s ability to effectively review the close to 4,000 pieces of critical EU legislation by December this year, which is the current plan under the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. The current timetable leaves only 12 months to complete that Sisyphean task.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He was in a debate with me the other day about the House of Lords. When we started to describe the House of Lords and how it was composed and so on, it started to sound

absurd. Does the same not apply to the retained EU law Bill, once we consider what it is actually trying to do? The idea that thousands of regulations can be reviewed in 12 months—it is now less than 12 months—is just ridiculous. The risk of so many important issues, such as the ones that my hon. Friend is going to come on to, being hit by a cliff edge is potentially catastrophic. This is not an example of the legislature taking back control; it is a power grab by the Executive.

David Linden: At the risk of getting into some intra-Glasgow banter, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a reason why his constituents voted 78% to remain in the European Union. The good people of Glasgow North had the foresight to see that extracting themselves from the European Union, particularly in the manner in which the British Government proposed, would be a gargantuan task that frankly was not worth it, particularly to sacrifice on the altar a lot of safety standards. My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on to put that on the record. As he said, it is inevitable that this process will be rushed and we risk losing vital consumer protections.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point about the importance of consumer protections. Does he agree that there are equally important protections for the environment and workers’ rights, and many of those are deeply felt across our communities across these islands?

David Linden: I am immensely grateful to the hon. Member. He is spot on. We have had a bit of a taster from this Government as to what they want to do with environment standards and workers’ rights. This afternoon, we have been having that debate on the environment, and there were plenty of questions at Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions this morning about sewage spilling into rivers. We have the UK Government saying that Brexit was about taking back control and strengthening rights, but the only thing they have done so far on employment legislation is to table the immoral Bill that would reduce the fundamental human right of workers to withdraw their labour. I suspect that what the Government are doing with workers’ rights and environmental rights is just a taster of what they intend to do.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): There is also what the Government are doing in areas such as intellectual property rights and copyright, particularly as that affects the music industry, which is an enormously important industry for the country in terms of employment and exports, but also in creating an attraction for the UK from around the world. The proposals to dramatically reduce copyright in favour of the internet giants is clearly undesirable but, irrespective of the regulations, is this not also about some of the regulators, which seem gripped by an out-of-control free market approach?

David Linden: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) was good enough to send me the briefing from the music industry, which hits on that point. I thank the industry for its interest and for continuing to campaign. It is a body of evidence that the Minister should be considering in the context of this debate.

We also have the risk of losing the interpretive effects of EU case law, which could no longer be applied in UK cases. The overarching issue is that, if nothing proactive is done to retain any EU law, modified or otherwise, it will simply disappear from the UK statute book. Some—I would not disagree with them—are going as far as to call this a bonfire of regulations. The British Government are complicit in lighting the flames of that bonfire, and they will be held responsible for melting the very instruments that our trading standards officers rely on every day to protect us.

Countless organisations have come forward with worries about the proposed timetable for the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill. Just before the debate, I was discussing with my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North that there are, I think, 18 pages of amendments for consideration on Wednesday night, and that is just from the Government. Clearly, we are not going to get through all the legislative scrutiny in a considered manner, let alone the civil servants.

Patrick Grady: Will my hon. Friend give way?

David Linden: I am happy to.

Patrick Grady: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; I do not want to keep him. He is absolutely right. That Bill is of major constitutional importance and normally we would expect such a Bill to be dealt with in Committee of the whole House. It had four days in Public Bill Committee, and the timetable motion does not provide a fixed amount of time; it will cut us off at 6 o'clock. It is completely ridiculous and makes a mockery of the kind of scrutiny that the Government said Brexit was supposed to bring to this House.

David Linden: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is spot on to point that out. I am surprised that one of the doughtiest champions of Parliament and its sovereignty, the right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), was not outraged at the idea that that Bill would be rammed through a Public Bill Committee in the space of four sessions and not dealt with on the Floor of the House. My hon. Friend is right to put that on the record.

The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has urged the British Government to scrap the timetable for the retained EU law Bill, warning of a loss of protections across product and food safety, as well as the inhibiting of its ability to effectively stop scams. The institute and a coalition of charities, including the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Child Accident Prevention Trust, have launched the “Safeguarding Our Standards” campaign to persuade the British Government to scrap the Bill’s current deadline. The hon. Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue), the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on consumer protection, has said that this campaign is

“about ensuring that we have good regulation in place that protects consumers and keeps people safe... Good regulation benefits business and consumers alike. Let’s not throw out the baby with the bathwater.”

She is absolutely right. I could not agree more.

A new survey of trading standards experts—I know some on the Government Benches are not a big fan of experts and would use some expletives about them, but

I believe that experts should be listened to—that includes the likes of my constituent Ms McKenna, finds that an overwhelming majority, 92.5%, believe that the Government should consider dropping their commitment to sunset legislation by the end of 2023. Almost three quarters of respondents said that an arbitrary timetable to sunset all EU-derived legislation should be abandoned all together.

Another survey revealed that the public think that the Government, and indeed Parliament, should prioritise their time by dealing with the cost of living crisis, closely followed by action to tackle NHS waiting lists. The translation of EU legislation into UK law was ranked last by the public in a list of the Government’s priorities. John Herriman, the chief executive of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, said:

“Rushing to overhaul vast swathes of UK legislation, particularly when the country faces such an unprecedented set of other challenges, is not something that those of us working in trading standards or consumer protection want, and there is clearly concern from the public that the Government should be focusing its precious parliamentary time on other matters.”

I agree wholeheartedly with the position set out by Mr Herriman.

It would be fair to say that most of us can see that Brexit has not exactly been a roaring success—to put it mildly—but this desperate attempt to be seen to create a bonfire of EU regulations will serve only to shoot ourselves in the foot once more. I urge the British Government to, at the very least, explore a phased approach to the sunset of legislation, based on specific legislative areas, and not leave our trading standards officers such as Michelle without the tools required to protect our constituents. That would give Ministers enough time to sort through and review the close to 4,000 pieces of EU legislation that greatly impact the general public, to whom we are accountable.

For those watching today’s debate, this may seem like an incredibly dry subject, but regulation and a baseline for safety standards really does matter. Let me paint a picture of how this matters in practical terms. The week before Christmas, North Lanarkshire Council’s trading standards department took action to remove more than 1,800 unsafe light-up toy rings from an online marketplace. The toy rings were assessed to pose a serious risk to young children due an easily accessible button cell battery that can cause injury or death if ingested. The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Jo Gideon) has campaigned on that, and I fully support it. Without the relevant regulatory powers to inspect, test and take corrective action, trading standards would not be able to remove unsafe toys or electrical or mechanical goods from circulation. It is precisely those types of interventions that are potentially at risk from the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill.

I will give another example. A consignment of over 150 e-scooters, e-bikes and hoverboards was recently stopped at the ports by Falkirk Council’s trading standards. A sample was sent for testing, and the battery of one of the scooters exploded during the test. The battery management system failed to protect the battery pack and it was thrown out of the battery pack. Shockingly, cells were found around 7 metres away and flames were over 2 metres high. The testing identified a range of other safety concerns and, as such, the consignment was not permitted to be released for free circulation. In layman’s terms, the thing could literally blow up while being charged in someone’s living room.

John Spellar: Is it not also the case that, apart from dramatic cases such as that, ordinary businesses need to be able to plan their work? There are so many uncertainties normally, and even more at the moment if they are not able to plan against a fixed set of regulations. Those regulations may need to be improved and changed. We should not just be stuck on certain regulations, because some of them need changing. Businesses need some degree of certainty so they can plan and invest.

David Linden: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am sceptical, but it may well be the case that the UK Government want to strengthen the regulations. We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Let us not rush this; let us make sure we get it right. He is spot on.

If we have no standards, we have no way of protecting people from potentially catastrophic injuries. That is why trading standards matter, and that is why the Government cannot—indeed, must not—proceed with the repeal of these regulations in the timescale outlined.

I have other concerns about the decline in the workforce of trading standards officers and the ticking time bomb that exists, with nowhere near enough TSOs coming into the workforce. Councils all across these islands have, over many decades, seen their trading standards departments practically hollowed out. In many respects, removing from statute the regulations they enforce would, I fear, be the final nail in the coffin.

To recap, Members across the House, trading standards experts and a coalition of charities have all said that that the timetable is unachievable and dangerous. In fact, trading standards officers have said that changes to legislation would affect their ability to carry out their enforcement work, which, in turn, would affect ordinary people and businesses right across these islands. If Brexit was about taking back control, frankly, I do not see how sacrificing the safety standards and regulations that protect us and our constituents delivers on that promise.

The public have also made clear that this should not be the Government's priority; instead, they should be focusing on the multitude of crises they face, not least the cost of living crisis. Instead of listening, the British Government appear to have their fingers in their ears, and they are kidding themselves on that this near impossible task will be completed by the end of this year. That will be the legacy of Tory Britain: an isolationist, populist, short-term thinking Government who would rather rush ahead with their dangerous plans than adopt a careful and considered approach.

In his response, I want to hear the Minister acknowledge the concerns, if not mine then certainly those of the experts, who are genuinely fearful of a bonfire of trading standards legislation. If the electric scooter story tells us anything, it is that a bonfire of these regulations will only result in many other things needlessly catching fire, and that, I would humbly suggest, is not taking back control.

4.46 pm

The Minister for Energy and Climate (Graham Stuart): I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) on securing this important debate. I listened to his contribution and the interventions of other Members with interest.

I begin by assuring the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, Michelle that we take these concerns seriously and that the aim of the Government is not to reduce consumer protections or the effectiveness of the trading standards regime of enforcement. I applaud the sterling work done by trading standards departments and services across the UK, including those of Michelle and her colleagues in Scotland, and the Government will continue to ensure that those departments and services have access to the information, and the regulations, they need to continue their important work. It was ironic that the hon. Gentleman, who I thought spoke very well, started his speech by making accusations of fearmongering, before going on to suggest that this Government were going to remove the very standards upon which trading standards rely. The scaremongering in this debate was clearly his.

The Government introduced the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill on 22 September 2022. The Bill is an important step closer to the culmination of a journey that began on 23 June 2016, when more than 17 million citizens of the United Kingdom and Gibraltar, including more than 1 million in Scotland, voted for the UK to leave the European Union. Retained EU law was never intended to sit on the statute book indefinitely. There will always be other priorities and challenges facing the country and the Government at any time. The idea that we should just leave that law there makes no sense. What we should do is make sure we have law that is fit for purpose and fit for the needs of this country.

The time is right to end the special status of retained EU law on the UK statute book on 31 December this year. The Bill will abolish that special status and enable the Government, via Parliament, to amend more easily, repeal and replace retained EU law, precisely in order to improve the agility with which we respond to things such as scooters with exploding batteries or children's toys with dangerous button batteries. The Bill will include a sunset date by which all remaining retained EU law will either be repealed or assimilated into UK domestic law. It provides the impetus to ensure that the regulation that stops those things is properly fit for this country.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: I will move on.

By ending the special status of retained EU law, we will reassert the sovereignty of Parliament. I think that is what makes the separatists so unhappy: they hate the idea that the Ministers of an elected UK Government in this sovereign Parliament should be the ones to ensure that we have a regulatory regime bespoke to the needs and interests of consumers and businesses in the UK.

I will now turn to standards and consumer protections. My Department has responsibility for a number of pieces of retained EU law that we are in the process of reviewing.

Patrick Grady: Will the Minister give way?

Graham Stuart: We have heard enough fictions and untruths already, and we do not need any more.

David Linden: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is "untruths" in accordance with "Erskine May"?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I would ask the Minister to withdraw that.

Graham Stuart: I happily and quickly do so. I am sure any misrepresentations were, in the parlance, inadvertent.

There is retained EU law that underpins various areas of consumer protections and trading standards work. The list of retained EU law that BEIS is responsible for can be accessed via the retained EU law dashboard, which is publicly available on gov.uk. The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill means that Departments will need to review their policy areas to determine whether existing regulations inherited from the EU are fit for purpose in the UK, or whether reform is needed ahead of the sunset date. These are entirely common-sense approaches as we assert ourselves as an independent country. They will allow Departments to take an active decision on whether this retained EU law is a good fit for the current UK landscape.

The Bill does not mean that there will be a reduction in standards, or that the protections that consumers and sellers enjoy will be reduced. This Government are committed to maintaining high standards and, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East even suggested, seeking where possible to raise those standards, as appropriate, across the UK and ensure high levels of consumer protection. The UK has a proud record and a proud history of excellent trading standards work, which sits independently of our membership of the EU. However, now that the UK has left the EU, it is only right that this Government look at all areas of policy to see where we can innovate and modernise, as well as to capitalise on the regulatory freedoms that we have for the long term. *[Interruption.]* SNP Members may chunter from a sedentary position and seek to intervene in an Adjournment debate, but I will carry on setting out the reality after we have heard the—*[Interruption.]* After we have heard the counter to that—thanks so much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will try to stay on the straight and narrow.

We must modernise our regulations where they are outdated, and ensure that unnecessary burdens are minimised and vital protections continue to be upheld. These are all things that everyone across this House should support, rather than getting engaged in scaremongering based on false premises, which I hope I am allowed to say, Mr Deputy Speaker. We will retain our high levels of consumer protections, but deliver them in a way that is less bureaucratic and less costly, as well as ensuring that our rules are properly targeted at the real problems that consumers face.

There may be limited time, but there are a couple of areas we are looking at. For instance, package travel regulations provide an opportunity not only to make sure we continue the protections for foreign travel, but to look at whether they could be extended to domestic situations. That is the kind of agility that we have the opportunity to show. On labelling, there are cumbersome EU laws that dictate labelling on sometimes small products, leading to waste and inefficiency. We now have the opportunity to use e-labelling, which industries have been calling for, and to do so in a way that is environmentally friendly and leads to better and cheaper products for the consumer.

At the moment, there are regulations in EU retained law that cannot cope with new products, scientific advances or—as the hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned,

ironically—e-marketplaces. I would argue that the existing EU regulatory regime is not sufficiently agile to deal with that. That is exactly the sort of thing we are going to sort out and improve, and any right-minded person who was not just trying to make political points for the sake of it would support that. I guess if someone is a monomaniacal separatist, they will use any opportunity to try to make allegations suggesting that things are worse, but we will retain high consumer standards.

As it stands, there are insufficient powers to make subordinate legislation that enables the amendment of standards that are entrenched in retained EU law. In layman's terms, that means that standards set out for commercial operators, as well as other areas of regulation, do not get updated as frequently as they should. We will be able to update them more frequently, more effectively, and protect consumers in Scotland and elsewhere.

Regulations are currently unable to adapt as quickly as they should. Now that we have left the European Union we must ensure that approaches and methodologies that trading standards uses to enforce regulations are tailored to work best for our local authorities, consumers and sellers, and are able to be consistently updated in consideration of our unique interests. Subordinate legislation that the Government put forward to the House following the review of our retained EU law is not intended to impact or erode core protections to consumers set out in primary legislation, such as the vital consumer rights enshrined in the Consumer Protection Act 1987 and the Consumer Rights Act 2015. Those rights include consumer protections against unfair terms in a contract, protections against faulty physical and digital goods, and a variety of other crucial rights that thousands of consumers depend on every day. Having stated that on the Floor of the House at the Dispatch Box, I hope we will not hear SNP Members suggest the opposite from now on for their own perverse political aims.

The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill and the accompanying reviews of retained EU law in areas such as consumer protections will ensure that we use our new-found regulatory freedom to its fullest potential. Is this perhaps what lies at the heart of the frustration felt by some hon. Members? The truth is that there are Brexit benefits, and this is one of them. We are going to have a better system of law that is based on the needs of people in this country, and more agile and effective. A crucial part of the review is removing retained EU law where it is obsolete or outdated—something to which SNP Members are obviously opposed. They want to keep obsolete law. As energy Minister I was personally responsible for reviewing emissions trading scheme law. It turned out that the vast bulk of that regulation is now redundant.

David Linden rose—

Graham Stuart: Does the hon. Gentleman want to leave that on the statute book, so that we must retain those bits? We have gone through that and come up with a practical solution. That is what Ministers across the Government are doing.

David Linden rose—

Graham Stuart: If I was going to give way I would have given way by now. The hon. Gentleman may sit down, and I will let him know if I am going to give way.

[*Graham Stuart*]

This Government are committed to ensuring that the burdens of delivering the best regulatory schemes are removed, while ensuring that we maintain the highest standards. We have also been clear that we will maintain our international obligations—something the hon. Gentleman should be able to applaud. Some retained EU law on our statute book is required to continue to operate for things such as the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement, the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol. The Bill, together with the appropriate exercise of powers under it, will uphold the UK Government's commitments to complying with their international obligations.

As committed to at the Dispatch Box by my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Dean Russell), who did a particularly fine job on the Bill's Second Reading, the Government will, as a priority, ensure that necessary legislation is in place to uphold the UK's international obligations. Where retained EU law is required to maintain those obligations, we will set that out through the dashboard, so that the public can scrutinise it. To conclude—[*Interruption.*] Well, before I conclude, as there is time left, why don't I let the hon. Gentleman intervene?

David Linden: I will go first, and then perhaps my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North can go second.

The Minister spoke earlier about things being obsolete. Does he understand the irony of him telling me that things are obsolete, when his party has not been voted

for by the majority in Scotland since the 1950s? If anything is obsolete, it is the Conservative and Unionist party.

Graham Stuart: What is obsolete, following the decisions of the courts, is the hon. Member's separatist party's desire to have a referendum and the false narrative of some partnership of nations being unwillingly held together. What is obsolete is his party's failure ever to respect the result of a referendum. It does not like what the public decide. Well done to him and his party, who have done quite well electorally, except when it comes to the thing that matters most to him: separatism. That is what he wants, but the Scottish people do not want it. The Scottish people voted against it, and his party rails and rails against the fact that, despite all its efforts to use every single tool that it has available in the Scottish Government, his constituents and those of the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) cannot be persuaded that they wish to leave the United Kingdom. Why would they? This Parliament is able, on a sovereign basis, to provide better standards of protection, better regulation, and regulation that is brought about and driven by a democratically elected United Kingdom Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): I do not think that I have heard the House so noisy with so few people in it.

Question put and agreed to.

4.59 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 January 2023

[RUSHANARA ALI *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Royal Mail and the Universal Service Obligation

1.30 pm

Kate Osborne (Jarrow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Royal Mail and the future of the Universal Service Obligation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. The future of Royal Mail and the universal service obligation is important to us all. It is important for our communities and businesses, and for our economy. For many in rural communities, particularly the elderly, our posties are a lifeline. That was never more evident than during the pandemic. In November 2022, Royal Mail wrote to Ministers setting out its arguments for reducing the postal service to a five-day-a-week service, despite Ministers confirming that they did not want that to happen.

In Tuesday's debate on the future of postal services, I was pleased to hear from the Minister that the Government remain committed to securing a sustainable universal service for users, and that there are currently no plans to change the minimum requirements of the service. Unfortunately, Royal Mail does not seem to be listening. Even after the Minister's response on Tuesday, it wrote to me continuing to push for a reduction in the universal service obligation. Royal Mail took £758 million in profit last year, yet it is still pushing to reduce our services and to erode workers' pay and conditions, and is threatening to cut thousands of jobs. The universal service obligation sets out that Royal Mail must provide a six-day-a-week, one-price-goes-anywhere postal service to the 32 million UK addresses. That obligation is overseen and monitored by Ofcom. I have spent this week meeting people from professional publishing agencies, business, industry and trade unions, as well as others, are all whom are keen to protect the future of Royal Mail. I have met representatives from Royal Mail, and my office met them again this week.

Royal Mail has been a huge part of my life. Before being elected the MP for Jarrow, I was employed by Royal Mail for 25 years. I joined the Communication Workers Union—or the Union of Communication Workers, as it was then known—on the very first day. I saw numerous chief executive officers come and go—a bit like Ministers—and take millions in pay-offs on their way out. We have had Adam Crozier, Moya Greene, Rico Back and Simon Thompson over the last 20-odd years. In 2010, Moya Greene was the highest-paid civil servant in the UK. Just three years later, she oversaw the privatisation of Royal Mail and then disappeared with a pay-off worth over £3 million and a pocket full of shares. Less than two years later, Rico Back left with around £3 million of shares. Now we have Simon Thompson, a CEO with no experience of logistics, who is hell-bent on inflaming industrial relations and destroying Royal Mail and our USO.

During the pandemic, posties were relied on to deliver covid tests, as well as deal with the huge increase in parcels. That led to an influx of cash that would not, of course, continue post-covid. Instead of using that extra money to transition back to a business-as-usual level of revenue, Thompson awarded £567 million to shareholders. Thompson is insisting on a confrontational row with Royal Mail employees and their trade unions, and is deliberately mismanaging our postal services to undermine them and to put pressure on Ministers to reduce the USO. The Government could help to solve the dispute by reiterating to Royal Mail that it should not be going down the gig economy path to a parcel service, and that the USO will not be reduced. Will the Minister commit to that?

During my years at Royal Mail as a union negotiator, I had many meetings with CEOs and management regarding pensions, pay, terms and conditions and working practices. We agreed changes to deal with new challenges, which were numerous. The workers know much more about the detail of everyday working practices than most, if not all, of the senior management teams. Workers and management negotiated, and we made changes together.

Instead of negotiating, Simon Thompson is attacking employees on social media, and taking disciplinary action against workers who are taking legitimate action. Rico Back, the former CEO, said that the management and board had “wasted time” and failed to negotiate properly with trade unions, and were on a

“confrontational path, which is not necessary.”

Will the Minister condemn the inflammatory actions of Royal Mail's senior management team?

Yesterday, Royal Mail wrote to me, disputing that it is destroying the postal service. It said:

“We remain very much committed to the Universal Service.”

The next sentence contradicts that:

“Our request to the Government to move to a five-day letter service, comes from the fact that we want to better meet changing customer needs.”

How can it be fully committed to something that it is desperately trying to change? Royal Mail often cites the fall in letter volumes since privatisation, which the Minister mentioned in Tuesday's debate; however, the price of first and second-class stamps has risen dramatically. Will the Minister confirm whether the USO is the financial burden that it is being portrayed as?

In response to the shadow Minister for employment rights and protections, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), the Minister said that he had

“met both Ofcom and Royal Mail management to discuss”

the future of the postal service,

“made it clear to Royal Mail that it needs to make any case for change to Ofcom”,

and

“will fully consider any advice”—[*Official Report*, 10 January 2023; Vol. 725, c. 222WH.]

given by the regulator. I welcome that commitment, but will the Minister give an assurance that the process will be more thorough than the previous Ofcom review of users' needs?

Many letters sent in the UK are non-USO mail, but they are delivered jointly over the same network. That mail includes important, time-sensitive information, such as letters from hospitals, His Majesty's Revenue and

[Kate Osborne]

Customs, communications from the police and legal documents, as well as current affairs magazines. The 2020 Ofcom review of users' needs—often cited by Royal Mail, which claims the review found that five-day-per-week deliveries would meet residential and small and medium-sized enterprise user needs—did not properly account for large business users and non-USO mail. It is not a reliable review. It certainly does not do a good enough job of showing the impact that the removal of Saturday deliveries would have.

The Royal Mail is a beloved national institution, loved by the public and relied on by many. It can have a vibrant future, but only if Ministers act now to stop the Royal Mail management team destroying the service. I hope that the Minister will respond to the important questions that I have raised, and that will be raised by others in the debate, and will commit to the retention of the USO's six-day-a-week delivery service.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Order. It is busy, and we have a number of speakers. I will set an informal time limit of four minutes to get everybody in, but we may have to adjust that. You are already doing so, but please remember to bob up and down after each speaker, so that I can call you.

1.38 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali, and to contribute briefly to the debate. I will read out two emails from constituents. One says:

"My son was sent a Penalty Charge Notice"

on 25 November, but it did not arrive until 15 December. That was from Mrs Martin, of Dora Road in my constituency. Today I had an email from Mr Smith, who said that the "shambles" continues; the Christmas decorations are down and the left-overs have been consumed, but he is "still receiving Christmas cards". The first email was from December 2021, and the second from December 2022. The problems we in Wimbledon are experiencing with Royal Mail are not just this year's problems. I have had numerous meetings with Royal Mail and my constituents, and the unions attended one of them. The postal service in Wimbledon is not delivering for my constituents. There was a short-term improvement, and management promised that they would change some working practices, but none of that has happened.

Wimbledon suffers particularly. I heard the complaints of the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) about Royal Mail's management, and I agree that they are undoubtedly partly to blame. However, the CWU headquarters are in Wimbledon, and the CWU sees the operation in my constituency as a trial of strength with management. That undoubtedly means that we get a worse service than pretty much anywhere else in London—probably than in most of the country. Frankly, that confrontational attitude hinders my constituents.

The debate is about the future of the universal service obligation, as the hon. Lady said. The universal service obligation set out in the Postal Services Act 2011, which privatised Royal Mail, should be adhered to for my constituents, as well as for everyone across this country. I note that the Government have said that they will not

change the universal service obligation from six days to five. Can my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that, if the Government are ever minded to do so, they will set out a way for other industries not to be impacted by a decline in the service? Can he also confirm that they have instructed Royal Mail not to become a parcel-only service? Despite so much being done by email, the postal service is still hugely important to many of my constituents and, I am sure, those of other hon. Members.

What will the Minister do to ensure that Ofcom meets its obligations as a regulator? We have very few levers to pull that will influence Royal Mail, tell it what to do or tell it how to improve its service; Ofcom has those levers. I often receive emails from constituents who ask me why I have not done more, or why Ofcom is toothless. What will the Minister do to ensure that Ofcom, which seems to have been largely absent during the poor delivery of the service, meets its obligation to hold Royal Mail to account, and to ensure that Royal Mail meets its universal service obligation?

Clearly, the current dispute is a problem and results in pressure from both sides. I hope that the Minister can reassure us that the universal service obligation, which is so important to the constituents of Wimbledon and other places, will be met.

1.43 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing the debate, and offer my support to the CWU in the dispute with Royal Mail. I was privileged to stand on picket lines with Craig Anderson, Councillor John Carson and many others at the Glasgow south-east delivery office in Fullarton Drive, as well as at the Gartcraig delivery office. During those visits to picket lines, I heard one resounding message from the workforce: no one wants the strike. No one wants to lose their pay, particularly during a cost of living crisis; and no one wants to risk their employment. Our posties are striking because they do not want a vital service to be destroyed and torn apart, and they want to be paid fairly for the work that they contribute to the service.

Let me speak directly to Simon Thompson at Royal Mail. His behaviour throughout the dispute has been appalling. In a Zoom interview, someone wrote his lines on a whiteboard behind the camera; that was symptomatic of the intransigence of the Royal Mail senior management team. My constituents did not go out on their doorsteps on a Thursday night to clap for key workers only for Mr Thompson to treat his staff like crap. He must up his game, and if he cannot, he must resign. It is increasingly clear that he is the biggest stumbling block to a resolution to the dispute.

The truth is that consecutive Governments in Westminster have overseen the degradation of our postal services. If this Conservative Government let the USO end, it may be the straw that breaks the camel's back. It is widely known that Royal Mail is the designated provider of the universal postal service. It delivers six days a week to 30 million addresses on these islands, and one price goes anywhere. That seemingly unalienable fact is now under threat.

Royal Mail bosses have shamefully approached the British Government seeking to change that agreement. They have asked to move from the minimum six-day

delivery service to a five-day delivery service for letters; Saturdays would be excluded. They say that is to protect the sustainability of the universal service. The SNP entirely recognises the importance of the USO, particularly for our rural communities in Scotland, which are so important. We will continue to fight for its protection.

We need to look more at the obscene profits from Royal Mail. While it plans to cut services and pay for postal workers, it pays out excessive sums to its shareholders. In May 2022, Royal Mail Group announced record-breaking profits of £758 million in 2021, £567 million of which was promptly paid out to shareholders. Only weeks later, Royal Mail announced significant losses, alleging it was losing over £1 million a day. Shortly after that, it approached the British Government requesting to move from a six-day to a five-day delivery obligation. The senior leadership of Royal Mail have also used their mismanagement of funds to justify scrapping up to 10,000 postal worker jobs from the service by 2023, while they continue to recruit and retain many thousands of agency staff.

Is it any surprise that CWU members have gone on strike? After all—some Ministers would do well to realise this—the right to withdraw one's labour is one of the most fundamental human rights. It is a right that the British Government are now seeking to deny. Let us be clear: the CWU is in dispute with Royal Mail over unacceptable changes to terms and conditions and the abandonment of mutually agreed plans for modernisation, and in defence of the service that postal workers provide. There is also the proposed 2% pay increase. The CWU is also asking for an inquiry into the mismanagement of Royal Mail and how that will undermine the USO.

I do not think that Royal Mail senior management are listening. It appears that every time I tweet something about Royal Mail, a letter arrives within days disputing what I have said. Perhaps Royal Mail's senior management team should spend less time monitoring my Twitter account, and more time at the negotiating table with our colleagues in the CWU.

The end of Royal Mail would exacerbate regional inequalities at a time when the British Government claim to be levelling up these islands. Royal Mail must be renationalised, and a commitment must be made to ensuring that the USO remains an unalienable fact of the postal service. To sum up in four words: stand by your post.

1.48 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate.

Royal Mail is a proud British institution, established by King Henry VIII in 1516. I begin by thanking postal workers in Luton and across the UK for their work all year round. I am pleased to have a delivery office in my constituency of Luton South; I have visited it many times. I have spoken with postal workers and their local and regional Communication Workers Union representatives, and I have seen at first hand their dedication to delivering—literally and metaphorically—for our community.

Postal workers take huge pride in their job, and want to ensure the long-term success of the service. Strike action is never taken lightly. Substantial real-terms pay cuts and attacks on terms and conditions of employment

give workers little choice but to stand up for their livelihood. Alongside those legitimate grievances, there is also the threat to the universal service obligation, which is the obligation to adopt a “one price goes anywhere” principle of affordable postal services. Under the minimum service requirements enshrined in the Postal Services Act 2011, Royal Mail must deliver letters to every address in the UK six days a week, at a uniform price, and parcels five days a week.

As we have heard, in May 2022 the Royal Mail Group, which is now International Distributions Services, announced record-breaking profits for 2021 of £758 million and then promptly paid £567 million to its shareholders. Then, just weeks afterwards, Royal Mail announced significant losses, alleging that it was losing over £1 million a day. That led to the concerning approach to the Government to request a reduction of the universal service obligation, from an obligation of letter delivery six days a week to an obligation of only five days a week, between Monday and Friday. It is clear that there are serious questions to be asked about what is going on at Royal Mail. Shareholders are given huge dividends, yet soon afterwards up to 10,000 postal workers' jobs and the six-day-a-week delivery service are at risk. It just does not stack up.

Now we have the prospect of a takeover of Royal Mail by Vesa Equity, which is also concerning for the future of the universal service obligation. There is a serious risk that Vesa Equity would sell off Royal Mail UK but retain control of General Logistics Systems—the international parcel subsidiary—which continues to be profitable and has previously helped to cross-subsidise the UK business.

Reducing the universal service obligation would be hugely detrimental to the scope and quality of the UK's universal postal service, which is heavily relied on by businesses and consumers. It would also lead to the loss of thousands of permanent Royal Mail jobs around the country, exacerbating regional inequalities.

Let me reiterate the points that have been made this week. The Government must guarantee that the universal service obligation is secure for the future and will continue to be provided by Royal Mail, because people value their local postal workers. Just look at the covid-19 pandemic, when postal workers put their lives on the line to deliver letters and parcels, as well as providing vital contact for vulnerable residents, many of whom were isolated, elderly or lived on their own. We must focus on the value of our postal service—particularly its relationships and its reach across the UK—and not just on the cost of individual transactions.

This key community contribution must be protected, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow that Royal Mail must not adopt the gig economy employment model of low wages and insecure contracts. I therefore ask the Minister whether there needs to be an inquiry into whether the mismanagement of Royal Mail will undermine the postal universal service obligation, and I look forward to his response to the debate.

1.52 pm

David Johnston (Wantage) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Ms Ali. I have spoken about Royal Mail quite a bit in this place—I have secured my own Westminster Hall debate about it, I have had meetings with HQ and arranged meetings for constituents

[David Johnston]

with HQ, and I have visited a delivery office—so I am not planning to make a long speech. However, each time I have spoken about Royal Mail, I have been clear that our individual postmen and women work very hard. There is a problem in the management of the service. I totally accept the changing nature of the service, with us sending far fewer letters now and sending many more parcels, and I also accept that there have been staffing issues.

Nevertheless, I started getting complaints about Royal Mail in August 2020, and I am afraid that I have had more complaints about it than about any other organisation. They are sometimes about things such as cards and magazine subscriptions not arriving for several weeks, but the much more serious ones are about bank cards, insurance renewals and hospital appointments that are missed. My constituents feel very much that they are being fobbed off by Royal Mail. One of them said, “I feel like they’re saying, ‘We’re trying, but it’s not our fault.’” That is the reason why I have spoken so much about Royal Mail in the House, held my own debate about it and so on. I have experienced the issues myself, living in Didcot. Recently, constituents such as Keith McEwen and Sandra Trinder have written to me about things that have taken three or three and a half weeks to arrive.

Specifically on the universal service obligation, I may be the only one in the room who is agnostic about whether there is a five-day or a six-day delivery. The reason is that my constituents are complaining of not getting things for two or three weeks. I asked my constituents on Facebook what they would think if Royal Mail moved from six-day to five-day delivery. I did not get a huge number of responses to that poll, but 72% said they would be quite happy with a five-day service if—this is what they kept saying in their comments—that service was reliable. If they actually got the five-day service, they would be relaxed about not having the Saturday service.

I totally hear what the Minister says about the six days, but I am personally agnostic about that. My constituents are most concerned about ensuring that delivery is reliable, however many days it happens on, that they get things in a timely fashion and that they do not miss serious things they should have taken part in or done, because that can sometimes have a financial or a health cost. However many days the Government agree should be delivered on, I would be grateful if the Minister could outline how we will drive up the reliability of the service, because we cannot keep seeing stamp price increases for a service that is not being delivered.

1.55 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for her work in securing today’s important debate, and I commend other Members for their contributions. Most of all, I thank our postal service and postal workers for their incredible work for our community over what have been three very difficult years during the pandemic and then carrying on into the post-pandemic period. I want to make three points about the importance of the Saturday service—first, about its importance to older and isolated people; secondly, about its importance to

business and, in particular, small and local businesses; and thirdly, about the wider principle and continuing importance of universality in postal services.

On the importance of the daily postal service for older people, I have had a number of conversations with residents in my community and particularly with older people who do not rely on electronic forms of communication and who still like physical forms of communication. It is important to bear that in mind; although the wider world has shifted somewhat towards email, many people still prefer to have things in a physical form. I also want to draw Members’ attention to the importance, particularly to lonely or isolated people, of receiving items such as Christmas cards or birthday cards in the post. This truly vital service in our community helps people feel loved and valued. We can imagine the feelings of joy when a grandparent receives a card from their grandchild on their birthday. We should preserve something so important, and of course the Saturday service is an important part of that.

I also want to focus on the importance to businesses. Some excellent points were made earlier about the importance of delivering literature, bank cards and other important business information by post. There is another side to that, however, which has not yet been raised in the debate, and that is the importance of postal deliveries as a form of advertising for local small businesses. For many small and medium-sized enterprises in my area and other parts of the country, being able to deliver something through the post, such as a flyer, a card, a magazine or some other marketing literature, can be extremely important. Removing the Saturday service would effectively take away one sixth of the opportunity to reach the public. It is also important to consider that, for some types of business, it may be particularly important to have literature go out on a Saturday morning. Other colleagues have talked about information about appointments, bank cards or other business or important personal information being delivered by post.

I am very aware of time, and I know that other colleagues want to get in, but I want to offer my support for the principle of universality. I am glad that the Government have indicated that they want it to continue. I am concerned about the way the dispute is developing, the problems with the service with Royal Mail at the moment, and possible changes to ownership. I ask the Minister to reassure the House about his and the Government’s ongoing commitment to universality.

1.58 pm

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. As the MP for the largest constituency in the UK outside the highlands of Scotland, I very much welcome this debate, secured by the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne). As others have said, the Royal Mail and the universal service obligation are vital in rural areas such as mine. Rural areas also tend to have a higher age demographic and still suffer from poor broadband services. I have constituents who are still on dial-up—that is often not recognised. I also have constituents who live in notspots who cannot use mobile phones. It is still vital that they have an opportunity to receive postal communications, and that should be six days a week, so I welcome what the Minister has said on that and I very much hope that there will be no pushing back.

I pay huge tribute to the posties in my constituency for the job they do. If any Members present have tried to deliver addressed mail to constituents, they will know what a challenge it is. Having met many posties on visits to delivery offices, I did not find them to be a group of militant trade unionists; I found them to be people who took great pride in the job they did. In fact, they often feel embarrassed or ashamed about the way the service is currently being delivered. One person at the Lockerbie postal delivery office told me that they were really disappointed when they did not meet their targets for the first time. They were not out to cause disruption; they want to deliver a first-class service. For them to do that, we need to see the same commitment from the management of Royal Mail.

The market is changing, but the example I would cite is that of Amazon, which recently chose to bring a delivery vehicle into parts of my constituency where deliveries would have previously been made by Royal Mail. That was a commercial decision; as we saw with the recent closure of the Amazon facility near Greenock, the company makes commercial decisions, so it might well decide tomorrow that it is not going to provide a van service into Dumfriesshire. If we allow Royal Mail to be diminished, what kind of service will be provided to constituents? That is something I have concerns about, along with all the issues that Members have raised about private delivery firms. When the House of Commons used a private delivery firm, it managed to deliver my parliamentary mail on more than one occasion to residential addresses, rather than to my office.

I know that the Minister is concerned about the nature of the Post Office, because although it recently declared that it was entirely separate from Royal Mail, that is not really the case. The two are interconnected, and when CJ Lang and Son—the operator of the SPAR convenience store network in Scotland—pulled out of a number of post offices, it cited parcel issues and the return of parcels to post offices.

In concluding, I want to make the further point that I am concerned about the sustainability of the post office network and Royal Mail across my constituency and others. These two assets are incredibly valuable to constituents, and the Government should be doing everything they can to sustain them.

2.3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow my comrade, the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell). I have to say that I agreed with many of his remarks, which will no doubt concern him greatly. I also congratulate my good friend, the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), on securing this important debate.

It would be remiss of me not to mention my family connections to Royal Mail: my late grandfather worked for it for many decades, and two uncles also worked for it. They cared passionately about the Royal Mail service when they worked for it, as do the workers in the Govan and Hillington delivery offices—when I have met them on the picket line during the present dispute, it is clear just how much they care. As I have said to the Scottish secretary of the Communication Workers Union, its members in Govan and Hillington are a credit to themselves and their trade union, because they care about the public. They know the communities and they look after

vulnerable members of those communities, looking in on them and making sure they are okay. They care about the service and the key principles around that service.

Royal Mail staff have no interest in turning the service into a gig economy-style parcel courier, but Royal Mail is introducing insecure contracts and lower pay into the service to try to turn Royal Mail into just that sort of gig economy parcel courier service, which should be of deep concern, for many of the reasons that the right hon. Member mentioned. My concern is that Royal Mail's direction of travel will leave communities, businesses, customers and workers worse off.

In discussing the universal service obligation, we need to ask questions about the financial mismanagement of Royal Mail, which I believe puts the universal obligation at risk. Questions need to be asked about how a company can make profits of £758 million, as reported in March last year, which would easily qualify for any excess profits tax, and, six months later, that profit has been turned into a loss of £57 million. The company is almost Carillionesque in its management approach. As someone who was part of the Carillion inquiry, I can see similar themes in Royal Mail's management approach in terms of profits, sending money to its shareholders, running down the service and then making losses. The comparison is not unfair.

The end of Saturday deliveries would have a harmful effect on other industries, such as the publishing sector, as has been mentioned. It would result in millions of pounds in losses from people cancelling magazine subscriptions, for example, and reduce advertising revenues. It would also lead to thousands of decent Royal Mail jobs being lost around these islands, and it runs completely counter to the often stated levelling-up agenda that we hear about so often.

In closing, I hope the Minister will talk about the proposed takeover by Vesa Equity, which has been allowed to increase its stake in Royal Mail; we have had no explanation about that as yet. I have a very real concern that it wants to break up the service and break Royal Mail apart. If that is the case, the company will hear from many hon. Members, and not just myself, as to why that should be opposed and obstructed.

2.7 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important and timely debate.

As many hon. Members have said, we have to look at the current situation with Royal Mail regarding the USO and at the Royal Mail going forward. Not only have I been on the picket lines, but I have visited people in the workplace, and it is a fact that those individuals are more determined to take the Royal Mail forward as a viable, modern organisation than the people who are actually managing it. The people managing the company at the moment are taking fortunes from the business, and I will mention Simon Thompson personally. The fact that the salary of the chief executive is 23 times more than the median wage of a Royal Mail worker is scandalous, and nobody here would agree with paying him that amount.

Simon Thompson's objective is to destroy the Royal Mail and sell it off to Vesa Equity, which now owns 23% or 24% of Royal Mail. That fact was unearthed by

[Ian Lavery]

the CWU during early discussions about the pay award. Behind the scenes the management is trying to destroy Royal Mail in order to sell it off and to make fortunes, and then those people will move on to other industries in order to do the same. On the other side, we have people who are losing wages and who are prepared to fight for a viable, modern Royal Mail service, looking after the public in the future. That is the difference.

There are 115,000 posties on strike: the key workers we all clapped during the pandemic for the wonderful job they had done; the men and women who trundled the streets with the covid packs, day in, day out; the only individuals lots of people saw on a daily basis, in the morning—always with a smile, always with a whistle. These are the individuals who are fighting for what we all need, which is a modern Royal Mail, not a gigeconomy, courier-type service where we hive off the letters and use self-employed white van drivers, who themselves work extremely hard. We do not want to replace what we have with that type of employment; I would have thought those days had gone.

The profits been mentioned a number of times. What organisation could make £750 million-odd in profit, give £570 million-odd to shareholders and then not have any money to pay the people who provide the service, and then, just months after, say it is losing £1 million a day? It is ludicrous. There needs to be an inquiry into how the management are deliberately destroying Royal Mail, both financially and structurally. Until we get that, we have to support Royal Mail and the workers on the picket line to make sure we get a fair resolution and a decent, modern Royal Mail service into the future.

2.12 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Ms Ali, after 26 years of being in the House, it is a great pleasure to speak in a debate with you in the Chair for the first time. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate.

I will start by doing something I did not expect to do, which is to agree with the right hon. Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell), who gave an excellent speech, including his complimentary comments about the people who work in the postal service. What I find sad about the Government is that whenever they talk about public sector workers, they always talk about them as if they are the enemy, but when I talk to public sector workers, I hear that they are concerned about their conditions making it difficult for them to be able to provide the service they are providing. That is true of the postal workers, when I talk to them about their industrial action and defending the universal service obligation.

The situation we are in right now was predicted at the time of privatisation—incidentally, Royal Mail has been in private hands for 10 years, and here we are with this standard of service. What a disgrace! It was predicted that sooner or later, its management would want to cherry-pick the service. The more profitable bits would be hived off, and the universal service obligation would come under threat.

Post covid, many more people are working from home. I recently led a debate in this Chamber regarding my local train service, because the Government are

saying, “We are cutting the local train service because more people are working from home.” Well, if more people are working from home, it follows that more people will be reliant on their post; they will want those important documents that cannot be emailed, which other Members have described, to come through the post. If the Government’s argument for cutting trains applies to the postal service as well, it will be more important to defend the universal service obligation, not less.

I have raised the issue of casualisation in the past. We had casual labour employed to deliver the local post a number of years ago, and we found undelivered bags of mail in the Quaggy river, which runs through my constituency. More importantly, the employers could not identify the workers they had employed to deliver those bags of mail. They had no identification—no way of following up who they were. Those people had rifled through the post, and what they did not have time to open they just dumped in the river—no come back, no follow-up. Is that the sort of casualisation that we want to see—people being hired to deliver the post for Royal Mail because they have a van? It is a service that people rely on and we should not be dumbing it down.

I have one or two questions for the Minister. Royal Mail announced record profits last May of £758 million. It paid out £567 million to shareholders and buy-back schemes. Within six months of International Distributions Services becoming Royal Mail’s parent company, it announced it was losing £1 million a day and was going to cut 10,000 workers. What questions did the Government ask of IDS when it announced it was losing £1 million a day so soon after it had made record profits of £758 million? Given that the losses were within just six months, surely that should have raised some alarm bells within the Government.

What attitude do the Government take to the dumbing down of the workforce, the introduction of the laws of the gig economy—rather than relying on the dedicated workforce that we have—and Royal Mail’s undermining of the workforce? IDS, the parent company, says it is making losses, but apparently boasts to potential investors—this was reported in *The Telegraph*—that it has a £1.7 million investment war chest to put into the company. How can it be saying one thing to one audience and another to the other?

I know the Minister will sympathise with my final point. Apparently, Mr Daniel Křetínský has links to the gas operator Gazprom. What assurances do we have that we are not supporting Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine by the back door? Is there a national security risk from his involvement with Royal Mail?

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Member tell the House whether he has informed the Member he mentioned that he would refer to him in this debate?

Clive Efford: I am not talking about a Member of the House. Daniel Křetínský is the owner of Vesa Equity Investment.

Rushanara Ali (in the Chair): Fine; it is a similar name.

Clive Efford: Finally, will the Minister undertake to defend the universal service obligation and not dumb it down in any way?

2.17 pm

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important debate. £567 million: that is the amount Royal Mail bosses paid to shareholders in 2021, and it came from record-breaking profits that totalled £758 million. But just a few months after the company recorded these eye-watering figures, its bosses claimed that the business was bleeding money and went on to threaten the jobs of up to 10,000 posties.

That is the background to this dispute on Royal Mail: bosses on million-pound salaries taking what they can get, ransacking a 500-year-old part of our national infrastructure while seeking to cut jobs, shred workers' terms and conditions, and worsen a service that our communities rely on. I stand in full solidarity with members of the Communication Workers Union at Royal Mail in Coventry and across the country who have been on strike to protect their jobs and rights, and for a fair pay rise. I also want to put on record my disgust at the union-busting tactics that Royal Mail management have engaged in, with about 100 spurious allegations levelled against CWU reps, whose only crime in the bosses' eyes is standing up for themselves and their colleagues by going on strike.

I want to address the point about strikes head on, because they impact all our constituents. Of course they do; it is in their nature. Strikes are disruptive, just as they are on the railways or in the NHS. But when living costs soar, when everything is going up except wages, and when asking nicely does not get results, workers simply have no choice but to go on strike. The real problem is not workers going on strike; it is the rigged economy that the Tories have built that forces workers to go on strike, and I think that point is catching on. We only have to look at the polls across the board. The public back the strikers, from posties and nurses to teachers and rail workers. Even if they are not taking industrial action, people know that striking workers want what they want for themselves: fair pay, decent jobs and affordable bills. They want basic rights. They are not asking for much, and they have had enough of losing out while people at the top have got richer and richer.

This is not new in the Royal Mail. Since the Tory-Lib Dem coalition privatised the service in 2013, going beyond what even Thatcher attempted, shareholders have been paid more than £2 billion in dividends and buy-backs, and bosses' salaries have skyrocketed, but services have declined and workers' wages have stagnated. Even the privatisation was a total rip-off, with big banks undervaluing the company to a tune of billions and letting big shareholders make huge fortunes as they watched the value of their shares rocket, only to sell up once share prices stabilised. Now, after nearly a decade of privatisation, Royal Mail bosses want to end the universal service obligation, risking a service that caters to 32 million households and that has existed for more than 500 years, and replacing it with yet another gig economy company.

I want to end with a message to the Government: do not let Royal Mail be broken up; do not let mismanagement and greed destroy a service that our communities rely on, nor watch from the sidelines as our posties are made redundant, and their terms and conditions shredded.

Ultimately, my message to the Minister and the Government is: end the failed experiment of privatisation and bring Royal Mail back into public ownership.

2.21 pm

Sam Tarry (Ilford South) (Lab): It is an honour to speak under your chairship, Ms Ali. I want to start by expressing my solidarity with members of the Communication Workers Union who are taking industrial action for better pay and conditions, and with the Romford amalgamated branch, whose members in the main sorting office are almost a stone's throw from my office in Ilford. I give a particular shoutout to someone who has been on the picket lines leading the charge: Bill Bishopp, who I like to call the branch secretary. Employees like them are heroes who have worked throughout the pandemic. They have made Royal Mail one of our most beloved national institutions, which, as many Members have said today, our nation—the length and breadth of Britain—relies on. Any future must be one in which its workforce is valued, treated fairly, and paid fairly.

I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne), who has many years' experience working with Royal Mail, for securing this debate.

In the last year, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) has said, Royal Mail Group announced record-breaking profits of £758 million, £567 million of which was promptly paid out to shareholders. The crazy thing is that just a few weeks later, it announced significant losses, alleging it was losing over £1 million a day. At that point, shortly after, Royal Mail went cap in hand to the Government to plead poverty and ask for permission to reduce its commitments to the universal service obligation from six days to five. That is a wholesale levelling down of Royal Mail, and it has severely jeopardised the viability of the universal service obligation—the cornerstone of an effective and modern postal service.

Royal Mail has consistently failed to hit its quality of service targets in the past five years. As many Members have said, the obligation provides a crucial safety net to everyone in the UK as we all have a fundamental right to request access to a minimum set of communications services at affordable prices. It ensures that no matter where we are, Royal Mail must provide a six-days-a-week, one-price-goes-anywhere postal service. If we lose that universal postal service, countless homes in the UK will lose that safety net and find themselves at the mercy of a broken and imbalanced privatised system, as we have already seen happening over the past decade, that allows providers to cherry-pick the cheap, easy-to-reach customers and ignore those in more remote and less accessible communities.

The Government cannot keep letting Royal Mail off the hook in its consistent failures and must hold it to account. People in this country have to be able to rely on their postal service. As many Members have said today, vital medical letters and urgent bills need to arrive on time. At some point, someone has to say, "Enough is enough." The company is fundamentally run as a dreadful business, but it need not be run in that way. Surely breaking the USO is in direct conflict with the levelling-up agenda. If the Government claim to champion that in every part of the UK, concerns about Royal Mail demonstrate a levelling down across many

[Sam Tarry]

parts of our country—perhaps not in my constituency, but, as many Members have said today, in rural constituencies that really rely on the services.

At the same time as Royal Mail sought to tear the USO to shreds, its senior leadership used that mismanagement of funds to justify cutting 10,000 postal jobs and offering a derisory pay rise of only 2%. As we all know, inflation is spiralling up massively on a weekly basis. All the while, Royal Mail leadership retained and recruited agency staff, while engaging in disgraceful fire and rehire tactics to introduce owner drivers, who are on 20% less pay and insecure contracts—effectively turning a national institution into another gig economy employer. It is no wonder that the CWU, which represents 120,000 postal workers, has taken to the picket lines to oppose that disgraceful attack.

Will the Minister condemn those disgraceful employment practices, which almost guarantee a race to the bottom on pay and conditions? If so, what measures will the Government take to ensure that quality, secure jobs in the sector are not replaced by insecure and poorly paid positions? This vital service has been privatised and is run for profit, but I wonder whether the Government might consider something more radical. According to We Own It research, we would save £171 million a year by bringing Royal Mail into public ownership, which is enough to open 342 new Crown post offices, with post banks. Some 68% of the public would love Royal Mail to be brought into public ownership. Doing so would be both popular and practical.

The public have been sending letters by Royal Mail for more than half a millennium. For isolated, vulnerable and elderly people, a friendly face on the doorstep can be a lifeline. One local postie in Ilford, Michelle, told me:

“I’m very proud of the work I do; it’s not just about delivering Mail and parcels. I love keeping an eye out for those who are vulnerable or lonely and having a chat with them to brighten their day. Keeping the spirit of the postman alive for the children as many posties have before me. I’m the eyes and ears for missing pets etc. we are more than just a courier service. We keep the community going...We will not give up on providing the service the public deserves and has known for 500 years.”

If a postie can say that, the Government must consider what on earth is going on, and how we fix it.

2.27 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ali. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) for securing the debate.

Postal workers are the lifeblood of our communities, and they kept us afloat during the covid-19 pandemic. We clapped their selflessness and dedication. For many, they were, and are, the only source of human contact. They stepped up to the plate when we needed them most. It has been a pleasure to stand on picket lines in Liverpool, West Derby and witness the respect with which they are regarded in my community.

Royal Mail represents one of the clearest examples of the decimation caused by privatising a public service. It was established over 500 years ago, and the universal service obligation is now on the verge of being lost forever. That follows the service’s 2012 privatisation by the coalition Government. Royal Mail was profitable at

the time of privatisation: in the year prior to its sale it reported a 60% increase in its pre-tax annual profits to £324 million. Privatisation was an awful decision.

Fast-forwarding to today, Royal Mail has paid out billions in shareholder dividends and millions in payments to chief executive officers, while hiking up stamp prices, cutting workers’ wages in real terms and failing to meet Ofcom targets for service provision. There is now an attempt by Royal Mail bosses to get the Government to change the USO, by asking to move to a minimum five-day delivery service for letters from the current minimum six-day service. While West Derby postal workers have been forced to food banks because of low pay, and 10,000 postal workers have been cut from the service in the middle of the cost of living crisis, CEO Simon Thompson received a £140,000 bonus. Royal Mail has also introduced owner drivers on lower pay and insecure contracts, which signals a move to a gig economy employment model. Workers on the picket line are terrified of that move; they are terrified for the people in their communities—not just for their own jobs.

Make no mistake: if Royal Mail’s senior leadership is allowed to continue with those plans, and with its mismanagement of the organisation’s funds, Royal Mail as we know it will simply no longer exist. It will no longer provide a service to over 32 million addresses daily. After 500 years of service, it will be broken up and turned into another gig economy parcel courier, leaving communities, businesses, customers and workers worse off. Will the Minister respond to the calls of the Opposition and the CWU and launch an urgent inquiry into the leadership of the Royal Mail, given that it is a key part of the UK’s national infrastructure and appears to have been brought to the brink of collapse due to the gross mismanagement of its business by the current management?

It is no surprise that the majority of voters want Royal Mail to be brought back into public ownership. Research from the University of Greenwich tells us that buying back Royal Mail would cost £4.6 billion, but £171 million would be saved every year, to be reinvested into the postal service. Does the Minister want to stand by and allow one of the most cherished foundation stones of our nation, the Royal Mail, to be lost forever? If the Government shared the CWU’s vision, the service could be at the forefront of the regeneration of our communities. Instead, it is becoming a hollowed-out and gutted UK version of some of the awful international companies in this sector that treat their workforce as fodder. We must be better than that. Those loyal postal workers deserve the Minister’s action and support. They and our nation deserve nothing less.

2.30 pm

Beth Winter (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Royal Mail and the universal service obligation force us to ask questions about public services, public ownership, privatisation, and the current industrial disputes about pay and terms and conditions in workplaces. Royal Mail is a public service, and the USO, with the six-day delivery service, stamps on it the fact that it is and should be a service for everyone, but it is now operated in the private sector.

The management are operating to maximise their profits and slash services, and are disbursing those profits in dividends to private shareholders. They have paid so much in dividends that they now claim they

cannot pay staff and need to significantly reduce their terms and conditions. Other comrades here today have already exposed the grotesque profits that have been accrued—billions in the past decade—and paid out in dividends to shareholders.

At the same time, Royal Mail is pleading poverty and saying that it cannot pay workers a fair and decent wage. It is offering a below-inflation pay offer, which is absolutely unacceptable and abhorrent. That is why we have had 18 days of industrial action. I want to express my full support for and solidarity with those who have been forced—it is not a choice—to take strike action. I have spent many days with members in the delivery office and on the picket line in Aberaman. I congratulate them, because they have had to do this in very difficult circumstances. The CWU branch rep in south Wales, Jason Richards, is doing some outstanding work.

I recently wrote to the Secretary of State about Royal Mail's financial management of the business and its approach to meeting the USO for postal deliveries, and I have not received a reply. I would like to know why not.

I am mindful of time, but I want to pose some questions to the Minister. First, how can it be that the IDS board led the company to the brink of financial disaster just six months after reporting profits? How is that acceptable, given that it has been entrusted to run what is still a vital public service? If the Royal Mail chair and the CEO can tell *The Daily Telegraph* that the company has built up a £1.7 billion war chest to invest in the business, how can it then tell the CWU that it has debt and liquidity issues? What does the Department think of that financial management, and is the Minister taking steps to launch an inquiry, as others have already asked?

Can the Government explain the reasoning behind allowing a private equity firm, Vesa Equity, to acquire a controlling stake in the UK's primary postal service provider, potentially leading to a full takeover and likely asset stripping of this critical national infrastructure? Does the proposed move to a five-day delivery service not demonstrate that the Royal Mail's commitment to the USO is now broken, and that it wants to change a public service into the truly private, profit-led and cash-cow enterprise it would prefer Royal Mail to be?

My final question is this. With nearly 70% of the public in support of bringing Royal Mail back into public ownership, have the Government considered that option and how it could boost economic growth and opportunity, while providing secure, well-paid jobs for workers in everybody's communities, rather than the current proposal to cut jobs and shift to a gig economy of self-employment? I will finish by reiterating my message of solidarity. I give thanks to CWU—I know that we have officials in the Public Gallery—which provides such a vital link within our communities. They truly do deserve a better deal. Solidarity to them.

2.35 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Ali. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this important and timely debate. I cannot think of many Members who have had the experience of Royal Mail that she has had. I thank her for her 25 years of service and her relentless advocacy for those who rely on the USO and wider services.

Posties are indeed a lifeline. It is clear from the contributions across the House today that there is a great strength of feeling in all parts of the Chamber. There is a strength of feeling on the importance of the management and delivery from Royal Mail of our USO for communities across our country, and on the need to safeguard the USO, which so many across the country rely on. Notwithstanding the commercial challenges that Royal Mail faces, there is a problem with the management that has come through very clearly in this debate. Complaints are not being effectively dealt with and customers are paying more for less.

I thank the postal workers in my constituency of Feltham and Heston and the CWU, not just in my constituency but around the country—they are represented in the Public Gallery today. Royal Mail is a prized and loved institution. Royal Mail staff are essential workers. Whether it was delivering test and trace kits or being a point of contact for those isolating, they helped to get us through the pandemic. It is Royal Mail's dedicated workers who deliver the universal service obligation, delivering to every address in the UK, six days a week, at a uniform affordable price.

Almost all of us still rely on letters, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Matt Rodda) has said so clearly, the service is much more important for those who are vulnerable. The quality of service also matters. Citizens Advice has been calling out the quality of service in recent years—an issue over which the management of Royal Mail need to be held to account. Royal Mail has failed to hit a single quarterly target for over two years. Letter delays can result in consumer harm, such as missing hospital appointments, fines for missing court dates and weakened credit scores following missed bills.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of having a robust, well-functioning and affordable delivery service that can reach all parts of the country. It also demonstrated the value of postal workers connecting communities and delivering vital services to those in need. That is why Labour is committed to the universal service obligation as the company's central mission. The next Labour Government will want to ensure that the USO is secure for the future and continues to be provided by Royal Mail in a way that is affordable and accessible to all users, and financially sustainable for the long term. We will also strongly oppose any attempts, whether by the Conservatives in the future or by the leadership of Royal Mail Group, to weaken or abandon the USO.

I am glad to have seen the Minister's response to a recent written parliamentary question, as well as the debate earlier this week. I will be listening closely to what he says today. As we have heard, Royal Mail has asked the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to cut Saturday letter deliveries from the USO. We are extremely concerned about that and about the potential consequences, including for example for businesses with magazine subscriptions where Saturday deliveries form part of the delivery model.

Any industrial challenge needs to be resolved in a way that is pro-business and pro-worker, which is why we will support Royal Mail workers in their efforts to secure the long-term health and future of the service, by supporting mutually agreed changes to modernise the service. We all recognise the challenges that Royal Mail faces—whether it is the rising cost of doing business,

[Seema Malhotra]

much of which is due to the Tories' mismanagement of the economy and 13 years of failure, or growing competition in the parcel business—but it is wrong to see it as a service that is not changing or modernising, as some people have sought to characterise it. It has changed, and it is changing.

The Labour party will work with Royal Mail and the unions to expand the role of postal workers, adding social value to our communities and introducing innovative products and services to support the levelling up and growth of our local and regional economies. The Labour party stands against the break-up of Royal Mail and will oppose any attempt to turn this vital service into a gig economy employer through a takeover. Labour will review all aspects of the postal sector to ensure that the USO is continued and strengthened, including the delivery of parcels. This includes assessing the options for improving Royal Mail, taking into account the proposals from the CWU.

Let us be in no doubt that we all want to see a successful, long-term future for Royal Mail, in which the Government have to play their part, too. However, decisions by management are rightly under scrutiny, with questions remaining over the decision of International Distributions Services to give out over £400 million in dividends and £167 million in share buybacks last year, despite knowing about the post-pandemic mail traffic forecasts. The company is now seeing a financial loss in the first half of this financial year.

The Secretary of State has yet to respond to the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) in November, which outlined his concerns about recent developments and the increased shareholding in International Distribution Services by Vesa Equity, a company with links to Russia, which the Government have allowed to acquire a controlling stake. The management's handling of the current industrial dispute is also under question—not just from colleagues today, but from former CEO Rico Back.

It has also been concerning to hear reports of Royal Mail intimidating striking workers. If that is correct, even in a small number of cases, it is absolutely unacceptable. I ask the Minister to put on the record his and the Government's condemnation of any intimidation. Frankly, Royal Mail's essential workers, who I know take such pride in their jobs, should not have felt driven to take industrial action to get a fairer deal. It is positive that the CWU and Royal Mail are now in a period of intensive negotiations, and the country will expect a fair negotiated deal and an end to the dispute.

We have had a very important debate today, and at a very significant time. But it is clear that, at a time like this, the Government's vision and policy for the future of Royal Mail really matter. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will not change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service, which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011? What recent discussions has he had with Ofcom regarding Royal Mail's performance against the USO and its performance targets? What concerns has he raised, including about its sudden and rapid reversal of fortunes? What discussions has the Minister had with the CWU about its proposals, and what discussions has he had with Royal Mail about how it has handled the management of the organisation and the assessment of its strategy

for the future of the business, for workers and for our constituents? As my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) said, this is a service that people rely on and we should not be dumbing it down.

2.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Ms Ali. I congratulate the hon. Member for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) on securing this really important debate about Royal Mail and the future of the universal postal service, and I very much appreciate her experience and expertise, and what she is able to add to this very important debate. She talked about the changes at the top of Royal Mail, as well as the changes in personnel in my role. I pay tribute to my predecessors, not least for their unwavering commitment to Royal Mail workers, who do such a fine job, and to a universal postal service, which I will come to in a second. Today's debate is the second I have had on this matter in this Chamber this week, which shows how important the subject is to our constituents and to fellow Members of Parliament. I agree with the way the hon. Lady described the service; it is a lifeline for many throughout our communities.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their important contributions. As they know, postal services are an integral part of the modern economy, allowing the smallest of businesses to connect with customers across the world and providing consumers with access to a vast range of products. Most people rely on at least some important information to be delivered by post. Cards and letters remain a special way to keep in touch with loved ones, and, as the hon. Member for Luton South (Rachel Hopkins) said, it was hugely important that covid tests were distributed properly during the pandemic.

In the last financial year, all postal operators delivered around 3.8 billion parcels across the UK and Royal Mail delivered around 8 billion addressed letters. My hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston) is right that the volume of letters delivered has dropped to 8 billion; it was around double that in 2013, at the time of privatisation. Nevertheless, the importance of the postal service in keeping people connected was never more apparent than during the covid pandemic. We are hugely grateful to the delivery workers, who worked exceptionally hard to deliver letters and parcels in those difficult circumstances.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) talked about the pride that postal workers feel in their jobs. I absolutely concur with that. My father was a milkman in our local community. The hon. Member for Glasgow South West talked about how vulnerable members of the community are looked after by postal workers, and that was the experience of my father in our little local community as well, so I fully recognise the importance of the service.

Post offices also play a unique and vital role in the UK's postal system. We are committed to ensuring that we keep a minimum of 11,500 branches throughout the UK, with 99% of the population being within three miles of a post office. That is why we have invested £2.5 billion in the post office network over the last 10 years.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) seemed to think that Government Members view public service workers as enemies. I gently say to him that I take exception to that. We all have friends and relatives who proudly work in the public service. My mum was a social worker who worked in the public sector all her life, and she did a fantastic job, so I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's characterisation, and I do not recognise in my colleagues, either.

Clive Efford: My simple question is: how will the Minister vote on the Bill on Monday?

Kevin Hollinrake: We will have a good opportunity to debate the Bill on Monday, so I do not want to get dragged into that right now.

Ian Lavery: Yes or no?

Kevin Hollinrake: As the Minister concerned, clearly I will vote in favour, as the hon. Gentleman would imagine, but let us have a good debate about that on Monday. I spoke to one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues, the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), today, and he said he was very supportive of a minimum service level, so we should not draw battle lines on this issue simply on party political grounds. But perhaps we should have a go at debating that on Monday.

The importance of the universal postal service is a key element of today's debate, as mentioned by many hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale, my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), and the hon. Members for Reading East (Matt Rodda), for Luton South, for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and for Ilford South (Sam Tarry). Our objective continues to be the provision of a financially sustainable and efficient universal service that meets the needs of users, within an open and competitive postal market. That is why the six-day-a-week, one-price-goes-anywhere, universal service remains at the heart of the regulatory regime, and why Ofcom has a primary duty to secure its provision.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon asked what I am doing to make sure that Ofcom meets its responsibilities. I met the head of Ofcom and other members and pointed out very clearly its role as a regulator, and in ensuring that this service continues.

To be completely clear, the Government currently have no plans to change the statutory minimum requirements of the universal postal service, which are set out in the Postal Services Act 2011.

Chris Stephens: I take what the Minister says in good faith, but could he maybe just respond to some of our concerns about the actions of Royal Mail and the proposed takeover from Vesa Equity? While the Government are saying that they want to keep the six-day service, Royal Mail management and some of its shareholders seem to be trying to do something completely different.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I will come on to the Vesa point later, but set out in the legislation, from back in 2011, there is

a clear and transparent process for how any changes to the universal postal service should be considered. That was coalition legislation. Any such change would need to be made through secondary legislation and be agreed by Parliament. We would also expect Ofcom to consult with all stakeholders. Our position has been very clear in my meetings with Royal Mail and Ofcom: we think that the six-day service should continue.

Ofcom has a monitoring regime in place to identify any risks or threats to the universal postal service. Since 2012, it has published an annual report setting out key data and trends in the postal sector, the impact of the changing market dynamics on UK postal services, and Royal Mail's performance. Royal Mail is clearly facing some challenges, particularly given the long-term decline in letter volumes and the currently challenging economic backdrop, but I have yet to receive any convincing case for a need to change to meet users' needs and to ensure the financial sustainability of the universal postal service.

A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon and the hon. Member for Jarrow, raised a point about large business owners and the impact on large businesses, such as those that produce magazines and the like, and how they would be impacted. We would fully expect their needs to be taken into account, in terms of user needs' surveys. The hon. Member for Reading East talked about the impact on small and medium-sized enterprises—something that is very important to me personally—and making sure that they can get marketing messages out to communities across their target areas.

I have made it clear to Royal Mail that it needs to make any case for change to Ofcom and that I will fully consider any advice the regulator gives me on the future scope of the universal postal service.

Hon. Members have understandably raised concerns about Royal Mail's service delivery performance. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Ian Byrne) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon both raised that point. It is true that the business has faced increasing pressures over the last few years, not least the coronavirus pandemic and the industrial relations dispute with the Communication Workers Union. There have been impacts on the business and the users of postal services. It is regrettable to see postal services disrupted due to strike action and to see the impact that that is having on consumers, businesses and other users.

We are not involved in the negotiations, given that Royal Mail is a private company. However, we are monitoring the dispute closely and have urged Royal Mail and the CWU to reach a resolution as soon as possible. I know there are ACAS talks right now and there will be no further strikes until 20 January, until the talks have concluded. I very much hope that the talks will prove successful.

Ian Lavery: Before the Minister concludes, will he comment on the fact that Royal Mail is openly bragging that it has £1.7 billion in a war chest for union-busting and investing in the company?

Kevin Hollinrake: I will come on to that important point.

Among other things, Royal Mail is required by Ofcom regulation to achieve certain performance targets in the delivery of its universal service products to ensure that

[Kevin Hollinrake]

consumers receive an adequate level of service. The regulator has powers to investigate and to take enforcement action, as it did when it fined Royal Mail £1.5 million in 2020 for missing its 2018-19 first class national delivery target.

Ofcom does accept that covid-19 has had a continued impact on Royal Mail's service delivery, which is why Ofcom did not fine it for its regulatory obligations breaches last year. However, in that decision, Ofcom also noted its concerns, which should concern us all, about Royal Mail's performance in the early part of the year, which Ofcom felt fell well short of where it should be. Ofcom believes that Royal Mail has had plenty of time to learn lessons from the pandemic, which will mean that it is unlikely to consider the factors considered for 2021-22 as exceptional and beyond its control in the future. Royal Mail has committed to restoring quality of service as soon as possible, and I expect Ofcom to keep a close eye on its performance over the remainder of this year.

Points about renationalisation were raised by the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden), Coventry South (Zarah Sultana) and Glasgow South West and others. While Royal Mail undoubtedly faces challenges, the Government are clear that renationalising the business is not the answer. One of the primary reasons for the sale was to enable Royal Mail to access the capital it needs to invest. When Royal Mail was independently reviewed in 2008 for the last Labour Government, we were told that it was underfunded and had not kept pace; it was 40% less efficient than equivalents around the world.

Financial performance was raised by the hon. Member for Wansbeck and the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Beth Winter). I think the hon. Member for Cynon Valley said that she had not had a response to her letter. I have asked my officials to look into that urgently, along with the letter from the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), to ensure that they get responses quickly; I apologise for that.

In terms of profitability, it is important to look at Royal Mail in isolation, rather than at IDS itself. Different figures have been bandied about. Look at profitability this year: as Members have mentioned, in the same period in the previous year it made a profit of £235 million—this year, it made a loss of £220 million. To answer hon. Members' questions, in its regulatory notice in the Regulatory News Service—in which the information must be accurate—it blames that on the strikes, the lack of productivity improvements that were set out in the "Pathway to Change" document and the macro-economic climate.

The hon. Member for Wansbeck described the £1.7 billion invested as a war chest to fight unions; I do not think that that is an accurate statement. I saw it reported in one of the papers—I think it stated that it was £1.7 billion to invest across the businesses. That does not mean that it uses that war chest to simply fight industrial action, and I would not expect that to happen. We are keen to ensure that the dispute is resolved, and amicably.

Royal Mail has invested more than £2 billion in the UK business since privatisation, including £900 million over the last three years and £441 million in the last financial year, in areas such as electric vans, two new parcel hubs, automation and improving its poorest performing delivery offices. Importantly, that investment is transforming how Royal Mail operates, with parcel automation up from 12% in 2019 to 65% now. There is certainly room for improvement in Royal Mail's service delivery. Ofcom's analysis tells us that most consumers continue to be satisfied with postal services, but we should continue to challenge Royal Mail on its performance.

As I have set out, the Government remain committed to securing a financially sustainable and efficient universal postal service for users throughout the UK that is accessible and affordable. There are currently no plans to change the minimum requirements of the service.

2.58 pm

Kate Osborne: I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for speaking in the debate. I am not surprised to hear the Minister say that he will be voting for the legislation on Monday; I will certainly not be voting in favour of it, because it is a fundamental attack on workers and human rights. I thank the Minister for his responses, and I mostly want to thank all postal workers—my old colleagues—for continuing to deliver, literally, in the face of the vile attacks that they are receiving from the management of Royal Mail.

As the Minister has heard, there are so many different areas in which Royal Mail's senior management is failing. We need an inquiry into the gross mismanagement of Royal Mail; that is something that I have asked for before, and I ask for it again. The millions of pounds given to shareholders and CEOs in profit should be put back into the business, and Royal Mail—a service that we all rely on—should be renationalised. Royal Mail needs to resolve the dispute with the CWU, and I send solidarity to all members and workers—I know that they are in talks this week. It must row back from threatening to sack tens of thousands of workers; these job losses will impact on not only those losing their jobs but the workers who are left behind to pick up the slack and, of course, it will impact on us all as users of Royal Mail.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Skills and Labour Shortages

[SIR GRAHAM BRADY IN THE CHAIR]

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Scottish Affairs Committee on 16 November 2021, on Labour shortages, HC 879.]

3.1 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of skills and labour shortages.

I am delighted to have secured this debate on labour and skills shortages across the UK. The reality of those shortages affects my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran and every single constituency across the UK, so the matter should be of concern to all of us. It acts as a drag on our whole economy, and unless specific and deliberate measures are taken to address it, it will undoubtedly prevent the kind of economic recovery that we all want to see. I thank hon. Members for turning out for this important debate.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind): I am sure the hon. Member will agree that the Government's post-Brexit approach to migration has had a negative impact on the UK's ability to fill crucial posts in sectors such as agriculture, farming, healthcare and the arts. Does she agree that the Home Office should be looking wholesale at the efficacy of visa programmes, rather than bit by bit, country by country?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. She tempts me to get into that particular area before I am ready to do so, but I will say more about it in a moment.

I extend my thanks to the Association of Colleges, the Chartered Management Institute, the Heart of London Business Alliance, the House of Commons Library, the Open University and several others for the helpful and informative briefings that they have provided for this debate.

The shortage of skills and labour affects, to a greater or lesser degree, every single sector of our economy and every area of our lives. It affects our productivity and our public services. We see it in areas such as health and social care. There are shortages right across our NHS—in radiology, audiology and that is not to mention doctors and nurses. The Nuffield Trust estimates that in England alone, the shortage of doctors in the NHS could be as high as 12,000, and the shortage of nurses could be over 50,000.

There are also shortages in food processing, agriculture, transport, haulage, construction, butchery, tourism, manufacturing, veterinary medicine, information and cybersecurity and hospitality. Pressures on supply chains have helped to increase the cost of goods and services, which we see particularly in the soaring cost of food.

As the title of the debate indicates, there is a shortage of labour and required skills in a range of areas. That matters. The Open University's 2022 business barometer estimated that 78% of UK organisations suffered a decline in output, profitability and growth as a consequence of a lack of available skills. The Recruitment and Employment Confederation estimates that if labour shortages are

not addressed, the UK economy will be £39 billion worse off each year from 2024. The Chartered Management Institute found that overall, 71% of managers said that their organisations experienced ongoing difficulties in recruiting the skilled staff they need.

The cost is huge. Research, again from the Open University, found that 72% of businesses had increased the workload on other staff because of staff shortages, and 78% reported that those shortages were causing a reduction in activity, service delivery, profitability and long-term growth plans. Significant strains are consequently placed on service levels and supply chains, and members of existing workforces leave due to the impact on their own wellbeing of prolonged staff shortages. According to the Federation of Small Businesses, 80% of small firms face difficulty recruiting applicants with suitable skills.

The number of vacancies unfilled across the UK is now slightly higher than the number of people registered as unemployed. Managers are doing all they can to recruit the staff they need. They may be doing so through the old-fashioned method of word-of-mouth recommendations, by engaging recruitment agencies, by use of social media and print media, by distributing leaflets and flyers advertising vacancies, by offering introductory pay bonuses, by paying more competitive salaries, and by revising their wider employment practices and policies to attract and retain those with the skills they need—such as offering flexible working hours where possible—but despite those best efforts, the challenges remain.

There are several reasons for the shortage of labour and skills across our economy. We know that the demand for labour has recovered faster than the labour supply since the pandemic; indeed, the labour demand is above pre-pandemic levels, while the labour supply is below pre-pandemic levels. When the pandemic hit, older workers responded to the initial reduction in labour demand by no longer looking for work, so they went from being unemployed to being inactive. Since the pandemic, the number of people unable to work due to health reasons seems to have increased. However, in October 2022, the Institute for Fiscal Studies' longitudinal data showed that many among the older population who are economically inactive because of long-term illness left the labour market before they became ill—they left because they decided to retire. Indeed, with the advent of remote working, many older workers found that they quite enjoyed spending time at home and did not wish to return to the workplace, and they took the opportunity to retire as a result.

The other driver of the labour and skills shortages we face, which poses the real threat to our economic recovery and potential prosperity, is—as everyone in this Chamber and outside it knows—Brexit. Even a House of Lords report last month pointed to an increase in early retirement and changes to migrant worker patterns since the Brexit referendum as exacerbating the main drivers of those shortages. It found that

“Over the last few years many EU workers, who filled these roles, have left the UK.”

There is no dispute about the fact that before the EU referendum and the pandemic, free movement from the EU was a major source of labour in the UK. By 2020, an estimated 55% of foreign-born workers who said that they originally moved to the UK for work-related

[Patricia Gibson]

reasons were born in EU countries. Now, many have left the UK since the UK left the EU—years that coincidentally saw a pandemic, as well. Even if those workers who have left want to return to the UK, many will find themselves unable to do so because of the UK's restrictive post-Brexit immigration policies. That is despite the fact that our economy—our labour market—needs them to fill the gaps that we are suffering, which are acting as a drag on our economy and our current and future prosperity.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I am sure that the hon. Member will have noted that the most recent figures for net migration are around half a million, which demonstrates that this country still has a pretty liberal immigration policy that is focused on the needs of the economy and business.

Patricia Gibson: I plan to touch on that. However, migration is not enough; it does not fill the range of gaps, including skill gaps, and needs in our economy. I will say something about that in just a moment.

Between Brexit and the start of the pandemic, the number of national insurance numbers issued to people from the EU fell by 24%. That impacted our NHS, and the number of specialist doctors in the UK from the EU or the European free trade area; it was more than 4,000 lower than if pre-Brexit trends had continued. Just to be clear, the shortfall is not being made up by non-EU workers. The situation is particularly acute in rural areas, prompting the Migration Advisory Committee to warn of the risks of rural depopulation, which is pretty serious.

The Minister will wish to argue that this serious situation could be addressed by investing in skills and education, to which I would say this: first, that would require real investment that is not forthcoming at the levels that we would all wish to see; and secondly, that strategy would not help the situation right now. It would perhaps help us to plug some gaps in the longer term, but our economy—our public and private sectors—need help right now. The situation is particularly worrying for Scotland, given that ours is the only country in the UK in which the population is projected to fall in the next decade.

What can the Government do about this situation? Well, they could make it easier for businesses to recruit from abroad as and when they need to, for all skill levels. Employers are concerned about how onerous, time-consuming and bureaucratic it is to recruit staff from abroad, and it should not be. Employers make every effort to recruit locally, but when that does not result in their gaining the staff and skills that they need, it should be much easier and smoother to tap into the labour markets of our European neighbours. That would make perfect sense for our employers, our economic prosperity, and those who are recruited. The Government's own MPs are coming to realise how urgent the situation is. That was evident when the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) echoed the Scottish Government's calls for the Home Office to provide long-term stability for migrant workers with a 24-month visa.

It pains me to say it, but the UK Government are prisoners of their own rhetoric; they have somewhat boxed themselves in over visas and immigration, despite

the demands of our economy. The Chancellor told us in his autumn statement last November that the Prime Minister would ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to

“do a thorough review of issues holding back workforce participation, to conclude early in the new year.”—[*Official Report*, 17 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 848.]

Some people's hopes were raised that those words might signal change, driven by common sense, but as we have heard nothing since about a review, I fear that those hopes were misplaced. Perhaps when the Minister responds to the debate, he can update us on that review.

The temporary exception to the skilled worker criteria under the Government's points-based immigration system for care workers, and the introduction of a bespoke visa for seasonal agricultural workers, are absolutely fine moves, as far as they go. However, they are clearly inadequate to address the scale of the workforce challenges faced by the sectors to which they are directed. They also take no account of the range of needs in other sectors. Similarly, the kickstart scheme, well-intentioned though it is, is simply inadequate to address these challenges.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on her speech. She is absolutely right about the impact that Brexit has had. That impact has perhaps been escalated and exacerbated by covid; a lot of migrant workers went home as soon as the pandemic began. Obviously, it is more difficult than before for others to come in, which has escalated the situation. I want to clarify what she is asking for by way of response. Am I right in saying that it is a 24-month visa, and an escalation of the schemes that she mentioned, within the confines of not returning to freedom of movement? Or is she saying that we should have a return to complete freedom of movement, and that anyone from the EU who wants to come and work here should be able to?

Patricia Gibson: I have absolutely no problem with freedom of movement—we have suffered enormously as a result of no longer having it—but I appreciate that the Government will not move in that direction, so I am asking them to allow our public and private sectors to recruit from Europe as and when they need to in order to fill their skills gaps and jobs gaps. That is very difficult. The skilled workers criteria are too narrow and do not fill the gaps, even for the sectors that they are intended to help. They are not enough and do not take into account the strains and shortages in areas of the economy that they are not directed at. I believe that the Minister and the Government understand all the difficulties that I and others have mentioned, but feel trapped by their rhetoric. I hope they will get over that and take a common-sense approach, for the sake of our economic prosperity.

The Government commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to review the shortage occupation list, but I understand that the review has been paused pending clarification of the Government's priorities surrounding the skilled workers route. When the Minister gets to his feet, perhaps he will give us more detail of how the review is going, when it will be unpaused, and when we might see some benefit from it.

In the absence of any attempt to address the very serious situation in the way that I and many people across this House would like, and that would have the

necessary impact on the challenges, I urge the Minister at the very least to play his part in persuading his Government to allow a Scottish visa to be established, so that those who wish to live in Scotland and contribute to its workforce may do so. By way of precedent, similar successful schemes have been established in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Switzerland on a regional basis. Scotland should not suffer from a one-size-fits-all UK approach; its demographic, geographical and labour needs are entirely different.

It makes sense to allow asylum seekers who come to the UK to enter our workforce. They are stuck in hotels or Home Office accommodation at huge cost to the taxpayer, but many of them have valuable skills that we need, and they are desperate to enter our workforce, while we suffer skills and labour shortages. That defies all common sense.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I support the hon. Lady's comments. In Northern Ireland, the Syrian scheme came in, and that was followed by the Afghan scheme. We still have people who came in through the Afghan scheme in the Marine Court hotel in North Down. I have made representations to the Minister and the Department. Local companies such as Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct are willing to give those people jobs, and those people want to work, but we cannot get them into employment. They are still stuck in a hotel. Would anyone like to be stuck in a hotel for one and a half years?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. We often hear from those on the Government Benches about how expensive the system is. Well, there is a way out. There is a way to benefit our economy, the asylum seekers, our communities and our workforce. It is a no-brainer. The situation defies all common sense. Refugee Action has calculated that if asylum seekers were given permission to work, that could generate up to £330 million annually for the UK Treasury. I urge the Minister to do what he can to persuade his Government to support the private Member's Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), the Asylum Seekers (Permission to Work) Bill.

The Scottish Government are doing everything they can with their very limited powers to address skills and labour shortages across Scotland, and have developed a "working with business" action plan. They are identifying new and existing actions that they can take, alongside business and partners such as skills agencies, to mitigate the impact of skills and labour shortages, and to stimulate economic recovery through a range of employability, skills and sector-specific interventions. However, the Minister knows that the real levers of power that have to be used if we are to address the issue are with the UK Government. If he says that the UK Government are not willing to take the necessary steps right now to address the shortages that are damaging the economy in Scotland, as well as the rest of the UK, he should make the case to his Government for devolving the necessary powers to the Scottish Parliament, so it can tackle this problem in a more effective and logical way in the interim, before independence for Scotland. In that way, Scotland can in the meantime attract and retain those with the skills and attributes that we need in our workforce, so that our communities, our economy and our country can grow for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

3.21 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for this important debate, Sir Graham. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing it; it matters so much to many of our constituents. Although our views are very different on a number of matters, such as Brexit, I agree that addressing labour and skills shortages is crucial for our economy. That point was made strongly to me at a recent advice surgery by a constituent who has been struggling to recruit workers to her car repair business in Barnet. I strongly believe that apprenticeships can help us tackle that problem, and I will largely focus my remarks on them.

Apprenticeships are a highly effective way to improve people's skills. That is important for several reasons. First, they make our economy more productive and competitive, and that boosts growth and raises living standards. They help plug the labour shortages that we have been hearing about this afternoon.

Margaret Ferrier: Does the right hon. Lady agree that if the Government invest both time and money in engaging unemployed people in younger age groups, and support them in careers that they have a passion for and enjoy, that could head off a further growth in labour and skills shortages? Could that begin to balance out the inactivity that we see in those approaching retirement years?

Theresa Villiers: I certainly agree that investing in adult education, apprenticeships and skills is crucial for giving people opportunities in life and the skills that they need. That is why I welcome the huge amount of work that the Government have done on this issue. Indeed, the Prime Minister identified that as a key priority for him.

Apprenticeships, skills and adult education are crucial in giving people the chance to succeed in life, whatever their background. They can be an engine of social mobility and social justice. Apprenticeships in the science and technology field can strengthen the capacity of our workforce to tackle the two huge environmental challenges we face: climate change and nature recovery. For those three reasons alone, I am a big enthusiast for apprenticeships. I have met a number of people whose lives have been transformed for the better because of them.

Mr Perkins: I absolutely share the right hon. Lady's enthusiasm for apprenticeships, so I suspect she will be as concerned as I am that, since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, the number of apprenticeships has fallen, and the number of apprentices in small and medium-sized enterprises has fallen massively. Companies that do not pay the apprenticeship levy are much less likely to do apprenticeships. Does she agree with me and the Labour party that we need to make the apprenticeship levy more flexible, and bring more small businesses under that regime?

Theresa Villiers: There is scope to review the apprenticeship levy and make it more flexible; I will come on to that. We also have to recognise the success in recent years in delivering apprenticeships; there have been around 5.2 million since the Conservatives returned

[Theresa Villiers]

to office in 2010. Yes, there has been a slight fall since the covid pandemic, which we need to address. I will come on to that later.

I commend Middlesex University, which is local to my constituency, for its work on degree apprenticeships. They deliver a great combination of academic and in-work learning, without creating the burden of debt that comes with a more traditional degree. It was great to meet young people in the university's apprenticeship programme who are training for roles in the NHS at Barnet Hospital. Those dedicated apprentices show that skilling up people already working in the NHS can help to address labour shortages in healthcare, which we urgently need to tackle if we are to expand the NHS's capacity for dealing with rising healthcare need.

I also praise the work of the BioIndustry Association. Last year, I met the association, along with some of its young people who are undertaking apprenticeships in the biotech and life sciences sector, to discuss these important matters. That part of our economy is truly world beating, as the inspirational work on delivering a vaccine during the covid pandemic showed. We need to ensure that the life sciences sector has a great pool of talent from which to recruit if it is to live up to its potential to deliver the new treatments, vaccinations and diagnostics that could transform healthcare in years to come, and if it is to provide hope for people suffering from devastating conditions such as cancer and dementia.

In his winding-up speech, I want the Minister to consider how we can get more people into apprenticeships. When it comes to tech sectors such as life sciences, co-ordination between the Government's research and development and skills programmes can be invaluable. For example, the network of catapult centres created by the Government to encourage cutting-edge science and innovation could play a positive role in supporting small businesses in handling the apprenticeship process. That is illustrated by the cell and gene therapy catapult's development of ATAC—the Advanced Therapies Apprenticeship Community. That engaged over 48 companies in using apprenticeships to attract, train and retain talent. Over half of the companies were small or medium-sized enterprises at the time of first recruitment.

Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), I ask the Minister to consider the wider point of how we can make it easier for small businesses, such as that owned by my constituent, to employ and train apprentices. I am the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships, which considered that issue in a report published last July.

Patricia Gibson: The right hon. Lady is making important points about apprenticeships, which we all understand are important for our young people and economy. Of course, the situation is urgent. Does she agree that Government action on the issue so far, such as the kickstart scheme, which cost £2 billion and had a take-up of around 25%, shows that more bold and radical thinking is needed to address the challenges we face?

Theresa Villiers: A great deal has been achieved so far—not least more than half a million apprenticeships—but of course we can always do more. We need to ensure

that schemes such as kickstart, and the other skills programme, have as wide an uptake as possible. I am particularly keen to see minority ethnic communities engaged effectively in those skills programmes. There is more that can be done, but much has already been achieved.

In the APPG's July report, we appeal for a reduction in the complexity of both the creation of new apprenticeships and the delivery of current ones. I hope that the Minister will look at how the system, including the apprenticeship levy, is working, to make it more cost-effective for small businesses to take on apprentices. We also need the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to engage closely with sectors such as construction, healthcare, life sciences and green tech, to ensure that apprenticeship standards keep up to date with the pace of change. All of us, whether we are MPs, parents, teachers, Ministers or employers, need to do more to promote apprenticeships as a great way for young people to get on in life and achieve their goals. I have welcomed the opportunity to do that in today's debate. I hope that there will be many more opportunities to discuss these important matters in the House in the months to come.

3.30 pm

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this important debate.

According to the Confederation of British Industry, 90% of the UK workforce—or 30 million people—will need to be reskilled by 2030. In its report published in October 2020, it also said that automation and technology will bring millions of new jobs to the UK, and that there would be a big rise in demand for skills such as digital, STEM and interpersonal, but many other roles will change significantly or disappear. The occupations that are most likely to shrink have the lowest rates of training, the highest unemployment rates and the lowest wages.

We do not know what the workforce of the future will look like. However, we know that with more automation and artificial intelligence, some sectors will be changed beyond recognition. It is clear that we need to think very carefully about the skills strategy, and in particular, what that means for those on low pay. Although it is important to look at current skills shortages and to plan to address them, a long-term perspective is much needed. Adopting too narrow an approach to skills and education will not serve us well. We also need to be clear that investment in education and skills is crucial for the future of our economy and wider society.

It is therefore massively disappointing that, last month, the “Annual report on education spending in England” from the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that even though total spending on adult skills is set to increase by 22% between 2019-20 and 2024-25,

“this only reverses a fraction of past cuts: total adult skills spending in 2024-25 will still be 22% below 2009-10 levels.”

Spending on classroom-based adult education has fallen even more

“and will still be 40% below 2009-10 levels even with the additional funding.”

There is a particular need to focus on basic skills if we are to improve our economic outlook.

Mr Perkins: On that point about basic skills, there was an incredibly successful Unionlearn programme, which enabled people who were in the workplace, whether they were members of a trade union or not, to access some of the basic skills they might not have got at school. It made a radical difference to people's careers and their progression. Does my hon. Friend agree that getting rid of Unionlearn was a retrograde and politically motivated move and that we are paying a dear price for it?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and I agree; getting rid of Unionlearn did a disservice to our country and everybody in it.

A recent report by the Centre for Social Justice points to a huge deficit of basic skills across England. One of those basic skills is adult literacy. According to the National Literacy Trust, 7.1 million adults in England—that is 16.4% of the adult population—are functionally illiterate. However, the Government have failed to respond to the severity of the crisis. I highlighted the matter with amendments to both the Bill that became the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 and, more recently, to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill. Both amendments called on the Government to review levels of adult literacy, publish the findings and set out a strategy to improve levels of adult literacy.

In ignoring the scale of the crisis in adult literacy, the Government are wasting the talents of more than 16% of the adult population. That makes absolutely no sense. We need a Government that will provide people with the opportunity to acquire skills that they need to progress, both for their personal development and the good of the economy.

I am also concerned about the Government's approach to skills and adult education more widely. It seems that Ministers are focusing intensely on skills for jobs, to the detriment of education as a whole. The benefits of an educated society cannot be overestimated. Some of those benefits are demonstrated clearly in the Workers' Educational Association 2022 impact report. The WEA does a fantastic job in providing the secretary to the all-party group for adult education, which I chair.

The WEA supports adults to gain the skills they need to get into work and to improve their prospects if they are already in work. It also helps adults who are often far away from the labour market to develop skills to cope with social isolation, to improve their physical and mental health, and to acquire a love of learning by helping them to develop interests and connections with the communities around them. The WEA's impact report notes that 84% of the association's students reported improvements in their overall wellbeing, 51% reported an increase in their self-confidence, and 43% said that their course helped them to make new friends.

The Government's recent consultation document on implementing a new further education funding and accountability system sets out proposals to

"re-orientate the vision for non-qualification provision"

in areas funded by the Education and Skills Agency, which account for about 40% of adult education provision. The Government propose that, in future, all non-qualification provision in adult education

"should meet at least one of the following objectives:...achieving employment outcomes for all learners...achieving progression to further learning that moves individuals closer to the labour

market, for all learners...helping those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities to support their personal development and access to independent living".

Although all of those are hugely important, stakeholders are understandably concerned about what this might mean for people who need longer to gain the confidence or basic skills to progress into work. I am also concerned about what the Government's approach means for the delivery of a broad adult education curriculum. I would be grateful if the Minister could give a reassurance that his Government's policies will not mean the abolition of courses in subjects such as art, history, sociology, drama, music and literature.

Sue Pember, the policy director at HOLEX, the professional body for adult community education and learning, has pointed out that the consultation

"seems to have missed the point that many adult learners don't sign up for their first course because they think it might lead to a better job or set them on a pathway to a brand-new suite of qualifications. Most turn up to adult community education because they want a fresh start, they're hoping to find a sense of community and to improve their wellbeing."

That certainly rings true with my experience as a former adult education tutor. On many occasions, I have seen the impact that being able to learn a subject later in life can have on an adult who may not have benefited from education in their younger years. There are many reasons why someone did not thrive during their school years, such as ill health, the ill health of a family member, or the fact that they moved around a lot as a child and were not able to settle in one area.

Sue Pember's statement also brings to mind something that I heard during a recent meeting with the University and College Union's adult education members. One of the people there told me a story about their student who went on to attain a PhD, I believe, in biochemistry. When the student first attended the college, she went to a course in belly dancing. She wanted some relaxation—I think she wanted to get away from her kids—but she wound up with a PhD in a very difficult science subject. That is a good example of how having something on offer for people who want to pursue their own interests can lead to further opportunities.

It seems that the cultural shift away from education and skills, and towards the Government's narrow focus on solely vocational skills, will significantly reduce opportunities for adults to learn in subjects that they can enjoy and that can bring them benefits that are not necessarily employment-related. We need not only skills training opportunities, but adult education in community settings with a broad curriculum offer. That can be particularly important for people who find themselves unemployed after decades of work, as well as for retired people who want to learn something new.

At a time when we have an ageing society and increasing problems of loneliness, it cannot be right to bring in measures that have the potential to remove community-based learning opportunities. Further, someone who has come out of paid employment to care for a family member, or who has been made redundant, may well benefit far more from a course that does not have any obvious career outcome, particularly if they need to regain their confidence after being away from the labour market. Redundancy can knock people's sense of confidence.

Education gives people the opportunity to develop and explore things that are of interest to them. When it comes to learning, there is no greater motivation than

[Margaret Greenwood]

being interested. To narrow the focus of adult education and skills in the way that the Government are doing is to leave us much poorer culturally. Unless adults are provided with a good range of opportunities in their communities, we are not harnessing the talents of everyone in the country, and we are depriving people of the opportunity to become the very best that they can. That is a detriment to us all.

As I said, we do not know what the jobs of the future will look like, so we need to make sure that people have the opportunities to retrain and to enrich their lives through education at any point in life. The Government need to invest in all of our futures.

3.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on leading the debate and on setting the scene so well, as she always does. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) and I thank her for her contribution. In her introduction, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran made a point that I referred to in my intervention, but I want to reiterate it and take it from two angles.

First, I will speak about the Afghan refugees who have been staying at the Marine Court Hotel in Bangor, in the neighbouring constituency to mine, since their arrival from Afghanistan. As I have made the responsible Ministers aware, two major food production employers in my constituency, Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct, have jobs available right now. Those jobs were available months ago; indeed, they were available more than a year ago. I find it frustrating that we have people who want to be active and have skills, and that there are jobs available for them, so I support the point made by the hon. Member. I not sure whether that issue falls within the Minister's remit, but if not, will he pass it on to the relevant Minister?

The situation is frustrating because there are vacancies in food production in my constituency that are difficult to fill. It is not as though employers have not tried to fill those vacancies; they have been energetic and have been into further education establishments and schools to talk to people at an early stage about that type of work. It is well-paid work, with excellent remuneration, but it is frustrating for them not to be able to recruit within their area.

In modern times, there often seem to be shortages in many things. For businesses, especially our small and medium-sized enterprises, shortages in skilled staff are rife. That has been brought to my attention by many business owners in Strangford. After a few horrific years, with the impacts of covid, a dire economy and the cost of living crisis, we have to improve the situation. There are things that we can do, as other hon. Members have said. Staff are the reason our businesses can function. Without a sustainable staffing base, businesses cannot work on a day-to-day basis.

I mentioned Willowbrook Foods and Mash Direct, and in both those cases, the companies were in a position to offer workers accommodation as well, which is a real plus. They are often looking for new staff to fill the most important roles in the business. They are casting their recruitment campaigns widely, across the whole

Province. They bus people in from Newry and Mid Ulster, and people even come from the Republic of Ireland to work there.

The hospitality sector in my constituency is facing major staff shortages. We are fortunate to have a number of coffee shops and small cafés, and a coffee culture has been created in my major town of Newtownards. Examples of coffee shops in my constituency include Fika in Greyabbey, No8 Court Street in Newtownards and Sugarcane in Comber, but there is often high employee turnover and wages are, by their nature, low. Hospitality businesses have been reaching out to previous applicants to entice them back and to hire them to fill vacant positions, which shows the huge impact of labour shortages on the hospitality sector. There cannot be an MP in this House, including you, Sir Graham, who is not aware of the dire shortage of staff in the hospitality industry.

The shortage of skilled labour is now the second biggest threat to the motor repair industry, compared with being ranked the 10th biggest threat in 2020. The mechanical industry can combat the skilled labour shortage by incorporating apprenticeships to train and develop new talent. To my eyes, the major issue with skilled apprenticeships is the low rate of pay, which has to improve. The Minister has good ideas to take things forward, which I know come from his previous business, so I am keen to hear his feedback on how businesses can progress with apprenticeships.

There may have to be a wee bit of a difference, where some sort of apprenticeship bonus is paid to some of those companies. Most apprenticeships, by their nature, last three years. I can give the example of a constituent who started an apprenticeship for a well-known car company when he was 15. He was being paid £3.10 per hour for his work. Wow—not many people could get away with that, even with funding from their mum and dad. Government funding of apprenticeships allows for apprentices who want to continue their work with their company to be paid fully and fairly, causing less of a problem for staff and businesses.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) rightly referred to apprenticeships and I endorse what she said; I feel that apprenticeships can be improved. Again, I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts on that issue.

The Recruitment and Employment Confederation stated that the UK economy could lose up to £39 billion a year from 2024—a massive sum—if the Government do not resolve labour and skills shortages. In a way, we in Northern Ireland have been very lucky, because our population has risen from 1.75 million to just over 1.9 million. Most of those people coming in are from Europe or further afield, so I suspect that we in Northern Ireland do not feel the pain as much as people in other parts of the United Kingdom. When those people come over, many of them stay; when Brexit happened, they applied to stay, and I helped some of them get jobs. They have become a very integral part of our community. People from Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania—lots of people have come in—have brought their culture and their work ethic into my Strangford constituency, and have done extremely well. I see a real bonus in retaining them.

To put this into perspective, that loss of £39 billion a year from 2024 is equivalent to losing almost the entire current defence budget. It is also equivalent to roughly

two Elizabeth lines annually—by the way, that line is off today, for some reason. That shows the financial sums that can be lost if we do not get this right. If we take those figures at face value, we see how severe our labour shortages are. The public look to us in this House—to us as MPs, to our Minister and to the Department—to give them the support and the answers they need, so let us do that to support our local communities. I know the Minister well and I am very keen to get his thoughts on how we progress this issue. I do not say that just because he is a long-time friend; I believe that he has an understanding of the issue, and I look forward to what he has to say.

3.48 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this very important debate. She has given us an excellent exposition—referring to data, expert research and statistics—of the extent of the problem we face across the United Kingdom in relation to skills and labour shortages.

Like me, as a Scottish Member of Parliament, she has focused on the particular problems that the Scottish economy faces as a result of the loss of free movement, particularly because of our demographics. Her message was clear: we have lost a lot as a result of the end of free movement. What has replaced it involves far too much red tape for employers, and indeed for universities, which I will come to in a moment. That red tape needs to be cut. The British Government must not be prisoners of their own rhetoric; we need change driven by common sense. We in the SNP would like to have retained free movement. Our ultimate aim is to become an independent nation and rejoin the European Union, and again enjoy the benefits of free movement. However, while we are in our current situation as part of the United Kingdom, we would like the British Government to take a much more pragmatic approach to replacing what has been lost as a result of the end of free movement.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) made an important contribution on the importance of apprenticeships. I commend her and her cross-party colleagues on the work they do in the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. We have a good news story to tell about apprenticeships in Scotland. That is not just the view of the Scottish Government; Liz Cameron, the chief executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce, wrote in *The Press and Journal* just nine days ago that

“apprenticeships and the services delivered by Skills Development Scotland”—

the Scottish Government’s national skills agency—are “a shining example of aligning with economic trends and industry demand”.

At the moment, 12,000 companies in Scotland are employing apprentices and 43,000 people are employed in apprentice training, so that is a good news story for Scotland.

Turning to the remarks made by the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood), it was very important that she reminded us of the need to look at the long term as well as the short term, although, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, we face an acute short-term problem. However, it is important to look at the long-term problem. It was

good to hear what the hon. Member for Wirral West said about adult education, which was based on her experience as a former adult education tutor. We will all have experience of constituents or family members whose lives and working capabilities have been transformed by adult education.

Very importantly, the hon. Lady also reminded us of the contribution that trade unions can make to improving skills and addressing labour shortages. Indeed, the Labour spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), intervened on the hon. Member for Wirral West on that subject. It is important in this week particularly—when the trade unions are coming under attack from the Government, and the right of freedom of association and the right to strike are coming under attack—for us to remember what an enormous contribution trade unions make to the life of the nations of this Union, in encouraging people to move forward in their employment and gain new skills, particularly through their adult education programmes. It was good to hear something positive about the contribution of trade unions to our society.

Last, but most certainly not least, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the difficulty of filling vacancies in the food production sector in his constituency. That is a familiar story across the United Kingdom for those of us who have those sorts of services in our constituencies. He also spoke about the difficulties faced by small businesses, such as coffee shops and those in the hospitality sector, which have a quick turnover of employees. I can speak from personal experience, as my constituency is in the centre of Edinburgh and contains a big chunk of the financial sector. There are lots of little coffee shops that face that problem, particularly now that they cannot employ expert baristas from nations in the European Union.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke passionately about an issue that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran: the need to let our asylum seekers work. I will say more about that in a moment. In my constituency of Edinburgh South West, we have faced particular employment problems in hospitality venues. I have met many business owners in the food and drink sector who are struggling to attract and retain staff. They are struggling with increasing wage bills, a lack of available staff, and increasing food and energy inflation, which all makes for a difficult situation. I am sure many hon. and right hon. Members will have had the experience over the holiday period of being unable to book a table to eat and then walking into a half-empty restaurant, only to be told that no tables were available because the restaurant was operating under capacity due to staff shortages. As a result of the pandemic, I have been holidaying at home a lot more, and I have noticed staff shortages in hospitality venues across Scotland and in the north of England, where I have been on holiday.

Heineken UK is headquartered in my constituency. Through its Star Pubs & Bars, it leases almost 2,500 pubs and bars across the United Kingdom. It tells me that feedback from its licensees is that staffing is a really big problem for them and that, in particular, a shortage of chefs is forcing many pubs and restaurants to close for one or two days a week, so that they need only one chef and one team to work for the other five days. That helps the business to survive, but it means losing one or

[Joanna Cherry]

two days' trade per week. Consumers get used to fewer visits to the restaurant or pub, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and creates problems in the sector.

I mentioned the role of universities. I have two major universities in my constituency—Heriot-Watt University and Edinburgh Napier University—and many academics and administrative staff from the University of Edinburgh live there. I have had a lot of communication, particularly from professors, about how Government mismanagement of policies such as the academic technology approval scheme is preventing talented postgraduate students from overseas from coming to study in Edinburgh, which means that our universities are losing out on some of the best PhD candidates. That has a deep impact on UK skills and research. Often if those people come here to study at a high level, they end up working here. We need to be encouraging that, not discouraging it.

Another acute problem in Scotland is in the renewables sector. Obviously, the renewables sector is an integral part of the Scottish economy, and becomes more and more important as we attempt to make the just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy necessitated by the climate crisis. One of my colleagues recently spoke to Green Cat Renewables, a group of successful Scottish companies located in Scotland whose shareholders are based in Scotland. For the past 17 years, it has been servicing the renewable energy and low-carbon sectors, but in recent years its ability to grow and service that market has been significantly hampered by the availability of suitably skilled staff. It told us that it has been at the forefront of developing subsidy-free renewable projects, multi-technology projects, and behind-the-meter and private wire projects. Since 2019, it has been growing steadily. However, as the country has come out of the pandemic, it has seen an unprecedented increase in the number of inquiries for new business, which it simply cannot keep up with, as its growth rate has slowed because it cannot get the skilled staff it needs. That means that it may lose out to international competitors. It pointed out to us that Governments in other jurisdictions subsidise part of the salary of fresh graduates and the retraining of candidates while they are in training. The Government could also help by assisting with the cost of training, new software and other resources.

As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said, the Minister will probably want to deflect away from Brexit matters and focus on the slowness of the recovery of the labour supply and economic activity since the pandemic. I am sure the Government will also say that they have responded to some needs through the health and social care visa and the seasonal agricultural visa, but the fact remains that the supply of labour is not keeping pace with the return to economic activity. The Government must not be allowed to use the pandemic or the war in Ukraine to deflect from the effects of Brexit and the loss of free movement on our labour market, particularly in Scotland, where we have the demographic problems that my hon. Friend referred to.

The Scottish Government do not have full competence in these areas, and do not have competence over immigration. We have asked for it. We would like to see immigration devolved. As my hon. Friend said, other countries that have federal or provincial systems, such

as Canada, allow the provinces to have their visa. That is what we want for Scotland, and indeed across the UK, although ultimately we want Scotland to become an independent country, return to the EU and get all the benefits that freedom of movement brings.

Finally, I would like to say something about giving asylum seekers the right to work, about which my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Strangford spoke passionately. The Joint Committee on Human Rights, which I chair, took evidence yesterday afternoon about the rights of asylum seekers. We heard that they do not have the right to work while their claim is being decided unless they have waited more than 12 months. Even then, they can work only in jobs on the shortage occupation list. There is currently a campaign called Lift the Ban that aims to lift the ban on working and allow asylum seekers to work after six months, and not limit their opportunities to the shortage occupation list. The reality is that the majority of people who claim asylum in this country go on to get asylum, so they are going to be staying here. Why not give them the dignity of working and make them economically useful to the country that is going to become their home while they wait for their asylum application to be processed? Yesterday we heard that, as of October last year, 85% of the small boat arrivals who had received an initial decision on their application had been granted asylum or another form of humanitarian protection. That is 85% of the people who we are told should not be here at all. Many of them are bringing all sorts of skills that would benefit our country.

I was distressed to hear yesterday about the practice of dispersing asylum seekers and moving them from place to place with minimal notice, which means that their children often have their education interrupted. A child will have just got settled in a school and then his or her family are moved on. As well as being distressing for the child, it disrupts their education. That child will grow up to stay and live in the United Kingdom, and we need him or her to have a good education so that they can contribute to our economy.

The Government are not doing many things that they could be. Giving asylum seekers the right to work is just one glaring example that would save us a lot of money and contribute a huge amount to our economy. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran listed other examples, and I am looking forward to hearing some concrete answers to her asks when the Minister sums up.

4.1 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this useful debate and on her contribution, which I will reflect on in more detail in a moment.

Skills shortages are prevailing throughout all four corners of the United Kingdom, so this debate is very welcome. As someone who spent nine years in recruitment in the '90s and noughties, I am aware that skills shortages are by no means a new phenomenon. However, the scale of the issue is now more serious than ever before. The scale of the failure requires the Government, private and public sector employers, and educationalists to work collaboratively and strategically to address it.

Sadly, there is no sign that either the resources or ambition required to address the issue are close to being found.

I will touch upon some of the key issues raised by hon. Members. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran spoke about Brexit at some length. She is right; there is no question but that the removal of freedom of movement will have made a big difference, coupled with—as I said—the accelerated exit of people who might have stayed here longer but decided to return when covid came and work slowed down. Lots of people during covid just wanted to get home to their families, so there was an increase in the number of workers who left the UK as a result. That has no doubt made a big difference as well.

The hon. Member also touched upon rural depopulation and the fact that there have been 24% fewer national insurance numbers issued to EU residents, as though that was an unfortunate consequence of Brexit. However, that was the entire purpose of Brexit from the perspective of many of my constituents who voted for it; that was what they wanted to happen. It was not an accident and it cannot have been a surprise to the Government that that happened.

I share the hon. Member's view that we need a far broader, strategic migration plan. We need to try to level with people in the UK about our needs for further migration. We should absolutely recognise the need for migrants to come in to work—not in highly skilled environments, but in what we might class as unskilled environments. We need those. I am currently staying in a hotel when I am down in London, and virtually every person cleaning it has been a migrant worker. I speak to them when I meet them. The idea that we can somehow just cope without them, or that there is an educational solution to it, is not true.

However, it is important to give some context for all these conversations. Since Brexit, the population of the United Kingdom is 1.4 million higher than it was in 2016, so the numbers have continued to increase. She is absolutely right that the context in England and Scotland is different. It is currently estimated that between 2014 and 2039, over a 25-year period, the population of England will grow by 17% and the population of Scotland by 7%.

Since 2011, in the 10 years between the censuses, the population of England grew twice as fast as the population of Scotland. If we go back to 1950, the population in Scotland was 5.1 million. It has barely changed and is now 5.3 million, whereas in England the population has gone from 40 million to 58 million, so the context is different. It is therefore easy for Scottish MPs to say, “We want to return to freedom of movement”, but we are in a United Kingdom, and there are different needs in different areas. However, Scotland is not unique among the nations and regions of the United Kingdom; in the north-east, there has been very little population growth in that time, though there was a lot of population growth in London and the south-east.

The right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) spoke passionately about apprenticeships. She and I share that passion. I always say that the greatest advocates for apprenticeships are apprentices, and those who see the difference that an apprenticeship has made to a young person's life. She also spoke about the importance of apprenticeships in tech sectors, and I agree with her entirely on that. The Labour party would

like greater flexibility around supporting people to get on to apprenticeships, and an ability to use the apprenticeship levy more flexibly.

The right hon. Lady was absolutely right about the need to make things easier for small businesses. We are pretty unique in this country. The apprenticeship levy is not a unique idea, but we are the only country that has created a divide between levy payers and non-levy payers. The non-levy payers have to scabble around to find funding for apprenticeships, and have to hope for good will from an apprenticeship levy payer who might donate some of their levy spend, but that is not a coherent system in any way.

The right hon. Lady was happy about the number of apprenticeships since 2010. When we look in more detail at the statistics, we see that there was a big increase when the Train to Gain programme was rebranded as an apprenticeship in 2010-11, but since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, there has been a fall in apprenticeships, a big fall in the number of SMEs taking on apprentices, a big fall in the number of level 2 and level 3 apprenticeships, and a lot more apprenticeship spending being dedicated to MBAs at level 7, which I do not think any of us envisage when we talk about apprenticeships, so there are real problems with the apprenticeship levy, and the Labour party has ideas on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) spoke about the adult skills budget increase. She was absolutely right, but what she did not say was that the 19% increase in the next five years is still, at the current rate of inflation, a real-terms cut. It is—I will touch on this in more detail in a moment—a tiny step back up the mountain, given the reduction that there has been in apprenticeships.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the journey from belly dancing to biochemistry. She is right that numerous people, particularly given the scale of the mental health crisis in this country, might return to education via flower arranging, belly dancing, or learning a foreign language or whatever, and will see that as part of their path back to the workplace. Given that we have more vacancies than people unemployed, and about 1.5 million people who are not in either of those groups, the need to get more of those people back into the labour market is crucial.

My hon. Friend said that the Government have narrowed the focus to much more vocational education, and she is right, but we have a huge reduction in the number of vocational routes that people can pursue now, so we are failing even on those narrower terms. She also spoke about the need for people to be able to retrain; she is absolutely right that many will need to do so. In 10 years' time, people will be doing jobs that we have not even heard of today; many people will go through four, five or six careers in their working life, so the ability to learn and soft skills are more important than a narrow focus on vocational education.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the skills and labour shortages in his constituency, and talked about people being bussed in from Newry every week, which I understand is an hour away. It cannot make sense for people to have to do that. He was speaking up for his constituency.

In her summing up, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) spoke about the need to cut red tape. That is an irony for us all; we were told that moving out of the European Union was

[Mr Toby Perkins]

the answer to red tape, but of course this Government are just as capable of creating it. We totally share the hon. and learned Member's view on apprenticeships, access to labour, the labour market and many other areas where the Government have been tremendously productive in creating, rather than removing, red tape. She discussed hospitality shortages, as well as speaking very wisely about universities being engines for growth, and a part of our reskilling our economy and making it more productive.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said that the Scottish Government are doing all that they can. Scottish Labour colleagues have told me about the national recovery plan that they proposed during the aftermath of covid, which would have guaranteed a job for every young person in Scotland. It would have meant investing in a national training fund and a business restart fund. They also told me of their comeback plan, under which there would have been investment in schools, and IT support in every primary and secondary school; they also wanted the creation of a community recovery fund, which would invest in local areas and make communities safer. Their view is that there was a missed opportunity there for Scotland, but it is important to say that in both Scotland and Wales, things are happening on skills, but the same schemes are not available to English businesses.

There is much we can learn in England from other Governments in the United Kingdom, as well as from our foreign competitors. In England, the apprenticeship levy has largely shut out too many small and medium-sized enterprises. It has hampered attempts to address skills shortages, particularly in sectors such as construction and engineering. In contrast, the Labour Government in Wales have just committed an extra £18 billion to be invested in apprenticeships, bringing the total to £140 million for apprenticeships across the country.

Levy-paying businesses in England have often argued for greater flexibility. Labour has proposed the introduction of a skills and growth levy to replace the apprenticeship levy; 50% of that pot could be spent on other kinds of high-quality training, which would not necessarily have to be apprenticeships. That would provide support to people who might be pre-apprenticeship, perhaps through traineeships or other programmes. It would also support the massive transition towards a greener working environment by helping people to retrain; for example, motor vehicle engineers could retrain so that they could do mechanics on electric vehicles, and heating engineers could retrain so that they could move into installing heat pumps. Those are the kind of areas where we think greater flexibility would be relevant.

We also propose establishing Skills England, to ensure courses and qualifications are of real benefit to learners and employers. The Government's sticking-plaster solution to skills shortages is not working. It feels as though there has been a real desire to pit organisations against each other, rather than a collaborative approach, which would make a real difference.

In conclusion, we envisage a confident and dynamic skills sector that is fit for purpose and able to react quickly to the challenges of the future, which include moving Britain to a greener economy, taking advantage of increasing automation and ensuring that home-grown talent is fully supported in a post-Brexit economy.

4.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kevin Hollinrake): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Sir Graham. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) on securing this vital debate.

Despite the shocks of the pandemic, the labour market has recovered well, as the hon. Lady pointed out. The employment rate is at a historic high, and unemployment and inactivity are low by historical and global standards. She is right that employment shortages are a drag on the economy. In many ways, the shortages are counter-intuitive: as my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Theresa Villiers) said, there was net migration of over 500,000 people last year—a huge amount of immigration. Of course, we need to ensure that the immigration that we get meets the needs of employers.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), made an interesting point. It is wrong to look at the issue in the context of the UK alone; the issues affect all developed nations. In fact, the World Economic Forum recently said that labour shortages are apparent across all OECD countries. In the UK, there are 1.187 million vacancies and 1.247 million unemployed people. In the US, incredibly, there are 10.5 million vacancies: 1.74 job opportunities for every person who is looking for a job. On that basis, the US has an even greater problem than the UK. Nevertheless, we have to take the issue seriously, and do what we can, competitively and in an international context, to try to resolve the problem and grow the economy for the benefit of all. Ensuring that the right people, with the right skills, are in the right jobs is essential to achieving that.

The hon. Member for Chesterfield may be aware that both skills and labour shortages have been at the centre of much ongoing work and many discussions across Government. The causes of labour shortages are complex; they are not attributable to any single factor. Broadly, some of the major causes of reduced labour supply include long-term sickness, which has been mentioned, and early retirement—two areas that the Government are making a significant effort to address. Indeed, I will meet next week with colleagues in the Treasury, the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, the Minister for Employment and key stakeholders—largely employer organisations—to see how we can address the issues.

Late last year, the autumn statement set out the scope of a review that will thoroughly assess workforce participation early in 2023. Numerous Select Committees have also taken an acute interest in labour shortages. Most recently, the Lords Economic Affairs Committee published its findings on labour supply. I appeared before the Committee and hold the members in very high regard, and I welcome its conclusions and the continued attention paid to labour market policy. A resilient labour market is vital if the UK is to retain its position as a world-leading economy. We must ensure that people of all ages are able to climb the ladder of opportunity and develop the skills that they, the country and business need.

I recognise that, as Members have said, businesses are struggling to recruit the right people and face other issues. The Government are committed to helping businesses that are struggling to get through those issues. The hon.

Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised an important point about hospitality, which clearly features in most of our constituencies. I am fully aware of some of the difficulties that hospitality faces. There is no doubt that Brexit has been an issue, and we should not try to ignore the issues of Brexit. The net migration figure has increased, but the profile of the workers is different, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said. We need to ensure that the supply meets the demand—not least for hospitality. I chair the Hospitality Sector Council, which has a sub-group looking at the issue right now. It includes leading people from the world of hospitality and business representative groups. We are keen to resolve these issues.

I will touch on Brexit. Even though I voted to remain in the European Union, it is wrong to look at it as simply a difficulty for the United Kingdom; there are clearly opportunities as well. One particular opportunity in the UK is the opportunity to mine lithium. We have been able to do that more effectively and quickly than some of our international counterparts, as we have managed to change our health and safety rules to cut some of the red tape and make it more viable.

As many Members have concluded, it is clear that the country has a number of skills gaps and, in certain sectors, those gaps are causing labour shortages. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran raised the issue of nurses. She is right that we have nurse shortages that we need to fill, despite having 40,000 more nurses than were working in the service in 2010.

I will focus on three core things: what the Government are doing to identify skills gaps; where we see skills gaps and how we need to tackle them; and wider action that we are taking to address labour supply shortages. The Department for Education is leading on improving the collection, analysis and dissemination of labour market information to support decision making by actors across the skills system. That important point was raised by the hon. Member for Wirral West. That will ensure that we can improve the skills system. That work includes a regular cycle of employer skills surveys to gather insights on employer needs and engagement with the skills system.

We have established the Unit for Future Skills, a new analytical and research unit working across Government to improve the quality of jobs and skills data, which will be made more available and accessible to policymakers, stakeholders and the general public, and will support a better understanding of skills mismatches and future demand. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran may be aware that Skills Development Scotland does similar work to the Unit for Future Skills. Officials from DfE and the devolved Administrations have met to discuss how that work can be shared, and will continue to engage on it.

For England, the Government are also establishing local skills improvement plans; that goes to some of the issues raised by the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran about rural areas and depopulation. The plans will help to forge stronger and more dynamic partnerships between employers and providers, and help to make training more responsive to employer and local market needs.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised the issue of skills in the food production sector. I think he has a Karro facility in his constituency—a pork production

facility. That production is key to his constituency and mine. I have visited that organisation and that facility, and I was struck by what it was doing to ensure that it was equipping young people in the local area with the skills that they needed for butchering and the like. Normally, those people would be coming in from eastern Europe, so these things are having specific beneficial effects for young people in our areas. It is key that businesses invest in the skills of their domestic workforce.

Local skills improvement plans in England are already working and making a difference. In the west of England, the local skills improvement plans identified health and social care, aerospace and advanced engineering as the sectors with the greatest skills challenges. We have awarded £2.75 million to colleges in the area to develop new courses and facilities for both sectors, including new apprenticeship routes for allied health professionals.

Margaret Greenwood: The Minister is talking about LSIPs and the areas of skills shortages that they have identified; he has given examples. Will he describe how we will get the investment that we need in adult basic skills? Local employers will not naturally think about people who cannot really read and write very well. My concern is that if they are describing what the offer is, that whole cohort of people who desperately need help to improve themselves may never get any help at all.

Kevin Hollinrake: I think the adult education budget has something to do with that, but the hon. Lady is right to point to the improvements that we need to make in numeracy and literacy. Clearly, that is not directly the responsibility of my Department, but I am very keen to go back to DfE and make sure that it is aware of her views.

On identifying skills gaps, evidence from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that 46% of employers reported having hard-to-fill vacancies. The top response from employers with hard-to-fill vacancies has been to upskill staff, which is clearly key. We know which regions have the highest skill-shortage density, and we know about the impact on employers when they lose business. The key areas where we feel that the skills gaps are most acute are workforce sectors with high volumes of vacancies, green jobs, which have been mentioned by many Members, growth sectors, and science and tech. We are committed to tackling these skills gaps through major investment and reforms to skill and further education provision.

I turn to some of the excellent work done by my colleagues in the Department for Education on apprenticeships, which were mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet and the hon. Member for Chesterfield. There have been over 5.1 million apprenticeship starts since May 2010. In recent years we have transformed apprenticeships, driving up the quality so that they better meet the skills needs of employers. I fully recognise and support businesses' calls for us to make the levy funds more flexible, but we have to see the issue in context.

Some of the earlier apprenticeship schemes were criticised for not being sufficiently robust and challenging, or of the right quality. It is about striking a balance, but I am very impressed by some of the skills bootcamp-type schemes that perhaps we should focus on in order to give more flexibility. I went to see a new initiative called

[Kevin Hollinrake]

Trade Up, which seeks to double the number of construction workers. It is a private sector initiative with very short, 10 to 16-week courses, and it involves getting gas fitters and joiners back into the sector.

There are lots of different solutions that we need to look at. The Government have launched T-levels for young people, which will boost access to high-quality technical education. The Government are also committed to ensuring that, at any stage, adults can upskill to reach their potential through skills bootcamps and level 3 free courses for jobs in priority areas. The adult education budget, and giving adults a funding entitlement to get English, maths and digital qualifications, is hugely important, as the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran said.

The Government's research and development people and culture strategy puts people at the heart of research and development, and sets out our plans to attract enough people with the right skills across all roles. We are aiming for a full pipeline of research and innovation workers for the future. A huge part of understanding the role that skills play is making sure that we can respond to labour market shortages. The Government are working closely with businesses, and encouraging them to take a stronger role in providing their workforce with skills and training.

Do you want me to conclude, Sir Graham?

Sir Graham Brady (in the Chair): That would be a good idea.

Kevin Hollinrake: Okay. I will touch on immigration, because it is hugely important. Clearly, this is a key part of the system. We have the new points-based immigration system, and it is critical to people who voted to leave the European Union that we control migration. Clearly, it is important that we take a pragmatic view. We are

monitoring the situation—for instance, we added care staff to the shortage occupation list only this year. I have great sympathy with asylum seekers, and as a Back Bencher I said that we should be more flexible. The issue is one that Members might want to discuss with the Home Office, which has direct responsibility for it.

I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for securing this very important debate. It has been fascinating and stimulating, and we have had a great discussion on a topic that everyone across these Benches believes is vital.

4.29 pm

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for responding to the debate, and I thank all Members who turned up and participated to give this important subject wide-ranging consideration. We have heard a lot about long-term solutions and apprenticeships. Of course we want to upskill and invest in our young people and provide positive destinations, but there has to be recognition that this is an urgent and pressing matter. I feel that the Minister did not give Brexit the consideration that it is due. The impact of Brexit must not be underestimated.

The Minister says this is a global issue. That means that our competitive edge needs to be even sharper as we seek to bring in workers to fill the gaps in our workforce. That is not happening because bureaucratic and other barriers are being put in place for people who might otherwise choose to come to work in Scotland or the rest of the UK. If the Government are not willing to tackle these matters and take the necessary action that the SNP would like, they should devolve the powers to Scotland, so that we can do it for ourselves.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 12 January 2023

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Energy Bills Support Scheme Contingent Liability Notification

The Minister for Energy and Climate (Graham Stuart):

Today, I have laid a departmental minute which describes a contingent liability undertaken by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to support citizens of Northern Ireland with their energy costs this winter, through the energy bills support scheme and alternative fuel payment in Northern Ireland.

It is normal practice, when a Government Department proposes to undertake a contingent liability in excess of £300,000 for which there is no specific statutory authority, for the Minister concerned to present a departmental minute to Parliament giving particulars of the liability created and explaining the circumstances; and to refrain from incurring the liability until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the statement, except in cases of special urgency. A letter has been sent to the Public Accounts Committee and Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee to explain the need behind this retrospective notification.

The energy bills support scheme and alternative fuel payment in Northern Ireland (EBSS AFP NI) is being delivered through the six domestic electricity suppliers operating in NI. Suppliers have indicated they will engage with the Post Office for voucher production and delivery, and for the Post Office to fulfil its role in the delivery of the scheme, a contract is required between it and each of the NI electricity suppliers.

The departmental minute sets out details of the new liability undertaken by BEIS. The liability provides post office with a letter of comfort, enabling the removal or amendment of some of the company's standard contract terms in this instance. This has enabled the Department to progress with scheme delivery to provide much needed support with energy bills to the people of Northern Ireland.

Our assessment of the expected value of the total liability is £3.125 million, with the immediate beneficiaries being the Post Office (for which the Secretary of State is the sole shareholder) and the relevant NI electricity suppliers. If the liability is called, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure. There is no sunset clause built into the letter of comfort, as it is tightly linked to the delivery of the specific scheme, and it is our expectation that the likelihood of the liability being called will reduce significantly following the completion of the end of scheme audit in quarter 3 of 2023-24.

HM Treasury has approved the proposal. A full departmental minute has been laid in the House of Commons providing more detail on this contingent liability.

[HCWS493]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Hong Kong: Sino-British Joint Declaration Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (James Cleverly): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today, and is available as an online attachment. It covers the period from 1 January to 30 June 2022. The report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. A copy is also available on the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office website: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/six-monthly-reports-on-hong-kong>. I commend the report to the House.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2023-01-12/HCWS495>.

[HCWS495]

UK Government Position on Venezuela

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (David Rutley):

On 30 December 2022, the 2015 National Assembly of Venezuela democratically voted to disband the interim Government and the position of constitutional interim President held by Juan Guaidó, with effect from 5 January 2023.

We respect the result of this vote. We continue to consider the National Assembly elected in 2015 as the last democratically elected National Assembly in Venezuela, and take note of the Assembly's vote to extend its mandate for another year.

It remains the UK Government's position that the 2018 presidential election was not held in accordance with international democratic standards. The UK continues not to accept the legitimacy of the Administration put in place by Nicolás Maduro.

We will continue to work with our international partners to encourage all parties concerned to do everything necessary to bring about a return to democracy in Venezuela and to hold free, fair presidential elections in 2024, in accordance with international democratic standards. The restoration of democratic institutions and practices in Venezuela is essential and will help bring an end to the multiple crises afflicting the Venezuelan people.

[HCWS496]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Tier 1 (Investor) Route: Review of Operation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department

(Suella Braverman): In March 2018, following the Salisbury poisonings, the then Home Secretary Amber Rudd committed to a review of individuals who had entered the UK under the tier 1 (investor) immigration route, prior to reforms made in 2015.

I am now providing here the Government's final response summarising the findings of that review.

The tier 1 (investor) route had allowed individuals (primarily non-EEA nationals) investing in the UK to enter, and eventually settle in, the UK. It was launched in 2008 and at that time required applicants to be able to demonstrate they had access to £1 million of available funds to invest in UK Government bonds and shares or loan funds to UK companies. The UK had operated some form of investor visa programme for high-net-worth personal investment since 1994. The tier 1 (investor) visa route was ultimately closed on 17 February 2022.

I can confirm that the Home Office considered the cases of the 6,312 tier 1 (investor) migrants and tier 1 (investor) adult dependants who obtained leave between the launch of the route on 30 June 2008, and the introduction on 6 April 2015 of a requirement to open a regulated UK bank account before applying for a visa under the route. Each case was reviewed for potential links to criminality or other risk factors. Officials also considered whether there were wider risks presented in the design and implementation of the route at that time, and the overall economic benefit of the route.

The review of cases identified a small minority of individuals connected to the tier 1 (investor) visa route that were potentially at high risk of having obtained wealth through corruption or other illicit financial activity, and/or being engaged in serious and organised crime. I should stress that the work carried out only implies that a particular individual potentially poses a risk of having connections to criminality; it does not mean guilt has been proven. UK law enforcement have access to this data and are taking action as appropriate under their operational remits. Information on all high-risk individuals has been discussed with the Home Office's independent operational partners and a range of actions has been and is being considered including, where appropriate, immigration action. Given the importance of ensuring the independence of the law enforcement process, I am unable to say more on the operationally sensitive work being taken forward in this area. While unable to comment specifically due to the operational sensitivity of the work, as an example of the range of actions we are taking, I can say that we have already sanctioned 10 oligarchs who had previously used this route as part of our extensive response to Russian aggression in the Ukraine.

The Home Office is robust in refusing leave where this is appropriate. During the operation of the tier 1 (investor) visa programme, the route has had a refusal rate for main applicants and their dependants of 7.9% for entry clearance applications and 4% for leave to remain applications, and for main applicants seeking indefinite leave to remain (settlement) the refusal rate is 2.2%¹.

The lessons learned from this review, and from ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the tier 1 (investor) route and the impact of reforms made between 2014 and 2019, formed a significant part of the evidence base on which the Government made their decision to ultimately close the route on 17 February 2022. The Home Office has found that there are inherent difficulties in an investment-based immigration route based on passive wealth, both in terms of security and economic value. I am determined this Government will ensure such mistakes are not repeated.

In that spirit, I am setting out in more detail broader systemic findings from the review:

The route attracted a disproportionate number of applicants from the countries identified in the UK's national risk assessment of money laundering and terrorist financing 2020 as particularly relevant to the cross-border money laundering risks faced and posed by the UK.

The review did not find evidence of a systemic failure across financial institutions to carry out appropriate customer due diligence checks on tier 1 (investor) visa applicants in the period in question. However, there was evidence of high-risk tier 1 (investor) applicants seeking out and exploiting financial institutions that had the weakest customer due diligence controls. In a number of instances, financial institutions associated with multiple high-risk migrants at the time have since been issued significant fines by the Financial Conduct Authority. This has been due to the firms' handling of customer due diligence for high-risk clients in general rather than specifically for tier 1 (investor) visa applicants.

The review found that the particular risks presented by the tier 1 (investor) route compared with other visa routes meant that the immigration system was not as well equipped to respond. UK Visas and Immigration are trained immigration caseworkers, but the risks posed by this route would require specialist expertise in detecting financial criminality. Cases linked to historical allegations of corruption or financial crime are complex, may be based on suspicion or allegations only, and not evidenced by criminal enforcement action in the country of origin. Complex financial crimes such as corruption and embezzlement can also remain undetected for significant periods of time.

I recognise that the UK's openness to global business carries risks that malign actors will take advantage of our systems to pursue corrupt and criminal ends. We must ensure that kleptocracies such as Russia are not able to act with impunity overseas. That is why the UK has taken strong action since the start of the war, and why we will continue to do so in the years to come. We have swiftly implemented the strongest set of economic sanctions ever imposed, against a G20 country. This stands at 1,200 individuals and 120 entities linked to the Russian state. In total, we have frozen over £18 billion in Russian assets since the war began.

We have established a new combatting kleptocracy cell in the National Crime Agency to investigate criminal sanctions evasion and high-end money laundering. And we have brought forward new and robust legislation to prevent corrupt elites from abusing our open economy, including establishing a new, open register for overseas entities owning property in the UK.

The Government are clear that any future visa route to facilitate investment-based migration must not offer entry solely on the basis of the applicant's personal wealth. We are continuing to consider options to bring forward alternative provisions to support investment-based migration benefiting the UK economy on a fundamentally different model within the innovator visa programme, placing more emphasis on the applicant's track record as an investor in innovative business and an assessment of their plans to actively engage in such activity in the UK. We will ensure any new provisions are brought forward carefully.

¹ Entry clearance refusal rate 30 June 2008 to Q3 main applicants and dependants.

Refusal rate for tier 1 (investor) leave to remain from 30 June 2008 to 2020.

Settlement for main applicants (indefinite leave to remain) April 2013 to 9 December 2022.

TRANSPORT**Dartford-Thurrock Crossing: Annual Accounts**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Richard Holden): Under regulation 3(1)(d) of the Trunk Road Charging Schemes (Bridges and Tunnels) (Keeping

of Accounts) (England) Regulations 2003, annual accounts for the Dartford-Thurrock crossing charging scheme are published today. The accounts relate to financial year 2021-22 and will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS494]

Ministerial Correction

Thursday 12 January 2023

CABINET OFFICE

Nuclear Test Veterans: Medals

The following is an extract from the ministerial statement on Nuclear Test Veterans: Medals on 22 November 2021.

Stephanie Peacock: This announcement is hugely welcome, and I pay tribute to everyone who has made it a reality. It has been a privilege to meet nuclear test veterans and their families on a number of occasions. I am sure that the Minister is aware of issues relating to Veterans UK compensation and war pensions. That is why I and the all-party parliamentary group on veterans have launched a survey, and I hope that, when we publish the findings, the Minister will listen to them. How many nuclear test veterans have had their applications for war pensions rejected?

Johnny Mercer: I do not have that data, but I am happy to write to the hon. Lady. When it comes to Veterans UK, my position does not change whether I

am inside or outside the tent. There are good people there who work hard but have been underinvested in over the years by Governments of all colours, to the point that, two years ago, they were still working from paper records. Clearly, they will not get optimal results for veterans in that manner. This Government have committed £25 million towards digitising that whole space.

[Official Report, 22 November 2022, Vol. 723, c. 166.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer):

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock).

The correct response should have been:

Johnny Mercer: I do not have that data, but I am happy to write to the hon. Lady. When it comes to Veterans UK, my position does not change whether I am inside or outside the tent. There are good people there who work hard but have been underinvested in over the years by Governments of all colours, to the point that, two years ago, they were still working from paper records. Clearly, they will not get optimal results for veterans in that manner. This Government have committed **£40 million** towards digitising that whole space.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 12 January 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS	685	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS— <i>continued</i>	
Affordable Local Food: Newcastle upon Tyne Central.....	696	Flood Defences: Shipley	695
Crustacean Deaths: North-east coast	698	Flood Risk	697
Deposit Return Schemes: Digital Technology	696	Food Security.....	688
Environment Agency Budget: Sewage Discharge ...	685	National Food Strategy.....	694
Environmental Land Management Schemes	692	Support for Zoos	694
Farmers: Mental Health.....	693	Topical Questions	699
Farming: Increased Costs.....	692	UK 100's Clean Air Recommendations.....	687
		VAT: Pet Food	697

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 12 January 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY	51WS	FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE— <i>continued</i>	
Energy Bills Support Scheme		UK Government Position on Venezuela.....	52WS
Contingent Liability Notification.....	51WS		
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	52WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	52WS
Hong Kong: Sino-British Joint Declaration		Tier 1 (Investor) Route: Review of Operation	52WS
Report.....	52WS		
		TRANSPORT	55WS
		Dartford-Thurrock Crossing: Annual Accounts	55WS

MINISTERIAL CORRECTION

Thursday 12 January 2023

	<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	9MC
Nuclear Test Veterans: Medals	9MC

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Thursday 19 January 2023**

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CONTENTS

Thursday 12 January 2023

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 685] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Business of the House [Col. 705]
Statement—(Penny Mordaunt)

Point of Order [Col. 724]

Backbench Business
Iran [Col. 726]
Motion—(Bob Blackman)—agreed to

Landfill Tax Fraud [Col. 773]
Motion—(Mr Kevan Jones)—agreed to

Retained EU Law: Trading Standards [Col. 803]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Royal Mail and the Universal Service Obligation [Col. 307WH]
Skills and Labour Shortages [Col. 331WH]
General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 51WS]

Ministerial Correction [Col. 9MC]
